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Translating Timelessness: The Relationship between Vladimir Nabokov's *Conclusive Evidence*, *Drugie berega* and *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*

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Comparing the three full-length versions of **Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography** reveals shifts in the way he imagines his reader as he moves between languages. In all three versions, Nabokov seeks to share his experience of **timelessness** with the reader, but the strategies Nabokov deploys change according to his shifting expectations of the reader's reactions. Nabokov's tussles with **Edmund Wilson** over Russian history and literature influence the way he imagines the reader of *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. The creation of a **ludic** text which prompts a re-thinking of patterns of perception offers a way of accommodating the author's ambivalent feelings towards the reader, who is desired as a friend as much as he is feared as an enemy.

'An inexperienced heraldist resembles a medieval traveler who brings back from the East the faunal fantasies influenced by the domestic bestiary he possessed all along rather than by the results of direct zoological exploration.'¹ This sentence, from the third chapter of the third full version of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography, suggests a fruitful practice of memory is oriented towards otherness. In this simile, the person who remembers well discovers new forms of life, while the person who remembers poorly only sees in the world what his mind projects into it. Mistaking the contents of one's own mind for the world stops one seeing the self and the past. Such solipsism is insidious in its imperceptibility; only encounters with other people can make one's solipsism visible. This is the case for the 'inexperienced heraldist', Nabokov, who remembered the family crest inaccurately in the two previous versions of the autobiography, and is about to correct the error. He could do so in the third version of the text, because the financial success of *Lolita* had enabled him to travel to Europe, where he met with family members with whom he discussed the past.² Both the genesis of this sentence and the view of memory it proposes signal the value the author places on encounters with others. An intersubjective practice of memory leads to a new and richer vision of the self and the past. In the light of this, the author's relationship with the readers of the autobiography takes on a special importance. The text has often been read as a portrayal of timelessness, that is, the experience of being conscious of many different moments as part of one complex texture.³ I want to show how its portrayal of timelessness is tied to the pursuit of an intersubjective practice of memory. Nabokov engages closely with his imagined reader's memory and mental habits as part of his quest to share his sense of timelessness.

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Knopf, 1999), p. 35, further references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.

² Alex Zwerdling, *The Rise of the Memoir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 131–32.

³ Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), pp. 23–28; Brian Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), p. 277; Michael Nieto Garcia, 'Nabokov's Index Puzzle: Life and Art Transcendent in *Speak, Memory*', *Nabokov Studies*, 13 (2014–2015), 167–91 (p. 177); Laci Mattison, 'Nabokov's Aesthetic Bergsonism: An Intuitive, Reperceptualized Time', *Mosaic*, 46 (2013), 37–52 (pp. 42–43).

Paradoxically, the devices he uses to explore timelessness change over time, as the reader he imagines shifts as he translates and revises the text to produce its three full-length versions: *Conclusive Evidence*; *Drugie berega* [Other Shores]⁴ and *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*.

Timelessness is a way into an expanded form of consciousness.⁵ Nabokov's pursuit of timelessness is both a product of and a protection against the many forms of loss he experienced: his father's murder; his mother's death and his inability to attend her funeral; his flight from Russia aged nineteen; the second flight from dictatorship and war in 1940; his loss of Russian as a literary language.⁶ Timelessness is intertwined with intersubjectivity, because relationships with others, alongside art and lepidoptery, are a royal road into enriched temporal consciousness. I have looked elsewhere at the genealogy of the intertwining of timelessness and intersubjectivity, which Nabokov comes to through the work of Frederic W. Myers, who imagines a mode of consciousness where the constraints of time and the boundaries of the self would begin to loosen.⁷ Here I wish to explore the ways in which the intertwining of timelessness and intersubjectivity shapes the form of Nabokov's autobiography.

Paradoxically, for Nabokov to share his past with his readers, he must also share a sense of timelessness, because seeing the past's layered connections with the present is the mode of temporal consciousness he most values. Sharing the past with readers in this way is fraught with difficulty. Broadly speaking, two kinds of obstacle face Nabokov as he attempts to establish an intersubjective portrayal of timelessness. The first is the foreignness of timelessness both to everyday experience and to the necessarily linear form of sentences and texts. As Christian Moraru notes in a comparison of Nabokovian and Proustian flights from time, such writing 'deciphers time, reads beyond contingent temporality, and in the same movement enciphers its revelations in a rich (sensible, temporal) imagery [...] It thus decodes and instantly recodes its ecstatic revelations – rewritings, so to speak, of what it has just read'.⁸ Textual portrayals of timelessness entail shifts between ways of perceiving meaning for the author and also potentially for his readers. The tension between timely form and timeless content places both the writer and his readers in the role of decipherer of enigmas: the writer discerns timelessness within experience which appears to be linear; the reader discerns timelessness within a text which appears to be linear.

⁴ *Conclusive Evidence: A Memoir* (New York: Harper, 1951); *Drugie berega* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978 [1954]); further references to these editions will appear parenthetically in the text.

⁵ Zwerdling, p. 122.

⁶ Dana Dragunoiu, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011), pp. 79–80 writes of Nabokov's 'obsessive attempt to tame the violence of history and ideology by bringing it under the control of memory and art', describing Nabokovian memory as 'at once kindly muse and ruthless tyrant'; Alex Zwerdling writes that 'Nabokov's deepest need in constructing his memoir is to make the shattered fragments of his own life cohere and endure' (p. 114).

⁷ 'Contesting the Unconscious Frederic W. Myers and *Speak, Memory*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 39.4 (2016), 19–32.

⁸ 'Time, Writing, and Ecstasy in *Speak, Memory*: Dramatizing the Proustian Project', *Nabokov Studies*, 2 (1995), 173–90 (p. 178).

In Nabokov's case, such metaphorical acts of translation are tied to a more literal translation of the self. From its inception, Nabokov's autobiographical project was also a re-invention of a literary self in another language.⁹ Nabokov began to write literary reminiscences as he was seeking a way out of Nazi Germany and its fragmenting Russian émigré community in the late 1930s. In this period, he produced a collection of essays in English which was sent to a British publisher, but the manuscript was never published.¹⁰ The first published autobiographical piece was 'Mademoiselle O', which appeared in French in the journal *Mesures*.¹¹ Although this piece is generically ambiguous, a translated and revised version of it did appear in the final autobiography.¹² In 1940, Nabokov left Europe for America, where he began publishing autobiographical sketches regularly in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly* and *Harper's Bazaar*. The first full-length version of the autobiography appears in 1951 entitled *Conclusive Evidence*. Nabokov translates and revises this text to produce the Russian *Drugie berega* [Other Shores] in 1954 and in 1967, a final version emerged, entitled *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*.

The fact that the first and final full-length versions of the text address an Anglophone reader means that the aesthetic question of portraying timelessness is tied to a cultural question of writing a life whose historical context the readers are unlikely to know. This is a problem for the portrayal of timelessness because history and timelessness are closely linked. As mentioned above, the literary expression of timelessness is a way of proclaiming the author's freedom from the loss of homeland, family and first literary language brought about by history. To understand timelessness fully, readers need to understand what, precisely, it frees the author from. But Nabokov knew from painful experience that many of his Anglophone contemporaries did not share his understanding of Russian history. His friendship with Edmund Wilson had taught him that literary, well-educated Americans could be troublingly blind to the violence of the early Bolshevik regime. As I will go on to show, Nabokov and Wilson's shift from friendship to enmity, from reading together to reading apart, from mutual enrichment to mutual suspicion, drives Nabokov's conception of the Anglophone reader.¹³

Although the cultural difficulty of communicating with a reader who does not share the author's understanding of Russian history might seem distinct from the aesthetic challenge of portraying timelessness within the linear form of a prose narrative, both cause the same anxiety in the author. Comparison of the three full-length versions of the autobiography suggests Nabokov worries about the solipsism of his imagined reader. He deploys a range of devices to ward off approaches to the autobiography where the reader would fail to perceive ideas in the text that would be new to him. Nabokov nudges his imagined reader to perceive his own unquestioned assumptions, both about reading autobiographical prose and about pre-Revolutionary Russian history. Both linear time and solipsistic ways of looking at the world are presented as barriers which constrain perception of the patterned complexity of the self in time. Nabokov stages a series of textual encounters where the reader sees himself seeing as a prelude to understanding the Nabokovian conception of history and timelessness. Seeing oneself seeing is a solution to the solipsism Nabokov fears in his imagined reader, because it calls into question perception and can illuminate the blocks between self and world. The

⁹ Zwerdling, pp. 115–16.

¹⁰ Stacy Schiff, *Véra (Mrs Vladimir Nabokov)* (New York: Random House, 1999), pp. 79–81.

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokoff-Sirine, 'Mademoiselle O', *Mesures* 2 (1936), 143–72.

¹² John Burt Foster, *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 110–11.

¹³ It is for this reason that I refer to the imagined reader as 'he'.

autobiographical text becomes a place of exploration of what can be seen by the author and his imagined reader when the barriers between self and world fall.

Comparison of the three full-length versions of the text shows the degree to which Nabokov is concerned with his imagined reader's existing memory and knowledge as he attempts to establish an intersubjective portrayal of timelessness. It makes visible the shifts in the way he conceives of his reader as he moves between languages. The Russian version is addressed to an imagined reader who is familiar enough with Russian literary and political history to make sense of Nabokov's playful, ironic or glancing references to it. There is evidence in Nabokov's correspondence that he anticipated his English-language reader misunderstanding Russian history. Nonetheless, the English-language versions of the text do at times encode a reader who understands Russian history. In these instances, there is a lack of coincidence between the imagined reader and the encoded reader. By ascribing views he fears in his imagined reader to a character in the narration whom the encoded reader is encouraged to see as foolish, Nabokov seeks to ward off responses he would dislike. Nabokov's anxiety about the Anglophone reader misunderstanding Russian history is particularly pronounced in *Speak, Memory*, so I focus on a comparison between *Drugie berega* and the final version when exploring this aspect of his relationship to the reader. By contrast, each of the three versions offers a valuable perspective on the devices Nabokov deploys to portray timelessness in a linear prose narrative. Each version encourages the imagined reader to consider his role as if it is being played by another person. Nabokov prompts the reader to see the text as a kind of puzzle which calls for combinatorial activity. Placing the imagined reader in the role of puzzle-solver or decipherer of enigmas encourages him to see himself seeing, because the reader as puzzle-solver is always both seeing the text and considering the ways in which he is seeing it. A comparison of the different versions thus illuminates Nabokov's shifting understanding of his imagined reader, and makes visible connections between thematic and formal explorations of timelessness, intersubjectivity and play.

Before beginning the comparison, it is worth establishing why I see the texts as three versions of one work. Though each has a different title, the three texts are much more alike than they are different. The difference between the titles is in fact deceptive to a degree. The text of *Conclusive Evidence* was published in Britain with the title, *Speak, Memory*, at the request of the publisher.¹⁴ *Drugie berega* is a line taken from the Pushkin poem, 'Vnov' ya posetil'. Maria Malikova points out that Nabokov translates the title of this poem as 'I have revisited', so the presence of the word 'Revisited' in the final English title can be read as an allusion to the same Pushkin poem which gives *Drugie berega* its title.¹⁵ Nabokov also consistently refers to the three different versions of the text as one work. In the preface to *Speak, Memory*, he gives an account of the genesis of the text, where he refers to *Conclusive Evidence* as the 'first version' and to *Drugie berega* as a translation (*Speak, Memory*, pp. 5–6). The critic does not have to be bound by the author's conception of his work, but a detailed comparison of the three texts reveals few major structural changes: Chapter Eleven of *Conclusive Evidence* is omitted from *Drugie berega* but reappears in *Speak, Memory*, but otherwise the broad structural lines of each text are the same. Although *Drugie berega* and *Speak, Memory* contain additional material not present in *Conclusive Evidence*, there is very little present in *Conclusive Evidence* that is not also present in the two later versions, which are less new endeavours, more significant developments of the first text.

¹⁴ Zwerdling, p. 126.

¹⁵ *Nabokov: Avto-bio-grafiia* (St Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2002), p. 48.

The work of Yury Lotman is helpful for thinking about the ways in which this process of translation and revision changes the way Nabokov imagines his reader. Lotman argues that ‘dialogic speech is distinguished not only by the common code of two juxtaposed utterances, but also by the presence of a common memory shared by addresser and addressee’.¹⁶ Unless the addressee is known to the writer, this dialogue ‘is directed toward an abstract addressee the extent of whose memory is reconstructed by the addresser as typical of anyone speaking the given language’.¹⁷ As Nabokov shifts between languages, the memory he imagines his reader to have changes. In what follows, I deduce the memory Nabokov ascribes to his imagined reader from changes he makes as he revises and translates the text. The memory Nabokov imagines his reader to have is only a reconstruction which could be incorrect, and indeed is likely to be incorrect for at least some of the many readers of the three versions of the text. To signal the difference between the imagined reader, deduced from the text, and real readers, who could have a multiplicity of responses, I use the singular for the former and the plural for the latter.

Writing History

The imagined reader of *Drugie berega* has a literary memory of the style of Nabokov’s Russian predecessors, which is linked to a political memory of pre-Revolutionary Russian liberalism. *Drugie berega* contains playful stylistic pastiches of the work of Bunin and Tolstoy which depend on this kind of literary memory, and which are not present in either of the English-language versions.¹⁸ The text contains several echoes of Tolstoy’s *Detstvo*, the fictional autobiography which founded the Russian genre of the ‘gentry memoir’. According to Andrew Baruch Wachtel, Tolstoy’s *Detstvo* gave birth to this genre, which portrays childhood as a time of great sensitivity and great happiness. In the sheltering world of a country estate, the child’s sensitivity is fostered by the adults around him, who are a benevolent presence in his life.¹⁹ Nabokov’s autobiography conforms to these general characteristics of the genre, and it also contains some specific echoes of *Detstvo*. As in Tolstoy’s text, the second chapter is devoted to a portrait of the child’s mother, while the third chapter depicts his father. Nabokov inserts knowing comments on the close relationship between the memories of the childhood he is narrating and the content of nineteenth-century Russian texts. He mentions, for example, that an old tennis court dated back to ‘kareninskie vremena’ and that the kind of childhood he had now only exists ‘v sovsem staroi russkoi literature’ (*Drugie berega*, p. 34; p. 51). Nabokov’s construction of such a relationship between nineteenth-century fiction and his own life accords with Alexander Dolinin’s view of Nabokov in his Russian-language writing as both ‘self-conscious’ and ‘tradition-conscious’.²⁰ Nabokov engages with the Russian canon as he writes his own life, suggesting that his life and the life of Russian literature can be seen as consubstantial. As Maria Malikova points out, there is an irony to this invocation of the continuation of the life of Russian literature in Nabokov’s life, as *Drugie berega* recounts the circumstances of his exile

¹⁶ Yury M. Lotman, ‘The Text and the Structure of Its Audience’, trans. by Ann Shukman *New Literary History*, 14 (1982), 81–87 (p. 83).

¹⁷ Lotman, p. 82.

¹⁸ See Gene Barabtarlo, ‘To the Other Shore’, *The Nabokovian*, 21 (1988), 33–35 (pp. 34–35) for an analysis of *Drugie berega*’s homage to Bunin.

¹⁹ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), pp. 83–131.

²⁰ ‘Nabokov as a Russian Writer’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. by Julian W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 49–64 (p. 59).

from Russia and is itself a translation and revision of a text written originally in English.²¹ In its construction of such ironic echoes between his own life-writing and fictional and autobiographical portrayals of Russian childhoods from the previous century, *Drugie berega* is oriented towards an imagined reader who is familiar enough with nineteenth-century Russian literature to perceive Nabokov's playful rewritings of it.

The inscription of *Drugie berega* within the genre of the gentry memoir also assumes a reader with a political memory of pre-Revolutionary Russian liberalism. Although not all writers of gentry memoirs were Russian liberals, Nabokov's inscription of his text within this genre is a way of contesting Bolshevik views of Russian history. Both *Conclusive Evidence* and *Speak, Memory* share some of the aspects of *Drugie berega* oriented towards a reader with a literary memory of the gentry memoir, but those aspects of *Drugie berega* which encode a reader with a political memory of Russian liberalism are significantly different in *Conclusive Evidence* and *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov gives details of his father's political activities to his English-language reader, but assumes knowledge of them in his Russian-language reader (*Speak, Memory*, pp. 17–18; *Drugie berega*, p. 21). Where the liberalism of Nabokov's father is explained to the English-language reader, in the Russian-language text it is implicit in, for example, the good relationships between Nabokov's family and their servants. Growing up in a world of benevolent human relationships is a trope of the gentry memoir, and in *Drugie berega* it serves to undermine the view of the new Bolshevik government as a change for the better for most Russians. Passages on the Nabokov family servants are added to *Drugie berega* which are not present in *Conclusive Evidence* nor in *Speak, Memory* (*Drugie berega*, p. 34; p. 38). Since many of the additions to *Conclusive Evidence* that were made as Nabokov translated it to produce *Drugie berega* do survive into *Speak, Memory*, the omission of the passages on servants from the final version is significant. It suggests that Nabokov worries that mentions of domestic servants to his imagined Anglophone reader will situate his family as part of an oppressive class and disrupt the portrayal he is offering of his father's liberalism. Where Nabokov does make such allusions in the English versions he accompanies them with remarks that point up his family's kindness to their employees and the harsh treatment they would go on to suffer under Bolshevik rule (*Speak, Memory*, pp. 30–31; p. 58). By contrast, in *Drugie berega*, Nabokov does not usually explain to the reader that the lives of his family servants were much better before the October Revolution. Instead, he assumes a political memory of his family's liberalism and the often negative effects of the Bolshevik government on the lives of Russia's poor.

The political memory Nabokov ascribes to his Russian-language reader becomes even clearer through a comparison of references to Soviet violence in *Drugie berega* and *Speak, Memory*. In *Drugie berega*, Nabokov refers to early Soviet violence in ways that suggest he imagines the reader already knows about it and shares his view of it as abhorrent (*Drugie berega*, p. 18; p. 21). In *Conclusive Evidence* and even more so in *Speak, Memory*, by contrast, Nabokov seems to imagine a reader who is sceptical of his views on Bolshevik violence, because he deploys strategies to ward off readings of Russian history with which he disagrees. Lotman's essay on the importance of the addressee's memory is once more helpful here. Lotman describes a process where the author can address unknown readers as if they were known readers, as for example when Pushkin includes an allusion to an unpublished poem that only his close friends from school could have read. Lotman argues that this creates a kind of complicity between the author and his readers, because it places the readers in the position of people who know the author very well. By encoding a reader within the text who

²¹ Malikova, pp. 13–14.

is very close to the author, Pushkin might succeed in establishing a relationship with his real readers that is closer than it otherwise would have been.²²

Something of the converse of this process occurs in the final version of *Speak, Memory*. Whereas Pushkin projects the good memory of those close to him on to his readers, Nabokov projects the faulty memory of someone who has become distant from him on to his readership. He draws on his experience of disagreeing with Edmund Wilson over Russian history to imagine the response of his unknown readers to *Speak, Memory*. He then embeds a Wilsonian response to his text as a way of encouraging his readers to take their distance from it. This dynamic becomes visible through a comparison of the author's correspondence with Edmund Wilson and the text of *Speak, Memory*. In one letter, Nabokov sets out to correct Wilson's understanding of the period just after the October Revolution. This comes in the context of Wilson's horror at Stalin's use of violence. Nabokov writes:

What you now see as a change for the worse ('Stalinism') in the regime is really a change for the better in knowledge on your part. The thunderclap of administrative purges woke you up (something that the moans in Solovki or at the Lubyanka had not been able to do) since they affected men on whose shoulders St. Lenin's hand had lain. You (or Dos Passos, or Rahv) will mention with horror the names of Ezhov and Yagoda – but what about Uritsky and Derzhinsky?²³

Nabokov goes on to praise the 'fearless and independent judges' of pre-Revolutionary Russia, its 'liberal and progressive' public opinion, and the representation of different political parties in the Duma. He ends with the comment, 'I think I shall eventually polish this letter and publish it somewhere.' As Simon Karlinsky notes, a version of this passage did end up in *Speak, Memory*.²⁴ In Nabokov's comment at the end of the letter, his orientation towards the memory of a known addressee, Wilson, shifts and becomes an orientation towards unknown addressees, the readers of a published text.

When Nabokov addresses his unknown reader in *Speak, Memory*, he embeds the same kinds of points he makes to Wilson, but instead of addressing them to the reader directly, he ascribes the need for a Russian history lesson to a character from his university years. He calls this character 'Nesbit' in his younger years and 'Ibsen' in later life. The reversal of his name signals the reversal of his position on Soviet violence. Nabokov describes Nesbit's misunderstandings of Russian history in the following terms:

In the early twenties Nesbit had mistaken his own ebullient idealism for a romantic and humane something in Lenin's ghastly rule. Ibsen, in the days of the no less ghastly Stalin, was mistaking a quantitative increase in his own knowledge for a qualitative change in the Soviet regime. The thunder-clap of purges that had affected 'old Bolsheviks,' the heroes of his youth, had given him a salutary shock, something that in Lenin's day all the groans coming from the Solovki forced labor camp or the Lubyanka dungeon had not been able to do. With horror he pronounced the name of Ezhov and Yagoda – but quite forgot their predecessors, Uritsky and Dzherzhinsky. While time had improved his judgement regarding contemporaneous Soviet affairs, he

²² Lotman, pp. 84–86.

²³ *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940–1971*, rev. and exp. edn, ed. by Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), p. 222.

²⁴ *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya*, ed. by Simon Karlinsky, pp. 222–24.

did not bother to reconsider the preconceived notions of his youth, and still saw in Lenin's short reign a kind of *quinquennium Neronis*. (*Speak, Memory*, pp. 212–13)

Here, there is a difference between the way Nabokov imagines the reader and the reader who is encoded in the text. A comparison of *Drugie berega* and *Speak, Memory*, alongside the correspondence with Edmund Wilson, suggests that Nabokov was anxious that the readers of *Speak, Memory* would share Wilson's view of the early years of the Soviet regime. However, the reader who is addressed in this passage does not share what Nabokov sees as Wilson's misunderstanding. Rather, this misunderstanding is projected on to a character within the text and the encoded reader is someone who understands Nesbit/Ibsen's error. By addressing the reader as if he shares the author's view of early Soviet violence, even though he suspects this is not the case, Nabokov nudges his reader to occupy his own standpoint on this issue.

Nabokov's comments on the faultiness of Nesbit/Ibsen's memory links back to his remarks about the faultiness of his own memory quoted earlier. Like the inexperienced heraldist, Nesbit/Ibsen is mixed up about the origin of his perceptions; he thinks he is seeing the world, but he is only seeing what his own mind has projected. The solution to this problem is not greater access to information; all the information Nesbit would have needed to understand the nature of Lenin's regime was readily available ('groans coming from the Solovki forced labor camp'). When the same information reaches Ibsen in a different form (the people inflicting and enduring the suffering have different names, although the suffering itself is the same), he can see it. The re-arrangement of the letters of 'Nesbit' to form 'Ibsen' perhaps signals the nature of the revelation as a re-perception of the same elements in a different form. In this sense, Nesbit/Ibsen's relationship to the Russian past is an aesthetic problem as much as it is a problem of historical knowledge. The solution to such solipsism is the 'salutary shock' of seeing oneself as another, which is linked elsewhere in the text to the thrill of art (*Speak, Memory*, p. 177). This idea is embedded in the form of the text, because by depicting someone responding to Russian history as Nesbit does, Nabokov has his imagined reader see his own responses as if they belong to someone else. This idea is also present in Nabokov's double shift into the third person to speak about his own mistake with the family crest; where he appears first as an inexperienced heraldist and then as a medieval traveller. Together these passages suggest that solipsism is feared both in the self and in the reader, and that one solution to solipsism is seeing oneself as another through artful re-imaginings of one's own identity.

Comparison of approaches to history in the Russian and English-language versions of the text suggests that Nabokov seeks to establish an intersubjective practice of memory in his autobiographical writing by creating a text which engages closely with his imagined reader's existing literary and political memory. In *Drugie berega*, the reader's existing literary and political memory is a kind of resource the author draws on to express in plangent tones his rootedness in a world which no longer exists. The irony of this portrait depends on the reader's knowledge of the traditions it inscribes itself in and their disappearance. In the English-language version of the text, by contrast, the memory of Nabokov's imagined reader is a threat to his portrayal of his past. Rather than engaging with the reader's political and historical memory as a resource, he sets out to correct it by staging an encounter between his imagined reader and Nesbit/Ibsen, a textual version of that reader. This clearing of what Nabokov sees as an historical misunderstanding is a necessary prelude to the portrayal of timelessness, which the next section will examine.

Writing Timelessness

Just as Nabokov's engagement with the historical context of his life is intersubjective in its incorporation of the imagined reader's knowledge and memory into its form, so his portrayal of timelessness seeks a particularly close form of contact between the mind of the author and that of his reader. Nabokov both portrays his experiences of artistic play and seeks to engage the reader in a ludic relationship by structuring the text as a game the reader is invited to play, because the perception of timelessness is itself a form of play. Readers are unlikely to approach the text as a game spontaneously, so how does Nabokov engage his imagined reader in the playful perception of timelessness? In what follows, I look first at the 'thematic designs' which run through the text, and at the reasons for seeing them as a kind of game, before considering the devices Nabokov deploys to encourage the reader to play the game he has set up.

Nabokov gives his text a structure which expresses his experience of timelessness through the creation of 'thematic designs', sets of images which are dispersed throughout the text and can be brought together to form a kind of network. These images include rainbows, gardens and parks, trains and tunnels, butterflies, and nets, among others. Such networks lend the text a coherence arising from artistic consciousness, rather than chronology. The structure of the text acts as a portrayal of its author's mind, because the reader who perceives the thematic designs sees the kinds of connections the author's mind discerns in apparently random material. As well as this, the themes themselves are a series of images of artistic consciousness. Rainbows, produced by a ray of light changing its trajectory as it enters a new medium, offer an image of an exilic artistic consciousness, which produces beauty from a moment of fracture. The swerving path of a ray of light entering a prism echoes the knight's move, that metaphor for literary evolution which Nabokov first encountered in the work of Victor Shklovsky and which recurs throughout his writing as an image for the productively oblique moves of literary thinking under constraint. Rainbows are linked to literary creation in the autobiography, because the pavilion where Nabokov writes his first poem is described as 'a coagulated rainbow,' and Nabokov's narration of this event is intertextually related to Romantic poetry on rainbows (*Speak, Memory*, p. 167).²⁵ Rainbows are connected to the beginnings of Nabokov's creative life and they are also linked to his birth in his mother's room, where later he will play with her rainbow-coloured jewels and observe the coloured lights of the imperial street decorations through the window (*Speak, Memory*, p. 168; p. 22). As is well known by now, Nabokov left clues about the inter-related nature of the text's patterns in its index, where the entry for 'Colored Hearing' refers the reader to 'Stained Glass,' which in turn takes him to 'Jewels and Pavilion'. The thematic design of rainbows offers one example of the way such networks of imagery offer portrayals of artistic consciousness at the level of both content and form.

The master-theme which brings together all the thematic designs of the text is game-playing and puzzle-solving. Games and puzzles recur in the text from the young Nabokov's jigsaw puzzles with his mother, to his later fascination with chess puzzles, to the final lines of the text, which see him playing a kind of puzzle with his young son (*Speak, Memory*, p. 27; pp. 226–30; p. 243). Ludic activity offers an image of artistic consciousness because game-playing, like artistic perception, is connected to the fascination of discerning patterns, engaging with trickery, encountering the movements of another mind, and free assent to a set

²⁵ Gerard de Vries, 'Tiaras and Triads in *Speak, Memory*', *The Nabokovian*, 43 (1999), 29–35 (p. 32).

of constraints. Each of the themes is connected to play in some way: trains appear as toy trains; rainbows as the rainbow colours of the jewels Nabokov plays with; nets as butterfly nets and tennis rackets (*Speak, Memory*, p. 16; p. 22; p. 27). Game-playing and puzzle-solving are also the activities through which the thematic designs are created and perceived. In notes preserved amongst Nabokov's drafts of the first version of *Conclusive Evidence*, he jots down all the themes which run through the text. He then draws a diagram suggesting that the theme of games and puzzles is a kind of master-theme, shaping the reader's apprehension of the other themes present in the text.²⁶ This idea is also expressed in the posthumously published sixteenth chapter of the autobiography, which is disguised as a review of the text by another writer. Here Nabokov describes the structure of the text in the following way: 'There are some main lines and there are numerous subordinate ones, and all of them are combined in a way recalling chess compositions, riddles of various kinds, but tending to their chess apotheosis form' (*Speak, Memory*, p. 249). The form of the text is ludic; the imagined reader is invited to perceive the artist's mind at play by joining him in the game of perceiving thematic designs.

For the text to work in this way, readers need to see the text as a game, but they are unlikely to do so spontaneously. Philippe Lejeune's canonical 1975 definition of autobiography as 'un récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité', though formulated after the publication of *Speak, Memory*, nonetheless identifies the expectation that twentieth-century readers are likely to have of autobiography as a genre which offers a narrative of personality development, rather than a ludic portrayal of the simultaneity of different moments within the mind of the artist.²⁷ How then does Nabokov prompt the reader to play the game of the text? In what follows I look at three strategies he pursues. Firstly, he encourages his reader to reflect on what it means to read autobiography, and to approach the genre as he does. Secondly, he makes a degree of non-chronological reading necessary for an understanding of the literal sense of the text in its final version, suggesting that his commitment to a ludic relationship with the reader grows as time passes. Thirdly, he embeds an example of a failure to read in new ways. Together these strategies are designed to transmit to the imagined reader authorial expectations of his behaviour.

Very early on in all full-length versions of the autobiography, Nabokov tells an anecdote which acts as a springboard for an articulation of his view of how the genre should work. The anecdote is about a friend of his father's called Kuropatkin and it draws attention to the importance of thematic designs. Kuropatkin would do magic tricks with matches for Nabokov as a child and, many years later, he asked Nabokov's father for a light while dressed as a peasant as part of an attempt to escape from the Bolshevik authorities (*Conclusive Evidence*, pp. 8–9; *Drugie berega*, pp. 18–19; *Speak, Memory*, pp. 15–16). Nabokov writes: 'I hope old Kuropatkin, in his rustic disguise, managed to evade Soviet imprisonment, but that is not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme (...) The following of such thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography' (*Speak, Memory*, p. 16). Although Nabokov's comment above about 'the true purpose of autobiography' seems to describe authorial activity, it can also be read as a veiled instruction to readers to follow the thematic designs present within the text. This moment of the text fits Michael Sheringham's description of what happens when an autobiographer addresses the role of his imagined reader. Sheringham's formulation of the dynamic of such

²⁶ Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov Papers, Box 9.

²⁷ Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), p. 14.

moments clarifies how it is connected to an intersubjective, ludic form of memory in Nabokov's work. Sheringham writes that reflections on the role of the reader emerge 'when questions of methodology, protocol, intention, and disavowal are broached'.²⁸ Autobiographical reflections on the role of the reader lead to a form of imagined role reversal between author and reader. At such moments:

the writer temporarily disengages from the act of narration, as well as from the protagonist. Symmetrically, a potential mutation occurs in the reader's role. From being cast as the passive consumer of the tale, he or she is summoned to a certain vigilance about the prevailing conditions of reading. The writer vicariously crosses the boundary that separates writing from reading and tries to anticipate and incorporate in advance the reader's reception. Correspondingly, the reader has to cross over the other way and imagine what it was like to write the text – and what it would have been like to be concerned about its reception.²⁹

This disengagement from the act of narration is present in Nabokov's shift away from telling the anecdote to a discussion of its 'point'. Nabokov's reference to 'the true purpose of autobiography' alerts the reader to the question of method, as it suggests a felt authorial need to clear away possible misunderstandings among his readership about the nature of the genre. Even as this authorial anxiety leads to a kind of distancing of both author and reader from the material at hand, it opens a space for a potentially very close relationship between the two. As in Sheringham's description, Nabokov's implicit instructions on reading his text offer his imagined reader the opportunity to place himself in the position of the writer and vice versa. Here the imagined reader is encouraged to stand outside his own reading habits and consider them anew, just as the imagined reader who sees himself in Nesbit/Ibsen is offered the opportunity to see himself as another and so to see the world differently.

Real readers are of course always free to ignore the implicit instruction Nabokov gives early in the text and read from beginning to end without engaging in the kinds of combinatorial activity the text prompts. In the case of both *Conclusive Evidence* and *Drugie berega*, the reader who chooses not to follow the text's thematic designs will still be able to make sense of it. However, in the final version of the text, Nabokov includes sentences whose literal sense will be obscure unless the reader is willing to bring together distant parts of the text. This is especially the case in the sixth chapter of the autobiography, which is devoted to lepidoptery. Here, Nabokov portrays butterfly-hunting as a thread joining the different places in his life together. Where the shifts between languages in his writing speak of the tumult of history introducing dislocation into his authorial career, lepidoptery runs as one unbroken seam through his life (*Speak, Memory*, p. 95). Nabokov ends Chapter Six by making explicit the link between lepidoptery and timelessness:

I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness – in a landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. (*Speak, Memory*, p. 106)

²⁸ *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires: Rousseau to Perec* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 139.

²⁹ Sheringham, p. 139.

Nabokov makes changes to this chapter so that the interweaving of the concepts of pattern, superimposition and timelessness becomes more salient. In the final version, the reader must engage in recombination of the given chronology to make sense of the text at a literal level. To look at these changes and the effects they have I will examine the narration of the first sighting of the Swallowtail in *Conclusive Evidence*, *Drugie berega* and *Speak, Memory*. In *Conclusive Evidence*, the earliest full-length version of the autobiography, Nabokov's first sighting of the Swallowtail is narrated in the following sentence: 'On some honeysuckle near the veranda, I had happened to see a Swallowtail – a splendid, pale-yellow creature with black blotches and blue crenulations, and a cinnabar eyespot above each chrome-rimmed black tail.' (*Conclusive Evidence*, p. 80) Though this is the most straightforward of all the narrations of this moment, even here the adjective 'chrome-rimmed' fuses the period of Nabokov's childhood (before the invention of chrome plating) and his later American period, introducing a note of timelessness to the narrative perspective.³⁰ In the Russian version, Nabokov maintains the interweaving of child and adult perspectives and adds an evocation of the ecstasy this moment inspires in him. He writes: 'я увидел первого своего махаона – до сих пор аоническое обаяние этих голых гласных наполняет меня каким-то восторженным гулом!' (I saw my first Swallowtail – ever since the Aonian charm of those bare vowels fills me with a kind of rapturous murmur) (*Drugie berega*, p. 111) In *Drugie berega*, Nabokov draws on the aural potential of the Russian word for Swallowtail to link butterflies with art, desire and ecstasy. Assonance in 'ao' in the word for Swallowtail (махаон) and the word for Aonian (аоническое) creates a link between lepidoptery and art. This assonance is echoed by the assonance in 'яе' in the word for fills (наполняет) and charm (обаяние), so that the form of the sentence reinforces its evocation of a hum of ecstasy reverberating through the author's life.

Once this moment is re-translated from Russian to English, Nabokov loses the aural potential of the Russian word for Swallowtail. Faced with this loss of aural possibility, Nabokov does not revert to the plainer narration of *Conclusive Evidence*. Rather, he transposes the aural resonances he introduced into the Russian text into the visual realm. He rewrites the sighting of the Swallowtail in this way: 'My guiding angel (whose wings, except for the absence of a Florentine nimbus, resemble those of Fra Angelico's Gabriel) pointed out to me a rare visitor...' (*Speak, Memory*, p. 90). Nabokov's sister Elena had brought him a reproduction of Fra Angelico's c. 1450 painting of the Annunciation from the Panels for a Silver Case Painted for the Church of the Santissima Annunziata. Nabokov kept this reproduction on his writing-desk, where it bore notes about the resemblance between the angel and certain lepidoptera.³¹ The parenthetical comment suggests that Nabokov imagines his reader might respond to hints about the presence of several thematic designs in this moment of the narration. Since the angel's wings are imagined, it seems odd to specify that they lack a Florentine nimbus. For readers who have noticed the recurring reference to Florence, however, it links this moment of the text to Nabokov's parents' marriage (they spent their honeymoon in Florence) and to the moment Nabokov's mother learns her husband has been shot (she was reading a Blok poem on Florence at the time). Similarly, the reference to the appearance of the angel's wings adds another point to the thematic design of rainbows, as Fra Angelico's wings are striped in different colours. Because the painting plays on the opposition between the Garden of Eden invaded by sin, and the walled garden of the Virgin's womb, the reference to the painting also reinforces the body of images linked by the theme of

³⁰ Alfred Appel Jr, 'Remembering Nabokov', in *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, ed. by Peter Quennell (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), pp. 11–34 (pp. 13–14).

³¹ Dmitri Nabokov, 'On Revisiting Father's Room', in *Vladimir Nabokov: A Tribute*, ed. by Peter Quennell (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), pp. 126–36 (p. 127).

gardens and parks, which are at times safe havens from the turbulence of history and at times paradises invaded by disorder (*Speak, Memory*, p. 178; p. 180; p. 237).

Coming to an awareness of the many thematic networks present through the reference to the Fra Angelico painting enriches the reader's experience but is nonetheless optional, in that if readers happen not to know the painting or not to see its connections with other parts of the text, the narration of the first sighting of the Swallowtail will still make sense. In the same chapter, Nabokov also makes a revision to the final version where engaging in a degree of re-arranging of the text becomes necessary if the reader is to make sense of the narration on a literal level. He does this when telling of the fulfilment of a childhood ambition to name a new insect. In all versions, Nabokov writes how as a child he longed to discover a new variety of pug, and in *Drugie berega* and *Speak, Memory* he tells how, one night in Utah, he did discover an insect now known as Nabokov's Pug. He does not narrate this discovery in *Conclusive Evidence*, though he does hint that it happened (*Conclusive Evidence*, p. 90). The narration of the birth of this ambition is in the same position in each of the versions.

However, the narration of the actual discovery of Nabokov's Pug is not in the same place in *Speak, Memory* as it is in *Drugie berega*. In *Drugie berega*, it comes just before the chapter's final declaration, where Nabokov says that he does not believe in time (*Conclusive Evidence*, p. 92; *Drugie berega*, p. 126; *Speak, Memory*, p. 106). In the Russian version, therefore, the discovery's position at the end of the chapter suggests that the whole chapter has been building towards this moment of culmination and fulfilled longing. It also acts as a clear bridge into Nabokov's proclamation of disbelief in time. In *Speak, Memory*, by contrast, the discovery of Nabokov's Pug is described earlier in the chapter, at the beginning of the third section, so that the first-time reader encounters it before Nabokov tells us that as a child he dreamed of discovering a new kind of pug. By the time we reach the description of his childish efforts to discover something new, his embarrassment when his attempts are dismissed is softened by the reader's knowledge that when he writes this, he has been accepted amongst the scientific community and has had a discovery ratified by his colleagues (*Speak, Memory*, p. 102). By having the later triumph run through the whole narration of his lifelong fascination with butterflies, Nabokov deepens the a-chronology of the chapter, making the disbelief in time it expresses part of its very structure.

In fact, Nabokov adds new anecdotes to *Speak, Memory* about humiliating moments of being told he was wrong by famous entomologists, as if to further point up the contrast between his schoolboy failures and adult successes. This contrast emphasizes the gap between Nabokov's child and adult-selves but it also emphasizes the gap between the author and one of the readers he disapproves of. The narration of a whole series of failures which is added to this part of *Speak, Memory* contains a veiled reference to Edmund Wilson. When narrating his attempts to capture a rare butterfly, Nabokov has a sentence where he compares his own failures to those of other figures:

You have heard champion tennis players moan after muffing an easy shot. You may have seen the face of the world-famous grandmaster Wilhelm Edmundson when, during a simultaneous display in a Minsk café, he lost his rook, by an absurd oversight, to the local amateur and pediatrician, Dr Schach, who eventually won. But that day nobody (except my older self) could see me shake out a piece of twig from an otherwise empty net and stare at a hole in the tarlatan. (*Speak, Memory*, p. 101)

As Susan Elizabeth Sweeney points out, Wilhelm Edmundson stands for Edmund Wilson. The mention of a 'simultaneous display' here hints that the words might have another meaning, and the 'white W' on the butterfly's underside earlier in the passage points to the presence of Wilson. Nabokov repeats a version of this joke in the 1969 novel *Ada or Ardor*:

A Family Chronicle, explains it in ‘Notes to Ada’ and directs the reader to its presence in this passage of *Speak, Memory*.³² As in the Nesbit/Ibsen passage and the passage about ‘the true purpose of autobiography’, the reader is here confronted with an image of what it means to read well and badly. Readers who see the allusion to Wilson will know that the image of Wilhelm Edmundson losing his rook is an image of bad reading, but even readers who do not decipher the allusion will know that chess and reading are linked in Nabokov’s thought from comments he makes elsewhere in *Speak, Memory* (*Speak, Memory*, pp. 227–28). As in the Nesbit/Ibsen passage, these images of failure offer guidance on what reading well means to Nabokov. Each of these failures is a form of missed contact, which reinforces the sense of reading well as a move beyond solipsism to enter a full relationship with the world or with another mind. The presence of the thematic design of nets in the tennis racket and the butterfly net reinforces the portrayal of artistic consciousness as a kind of reticulate structure where the artist’s mind is bound to others through links extending outwards in all directions. The hole in the butterfly net that allows the butterfly to escape and leaves the young Nabokov holding a twig speaks of the breaks in the links between self, others and world that occur when forms of play break down. At such moments, the artist, the lepidopterist, and the player of chess and tennis, finds his relationship to the world impoverished rather than enriched.

Nabokov’s relationship with Wilson informs his ambivalent relationship to his imagined English-language reader. The hostility and defensiveness present in the way Nabokov addresses the Anglophone reader seems to be rendered more acute by the tantalising possibility that the imagined reader could be made to see the world and the text as Nabokov wishes. Wilson’s twin role as an artistic collaborator and catastrophic mis-reader appears to heighten Nabokov’s sense of the great promise and great risk of his relationship with the reader. Seeing the text as ludic offers a way into the ambivalent relationship between the author and his imagined reader, as the setter of a puzzle both desires the freedom of the solver to play the game, while constraining him to see only through lenses created by someone else. Though the ways in which Nabokov addresses the reader shift as he moves between languages, the presence of devices which suggest a concern with the imagined reader’s existing memory remains constant. So, too, does the counter-intuitive understanding of memory as a return to the new, as Nabokovian memory works on the assumption that there are elements of the past which have been perceived but not seen. Encounters with other people allow the self to see those elements of the world which they barely perceive or mis-perceive due to solipsism. This dynamic is present in several ways: in the genesis of the text which is shaped by discussions with family members; in depictions of the author’s own solipsism and moves beyond it; in the efforts to bring his Anglophone readers to a new way of seeing Russian history, and in the quest to lead all readers to a ludic approach to the text. Autobiography’s promise of an intersubjective expression of memory is always threatened by the imagined reader’s tendency to mistake the self for the world, which means that Nabokov’s engagement with his reader is fuelled by attraction and fear, aggression and desire.

³² Susan Elizabeth Sweeney, ‘Sinistral Details: Nabokov, Wilson, and *Hamlet* in *Bend Sinister*’, *Nabokov Studies*, 1 (1994), 179–95 (pp. 192–93).