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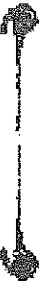
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his *Onegin* is more complex than “periphrastic translation at its most extreme” (Meyer’s phrase), and I expect that further work will reveal a still deeper organic relationship between the two works.

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Nabokov and Benjamin: A Late Modernist Response to History

Will Norman
Oxford University

Nabokov and Benjamin? Such has been the novelist’s enduring influence over scholarship on his work that a pairing like this seems unusual, if not perverse. Scholars have tended to follow Nabokov’s lead in limiting comparative critical enquiry to those writers who receive his endorsement or who are subject to intertextual allusion. Few have been willing to transgress on Nabokov’s taboos by linking him to historically specific cultural formations, or even to writers and theoretical schools who attracted his disapproval. Walter Benjamin, a literary critic with interests in both Marxist and Freudian theory, unites two of Nabokov’s greatest bugbears and so, unsurprisingly, has received little attention from Nabokov scholars.¹ Despite their considerable ideological differences, these two writers share more than a historical location. They also share a response to the idea of history which emerges from the European modernist aesthetics which fascinated them both.

Both Nabokov and Benjamin return compulsively to the frozen image rather than the continuous narrative in their dealings with the past. Indeed, Benjamin claims that “history breaks down into images, not into stories” (*The Arcades Project* 476), while Nabokov claims to “think in images” (*Speak, Memory* 14). Benjamin’s metaphorical “breaking down” is also Nabokov’s strategy in his temporally disrupted autobiography, patterned by images both literary and photographic. Both writers deploy the idea of the fragment, or isolated image, in forming a constellation of the past. The constellation, a meaningful pattern, is organized and interpreted according to subjective experience rather than the impersonal forces of the historical. Its effect is a short-circuiting of historical time which stalls what in Benjamin’s terminology, would be called the dialectic process of history. My aim in reading these two writers together is not

¹ Two scholars who have mentioned Benjamin briefly in relation to Nabokov (mainly in order to assert their differences) are Dolinin (202-3) and Foster (88-90).

simply to suggest convergences, however illuminating these may be. The point at which ideological differences assert themselves within their respective aesthetics tells us much about the same desire for autonomous textual control which leads Nabokov to disavow influence on his work. In reading the autobiography *Speak, Memory* (1967) and the short story "Posebchenie muzeya" ("The Visit to the Museum" 1939), I wish to use Benjamin as a correlative which puts Nabokov's historical anxiety into relief, and exposes those moments at which fissures appear in his apparently unassailable mastery over temporality.

Firstly, to outline some of the historical, geographical, social and aesthetic elements which Nabokov and Benjamin had in common. "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" and "On the Concept of History," the two of Benjamin's essays which I draw on most heavily, were written during the first five months of 1940 in Paris, at a time when Nazi forces were preparing for an invasion that would take the French capital in June, and ultimately lead to Benjamin's death later in the year. These same historical events were also the ones which forced Nabokov to flee a country for the third time in his life, this time for America. "The Visit to the Museum" was written in 1939, also in Paris, while *Speak, Memory*, although mostly composed in the USA between 1946 and 1950, is a work continuously overshadowed by its author's knowledge of several dictators—not only Stalin, but also Hitler. Nabokov's and Benjamin's histories occupy surprisingly similar locations. While Benjamin lived and worked in Weimar Germany between the wars, scraping together a living from writing short journalistic pieces and from the generosity of his parents, Nabokov resided in Berlin, leading a similarly precarious existence based on journal publication, as well as occasional teaching and his wife's income. Benjamin's and Vera Nabokov's Jewish background meant that, for both parties, the growing anti-Semitism and rise of the Nazi party in the early thirties exerted a political and ideological pressure on their material and social existence. Benjamin left for Paris in 1933, Nabokov in 1937. The life that awaited them there was barely more secure, both again relying on piecemeal publication, and the support of their respective émigré communities for survival. In addition to this, Nabokov and Benjamin also shared interests in the modernist art of Baudelaire,

Proust and Kafka. These literary interfaces show how, despite radically different ideological perspectives, they participated in the same cultural phenomenon, one of a late modernist obsession with high modernist literature. Both regarded temporal aesthetics as a key to the production of meaning within those texts. Given their common geography, social circumstance and literary affinities, it should not strike us as surprising that they took parallel steps in reformulating a temporal perspective that aimed to redeem the present through the active reorganization of the past; that regarded the received notion of the linear progression of history as destructive and barbaric.

Benjamin's formulation of a constellated historical model finds its fullest expression in one of the last pieces he wrote, "On the Concept of History" was written shortly after "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in late April or early May 1940. He told a number of correspondents that the piece was motivated by the experience of his generation in the years leading up to the war, an experience that, as I argue above, was shared in several respects by Nabokov, who was just seven years his junior. In a real sense, these theses are the culmination of much of Benjamin's life's work; "I have kept them safe for almost twenty years," he wrote to Gretel Adorno. "Indeed, I have kept them safe from myself" (*Selected Writings* Vol. 4, 440).²

The principle, which he calls either "historical materialism" or "materialistic historiography" emerges from the historian who "stops telling the sequence of events like the beads on a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (397). This expressed distinction between linear historicism and a constellated historical vision becomes the hallmark of Benjamin's idea, as in this passage from thesis XVII, which captures the essential methodology:

Universal history has no theoretical armature. Its method is additive; it musters a mass of data to fill the homogeneous, empty time. Materialistic historiography, on the other hand, is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the flow of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a

² For biographical and contextual material surrounding the composition of "On the Concept of History" see "Chronology, 1938-1940" in *Selected Writings* Vol. 4, 440-41.

shock, by which it crystallizes into a monad. A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only when he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogenous course of history. (396)

The language of violence, struggle and revolution may seem to distance this model from the fragmentation and patterning found in Nabokov, and particularly *Speak, Memory*. This is symptomatic of the respective authors' variant ideological perspectives rather than their methodology. In fact, is it not exactly this disruption of linear, public or, using Benjamin's phrase, "universal" history that Nabokov tries to achieve in the formal, organizing strategy of his autobiography?³ Nabokov, like Benjamin, takes as his weapon the incidental, the apparently inconsequential detail or image and, by careful arrangement with others of its kind, deploys it in a kind of guerrilla sortie against the mechanized onslaught of history. The martial imagery I use here is not incidental, as this episode from chapter one of *Speak, Memory* shows. The anecdote is as follows: A friend of Nabokov's father, General Kuropatkin, shows the young Nabokov a trick using matches to depict the sea in calm and then rough weather. He is interrupted by the news that he is to lead the Russian army against the Japanese in the 1905 war. Fifteen years later, during the flight from the Bolsheviks, Nabokov's father is asked for a light by a peasant, who turns out to be Kuropatkin. The "match theme" is explicitly shown to anticipate, survive, and even partake in the destruction of the military forces:

I hope Old Kuropatkin, in his rustic disguise, managed to evade Soviet imprisonment, but

³ The autobiography provides an ideal form for Benjamin's model of a consiliated past. In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin explains that "what Baudelaire meant by *correspondances* can be described as an experience which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form" (333). This idea of experience transformed so as to protect itself against history is strikingly applicable to *Speak, Memory*. Benjamin is insistent on the distinction between personal past and impersonal history: "*Correspondances* are the data of recollection—not historical data, but the data of pre-history" (334). This too recalls Nabokov's own efforts to organize his autobiography in clusters of remembered images rather than a linear historical chronology.

that is not the point. What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme: those magic ones he had shown me had been trilled with and mislaid, and his arniees had also vanished, and everything had fallen through, like the toy trains that, in the winter of 1904-5, in Weisbaden, I had tried to run over the frozen puddles in the grounds of the hotel Oranien. (23)

Hovering over this passage is an earlier detail, of pictures by Japanese artists showing how Russian trains would drown if their Army tried to lay rails across the ice of Lake Baikal. In other words, history is shown here to be implicated in martial violence and mechanization, then is literally derailed—its progress halted, its executors failed—while the pattern of images survives intact and static.

There are many such instances in *Speak, Memory*. This autobiography has been broken into fragments by historical interruptions, the biggest of which is the Russian revolution which separates Nabokov's idyllic (and, as he presents it to us, *timeless*) childhood from the fragility and privations of his adult existence in Europe, dominated by historical forces beyond his control. The constellations in *Speak, Memory* are those patterns which attempt, like the "match theme," to bypass history, short-circuiting its torturous logic. A typical example comes in chapter nine, that in which Nabokov addresses the difficult topic of his father, assassinated by Russian monarchists in 1922. Once more history is the violent force which threatens the existence of the personal past, and once more it is the constellation which resists its destructiveness. In this passage Nabokov remembers his father's library:

When the Soviet revolution made it imperative for us to leave St Petersburg, that library disintegrated, but queer little remnants of it kept cropping up abroad. Some twelve years later, I picked up from a bookstall one such waif, bearing my father's *ex-libris*. Very fittingly, it turned out to be *The War of the Worlds* by Wells. And after another decade had elapsed, I discovered one day in the New York Public Library, indexed under my father's name, a copy of the neat catalogue he had had privately printed when the phantom books listed therein still stood, ruddy and sleek, on his shelves. (141-2)

This is a particularly illustrative example of the constellated method, because of its emphasis on literary, *textual* resistance. There is an unanswered question here, about the precarious balancing act which this passage claims to perform: is the plotting of these textual coordinates—the writing of this anecdote—which brings our attention precisely to the absence of those “sleek, ruddy” books, enough to compensate for their loss to history? The catalogue, the purpose of which is to reassure us that its contents exist beyond their textual form, is forced to redirect itself away from its lost referents towards a self-conscious metaliterary function. The only book which might serve to cheat history of its prize lies solidly in our hands, and it is Nabokov’s autobiography to which this catalogue really refers.

For both Benjamin and Nabokov, the reclaiming of the past in a constellated form, and its constant refocusing towards the present instant, is part of a project aiming to *redeem* the past. Once more, Benjamin’s mystical, religious rhetoric should not necessarily prevent us from viewing these two writers together as sharing a late modernist response to the historical. Benjamin writes in “On the Concept of History” that “the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption” (245), the very Nabokovian idea that every event contains its own potential remembrance; that every remembered episode in *Speak, Memory* anticipates Nabokov’s later writing of it, as in the climax of chapter ten when the young Nabokov watches the sunset, “my own tomorrow ready to be delivered to me” (166). Benjamin goes on to explain his idea more fully:

Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history. To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of his past—which is to say, only a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments. (246)

The insistence on the continued existence of the past in its fullness is also found in Nabokov, most explicitly at the conclusion of the short story “*Krug*,” (“The Circle” 1934), written at the very outset of the autobiographical project: “Suddenly Innokenty grasped a wonderful fact: nothing is lost, nothing whatever; memory accumulates treasures...” (384). Benjamin’s assertion here goes further: the act of “citing” the past—a specifically textual term—is inextricably bound

up with the idea of redemption. For Benjamin, who seems to refer here to the lexicon of Jewish mysticism, this redemption carries connotations of freedom from sin, as well as the more secular meaning of salvage or rescue. One is reminded of his alternative explanation of the “Messianic cessation of happening,” that is “a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.” The past, then, can be retrospectively salvaged from effacement by history through its citation as part of the constellated model. The interesting fact here is that Nabokov uses the same term, “redemption,” in *Speak, Memory*, precisely at that moment when history swallows his personal past, and at the moment when his attempt at recollection comes up against the same historical crisis which enveloped Benjamin as he wrote “On the Concept of History” in 1940. Having struggled awkwardly with the topic of his brother Sergey, Nabokov recalls their last few years together, before he departed for America, leaving his sibling behind:

He was arrested, accused of being a “British spy” and sent to a Hanburg concentration camp where he died of inanition, on 10 January 1945. It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something—compassion, understanding, no matter what—which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem. (199)

For Nabokov too, redemption is a textual act—an act of citation responding to a past under threat of effacement. We only discover this when it doesn’t work, as in this case, when the tone of *Speak, Memory* unexpectedly deviates from its usual self-confidence and momentarily touches on despair. Just as he does when finally confronting the facts of his father’s political assassination (138), Nabokov falls back on conventional chronology here, culminating in the strange precision of the date of death. Unlike his dealings with Vladimir Dmitrievich, however, there is no attempt at creating a constellation across the text which might compensate for the loss to history. Although Sergey features at various points in *Speak, Memory* (the index lists seventeen instances), his appearances are brief, dull and incidental. He is not assimilated into the patterning of the work, or found to coincide with its many thematic and symbolic structures. He is rather isolated, unreadable, and therefore uncitable.

It is Nabokov’s particular approach to the problem of the death

that leads us into a deeper understanding of the way his constellating method works and of what its breakdown entails.

Whenever in my dreams I see the dead, they always appear silent, bothered, strangely depressed, quite unlike their dear, bright selves . . . they sit apart, frowning, as if death were a dark taint, a shameful family secret. It is certainly not then — not in dreams — but when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits. . . . (41)

This is one of the clearest of a number of statements Nabokov makes, which differentiate his methodology from that of Proust.⁴ If both writers are drawn to the evocation of the past through obscured patterns and correspondences, Nabokov's dedication to the effort of will and active consciousness in creating this constellation is at odds with Proust's celebrated "*mémoire involontaire*," which Nabokov describes in his lectures as an "act of intuition, of memory, of involuntary associations" (*Lectures on Literature* 208).⁵ In this quote, Nabokov's description of the dead coincides with the role of Sergey in the autobiography—dull, joyless, but, most significantly, isolated. The conscious effort required to form the constellation is one of *reading*, the forging of connections between disparate signs, between apparently unconnected moments in the past. This metaphor which likens the past to a text to be deciphered will not be unfamiliar to Nabokov readers and scholars, who have often interpreted his novels according to the model of a riddle or puzzle to be solved. However, the importance of Nabokov's *own* conscious effort, or even strain, involved in the process of constellating and citing the past—and the possibility of failure—have been seriously underestimated.

At this point Benjamin once again provides us with the opportunity for a new insight into Nabokov's strategy. During his career Benjamin developed various symbolic figures to represent some of the problems

associated with the modern response to the historical. "The Brooder" (*Der Gribler*) first appeared in *Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1928), and later became an important concept in his *Arcades Project*. As one of Benjamin's commentators describes him,

The brooder is to be taken above all as a *puzzling* figure . . . driven by an unarticulated but nevertheless compelling sense that fragments of experience, rearranged in some lost, but nonarbitrary construction, might spell out some large structure of experience. This tormented sense of occluded significance indwelling in apparently the most insignificant things is a special form of memory. . . . (Pensky 170)

The element of puzzling is emphasized by Benjamin when he writes that

The brooder's memory ranges over the indiscriminate mass of dead lore. Human knowledge, within this memory, is something piecemeal—in an especially pregnant sense: it is like the jumble of deliberately cut up pieces from which a puzzle is assembled. (*The Arcades Project* 368)

Brooding is then primarily an activity by which past experience is actively reshaped by the subject in an attempt to read it—to assign to it some meaning. The relationship between the fragments is always occluded, and therefore invites being construed as a puzzle (which suggests a particularly spatial comprehension). For Benjamin, brooding is an inherently fruitless process. As a conscious activity, presided over by the rational subject, projected solutions can only be partially applicable, and the brooder is incapable of bringing about that moment of redemption when "the past becomes citable in *all* its moments" (my italics). If we now reintroduce Nabokov's distinction between his own creative memory and Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, it is clear where Benjamin believes the possibility of redemption lies. As he writes in "On the Image of Proust" (1929), *mémoire involontaire* is "a painful shock," "the rejuvenating force which is a match for the inexorable process of aging" (244) and therefore a crucial weapon in the fight against linear temporality. Its "actualization" remains outside the control of the subject, thereby making redemption itself

⁴ This conscious differentiation is necessitated by the considerable parallels in temporal aesthetics between *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *Speak, Memory*. Morau gives a detailed comparative analysis.

⁵ Foster (86) makes a similar point concerning the distinction between Proust's *mémoire involontaire* and Nabokov's act of will.

a matter of chance, while the data of *mémoire involontaire* "are lost to the memory that seeks to retain them" ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" 333).⁶ At one point in his essay on Proust, Benjamin even reverses Nabokov's own argument, which pits the dreary dream world against the "highest terrace of consciousness." He suggests that, reading *À la recherche*, we become like daydreamers in our perception of occluded patterns and resemblances:

The similarity of one thing to another which we are used to, which occupies us in a wakeful state, reflects only vaguely the deeper resemblance of the dream world in which everything that happens appears not in identical but in similar guise, opaquely similar to each other. (239)

According to Benjamin then, Nabokov's conscious processing and coding of the past—his *active* reading—would consign him to the realm of the brooder who will endlessly sift through the fragments and images of experience and reconstruct them as puzzles designed to divulge the occluded meaning of the past. At the conclusion to *Speak, Memory* it becomes quite

clear that Nabokov intends this puzzle to lead away from the tyranny of the historical, embodied in the advance of Hitler across France, and into artistic freedom, his new life in America. Leading his wife and child through a park in St Nazaire, on their way to board their ship to New York, Nabokov sees, through the houses and buildings of the dock, the liner itself: "something we did not immediately point out to our child, so as to enjoy in full the blissful shock, the enchantment and glee he would experience on discovering . . ." He calls this game, which involves deciphering an organic whole from fragments, "as something in a scrambled picture," "Find What the Sailor Has Hidden," a constellated pattern "that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen" (237). The puzzle is the motif with which Nabokov chooses to end his autobiography, and is the model he has employed

as a structuring device throughout. It is tempting to believe, certainly at *this* point, that his design has been an entirely successful one, and that his consciously produced configuration of themes and motifs does constitute, as scholars like Boyd and Alexandrov would have it, an integrated aesthetic whole which escapes from time and from history.⁷ What is perhaps more telling though, are the moments at which the schema breaks down, and isolated fragments remain unassimilated by the puzzler, as Benjamin insists they inevitably will. According to his model, Proust's *mémoire involontaire* is a remembering in order to forget—"much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory" ("On the Image of Proust" 238). How appropriate then that Sergey, history's victim, should haunt Nabokov's autobiography as the unforgettable and yet unactable, his vision of the stumbling figure left behind, "one of those galling pictures that revolves on and on in one's mind" (160).

Before moving on to an examination of Nabokov's 1939 short story, "The Visit to the Museum," there is one last detail from *Speak, Memory* which serves as a way into my concluding analysis. The figure of Sergey, who represents a lacuna in Nabokov's conscious efforts at reading and coding the past, is described as holding a particular interest while holidaying in Bad Kissingen in 1910:

My brother loved the museum of wax figures in the Arcade off the Unter der Linden—Friedrich's grenadiers, Bonaparte communing with a mummy, young Liszt, who composed a rhapsody in his sleep, and Marat, who died in a shoe; (159)

The list of apparently random objects or people is a recurring motif in Nabokov's fiction, one that

¹ Boyd and Alexandrov are deeply interested in temporal aesthetics in *Speak, Memory*, but only in so far as its manipulation by Nabokov provides a route into transcendence of mortality and what Boyd calls "human time" (*The American Years* 164). Both scholars, in their metaphysical readings, underestimate the way that the text of *Speak, Memory* undermines Nabokov's numerous professions of having defated time and freed himself from its "prison" (*Speak, Memory* 18). They view Nabokov's pronouncements, in the work itself and elsewhere, as being seamlessly compatible with his literary practice. Alexandrov's long chapter on *Speak, Memory* in *Nabokov's Otherworld* is largely made up of transferring statements from his lectures, such as "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" into the textual world of the autobiography, reading them unproblematically side by side and eliding the difference between Nabokov's statements on aesthetics and his textual practice (23-

invites careful inspection and deciphering if the reader is to discover one of the constellations which resists linear reading and suggests the possibility of extra-temporal interpretation. One might think, for example, of the lists of names and places in *Loftia* which disclose to us the omnipresent Quilty. The interesting thing about this list is that, rather than lifting us out of history, it plunges us into it. This is not the pleasant, Bergsonian, baptismal flow of time which Nabokov refers to in his first chapter—"a radiant and mobile medium that was none other than the pure element of time" (19), but rather a nightmare historical time, of political tyranny, war and murder. The figures among whom Sergey is placed in the museum form an unsettling group. Emperor Friedrich I of Prussia, probably known to Nabokov through Carlyle's famous biography of his son, was a notorious autocrat and militarist who devoted considerable effort to forming the "giant grenadiers," a division made up of the most formidable men who could be found in the Empire, and who accompanied his coffin to its resting place at his state funeral. Napoleon, already associated with historical time through the battle scene evoked in chapter one, is another famous militarist and tyrant. Marat, famous for his incitement to violence in the French revolution, approved of the September 1792 massacres of

57). He thus asserts it as a "given" that "Nabokov did find ways to escape time" (40). Boyd performs a similar manoeuvre when he adopts Nabokov's own voice in restating the author's public position in regard to time and art, citing the achievement of *Speak, Memory* as evidence that "On the wings of art, we can almost fly the prison aisle of the present" (*The Russian Years* 314).

jailed "enemies of the Revolution" and established the "Committee of Surveillance" whose role was to root out anti-revolutionaries. Marat composed the death lists from which the innocent and the guilty alike were executed.⁸ Although Nabokov presents them quite innocuously, these figures taken together suggest an anxiety which unites the troubled figure of Sergey (elsewhere found clutching a bust of Napoleon [1981] with a bleak, fragmented vision of modern European history based on brutality and violence. That Sergey should particularly enjoy *this* museum, with *these* exhibits, is perverse in itself, given his eventual

⁸ It seems likely that the connective subtexts here are Carlyle's two famous works, *The French Revolution* (1837) and *History of Friedrich the Great* (1858-1865). Carlyle is mentioned with approval several times in Nabokov's writings, for example in his lecture on *Black House* where *The French Revolution* is described as "that magnificent work" (*Lectures on Literature* 81).

fate in a Nazi concentration camp. For the purposes of this discussion, though, the locus of this anxiety is crucial.

The museum, after all, presents a distorted, material version for Nabokov's (and Benjamin's) constellated model of the past—a model which transforms time into space. Boyd has pointed out Nabokov's frustration at the paradox which has it that multi-directional travel should be possible in space but not in time (*Russian Years* 294). The museum is in this sense a literalisation of a Nabokovian fantasy, an opportunity for the visitor to revisit diverse points in time with the effortlessness with which we normally traverse space. It is also a place where history is frozen into static images and fragments, and where the visitor is invited to read, to interpret and forge connections between several temporally discrete moments in time. The question which needs to be answered is then why the museum should here be crowded with such violence, from the direction of the future, where Sergey's fate awaits him, and from the past where an era of European history claims the lives of thousands. The problem is the way that the museum represents a public locus, and therefore a public, official history which subordinates individual histories to the interests of power just as Marat, Napoleon and Friedrich did. When we read these tyrants, there is no personal pattern of individual past to dazzle us, no "Find What the Sailor Has Hidden." In the locus of the museum, Nabokov's own aesthetics are turned against him, and the search for occluded meaning transpires to frustrate, to lead back into history and space where, to quote another part of *Speak, Memory*: "spirals become vicious circles again" (231), and may even, as in the case I now examine, judder back into motion to reveal a nightmare present.

It is in the old arcades of pre-war Europe that Sergey finds his waxwork museum, and also where Walter Benjamin found the inspiration for his gigantic, unfinished opus, *The Arcades Project*. This eclectic and idiosyncratic work deploys the tools of literary and art criticism to an essentially historicist end, Benjamin believing that it was here, in the outdated and disused arcades of the nineteenth century that his constellated history might be constructed out of the disregarded fragments of modern urban life. The brief essay "Passagen" ("Arcades," 1927), possibly composed with the help of Franz Hessel, Benjamin's fellow translator of Proust, is the

only completed extant text from the earliest period of work on *The Arcades Project* (871). It tells us much about the initial vision of the work which ensued, and also provides an illuminating correlative for Nabokov's own descent into public history in "A Visit to the Museum." "Arcades" is a narrative in form, one which tells of the narrator's exploration of the Passage de l'Opéra, "one of the oldest arcades in the city," at the point of its being "swallowed up" by the opening of the Boulevard Haussmann, symbol of the modernized Paris. The arcade is described as "a past become space," enacting precisely that conversion of dimensions which Proust and Nabokov both perform in their works. Once inside the arcade the observing narrator catalogues object after object, each resolutely isolated; collectively tormenting the narrator with the potential, just out of reach, for conclusive meaning; the merchandise is "unintelligible, or else has several meanings," and the "insistent letterings want to say more," but don't (871). As the narrator continues, a sense of disquiet and of disorientation manifests itself, as exits become indistinguishable from entrances, and doorways lead to places other than those signposted. The objects themselves, souvenirs and bibelots, "take on a hideous aspect" as the proliferation of fragments refuses to cohere: "manuals for lovmaking beside devotional prints in color," and the familiar figure of Napoleon "between cookbook and dreambook." As the piece begins to draw to a conclusion, Benjamin seems to fall into a way of assimilating these alien objects, though a surrealist method of allowing each one to take on the characteristics of another, blurring the distinctions between them and robbing them of their isolated individuality. Thus "if a shoemaker's shop should be a neighbor to a confectioner's, then his festoons of bootlaces will resemble licorice" while "combs swim about, frog green and coral red." Benjamin's appeal to this implied ordering by the unconscious should not surprise us, given his approval of Proust's anti-intentionalism. There remains, however, an ambiguous tension in "Arcades", which is augmented by the sense of relief as the narrator, avoiding the temptation of a blind alley, emerges into "the street to the triumphal gate that, gray and glorious, was built in honour of Louis the Great" (872). The suggestion is that Benjamin's surrealist approach involves these fragments of the past cohering into their own,

given order, rather than, as at the beginning of the essay, having it imposed upon them by the observer. And yet Benjamin's exploration of this cultural space is decidedly inconclusive, and even unsettling. Retrospectively, given the grandiose rhetoric of "On the Concept of History," this excursion into a spatialised past offers no "monad"—no constellation of meaning which might "blast open the continuum of history." There is instead a sense of uncertainty over the role of the interpreting subject: what exactly is this process of translating the cultural past? . . . what part does anamnestic creativity play in that process? . . . and how comfortable is it really, this disorientating, spatialized world of the past?

Nabokov's "The Visit to the Museum" belongs to a group of stories written in Russian in Paris in 1938, which provide an unusual perspective on Nabokov's historical anxiety.⁹ These pieces seem to confront directly the historical and personal crisis which enveloped Nabokov in the year preceding the outbreak of war and his flight to the United States, consciously addressing the threat of totalitarianism and violence with an immediacy only matched by *Bend Sinister*. "The Visit to the Museum" also shares a set of concerns with Benjamin's "Arcades," in its transformation of time into space, and its narrator / observer, who becomes disoriented in his struggle to decipher the meaning suggested by diverse fragments of cultural history. As with Benjamin's essay, this first-person narrator plays an ambiguous but crucial role as subject in the quest to decode historical data. Both fall into the categories of the *flâneur* and the émigré, individuals without affiliation who enter their cultural spaces idly, ostensibly by chance and without declared intention.¹⁰ Nabokov gives us a brief background

⁹ I use "*flâneur*" primarily in its conventional sense of "idler" or "loafer." Although they share some interesting characteristics, I agree with Dolinn (202-3) that Nabokov's and Benjamin's idlers differ in their respective positions in relation to the urban crowd.

loathsome to me" (227). He finds himself however, wandering about the town in question during a sudden rain storm and takes shelter in the museum, thus deciding to enter on a whim. While Benjamin clearly draws on the notion of the Baudelairean *flâneur*, on whom he had written so much, Nabokov also suggests a figure consciously divorcing himself from the crowds, disdainful of purposeful activity, and ultimately defining himself in opposition to the bourgeois (for what, in 1938, could be more bourgeois than tourism, and the checking off of "sights"?). Both Benjamin's and Nabokov's *flâneurs* are, however, drawn into paradigmatically bourgeois locales. Benjamin's narrator escapes uneasily from the inaugural ceremony of one of the new arcades, in a passage which deserves quotation for its evocation of civic pride and pomp in the modernizing advance of its society, alongside consumer frenzy:

For its inaugural ceremony, a monster orchestra in uniform performed in front of flower beds and flowing fountains. The crowd broke, groaning, over sandstone thresholds and moved along before planes of plate glass, saw artificial rain fall on the copper entrails of late-model autos as a demonstration of the quality of the materials, saw wheels turning round in oil, read on small black plaques, in paste-jewel figures, the prices of leather goods and gramophone records and embroidered kimonos. (871)

Nabokov's narrator also suffers the indignity of the crowds, in the form of a rowdy group of youths, "members of some rural athletic association" (281), but it is the process of visiting the museum itself which is most associated with hollow bourgeois civic virtue. On asking the custodian about one of the exhibits, he receives this reply:

"Science has not yet determined," he replied, undoubtedly having learned the phrase by rote. "They were found," he continued in the same phony tone, "in 1895, by Louis Pradier, Municipal Councillor and Knight of the Legion of Honour" (279)

It is significant then that Benjamin describes the *flâneur* as "the unwilling detective" ("Paris of the Second Empire" 22), for both these figures fall inexplicably into their roles of deciphering a public, civic

history. In the case of "The Visit to the Museum," this situation is complicated by the quest for the portrait, which has the effect of pitting a personal past against official history. As Nabokov makes clear from various allusions, the story involves a retelling of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice,¹¹ the *flâneur* taking the part of the daring adventurer descending into hell in order to retrieve a prized object. The harmless provincial museum is thus turned for Nabokov into a vision of hell—the hell of the historical. After the narrator's offer to buy the portrait is refused by the satanic M. Godard, the narrator is frustrated in his attempts to leave the "unnecessarily spreading museum" (282). As in "The Arcades," two features of the immersion in fragmented history stand out: firstly, the disorientation within the temporal space, and secondly, the resistance of the images to assimilation and coherence.

Oddly enough, Nabokov and Benjamin overlap on some fairly specific details. Numerous umbrellas, signifiers of the facelessness of bourgeois respectability, appear in both pieces, "displayed in serried ranks" (871) for Benjamin, while Nabokov's narrator observes "a crowd of grey-haired people with umbrellas examining a mock-up of the universe" (283). Even more surprising though, is the mutual references to mysterious staircases, coatstands and theatres. Benjamin writes how "between overloaded coatstands a spiral staircase rises into the darkness" and later speculates on what is apparently a door to a theatre, asking "would it not, if one opened it, lead one into darkness rather than a theatre?" (872). Nabokov's narrator similarly notices "stone stairs" which "descend into misty abysses" (283) and echoes Benjamin's experience strikingly when

Finally I ran into a room with coatracks monstrously loaded down with black coats and astrakhan furs; from beyond a door came a burst of applause, but when I flung open the door, there was no theater, but only a soft opacity. . . . (284)

Despite these remarkable parallels it is extremely unlikely that Nabokov had ever read "Arcades." What the echoes do show, however, is the extent to which Nabokov and Benjamin share a critical

¹¹ "Cines" include allusions to a sculpture of Orpheus (283) and to Offenbach, composer of *Orphée aux enfers* (*Orpheus in the Underworld*, first performed 1858/279). For a detailed examination of this theme, see De Reeck (137-48).

space, with similar formulations of emblematic bourgeois culture, haunted by the same possibility of being trapped in a disorientating, nightmarish version of history associated with it.

Benjamin, as I have pointed out, reverts to an ambiguous, surrealist methodology in his dealings with the fragmented image. Nabokov also seems to adopt the structure of dream (or more precisely, nightmare) in his story, but through a teasing sense of *potential* correspondence, rather than materialized unconscious ones. Although the "dummy soldiers in jackboots" (282) obviously refers to the militarized history which Sergey finds so attractive in the wax museum of *Speak, Memory*, the other exhibits form a miscellany, ranging from pianos to trains and paintings of storms, which defies assimilation into any extra-temporal pattern. Several commentators have suggested a sense of collective meaning in the objects. Maxim Shryver, for example, asserting that "the change of exhibits along the narrator's way suggests a history of human civilisation from antiquity to modernity" (59).¹² Such a reading is seductive

¹² De Roock (142) argues a similar point, asserting that the collection suggests a path from western civilisation into Soviet totalitarianism.

close examination, however, does not bear out any sense of sequential narrative of history. I would argue rather that though Nabokov sets the museum up as puzzle, the fragments themselves will not necessarily fit, with the effect of aligning both narrator and reader with Benjamin's brooder, construing the past as puzzle but without ever managing to complete it. The brooder, as Benjamin makes clear, is essentially an allegorist:

Through the disorderly fund which his knowledge places at his disposal, the allegorist rummages here and there for a particular piece, holds it next to some other piece, and tests to see if they fit together—that meaning with this image or this image with that meaning. (*The Arcades* 368)

The figure of the brooder goes some way to explaining why "The Visit to the Museum" is such a disturbing text, for unlike in many

others he wrote, Nabokov here proposes a riddle without offering a solution.

It is the ending of "The Visit to the Museum" though, which tells us most about Nabokov's historical anxiety in 1938. The narrator, having completely lost his bearings in the labyrinthine museum passes through the theatre door into a place he recognizes—the path by the Fontanka canal in St Petersburg—where he realizes with dread that his journey has not been in time, but in space: "Alas, it was not the Russia I remembered, but the factual Russia of today, forbidden to me, hopelessly slavish, and hopelessly my own native land" (285). Nabokov never returned to Russia after his departure in the midst of the revolution in 1917, but here, in his fiction, his narrator finds himself in Stalinist Leningrad, an unwelcome alien with a totalitarian dictatorship threatening his "fragile, illegal life" (285). Once again, "The Visit to the Museum" unsettles through its disruption of a typical Nabokovian conceit, whereby the fictional world is dismantled at the close of the novel, often in the manner of a stage set or performance.¹³

In this case, the narrator (as suggested by the "burst of applause" from behind the door) walks *onto* the stage, but into a world marked by its very realism, where "an unmistakable sense of reality replaced all the unreal trash amid which I had just been dashing to and fro" (284). To sense the significance of this we have only to refer forwards to *Speak, Memory* where the Russian revolution is described in theatrical terms as "that wite *deus ex machine*" (177). In "The Visit to the Museum" Nabokov articulates something he is unwilling to elsewhere, that the "unreal trash" of "fool-made history" (*Speak, Memory* 234) to which he has always denied the status of reality leads inexorably to a present where that refusal cannot be so easily effected, in which the search for redemption may fail.

The response to past which we have observed in Nabokov and Benjamin occurs at the intersection of literary and political history. The constellated model is primarily an attempt to wrest the personal past from the grips of a historical force deeply implicated in the

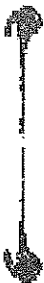
¹³ See for example *Invitation to a Beheading*, where Cincinnatus's own nightmare of history is blown away by a "spinning wind" which reveals only "flapping scenery" (191). Similarly, at the close of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, "the bald little prompter closes his book and light begins to fade gently" as the characters of the novel make their exits (173).

idea of totalitarianism, and as such responds to the rise of Nazism and Stalinism in Europe during the nineteen thirties. The idea of a *late* modernist response however, includes not only a sense of this political crisis, but also of a retrospective deployment of essentially modernist aesthetics. The constellated past, as we have seen, relies on a spatialisation of time which both Benjamin and Nabokov locate primarily in Proustian aesthetics. The lineage of this modernist assault on linear time which plots temporality across several dimensions reaches back to Baudelaire for Benjamin, and to Flaubert for Nabokov.¹⁴ In both cases the disruption of conventional chronology is an assertion of individual autonomy, but in the question of interpretative and textual control the two writers are divided. It is the strain of Nabokov's reluctance to relinquish complete mastery in the face of extreme political circumstances that we can observe at breaking point in "The Visit to the Museum," and which is so skillfully concealed in *Speak, Memory* until the treatment of Sergey. In excavating these fissures in Nabokov's grand myth of temporal mastery we might finally discover a writer different from the one who proclaims in *Speak, Memory* "I confess, I do not believe in time" (109) or the one who, in a review from 1940, answers his own question: "What is history? Dreams and dust" ("Mr Masefeld and Clio" 808).

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- ¹⁴ In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Benjamin makes explicit the connection he perceives between Proustian *mémoire involontaire* and Baudelaire's *correspondances*, leading to the notion of "historyless time" (335). In his lectures on Flaubert, Nabokov dwells at length on what he calls the "counterpoint method," which he regards as an innovation in the spatialisation, and therefore disruption of linear temporality, pointing out that "without Flaubert there would have been no Marcel Proust in France, no James Joyce in Ireland" (*Lectures on Literature* 147).

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**Plaster, Marble, Canon:
The Vindication of Nabokov
in Post-Soviet Russia**

Yuri Leving
Dalhousie University

Two of Vladimir Nabokov's poems appeared in the second issue of the *Aerial Ways* almanac (*Vozdysshnye puti* 1961). One of them was received with undisguised annoyance by the émigré readership. Gleb Struve called it a "malicious" [gnusnoe] poem in his letter to Vladimir Markov (Struve 133-34). Olga Emelyanova (Mozhayskaya) named it a shameless parody in her letter to Roman Grinberg, editor-in-chief of the *Aerial Ways*:

We, as well as Terapianol in his article, were surprised that Nabokov and Yung's poems were put in the almanac.² They fall out of the ensemble of the whole book. Nabokov's

What is the evil deed I have committed?
Seducer, criminal . . .

strongly resembles Pasternak (I don't remember the words exactly), who asks the same question and adds that he "has made the whole world weep" over *Doctor Zhivago*.³ Nabokov, after all, is a good lyrical poet and how shameful it is to steal both the rhythm and the theme (literally) from others . . .⁴

Gennady Khomyakov, then editor of the European almanac *Mosy* [Bridges] cracked an even more cutting remark:

I have already finished *Mosy* number 7, it is already being stitched and will come out in about a couple of weeks. We will send it to you.

Nabokov is surely a peculiar person, but

¹ Y. K. Terapianol (1892-1980)—a Russian émigré poet and literary critic.

² Four of Nikolai Yung's poems appeared in the almanac (258-60), one beginning with the following line: "There were times when being loved used to be a shame. . . ." Cf. with Nabokov's conjecture in a subsequent manuscript: "O, I know: people don't love me" (1963) instead of "O, I know: people are afraid of me" (1959). Quoted from Zimmer's *Vladimir Nabokov: Bibliographie des Gesammtenwerkes*, reproduced in Nabokov's library catalogue (Tajan 101).

³ The quote refers to Pasternak's 1959 poem, "The Nobel