Photography, and in general any supposedly objective and unmediated image of the past “caught” by the *camera obscura*, the predecessor of photography, is an obvious analogue for (auto-)biographical writing. Rousseau, in his first “Neuchatel” edition of *Confessions*, claims that in his “absolutely truthful” story about himself, he would avoid literary smoothness:

> It is about my portrait, not my literary writing. I am going to work, so to speak, assisted by the *camera obscura*: no art is needed here except the ability to accurately depict the strokes that I can see outlined on paper. (Rousseau 1935-1:422)

However, photographs, as part of the memoir, are not in a see-through illustration relationship with the memoir text (which explains the “objectivity” illusion of photo-biography). In addition to a teleologicality in their selection, even outside the author’s intention, photographs speak their own language; constituted by the viewer’s eye, they can “claw up,” and attain a “punctum” (see Barthes 1997; Podoroga 2001: 11-18); they can show the reader in posterity an object, “auratized” (Benjamin 1996: 22-24) by an elegiac look, for example. Let us

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consider some examples of the authorial use of photographs in autobiography, as a typological context of Nabokov’s practice.

In the first edition of Uedinennoe [The Secluded] by Vasily Rozanov, the unframed photographs, according to Viktor Shklovskii (1922: 328), look like family album photographs accidentally embedded in the book, reinforcing the intimate relationship of the text with its reader. In Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes, photographs serve the autobiographical narrative up to the moment when the author begins to write, and when language becomes his genuine biography:

The repertoire of images, therefore, will be finished at the point of a productive life’s beginning [...]. From this moment on, another repertoire will be created: a repertoire of writing” (Barthes 1999),

— whose visual sign can only be a writing hand. The selection of photographs in the autobiography, as in the selection of events for the narration, was made in Barthes’s work on the basis of the “punctum” available in them for the author — a detail hard to localize, one that “hurts,” as well as on the roles of those depicted in the shots, as prefigurations of the author’s way “to work, and to the pleasure of writing” (ibid.).

Before proceeding to Nabokov, let us examine the writing of contemporary author, Lev Rubinstein, under the declarative autobiographical title “It’s ME” (1996). This work aims to deconstruct the idea of autobiography as a family photo album. The text begins with captions under such an album:

1. It’s me. 2. It’s still me. 3. And that’s me. 4. These are my parents. They seem to be in Kislovodsk. Caption: ‘1952.’ 5. Misha with a volleyball.” (Rubinstein 1996: 69)

The referent, the “real” “me” is not fused here with its spectral twin in the photograph —“just like when a convict in certain types of punishment is chained to a corpse,” or as “couples of fish [...], floating together, as if united in eternal coitus” (Barthes 1997: 13) — but is completely displaced by the photograph, which in turn is displaced by the caption. If Barthes writes that in the photograph a pipe is always a pipe, Rubinstein argues that there is no longer
any pipe, nor an image of the pipe, and all that is left is a verbal text: “9. A market in Ufa. Caption: ‘A market in Ufa. 1940’” (ibid.). The reduction of the referent to the caption is supported in a playful fashion: what at first seem to be the names of the people depicted in the photograph, “33. Mogilevskaia S.I. and Pilipenko V.N. 42. Govendo T. Kh.” (ibid.: 71), turn out to be parts of a bibliography card, book titles, but not people:


Rubinstein’s verbal text, supplanting the photograph, starts to disintegrate under the influence of a doxa — a cliché from the Soviet films and television: “22. (And the soundlessly stirring lips of the TV anchor). [...] 26. (And the inflated veins in the hands of an aged worker)” (ibid.: 70); from other people’s texts: “50. And the caption:

Once sick of waiting for a grief
In such a homely nook of yours,
The footprints’ memories retrieve
Left on the freshly washed up floors.”

53. And the caption:

Patience and glory are sisters still
To each other unknown.
Hole up yourself and stay tranquil
Till the gauntlet is thrown

(iBid.: 72). Rubinstein draws on unlocalized visual clichés:

57. The duel pistol shakes the hand of the officer, who’s lame and limping. 58 A French novel, opened up in the middle, is shaking in the hands of a young lady (ibid.: 72-73).
The invasion of these “foreign” texts into autobiographical speech at first leads to the question: “32. And the caption: ‘What do I have to do with this?’” (ibid.: 71); and then to a predictable postmodern agreement with the cento nature of one’s own “self”: “63. That’s all me” (73). Autobiographical speech easily blends with common language, with someone else’s word, and is displaced by it:

113. And that’s me. 114. And that’s me in my underwear and undershirt. 115. And that’s me in my underwear and undershirt with my head under a blanket. 116. Check out me chase, in my underwear, head under blanket, in a sunlit place. 117. Check out me chase, in my underwear, head under blanket, in a sunlit place, with my groundhog [‘s case]. 118. With my groundhog [‘s case]. 119. (Leaving). (Ibid.: 76)

For Nabokov, photographs are an analogue of the false lifelikeness of biographie romantée, a “funeral puppet,” a copy of the “life’s original” (Drugie Berega: 169):

Just think about it: if Pushkin had lived another two or three years, we would have had his photograph. Just another step and he would have come out of the darkness, rich in nuances and full of picturesque hints, in which he abides, in order to firmly enter our dim day, which has been lasting for one hundred years. Here is what I deem important: the photograph — these few square centimeters of the light — solemnly unveiled a new era in the image-making by 1840, continuing to the present day, and did it so that from that date, which neither Byron, nor Pushkin, nor Goethe had lived up to, we are at the mercy of our modern idea, and in this idea all the celebrities of the second half of the 19th century take the form of an extended family, badly dressed in all black, as if they had been in mourning for their cheerful ex-life, always pushed out into the corners of sad and dark rooms with heavy dusty drapes in the background. From now on, this faded home light guides us through the grisaille of the century: it is very likely that the time will come when the era of the established photographs, in turn, will seem to us to be an artistic lie, endowed with some special charm; but that time has not yet arrived, and — what an opportunity provided to our imagination! — Pushkin never grew old and will never have to carry this heavy drape with grotesque folds, that funeral attire of
our grandfathers, with a little black tie, hidden by a snap-collar” (*Pushkin, or the Verity and Verisimilitude*. Quoted in: *Lectures on Russian Literature*: 418-419).

The photograph, in Nabokov’s view, reduces the visual picture of the “rich in nuances and full of pictorial allusions of the past” and imposes its “dim,” “faded” image on our imagination. In the photograph, there is no charm of the “artistic lie.” Its work with the past is likened by Nabokov to clothing a dead person (“funeral attire”), a grotesque retouching of a devitalized reality. Amongst the unrealized plans of Sebastian Knight, there was apparently a parody of a supposedly objective biography, based on photographs, for the sake of which he placed an ad in a newspaper:

The author, who is writing a fictional biography, needs photographs of a gentleman with an impressive appearance, a simple person, sedate, non-drinking, preferably single. The publication of the photographs, from childhood, youth and maturity in this book will be paid for” (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: 40).

He received pictures of “Mr. X.”:

[...] at first, of a moon-faced scamp in a badly stitched sailor’s jacket, then of an ugly teen in a cricket cap, then a platyrhine youngster and so on and so forth — up until an adult Mr. X. appeared on a shot — quite a repulsive one, a bulldog type of man steadily fattening in the world of photography backdrops and authentic forecourts. (Ibid.)

Nabokov makes it clear that the true biography does not need the photographs that he associates with false mimetic lifelikeness, rather, narrator B. wants to see pictures of Sebastian: “I needed the face of his Russian correspondent. I needed images of Sebastian himself” (ibid.). Instead, he receives the random/extraneous pictures hanging above Sebastian’s desk:

[...] an enlarged photo of a bare-chested Chinese, being dashingly beheaded, and another one — a banal photo sketch: a curly child playing with a puppy. (Ibid.)
Their choice and co-arrangement say more about Sebastian than his photo portrait could have offered. Instead of a portrait (and possibly a photographic one) of Gogol, Nabokov suggests

a portrait of Gogol’s nose. Not of the head, not of the waist, etc., but only of his nose. The large, solitary, sharp nose, clearly drawn by ink, as an increased picture of some important organ of an unusual zoological specimen. (*Lectures on Russian Literature*: 134)

Nabokov’s amazing blindness in regards to the art of photography, as well as his arrogant contempt for its language, resulted in the apparent inclusion of photographs in *Speak, Memory* apparently without a conscious aesthetic plan, but just as a clear illustration to the text, a tribute to the reader’s expectations: the house of the famous writer, his ancestors, his family, and himself at different stages of his life, as well as the butterflies described by him. A distrust of the language of photography, apparently, explains why all the photographs contain explanatory captions. However, it is precisely this lack of a conscious aesthetic mindset in handling the material, so rare for Nabokov, which reveals or even unmasks important features of his autobiographism through the conflict with the language of photography.

The *Speak, Memory* photographs are interesting due to their absolute priority of the public over the intimate, a total semiosis over the randomness of reality, Photographs of relatives are always staged, schematically showing main characterizing qualities: grandfather Dmitri Nikolaevich Nabokov with orders, pointedly and haughtily turning away from the camera (Image 1), grandmothers von Korf and Rukavishnikova (Image 2), in the theatrical postures of the photo shop — one backing her head with her hand dreamily, the other reading a book.
The next insets are paired photographs, illustrating family relations: Volodia and the father (Image 3), the mother and the father, the mother and the uncle. There is a deictic gesture to the staged and public pictures: the “here” and “look” is “louder” than in the “random” ones. Subjects either look directly at the camera — that is, at the viewer — or take an artificially meaningful posture and turn away: to capture attention, they persistently demand a cultural reading, i.e., an assonance, a dialogue with the author (in this case, not with the photographer, as according to Barthes, but with the author of the text, who chose, reproduced and appropriated these photographs). The selection of public and “symbolic” photographs not only makes the people depicted in them the spectrum — a [theatrical] play and a ghost, typical for photography in general — but also devitalizes the photograph, depriving it of its own language.
It is curious how the photographs of relatives neighbor those of the butterflies described by Nabokov (Image 4). Barthes’s characterization is apt: the characters in these photographs are still and do not leave their confines, “as if they were anesthetized and pinned there as butterflies.” As soon as the photograph receives the *punctum*, the images in the photographs come to life (Barthes 1997: 86); but Nabokov’s people, like butterflies, remain carefully straightened out and open to a cultural, public viewing.

As Nabokov himself notes, the only photograph that was taken “discreetly” and “unposed” — despite the alleged randomness — especially illustrates the characteristic attempt of all the photos in *Speak, Memory* to deprive the photograph of its own speech, to reduce it to the verbal expression over which the author has full power. “It is a rare case when a random shot sums up life so accurately,” writes Nabokov in a note on the photograph. Indeed, on the flip calendar one can see a date: February 27, 1929 (Image 5). At the time, Nabokov was writing his “chess” novel *The Luzhin Defense*, which corresponds to a checkerboard pattern on the tablecloth and the author’s sweater; family photos, out of the camera’s focus, lean against the four volumes of the Dahl dictionary. This limited set of signs tells us everything about the author that he wishes known: they do not even have “the smallest spark of chance” (Benjamin 1996: 71).
Only the images of his brother Sergei — in his dissociation from family groups and passive, disadvantaged position — seem to contain something “not falling into silence,” which “continues to be present here, and will never agree to dissolve in the ‘art’” (Benjamin 1996: 70), encouraging the viewer to self-decrypt the meaning, and to sympathize. The paired photographs of the author with his brother (“we look like the same child, with and without a wig”; Speak, Memory, inset) emphasize the obvious difference: a frowning Volodia, dressed as a boy, slightly pushes back a confused Sergei in girl’s dress. In the photograph of all the Nabokov children, Sergei is “unfortunately disfigured by flaws in the picture” (in a draft caption: “[...] a rather neglected Sergey [sic] <...>” [Berg Collection]) (Image 6).
The Nansen passport photographs of his wife and son serve as a declarative choice of the public versus the private — even though Nabokov, apparently, chose them to illustrate a passage about the humiliations of the refugee passport (in all three versions of Nabokov’s memoir: Drugie berega: 313 / Speak, Memory: 212 / Pamiat’, govori: 554). Here the choice of the passport photograph, already presented to hundreds of eyes, has lost its status as “personal” and became “public” (Image 7).

The semi-realized desire to hide oneself via a gesture of publicity, the dissociation of the “personal” “me” and the “public” “author” explains why, in the captions, Nabokov inconsistently calls himself either “me” or the “author”:

‘My father, at the age of thirty-five, with me, a seven-year old,’ ‘My mother and her brother’—‘father and mother of the author [...] the park birches and a spruce behind my parents,’ ‘a Nansen passport photo of [...] the author’s wife, Vera, and son, Dmitri’—‘In the picture, taken by my wife, [...] our son, Dmitri [...] standing with me [...]’ (Speak, Memory, inset, italics mine — M.M.).

The photograph, a “burial puppet,” exhibited for public viewing, contrasts starkly with the pastel portrait of Nabokov’s mother by Leon Bakst, in which the artist tried to convey the transient reality — “the fluctuating outlines of her lips” (Image 8).
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