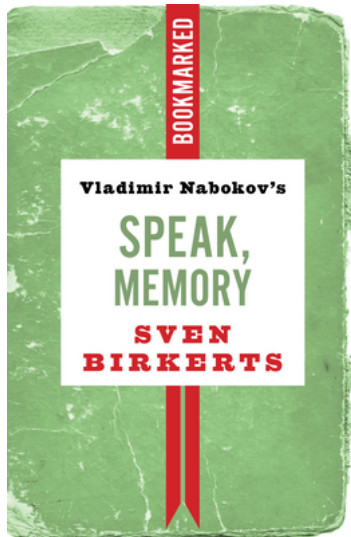


Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory: Bookmarked*, by Sven Birkerts. New York: Ig Publishing, 2020. ISBN 9781632461070. 176 pp.



Sven Birkerts' latest book, unassumingly titled *Vladimir Nabokov's Speak, Memory*, follows in the line of some contemporary books which use the writer's personal history as a lens through which to view Nabokov's aesthetic and moral philosophy, and in doing so, attempt to chart the ways in which the latter can illuminate their own experiences. It is no surprise that two of the most popular and recent examples of such writing, Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and Lila Azam Zanganeh's *The Enchanter*, are by emigrants who place a central focus on Nabokov's conception of 'exile' to portray and clarify their own tribulations and nostalgia for their lost homeland, Iran. Even though Zanganeh and Nafisi don't exactly exercise a deep, academic rigor while sifting through Nabokov's narratives, the interweaving of personal stories amidst Iran's rising authoritarianism in their accounts evoke the atmosphere of impending loss, of whole memories and cultures being on the verge of oblivion, which aligns them with the Nabokovian theme of a past forever imperiled by other forces, yet redeemable by the act of memory.

This innate sense of affinity with Nabokov's exilic experience is conspicuously missing in Birkerts' book, even though he admits a thin, rather lateral connection with exile (his Latvian parents met in Germany before moving to the United States, where he was born). But even more underwhelming are his scattershot impressions of Nabokov's memoir, coupled with tiringly generic and repetitive explanations of Nabokov's aesthetic, leaving much to desire. In fact, it becomes increasingly nebulous as to what exactly Birkerts is seeking to address or deconstruct vis-a-vis *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov's work has been subjected to interesting criticism by non-academic writers like Martin Amis and John Updike, and more recently Zadie Smith or Jeffrey Eugenides, who aptly calls him a "writer's writer." The professional novelists' perspective expresses just how

daunting and impressive Nabokov's achievements are for his peers, who perhaps understand more closely than academics how ridiculously difficult and unique the high-wire acts he pulls off on the page really are. But Birkerts offers no fresh frame of reference, and his task is made many times more difficult by his selecting *Speak, Memory* for analysis, which contains undoubtedly the strongest evocation of exile as well as the most emphatic defense of the redemptive power of memory in Nabokov's corpus. There is no clear order to his chapters, which are too sparsely written to cover areas important in Nabokov and end almost as abruptly as they begin, or to his narratorial voice, which jumps from one aspect of Nabokov's memoir to the next without any clear sense of progression.

In the beginning, one anticipates from Birkerts' tone and tenor that he will dive into a close reading of the text. Noting in his prologue that he has set himself the constraint of not consulting background material in order to isolate *Speak, Memory* as his sole focus, Birkerts further reinforces this. However, soon enough, his observations begin to be punctuated by anecdotes from his own past, his approaches to writing, and his rather hazy thoughts on memoir writing. Seemingly unsure about whether to commit to a strict, purposeful, hermeneutic reading of Nabokov's memoir or to juxtapose his past experiences alongside Nabokov's approach to memory, Birkerts' account, at a little more than hundred pages, meanders from one to the other, ending up with a faint crossover between the two. His readerly insights are often interrupted by short segments about his personal journey that led him to Nabokov and his memoir, but these two approaches never really cohere. His failure to present a holistic reading of *Speak, Memory* is especially highlighted if read by a Nabokov enthusiast, who is aware of the wealth of layers and patterns, the Proustian intensity with which Nabokov meditates on time, past, memory, etc., and the way themes and scenes from his memory are mirrored or refracted in his fiction. One of the recurring exhortations Birkerts makes in the book is that Nabokov "makes no pretense of being objective," that his memoir is not dictated by events of history, that memory continuously embellishes "reality" because a "writer's personality and character impinge on everything he writes." All this is certainly true, but to the point of being trite, if not tautological—something taken for granted not only in Nabokov studies but also in the dissemination of memoirs in popular culture and the publishing industry.

To compound this, he articulates his impressions in such sentimental and abstract prose as to be almost diametrically opposed to Nabokov's minutely observant and intricately detailed descriptions. For example, one of the "lessons" he draws (one can imagine the anti-didactic Nabokov cringing here) from *Speak, Memory* is that the organizing principle in crafting a memoir ought to be "the truth of one's own feeling." Elsewhere, he states blandly that the purpose of the memoir is to capture "the spirit and emotion of the bygone event," and subsequently, discussing Nabokov's description of childhood, he says that his words allow us to "feel the moment from the inside." Birkerts seems to be in completely uncertain territory when he resorts to such misty abstractions as "spirit," "unconscious," and what he at one point calls "the stuff of a life." Given that he mentions Nabokov's focus on "detail," it is surprising that umpteen unconvincing variations on truisms don't seem too vague or inappropriately casual to Birkerts' ears.

Birkerts' judgments thus land with far less revelatory impact than his tone suggests; furthermore, he fundamentally misunderstands Nabokov's aesthetic principles. Comparing the working of memory in Proust and Nabokov, Birkerts invokes the famous madeleine episode to suggest that just as Proust's madeleine triggers the "involuntary" nature of memory, Nabokov's memoir likewise testifies to the "unconsciousness" of memory. Although he cites no concrete portion, the mistaken equivalence between Proust and Nabokov arises probably because Birkerts misconstrues the latter's resistance to "standards of sequence or hierarchies of mattering" as memory simply acting upon him like a muse to "trigger" his recall. But throughout his memoir, one element that comes across clearly is how strongly Nabokov conceives memory to be an act of agency. As Michael Wood says, the work of memory for Nabokov is "an act of will" par excellence—will at "its most determined, lucid, and courageous," something which disqualifies a passive subject. It is less of a trigger than an active refocusing of the "lenses of memory," in Nabokov's words, which leads us to see and recreate the past, and especially to sense patterns through it. A Proustian sensibility which affords memory an involuntary hold over someone would be anathema to the Nabokovian "wingstroke of the will" that creates a "bright mental image" of the past.

What Nabokov combines, therefore, is a dedication to salvaging the minutest particulars of a memory while at the same time disregarding a reverence towards historical continuity, landmark events, or objective facts, to produce something close to the Kantian idea of "subjective universality." This would imply not "feeling" a connection with memories and giving them abstract expression, as Birkerts half-implies, but charting out and magnifying its details, sensing the patterns in its "form," so as to project it universally for readers who make a reciprocal investment in the details. This is closer to what Nabokov also suggests in his famous quote about "reality" being a "subjective affair...an infinite succession of steps" which can be apprehended through an increasing level of specificity, and this is also what he meant by his enigmatic statement that an artist should have "the precision of a poet and the imagination of a scientist." Pure subjectivity and precision, therefore, are not mutually exclusive, and often Birkerts tends to conflate this subjectivity with a sentimental solipsism without much close reading or minute analysis of the memoir's text.

Birkerts also makes the absurd suggestion that in this "coming of age" story, Nabokov's parents "don't much affect his experiences as he narrates them." This is particularly startling because, in the very second chapter, we encounter one of the most evocative and poignant phases of his memoir, as Nabokov lovingly details his experiences with his mother, and subsequently portrays what a formative role his father played in shaping his early interest in classical literature, especially in Dickens, Pushkin, and other Russian writers. The harmony between his and his mother's interests is clear for the reader; she acquaints him to the arboreal world around him of bushes, mushrooms, and insects, gives a tender instruction which drives the memoir and hauntingly foreshadows the exile they were to face: *Vot Zapomni* (Now remember!). Her influence is perhaps revealed best by the way she bonds with him about synesthesia—a condition they shared

which enabled both to intersperse one mode of sense-perception into another. As for his father, the possibility of a duel in which he could be killed brings at once the strongest outpouring of love as well as the most sorrowful realization that death is deferred, but not defeated.

Birkerts lists some of these connections but short-sightedly assumes that this supposed lack of parental influence is explained by Nabokov's instinct to safeguard privacy, a "protective reticence" which creates "distance," without probing if this understated approach is a deliberate narrative choice by Nabokov to achieve an effect. Even though he mentions Nabokov's emotions about his father's duel and his mother's instruction to "remember," he fails to see that this "distance" is a constructive element in the memoir, a lack that enables a resonance rather than an inexplicable failure of expression on Nabokov's part.

Another character whose subtle, understated presence in the memoir Birkerts misses is Sergey, Nabokov's elder brother. Sergey's homosexuality was a secret that Nabokov stealthily came across in his brother's diary and "in stupid wonder" revealed to his family members. This betrayal is mirrored in the future by his failure to save Sergey from the fascist regime in Nazi-Occupied Paris. Nabokov left with his wife and young son but immensely regretted that Sergey had to "stutter his astonishment to an indifferent concierge" when, too late, he came looking for his America-bound brother. A pattern appears in this repetition of events, although this time it sketches a motif that spells death and remorse, not the vibrant joys of consciousness.

Nabokov's portrayal of each of his family members hints that the tracing of designs and patterns across time and fate, which for Nabokov at least partly forms the *raison d'être* of memoir, is a task to be carried out no matter how pleasant or painful the evocation. To reiterate Michael Wood's argument, the memory of loss is reconstructed as a purpose and for which "reality is a rehearsal." "Regret is a kind of fulfillment rather than an accident," Wood writes, and Sergey's is "one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something." Birkerts is right that Sergey gets only "a few moments on stage," but he misses how Nabokov uses these interstitial moments as windows to magnify whole lifetimes and de-familiarize the usual ways we understand notions like memory, reality, and time. He even cites Michael Wood's title, "The Magician's Doubts," but symptomatically misses that the key word in that designation is doubt, not magician. While Wood deftly identifies a subtle strain of "fallibility" that runs alongside and curiously undermines Nabokov's confident rebellion over the tyrannies of time, Birkerts remains fixated rather mystically over Nabokov's "sleight of hand."

The few times he raises some genuinely interesting questions, Birkerts runs out of space to cogently pursue them. For example, he is on to something when he points out that "slowing down time," if not actually arresting its progress, forms a great deal of the impetus of Nabokov's narrative voice; or when he briefly discusses how particular modes, devices, or ways of seeing highlight Nabokov's emphasis on observation and ocular activity as gateways to subjectivity and knowledge. But Birkerts hurriedly extinguishes such aspects as the reader is just warming up to them. Throughout the book, there remains a nagging sense of something making its way into our minds but suffocatingly through a narrow, constricted corridor. Ultimately, one wishes that

Birkerts had chosen a substantially wider canvas to portray his thoughts, which is certainly something that *Speak, Memory*'s stature in Nabokov's oeuvre deserves.

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