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SPEAK, PHOTOGRAPHS?
VISUAL TRANSPARENCY AND VERBAL OPACITY
IN NABOKOV’S SPEAK, MEMORY

Like many contemporary writers, Vladimir Nabokov in Speak, Memory explores the destabilizing interaction between visual and verbal codes in an autobiographical work combining text and photographic image. The originality of this book, however, is that it is not so much, as in so many other postmodern works, the supposedly truthful photographic image that does not hold its promise and challenges perception and representation. In Speak, Memory, photographs are indeed presented as a faithful, transparent window into the past. What obfuscates this autobiographical project, however, is the opacity of the reminiscing, or anamnestic discourse on those photographs, in particular that which is contained in their accompanying captions. Borrowing from critics such as Barthes, Doubrovsky, Harvey Rugg, and others, this essay examines how Nabokov in Speak, Memory playfully subverts his own autobiography, or photobiography, through an idiosyncratic use of text and image that not only sheds light on his condition as an exile, but also challenges his readers’ expectations in typically postmodern, as well as Nabokovian, fashion.

In his 1966 foreword to Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited, Nabokov announces that this is “the final edition” (Nabokov 6) of a text which, like the butterflies so dear
to him, has undergone “multiple metamorphosis,” the present version being the outcome of a “diabolical task,” the “re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English retelling of Russian memories in the first place” (Nabokov 6). In this statement, Nabokov is not just being his legendarily witty self. This multiple metamorphosis, “not tried by any human before” (Nabokov 6) – a statement that recalls Rousseau’s own megalomaniac declarations at the beginning of Confessions – is indeed worthy of lepidopterous metamorphosis if only in the many titles the book acquired over time, from the provisional title “The Person in Question” to the titles of the 1951 editions, Conclusive Evidence in the United States and Speak, Memory: A Memoir in England – itself chosen after Nabokov toyed with, and finally abandoned, the ideas of “Speak, Mnemosyne” and of “The Anthemion” – to the title of the 1954 Russian edition, Drugie berega (“Other Shores”), to the final 1967 title, Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited. In that sense, the subtitle “An Autobiography Revisited” could not be more accurate, especially since Nabokov did not just “revisit” the titles, but also revised and reworked the content of his text up until that last and final 1967 version.

What makes this final title particularly interesting, though, is that the deliberate inscription of Nabokov’s project into a specific literary tradition, that of “autobiography” (as opposed to the earlier “Memoir”), also corresponds to the inclusion, for the very first time, of photographs in a text which, until then, was made up of words only. It thus seems that Nabokov, in this final version, is not just revisiting an earlier text, but revisiting a whole literary genre, so as to produce, through this combination of autobiography and photographs, what is indeed a “unique freak as autobiographies go,” as the pseudo-reviewer of Conclusive Evidence – who turns out to be the author, himself, of course – writes in “Chapter Sixteen,” later added as an appendix to the text. And the truth is that, as can be expected from Nabokov, this autobiography certainly is a “unique freak,” combining the characteristics of what Hervé Guibert calls a “photobiography” (qtd in Hughes & Noble, 175), what Johnnie Gratton calls a “photobiographical autofiction” (Gratton 184), what Mounir Laouyen and Alex Hughes call, after the French New Novel or anti-novel, a “New Autobiography” (Laouyen 3) or “anti-autobiography” (Hughes 168), and finally what Maria Louise Asher calls a “meta-

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1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Les Confessions, Livre I: “Je forme une entreprise qui n’eut jamais d’exemple, et dont l’exécution n’aura point d’imitateur” (1).
2 Chapter Sixteen, which Nabokov decided against publishing, finally appeared for the first time as an appendix in the 1998 American edition Knopf.
autobiography” (Asher 70). By combining text and photographs, this “new type of autobiography,” as Nabokov himself calls his project in a letter to a friend (Boyd ix), is indeed a “photobiography,” but Nabokov’s insistence on the constructed and highly subjective nature of his story through metatextual phrases like “the careful reconstruction of my artificial but beautifully exact Russian world” (Nabokov 211), or “and now comes that bicycle act – or at least my version of it” (Nabokov 162), immediately puts it amongst the postmodern categories of “photobiographical autofiction” or “metafiction.” In a mood of “general defiance against ‘ego-literature’” (Braud 76), to use Michel Braud’s phrase, postmodern theorists and practitioners of autobiography like Roland Barthes or Serge Doubrovsky have repeatedly emphasized the inherent impossibility that lies at the heart of the writing of the self. How can one give a truthful account of one’s self when one experiences that self as multiple, fragmented, and disjointed shards? And, as a result, how can that narrative be told by anyone else but “a character in a novel, or even by several characters,” as Barthes puts it in Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes (qtd in Ross, 12). Hence the concept of “autofiction” coined by Doubrosky in the 1970s, or that, more recent, of “New Autobiography,” which sees postmodern autobiography as marked by the “shattering of the self as whole” (Laouyen 3), and the autobiographical subject as representing “the degree zero of egoity” (Séardin, qtd in Laouyen, 3) through its “unassignable identity” and “undetermined center” (Laouyen 4). Through the voice of his pseudo-reviewer in Chapter Sixteen reminding the reader that autobiographies can be “true, more or less true, or deliberately fictitious” (Nabokov 247), Nabokov shows us that he is fully aware of the inherently deceitful, and perhaps also self-deceiving, nature of autofiction, and that autobiography can no longer be what it was for the ancestors of the genre, writers such as Montaigne, Chateaubriand, and Rousseau, who firmly believed that the self as a totality could be accounted for “dans toute la vérité de sa nature” (“in the whole truth of its nature”), to quote Montaigne.5

Why then does Nabokov feel the need in 1966 to add to his text photographs, commonly seen as the most transparent of images, in a gesture which, if the author did not repeatedly claim otherwise, might then be seen as reinforcing what is also traditionally supposed to be the most

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3 “L’éclatement du sujet unaire” (Laouyen 3).
4 “Le degré zéro de l’égoïté” (Séardin, qtd in Laouyen, 3).
5 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Preamble to Confessions: “Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de sa nature” (Rousseau, I, 1, 5). Rousseau himself is drawing from Montaigne’s statement in Essays, “The Author to the Reader”: “Je veux qu’on m’y voie en ma façon simple, naturelle et ordinaire, sans contention ni artifice: car c’est moi que je peins” (Montaigne, 49).
transparent genre, autobiography, a genre that purports to tell the truth about the self? And why, if autobiography is indeed for him synonymous with autofiction, does Nabokov use the photographic image of a camera “lucida” to describe the rigor and discipline of an autobiographical project whose demand for accuracy and faithfulness can only be conveyed, according to him, through a "precision of linear expression" which befits the "camera-lucida needs of literary composition" (Nabokov 68)? As Linda Harvey Rugg asks in the introduction to *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography*, “Do photographs in the context of an autobiography come to the rescue of autobiographical referentiality, or do they undermine the integrity of referentiality? “ (Harvey Rugg 1)

In the case of *Speak, Memory*, the answer is both, which is not surprising for an author well known for the ambiguity, irony, and undecidability of his writings. In *Speak, Memory*, photographs are indeed presented as a faithful, transparent window into a past, which, to use the phrase of Nabokov himself masquerading as the pseudo-reviewer of his own text, suddenly takes on “a singular air of luminous brightness” (252). What subverts the autobiographical project, however, is the opacity of the discourse on those photographs, a discourse that takes the form of captions added by Nabokov not for contextualizing, illustrative, or explanatory purposes, as is traditionally expected of captions, but mostly as a mask that the author uses to destabilize his reader and hide his trail in this supposed quest for the truth of the self.

In *Speak, Memory*, the actual black-and-white family photographs which are interspersed within the narrative, or grouped in its center, depending on the editions, are not just material reproductions meant to give a semblance of authenticity to a literary genre, autobiography, whose fictional nature, as we saw, has long been emphasized by critics. The photographic metaphor is what generates and governs a text in which both the reminiscing process to reach the depths of the past and the reviewing of that past are described in photographic terms. Through what Gavriel Moses calls a “veritable anatomy of modern optical technologies” (Moses 132), the numerous telescopes, microscopes, mirrors, and magic lanterns that were Nabokov’s toys when he was a child become metaphors to plunge into the recesses of memory through the “carefully wiped lenses of time” (Nabokov 179), or fancy’s “rear-view mirror” (Nabokov 74). Nabokov’s “imaginative optics,” to use Karen Jacobs’s phrase (Jacobs 5), thus serve as “time-transport devices” (Jacobs 5) or as “passports to alternate spatio-temporal locations” (Jacobs 5), which, as she explains, “[recall] Bahktin’s chronotope – a concept of ‘time-spaces’ that insist on the
inseparability of temporal and spatial realms” (Jacobs 5). Once the reminiscing process is thus activated, time is recaptured in Proustian fashion and the past is revealed in the form of “ancient snapshots” (Nabokov 23) or sometimes one single picture, obtained there again at the end of a long photographic process and described by Nabokov as “the definite and permanent image that repeated exposure did finally leave in [his] mind” (Nabokov 65). Just as in the fantasy that the author had as a child to plunge into the picture above his bed (Nabokov 63), Nabokov the adult in a “strangely translucent state” (Nabokov 23) can now let himself be guided through the “picture gallery of time” (Nabokov 37), as if in a “slide show” (Nabokov 117), a “magic-lantern projection,” or those “mute films of yore” (Nabokov 70). Thanks to this visual process, the past, lit by the “kerosene lamp held by the hand of memory” (Nabokov 74), is suddenly “filled with brightness” (Nabokov 56) and achieves total transparency – as indicated by phrases such as “through a tremulous prism, I distinguish” (Nabokov 132) or “I see with utmost clarity” (Nabokov 18) – having been captured by a camera which is indeed “lucida” (Nabokov 68). Interestingly enough, the visual metaphor used to describe the process of reminiscence, or anamnesis, and its textual counterpart, autobiography, become conflated as Nabokov invites us to be the literal viewers of a textual “slide show” (“I am going to show you a few slides,” Nabokov 117) or “magic-lantern sequence” (Nabokov 119) which provides the structure not just of chapter eight, but of Speak, Memory as a whole. And unlike the actual boring slide show that one of his tutors had organized in his childhood and which figures as a mise en abyme of his own imaginary slide show within the same chapter, this textual projection is what transports him straightaway, as if through the “magic shaft of a microscope” (Nabokov 128), into the magic realm of his “perfect past,” “the legendary Russia of [his] boyhood” (Nabokov 90).
This grounding of the autobiographical project in the intense referentiality and evidentiality of the photograph in an effort to conjure up the desired past, however, is to be taken with a pinch of salt in the case of an author who practices, in his own admission, “cryptic disguise” (Nabokov 250), “deceit to the point of diabolism” (Nabokov 227), and is “always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content” (Nabokov 227). For one thing, as the previous example indicates, only mental, imaginary photographs or slides can trigger the flow of memories and help re-create the magic of childhood. Real, concrete images evoke little, if no reaction at all, in a self who claims to be bored by actual slide shows, and even suggests, through the example of his mother in later years, after his father’s death, that photographs are unnecessary if memories are properly “stored” in one’s mind: “She did not really need [these photographs], for nothing had been lost… she had with her all that her soul had stored” (Nabokov 33). And if, as Doubrovsky points out, “the truth of images is an

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6 This indifference to, if not dismissal of, real photographs is actually not surprising in a writer who claims in *Strong Opinions* that there is no reality as such, that reality, by being “an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable” (*Strong Opinions* 10), is a “very subjective affair” (*Strong Opinions* 10), and thus just as deceitful as art: “all art is deception and so is nature” (*Strong Opinions* 11). It is in this respect quite telling that, when comparing metaphorically bad memoirists and good memoirists, Nabokov should spontaneously side with the defenders of painting in the old quarrel between the noble art of painting, which he sees as being on the side of truth, and the ignoble art of photography, which for him is tainted with
imaginary truth” (Doubrovsky 385), the truth of mental images is therefore doubly imaginary, thus rendering the quest for a possible truth of the self even more difficult.

Moreover, what is particularly striking in the case of this photobiography is that the actual photographs are not merely included in the text to illustrate and authenticate it, but are in turn accompanied by illustrating captions whose increasing length and density reveals that Nabokov favors the powers of the written word far more than those of the visual image. And what is even more interesting in those captions is that what the writer particularly relishes in those written words is their capacity to be opaque and misleading, and thus to obscure rather than clarify the meaning of the photographic image. In that respect, the anecdote that he recounts in the very first paragraph of his foreword becomes emblematic of the whole text, as he is “wrongly identified as ‘Audiberti’” in a photograph commemorating the publication in Paris of Chapter Five under the title “Mademoiselle O.” As we shall see, words as used by Nabokov are indeed opaque and deceiving, and ultimately unable to sustain the potentiality of visual images to function as memories of, as well as memorials to, a bygone past. Indeed, in the book’s eighteen “photobiographical units” (Sophie Calle, qtd in: Gratton 183) made of a photograph and its caption, the written text progressively takes on more and more space on the page, from one line to twenty lines, until it comes to occupy almost the same amount of space on the page as the photograph itself. It seems as if the photograph, in itself meaningless and mute, needed the help of language to explain and interpret it, thus confirming Sekula’s comment that “a photograph can only be understood within a linguistic context” and that “the photograph, as it stands, presents merely the possibility of meaning” (qtd in Harvey Rugg, footnote 23, 242). One might be tempted to say that, in this quest for the truth of selfhood, Nabokov the autobiographer, but not the photobiographer – since most of the photographs were not taken by him – was seeking to maintain or regain the control of his self-image through words, after temporarily relinquishing that power to the photographic image, or that Nabokov was trying to restore agency to his lifeless, voiceless self, presented as a mere disincarnated body on the photographs through a

sentimentality: “The bad memoirist re-touches his past, and the result is a blue-tinted or pink-shaded photograph taken by a stranger to console sentimental bereavement. The good memoirist, on the other hand, does his best to preserve the utmost truth of the detail. One of the ways he achieves his intent is to find the right spot on his canvas for placing the right patch of remembered color” (Strong Opinions 186).

7 “La vérité d’une image est une vérité imaginaire” (Doubrovsky 385).
remembering process that, as Harvey Rugg points out in *Picturing Ourselves*, is also a “re-membering of the autobiographical self” (Harvey Rugg 21).

Things are never that clear with Nabokov, however, and more than anything else, these captions seem to be primarily meant to destabilize the reader and create a relationship between text and image which is both ludic and highly suspect. Far from mutually illuminating each other in documentary fashion, the photographs and the captions seem to vie for recognition on the page in a power struggle that inevitably favors the talkative, sometimes exuberant text over the silent image. It thus becomes apparent fairly quickly that in most cases, these captions do not function as mere contextualizing or documentary illustrations of the visual images. Instead, they provide irrelevant information on peripheral details of the photograph (such as who is the owner of the car parked in the street in front of his former house, Nabokov 16), or lead the reader’s attention away from the main subject of the photograph (for instance, himself writing, an activity passed largely unnoticed to the benefit of incongruous comments like “Note the pat pattern of the tablecloth,” which recalls Beckett’s absurd picture of himself without himself in it in *Malone*.
Moreover, it seems that Nabokov cannot resist the old lure of narrative as he writes the supposedly neutral, documentary captions that soon turn into commentaries or even entirely new narratives (such as the story of the mosquito attack in the bedroom at night in a photograph originally of him and his son outside their house, Nabokov 234) that conceal the original intent of the photographs and even threaten, by their increasing length, to challenge the main narrative itself. The “far-seeing photographer” that Nabokov supposedly praises at the end of this particular caption is thus rather a “far-seeing writer,” possibly having trouble conjuring Mnemosyne, as the title Speak, Memory seems to suggest, but definitely unable to resist the lure of Calliope, the muse of eloquence. And the captions are thus to be understood not as what “captures” the meaning of a photograph and renders it textually, but as fictitious “legends” that are undoubtedly meant to be read – as the etymology of the word indicates, – but mostly for the sake of entertainment and play.

In typically postmodern manner, Nabokov’s autobiographical project – already radically questioned by the author's avowed trick of having written under a pseudonym a review of his own book – is thus presented as doubly unreliable through its subversive interplay of visual and verbal codes. Supposedly centered on an elusive self that “remains outside,” to use the pseudoreviewer’s phrase (Nabokov 254), this “unique freak” of an autobiography, this “autobiography revisited” is indeed a mock-autobiography, a “meta-autobiography” that draws attention to its own artificiality much more than it reveals anything about a possible truth of the self. As in all photographic autobiographies, as Maryse Fauvel explains, photography in Speak, Memory “foregrounds representation” (Fauvel 193), the only reality of the postmodern ‘I’ being “the effect of its representation,” to quote Sécardin (Sécardin 66). And if indeed no “conclusive evidence” is gained on Nabokov’s self, which remains the central element of a “mystery story,” the phrase he himself uses in his foreword (Nabokov 4), shedding no light on his “private mist” (Nabokov 173), there is “conclusive evidence” though, that of “[his] having existed,” which is,

8 It is interesting to notice that these irrelevant details and incongruous digressions are strikingly reminiscent of Gogol’s own writing style, whose “fantastic meandering way” (Nicolai Gogol 46), “sudden and wholly irrelevant wealth of details” (Gogol 76-77), and “lyrical digressions” (Gogol 81) Nabokov greatly admired. In this respect, Nabokov seems to be the true literary heir of Gogol when, like him, he “play[s] havoc with any conventional scheme” (Gogol 136) or writes “most innocent descriptive passages” which “all of a sudden [leave] the tracks and [swerve] into the irrational where [they] really [belong]” (142), a comment which applies perfectly to our discussion of captions in Speak, Memory.

9 “La photo semble être là pour affirmer la représentation” (Fauvel 193).

10 “Le ‘je’ postmoderne n’a de réalité que l’effet de sa représentation” (Sécardin 66).
as Doubrovsky explains, any writer’s Cogito: “I write my life and therefore I have been”\(^1\) (Doubrovsky 367). For an author like Nabokov whose life was characterized by exile, loss, and displacement, this inscription of the self in words, or “autography” (Rosse 14), no matter how elusive, becomes much more than the mere story of a life. It becomes life itself, life as created by literature, which, for Proust, is the only life there is anyway: “La vraie vie, la vie enfin découverte et éclaircie, la seule vie par conséquent réellement vécue, c’est la littérature” (Le Temps retrouvé, 895) (“True life, life finally discovered and enlightened, consequently the only life really lived, is literature.” Time Recaptured).

REFERENCES


\(^1\) “J’écris ma vie, donc j’ai été” (Doubrovsky 367).


