

1-1-1987

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### Recommended Citation

Sicker, Philip (1987) "Practicing Nostalgia: Time and Memory in Nabokov's Early Russian Fiction," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 11: Iss. 2, Article 7. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1200>

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## Practicing Nostalgia: Time and Memory in Nabokov's Early Russian Fiction

### Abstract

Nabokov's earliest Russian fiction reveals his lifelong preoccupation with time and his complex strategies for preserving heightened moments of experience. Dissatisfied with the brevity of involuntary (Proustian) recall, his *émigré* protagonists strive to inhabit their Russian past more fully through a painstaking process of aesthetic re-creation. Beginning with a handful of vivid recollections, the hero of *Mary* gradually fabricates a past that is more intensely real than the original. Nabokov's most mature characters, however, recognize the solipsistic danger and utility of living in a vanished mental paradise. Turning to the present, they find unexpected beauty in the arrangement of ordinary objects in Berlin. In order both to intensify these perceptions and to memorialize them, the heroes of "Torpid Smoke" and "A Guide to Berlin" adopt a remarkable strategy: projecting themselves into an imagined future, they view the scene before them as if it were already a memory. This ocular adjustment endows the perceived objects with a radiance, fixity, and "relief" that they would acquire (and lose) only in a moment of extraordinary recall; but this act simultaneously preserves the impression indelibly when it becomes part of the actual past. In short, by anticipating and accelerating time's destructive movement, by "practicing nostalgia" for the past while it is yet present, these individuals arrest the process of forgetting.

### Keywords

time, memory, nostalgia, Nabokov, Russian fiction, time, Proustian, *émigré* protagonist, aesthetics, re-creation, Torpid Smoke, A Guide to Berlin, future, past, forgetting

## PRACTICING NOSTALGIA: TIME AND MEMORY IN NABOKOV'S EARLY RUSSIAN FICTION

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“The nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years,” Vladimir Nabokov disclosed in *Speak, Memory*, “is a hypertrophied sense of lost childhood. . . .”<sup>1</sup> Like Proust, his most obvious antecedent in the high art of retrospection, Nabokov yearned to recover not merely particular sensations from his distant past but, more crucially, a quality of consciousness, a condition of being that marked his early years. He wished, in particular, to reclaim the magical sense of time that he first knew as a four-year-old in Russia, an awareness of duration, sequence and chronology but not of finitude or loss: “The mirror brims with brightness; a bumblebee has entered the room and bumps against the ceiling. Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die” (*SM*, p. 77). At such moments of recall, a “summer warmth” pervades his senses and the past becomes a “robust reality [that] makes a ghost of the present.” But if childhood recollections possess the most piquant taste of the actual, they are also the rarest and most elusive of flavors for the mature memorist to conjure. Most deeply buried of all is the source of the child’s well-being—his sense of being immersed in “a radiant and mobile medium” that mimics immortality, but is “none other than the pure element of time” (*SM*, p. 21). Separated from the origin and end of his existence by “an impersonal darkness on both sides of life,” Nabokov reports groping frantically in the remote regions of childhood for a “secret outlet” into eternity, only to discover that “the prison of time is spherical and without exits” (*SM*, p. 20). Having made this discovery, he had to contrive some means to combat “the utter degradation, ridicule and horror of having developed an infinity of sensation and thought within a finite existence” (*SM*, p. 297). Since experience afforded him neither shadowy recollections of prenatal being nor

glimpses beyond the grave, Nabokov devoted himself from the outset of his creative life to the preservation of heightened perceptual moments, past and present, within time's prison. His tools were memory and art, and through their related agency he sought to unify the constituent parts of his ego, to trace the "colored spiral in a small ball of glass" that was the pattern of his life (*SM*, p. 275).

Cultivated over half a century, these preoccupations gave rise to the fantastic memory flowering of *Ada*, but they also dominate Nabokov's very earliest Russian stories.<sup>2</sup> Written in Berlin during the 1920s and 30s under the pseudonym Siren and published in various *émigré* journals, these short works reveal not only a complex theory of time but also the remarkable strategies that he had already devised for retrieving and safeguarding its treasures. Although Nabokov addressed himself almost exclusively to short fiction at the start of his career (publishing twenty-two stories between 1924-29), and despite the fact that these works anticipate his mature concern with time and memory more than any of his Russian novels, they have existed until recently in a critical vacuum.<sup>3</sup> While they vary in form, style and quality, these fictions are linked by the predominance of a single theme: the experience of cultural and psychological loss, most often embodied in the loss of a beloved. Composed in the years following Nabokov's return from Cambridge in 1923, many are meditations on the exile that the Bolshevik Revolution inflicted on him and his family. Collectively, the stories afford multiple glimpses into the desperate, strangely unfocused minds of transplanted students and artists, train waiters and traveling salesmen, individuals for whom fog-ridden Berlin is not a real place but a diaphanous screen upon which they project—or try to project—memories of their Russian childhood or of vanished love. In these recollections alone does a faint sense of self survive, and it is with their gradual erosion that identity disappears altogether.

It is a recurrent paradox in these early stories that the moment in which the protagonist experiences his lover's absence most acutely and irrevocably is also the moment when he feels her presence most intensely in memory. "The Return of Chorb" (1925), one of Nabokov's most exquisite early fictions, explores the interdependence of grief and memory and the titular hero's attempts to preserve both.<sup>4</sup> Chorb's wife was electrocuted in a freak accident during their honeymoon trip. During the subsequent three weeks he has retraced their route from the South of France through the Alps to

Bavaria, revisiting each of the spots where they had stopped months before, as if this reversal in geographic sequence could likewise reverse the flow of time, intensifying memory until it is somehow actualized in flesh and blood. Chorb realizes, of course, that this is impossible, and he knows too that, just as he is moving forward in time, each new locale represents a more distant epoch in their short life together. Still, each place yields up its distinctive measure of grief, and in these accumulated moments of longing Chorb hopes to compose a lasting recollection of his wife: "He thought that if he managed to gather all the little things that they had noticed together—if he recreated thus the near past—her image would grow immortal and replace her forever" (*DS*, p. 61).

In order that "her image [be] made perfect," Chorb's private agony must not be contaminated by the sorrow of others nor diluted by their sympathy. Thus, he puts off disclosing the tragedy to his wife's parents until his retraced journey brings him to the small town where they met, married, and began their honeymoon. The town marks "the very source of his recollections" (*DS*, p. 66), and Chorb believes that the final "agonizing yet blissful test" in the immortalization of his beloved is to spend a night in the tawdry hotel room to where they had absconded immediately after their wedding. Strangely, however, he finds the thought of repairing to the room alone almost unendurable. An insomniac since his wife's death, his nights have been "imbued with sudden terror" (*DS*, p. 67). The source of this fear is not self-dissolution (as it is in such early works as "Terror" and *The Eye*), but a sudden sense of his wife's "irrational presence." Chorb's moment of panic obliterates the sustaining structure of memory. The invisible presence that haunts him bears no relation to the woman he loved and even less to the image of her that he strives to preserve. Darkness seems to encroach upon the temple of his personal recollection no less than time itself. To ward off this haunting he hires a prostitute to sleep beside him in the rented room; but when he awakens in the middle of the night and mistakes "the white specter of a woman" (*DS*, p. 69) for his dead wife, he erupts in horrified screams. Through a perversely Nabokovian coincidence, Chorb's in-laws arrive a moment later, just as the frightened harlot rushes from the room. The door closes, and in the silence that follows it seems clear not only that Chorb's sacred memory is about to be violated by communal mourning, but that the image he has lovingly recreated will be replaced by the nightmare visitor. Like Orpheus, whose stone statue stands outside the window,

backward-gazing Chorb finds that his dead lover has vanished in the darkness.

It is difficult to read these stories of the 1920s without suspecting the overarching influence of Proust's masterpiece, whose final volumes were being published in Paris even as Nabokov's first works were appearing in Berlin. The presentation of time as a subjective blending of multiple pasts and present, the habitual composition of reality through association and its dissolution when this process is suspended, the formation and deformation of personality through duration, the transfiguration of a beloved into an image and of memory into art—all these aspects of Nabokov's early fiction find more elaborate illustration in *Du Côté de chez Swann*. Above all, there is Nabokov's fascination with involuntary memory as a portal opening into our subterranean past. An instant of grief or a random sensory stimulus may serendipitously yield a perfectly preserved slice of the past. As Chorb grips the gate to his wife's childhood house, "the dewy touch of iron against his palm" revives "the keenest of all memories" of her (*DS*, p. 65); in "Christmas" (1925), a forlorn father brushes snow from a bridge parapet and catches a fleeting glimpse of his dead son crossing it, butterfly net in hand, the previous summer; a returning soldier in "The Doorbell" (1927), unable to remember his mother's face, hears her voice in a blacked-out apartment and "instantly reconstruct[s] down to the most minute feature" (*DS*, p. 107) an image of the woman he left seven years before. While all the senses except sight (the primary agent of willed memory) are capable of triggering such flashes of recall, "nothing revives the past so completely as a smell that was once associated with it."<sup>5</sup> When the hero of the 1925 novella *Mary* inhales the scent of carbide in a Berlin street, he is transported back to a road in the Russian countryside that he bicycled to visit his first lover: "it brought back everything at once: the wet grasses whipping against his moving legs and wheel spokes; the disk of milky light that imbibed and dissolved the obscurity; the different objects that emerged from it . . ." (*M*, p. 67).

While Nabokov's admiration for Proust is a matter of public record,<sup>6</sup> while he alludes to the French novelist in both *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Pale Fire*, and while he taught portions of *À la Recherche* in English translation each year at Cornell, he also advised an interviewer that he did not actually read Proust until around 1935-36, by which time he had already been formed as a writer and was "immune to outside influences."<sup>7</sup> In his now-published

lectures Nabokov asserts that "Proustian ideas are colored editions of . . . Bergsonian thought,"<sup>8</sup> a comment that suggests he may have read the philosopher first and that his own early exploration of time may owe something to Bergson's famous distinction between willed recall, which is a function of routine, and "true memory," which takes place continually and may, at random intervals, ignite an involuntary memory-image. More significant than the question of influence, however, is the manner in which Nabokov's early fiction departs from Proust and Bergson. Nabokov's characters may touch the living past for an instant, but, unlike Proust's persona, they show little ability to prolong or even pursue these moments. Reflecting on "the sudden death of an insignificant memory that chance occasion causes to be brought back from [its] humble and remote almshouse," the narrator of "A Busy Man" (1931) describes a condition of irretrievable loss akin to that which we have seen already in "The Return of Chorb": "[the memory] blinks, it is still pulsating and reflecting light—but the next moment, under your very eyes, it breathes one last time and turns up its poor toes, having not withstood the too abrupt transit into the harsh glare of the present. Henceforth all that remains at your disposal is the shadow, the abridgement of that recollection, now devoid, alas, of the original's bewitching convincingness" (*DS*, p. 165).

Analyzing Marcel's rediscovery of three distinct childhood memories at the end of *Le Temps retrouvé*, Nabokov notes that "the problem to be solved is how to keep these impressions from vanishing under the pressure of the present" (*Lectures*, p. 247). As memory evaporates so does identity, and consciousness, left with nothing more than a sense of its own temporal discontinuity, comes to question its very existence from moment to moment. With each new instant the mind not only doubts its capacity to align its fleeting contents, but fears that it might suddenly disappear into a time fissure, swoon into oblivion. Time is experienced not as an indivisible stream, but as a series of discrete and precarious throbs of consciousness. In Nabokov's work, as in Proust's, the problem of bridging past and present involves nothing less than establishing the reality and cohesion of the self. Addressing the same question, idealist thinkers from Descartes to Berkeley had laid their foundation for actuality in the absolute existence of God, who stood beyond material flux and sustained perceiver and object as continuous and independent realities through a perpetual act of creation. For Nabokov, an ambivalent believer at best, the task of reconstructing and knowing reality



required not continuous divine creation, but periodic human recreation through memory. Under proper circumstances, such labors could yield a sense of past as present or present as past. Proust, of course, had advanced an elaborate formulation of his own—and Nabokov quotes from it twice in his lecture: “What we call reality is a certain relationship between sensations and memories which surround us at the same time” (*Lectures*, p. 249). He goes on to explain that, just as Proustian present reality entails a fusion of sensual immediacy and manifold recollections, so too re-immersion in the reality of the past demands more than the operation of simple memory alone: “there must be a combination of present sensation . . . with a recollection, a remembrance, of the sensuous past.” From the start of his career, Nabokov adumbrates a similar model for actualizing the past, but rather than relying, as Proust had, upon the power of involuntary recall or subliminal intuition to dredge up buried experiences, he sought to preserve heightened moments for ready use by training conscious memory in a special way. It is a rigorous process involving not merely recall but the act of perception itself, one through which, he discovered, “by means of intense concentration,” a “neutral [recollected] smudge might be forced to come into beautiful focus” (*SM*, p. 12).

The moments most worth preserving for Nabokov are those in which we suddenly grasp a unique arrangement of objects in the physical universe, a design that coalesces amid the flow of random phenomena. Usually visual images, these ravishing perceptions may find their source in a lover’s face viewed against an evening sky, in a pine needle dangling from a gossamer of spider’s web, or merely in the colored debris of a city street. The protagonist of “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” for example, finds this quality of “particular interrelation, this pattern” (*ND*, p. 117) in the “inexpressible harmoniousness” of the three elements in the story’s title, but also in the “configuration” of insignificant details spied from a train: a smear on the platform, a cherry stone, a cigarette butt. Like Hopkins’s *in scape*, these glimpses of unity are not gifts conferred upon passive consciousness, but rather products of the mind’s selective engagement with the material world. For Nabokov, however, the final author of these compositions is not God but the imagination, which generates a relational oneness among various shapes and colors, tones and textures. The epistemology of the early fiction is entirely consistent with Nabokov’s later pronouncement that “whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the



assistance of creative fancy, that drop of water on a glass slide, which gives distinctness and relief to the observed organism."<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, neither perceptual intensity nor "creative fancy" can preserve the impressions they bring to life. Thus, for all his morbid acuity, the eulogist of "In Memory of I. I. Shigaev" (1934) complains that his life is "a perpetual good-bye to objects and people" (*TD*, p. 168), and the man in "Cloud, Castle, Lake" reflects that "never, never would he remember" the pattern that he sees with such "deathless precision" on the station platform (*ND*, pp. 116-17). A moment later, however, Nabokov's traveler adopts a curious strategy that is reiterated throughout these Berlin stories. As a group of schoolboys glides across his moving window, he gazes at them as though they were already engraved in a distant imaginary past, until they appear as the subject of "an old photograph" (*ND*, p. 117). For Nabokov, the key to invigorating memory is, paradoxically, to compound the act of recollection—to project oneself into a hypothetical future and, thus, view the composed but fleeting present image with the "distinctness and relief" of an object recovered from the past. Isolated in this way from its surrounding field of phenomena, the image is saved from oblivion by being trapped in the warm pool of the created past before it is allowed to enter the ocean of actual past. While this stunt of memory is a consummate act of will, it demands a spontaneous perceptual adjustment. As one who would photograph lightning must trigger the camera shutter in the instant that his eye registers the bolt, so the memorist must preserve his subject in a flash of the created past even as he beholds it.

This practice, so crucial to Nabokov's later work, may have originated in a "game" that he and a girl friend invented during an "oasal" vacation in Crimea during the Revolution. "The idea," he recalls, "consisted of parodizing a biographical approach projected, as it were, into the future and thus transforming the very specious present into a kind of paralyzed past . . ." (*SM*, p. 248). Walking out onto the terrace after supper, seventeen-year-old Nabokov might say of himself, in the tone of an ancient memorist, "The writer liked to go out on the terrace after supper." Disguised as frivolity, this pastime was actually an exercise in memory retention, prompted by an awareness that they would soon be severed from their Russian homeland. Decidedly more earnest in tone, the narrator of "The Admiralty Spire" (1933) describes how, under similar historical circumstances, he and his lover struggled to combat their imminent separation by

transforming their most vivid impressions “into monuments of our still nonexistent past, by trying to look at a garden path, at the moon, at the weeping willows, with the same eyes with which *now*—when fully conscious of irreparable losses—we might have looked at the old, waterlogged raft on the pond, at that moon above the black cowshed” (*TD*, p. 131). With Nabokov, this narrator would play a trick upon time, stay its ravages by anticipating and emulating its processes.

Refined throughout Nabokov’s career by Krug, Pnin and Humbert Humbert, and perfected by Van Veen, this method of memory retention traces back to one of his most remarkable early stories, “A Guide to Berlin” (1925). The work differs from others of the period both in its structural use of a travel manual format and in the unusual interest that its *émigré* narrator takes in his immediate surroundings. Identifying himself neither by name nor occupation, the speaker wishes to record (and hence preserve) for a nameless listener the singular beauties of his adopted city. Addressing his friend in a local pub, he unfolds an itinerary that includes not monuments and museums, but sewage pipes, trolleys, various workmen, zoo animals and, finally, the tavern itself. Collectively, these “sights” summarize the sequential movements and observations of the narrator’s day. In each he discovers an articulate pattern emerging, whether it be in the parallel stripes of fresh snow that run along the street’s “iron entrails,” or in the “arabesques” of “chrome yellow [and] pink blotches” on a carcass being carried into a shop (*DS*, p. 95). Stitched together, the story’s five closely studied scenes form a larger unity of impressions: street pipes lead into streetcars; the trolley perch affords successive views of a street repair crew, a baker, a postman, and a butcher unloading a side of meat; dead meat gives way to live meat at the Berlin aquarium, where a Galapagos tortoise munches vegetables under its “ageless, well-rubbed, dull bronze” carapace, its “splendid burden of time” (*DS*, p. 96). This shell, made beautiful by the pressure of time, serves as a symbol for the narrator’s own desire to achieve a temporal perspective from which “everything will be valuable and meaningful . . . everything will be ennobled and justified by its age” (*DS*, p. 95). His method, of course, is to peer at Berlin through a historical telescope of his own creation:

I think that here lies the sense of literary creation: to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tender-

ness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of plain everyday life will become festive in its own right. . . . (*DS*, p. 95)

Here, for the first time, Nabokov enunciates what is, perhaps, the central tenet of his creative life: art's crucial dependence not merely upon memory but upon a continual sense of the past. But it is equally clear in the story that even the most potent recollection seeks its final validation in art. Just as acute perception throws a patterned impression into spatial relief, and just as the simultaneous act of imagining that impression as past generates a sense of temporal relief, so too literature, in its simplest descriptive sense, liberates the remembered image from all other recollections, preserving it in its own "kindly mirror." But the narrator's guidebook is more than merely descriptive. Turning his attention at last to the interior of the pub, he sees a child in an adjacent room seated beneath a looking glass. For the narrator, this mirror becomes metaphor both for the child's lucid perception of his surroundings and for his presumed memory of them in the future. At the same time, it reflects the adult's aesthetic need to find his own impressions mirrored, intensified and memorialized in the child. Noting the boy's position, the narrator judges that he is able to see him and his friend drinking, the metallic gloss of the bar, and the green rectangle of the billiard table. Then, projecting himself into the child's imagined perspective, the narrator endows him with his own retrospective awareness: "Yet there is one thing I know. Whatever happens to him in life, he will always remember the picture he saw every day of his childhood from the little room where he was fed his soup" (*DS*, p. 98). Having viewed Berlin with the eye of a future historian, Nabokov's guide would now like to demonstrate that he has "glimpsed somebody [else's] future recollection." In truth, this hypothetical transference is not an exercise in telepathy but another method of time-telescoping, one through which the narrator seeks to solidify his future recollections of the present moment—the pub, the uncomprehending child, his friend and, above all, himself. The boy's point of view, assumed and then extended into the future (much as Dorothy's perspective is manipulated in "Tintern Abbey"), serves the narrator as an imaginative lense for sharpening and fixing in his memory the *entire* scene—the self as perceived and as perceiver, as well as the objects of its perception. The child, then, is not so much a surrogate self as an invented protagonist through whom the speaker

views the world and himself, much as Nabokov views Berlin through his own narrator-guide. Like his creator, this *émigré* cherishes a nostalgia for childhood's unburdened sense of time, but also an awareness that an adult's only recourse lies in the subterfuge of memory and art.

While a number of Nabokov's other early protagonists betray a Wordsworthian urgency that children store up impressions while their "paint" still remains on "the fingertips of the mind" (*TD*, p. 191), the child's sense of time as a "mobile medium" precludes both the fear of loss and strategies of recovery. Nabokov has suggested that one's first notion of identity is born with this initial time sense, and Ivanov, a tutor in "Perfection" (1932), imagines that his pupil will one day be jolted with a renewed "amazement at his own existence" (*TD*, p. 192) when he remembers the picture of a clown that hangs above his bed. But Ivanov lacks the retrospective genius of his counterpart in "A Guide," and, in his mature anxiety, he merely projects his own failing hopes for vivid recall upon the child. Moreover, as we have seen, involuntary memory flashes of the kind that he anticipates cannot really restore the ego's feeling of temporal continuity. Reversing Proust's formulation, Nabokov's characters regain a sense of self-cohesion not when they view the past as present, but only when they learn to view the present as past. "Torpido Smoke," another story of the early thirties, examines a young man's simultaneous discoveries of art and identity in just such a moment. "Drugged" by the alien oppressiveness of Berlin, Grisha spends his days lying in his room, listening to scraps of indistinct speech from the adjacent parlor and drifting in and out of "the languorous mist" of reverie. So diffused is his consciousness that he can scarcely recall the position and limits of his own recumbent body. Subject and object suffer a Prufrockian dissolution: a row of facing houses seems to extend like his arm, the "long, skeletal cloud" drifting across his window "might be his backbone" (*RB*, p. 29). Movement seems impossible because "the very form of his being" has "lost all distinctive marks and fixed boundaries." Like the victim in "Terror," he finds that he cannot recognize the "proper confines" of his own mirror reflection, but this discovery elicits nothing more than dull surprise (*RB*, p. 32). It is only after his sister invades his solitude and he drags himself into the dining room to borrow cigarettes from their father that Grisha's breakthrough occurs. As he returns to his bedroom, the simple scene he has just witnessed still burns in his mind like an afterimage:

With terrifying clarity, as if my soul were lit up by a noiseless explosion, I glimpsed a future recollection; it dawned upon me that exactly as I recalled such images of the past as the way my dead mother had of making a weepy face and clutching her temples when mealtime squabbles became too loud, so one day, I would have to recall, with merciless, irreparable sharpness, the hurt look of my father's shoulders as he leaned over the torn map [of Berlin], morose, wearing his warm indoor jacket powdered with ashes and dandruff; and all this mingled creatively with the recent vision of blue smoke clinging to dead leaves on a wet roof. (*RB*, p. 33)

By working these somber elements into a visual and emotional harmony, and then framing the scene as a recollection, Grisha ensures that he *will* recall it in the future—just as he will recall more forcefully the image of his dead mother that has become a part of that harmony. Recognizing his own extended existence through the creation of a future memory, Grisha has himself “taken shape” along with the scene in his mind. The perceptual continuity that links the present moment with both past and future memories carries with it a notion of self-sameness. Deeper than this theoretical comprehension of identity, however, is his existential affirmation of being in the present instant. Grisha feels a sudden “longing to live,” and with it a poem rising “hotly alight” within him. Although he reflects that verses are no more immortal than memories, he wishes to commemorate the moment and himself. One suspects that, after manifold transformations, the germinating poem becomes the story that we read.

This method of envisioning present images as future recollections seems to arrest them like so many gorgeous specimens pinned in a lepidopterist's case, or like so many exquisitely composed snapshots; but to recover the past more fully the butterflies must be made to flutter, the still photographs must become frames on a cinema reel, flowing into one another, partaking of the mobile essence of temporality itself. So it is that Nabokov's most complex protagonists, early and late, do not merely accumulate memory crystals but reanimate the past through a final creative act of recollection. When the narrator of “The Admiralty Spire” speaks of “practicing nostalgia” (*TD*, p. 131) with his former lover, Katya, so that they might “cope with” the burden of the past when it really existed for them, he suggests more than merely adopting a retrospective vision of the

present. In training himself to remember various details of their love idyll, he was also making possible an act of recombination and transmutation that brings their romance more richly to life sixteen years later. The narrator's impassioned account of their summer together takes the form of a letter to Katya and is meant as a corrective to her (presumed) novel, *The Admiralty Spire*, which has "encroached with astonishing insolence" (*TD*, p. 129) on his own version of the past. By weaving together discrete images of that distant time and so refashioning this teenage affair, he hopes to free their love from its "humiliating captivity" in a work of popular fiction. Since the novel is attributed to one "Serge Solntsev," and since we have only the narrator's unproven claim that this is Katya's pseudonym, we may suspect that the book bears no more biographical relation to his past than does the poem "Pale Fire" to Charles Kinbote's *Zembla*. Nabokov's primary concern here, however, is not the madness of a literary parasite, but rather memory's astonishing ability to recapture the essence of a personal epoch by reordering and purifying its contents. Whether or not Katya actually authored the offending novel is irrelevant to the narrator's luminous evocation of their love. Beginning with actual memories that he had deliberately preserved at the time—the summer moon, Katya's sweat-dampened silk frock, the species of strawberry that they picked, and so on—the narrator intermixes, conflates and spins forth from these details a radiant chronicle of a time when his sensory perceptions naturally "blended into a sense of oppressive delight" (*TD*, p. 132). Such acts of memory are not merely impulses to art but, as Nabokov has noted, artistic feats in themselves:

The past is a constant accumulation of images, but our brain is not an ideal organ for constant retrospection and the best we can do is to pick out and try to retain those patches of rainbow light flitting through memory. The act of retention is an act of art, artistic selection, artistic blending, artistic recombination of actual events. (*SO*, p. 186)

New memory configurations are born in this mixing process, much as the patterns of each constituent memory and of each significant perception emerge from the "creative mingling" of impressions. While the "good memorist" seeks to maintain "the utmost truth of detail," he also knows that the past that he recreates can never be an



objective decoding of bygone events. Personal histories, Nabokov ruefully acknowledges, cannot be "microfilmed" (*SM*, p. 15), and it is a "bad memorist" who merely "retouches" his past, producing a hopelessly "blue-tinted or pink-shaded photograph" (*SO*, p. 186). Creative recollection, by contrast, involves the evocation of a past atmosphere and the distillation of its sensory and emotional impact. The memory artist's selection and deployment of particular details, his discovery of "the right spot on his canvas for placing the right patch of remembered color," generates another kind of truth. Just as a van Gogh canvas may seem more real, more essential in its vibrant distortions than a camera print of the same field of sunflowers, the juxtaposition and interplay of various bits of colored memory can produce a truer, more intensely felt past than photographic recall ever could.

The narrator of "The Admiralty Spire" is one of Nabokov's first such artists of memory, but his belief that he can sustain his own creation only by denouncing a former lover's indicates his peculiar limitations. While he understands that his conception of the past is partly invention, his error lies in his insistence that Katya should invent in precisely the same way as he. Even if, as he claims, they inhabited the same sensory and emotional climate, vibrated with the same pulse and saw with a single pair of eyes, their minds would recompose similar memories differently, in accordance with their separate needs. One may recreate one's own psychic history, but never another's. The narrator betrays a deeper misunderstanding when he demands that Katya (if it *is* she) "stop writing books" (*TD*, p. 139), drawing a distinction between his own art of remembrance and her novelized account. Far from diluting the essence of memory, the instrument of fiction in Nabokov characteristically refines what the aesthetics of recollection have begun. In certain cases, fictional disguise actually provides his characters with a new perspective on their past that allows the merging and metamorphosis of memories to begin. The unexpected shifts from the third to the first person that we find in several of Nabokov's early works (culminating in the baroque alternation of these modes in *The Gift* [1937-38]) suggest their protagonists' need to examine the past through the agency of a narrative mask that they discard when creative recombination is underway. The "he" of "Torpid Smoke," for example, not only becomes "I" with the onset of a future memory of his father, but recreates his epiphany so potently that the past tense yields to the present. As the story ends, the once-



detached narrator imagines he is back in his Berlin bedroom, filled with the fire of poetry: "my face is wet with tears, my heart is bursting with happiness, and I know that this happiness is the greatest thing on earth" (*RB*, p. 33). As a realm of creative memory, fiction can be truer than simple autobiography, much as Van Veen's "anti-terra" is truer than the Russia that he and Ada once inhabited. This paradox explains a phenomenon that fascinated Nabokov late in his career. In his introduction to the English version of *Mary*, he notes that, despite some "superimposed inventions," Ganin's fictional love affair offers "a headier extract of personal reality" than does his "scrupulously faithful account" of his romance with Tamara (*Mary's* "twin sister") in *Speak, Memory* (*M*, p. xii). Nabokov's brief explanation—that, writing *Mary* in 1925, he was three times closer to the experience than he was in composing his memoir—is so "simple" as to seem thoroughly ironic. Not only had he just completed *Ada*, whose octogenarian protagonist, under the playful guise of a third person fiction, achieves feats of memory that far surpass his counterparts', but he had just translated the novella that marked his first extended investigation of the art of memory.

Ganin begins as the paradigmatic hero of Nabokov's early fiction: unemployed, adrift, and suffering from a "dispersion of the will" (*M*, p. 18), he dwells with seven other *émigrés* in a "house of ghosts" (*M*, p. 114). Although only twenty-five, he feels powerless because he has no "precise desire" in life, and he is rapidly becoming a ghost himself. The murky urban twilight seems to penetrate his body, "transforming his blood into fog" (*M*, p. 18). Worse still is the sense of disembodied shame that he feels at the cinema when he sees his own shape—an extra in a crowd scene—flickering upon the darkness. Ganin reflects that he has "sold his shadow" (*M*, p. 9) to several other filmmakers and imagines his shade wandering in various disguises from city to city, screen to screen. While this film image reminds him of the discontinuity of personality and the "fleeting evanescence of human life" (*M*, p. 22), it also suggests the insufficiency of preserving experience through any simple reproductive process, be it cinematic or mnemonic. After returning home from the moviehouse, however, Ganin is shocked into a renewed sense of being through an act of transformative recollection. When a repulsive neighbor chances to show him a photograph of his wife, who is soon to rejoin him from Russia after a long separation, the young man recognizes his

first love, Mary. Photography, even more than the cinema, can be a treacherous usurper of art's function for Nabokov, but here it serves as a unique aesthetic stimulus. Ganin sees in the crude snapshot not a married woman sitting in her garden, but the supple outline of the girl whom he loved, lost, and has already begun to recreate. With the care of a portraitist, he begins to blend remembered patches of their life together, pausing occasionally to judge his progress, retrieving bits of forgotten trivia, composing his canvas step by step. At first he puts off contemplating images of Mary herself, filling in the backgrounds—the summerhouse where they met, the river where they boated, the abandoned mansion where they made love—so as to conjure more richly “the girl whom he did not dare to place in [his creation] until it was absolutely complete” (*M*, p. 33). Confident of his power to resurrect Mary, he feels himself not merely a supreme artist, but “a god, recreating a world that had perished” (*M*, p. 33).

Ganin had felt a similar sense of creative potency once before, while convalescing from a bout of typhus nine years earlier, and his recreation of Mary derives its inspiration from this adolescent experience. As he lay in his sickbed he had conceived and nurtured the image of a dark-haired, Tartar-eyed girl whom he was to discover in the flesh a month later. Since he had fallen in love with Mary before he knew she existed, she seemed in his first glimpse of her at a concert to be “an uninterrupted continuation of the image which had foreshadowed her” (*M*, p. 44). In short, she appeared as a delicately etched memory come alive: his prescience had created the conditions for a kind of future memory. Ganin is able to summon a detailed recollection of their first meeting because, even at that moment in the past, he had viewed her with the precision and relief that only a retrospective view of the present can yield. Such memories make creative recomposition possible. As Ganin's teenage lover had been an alchemical fusion of girl and image, so his recreated lover is a product of two layers of superimposed memory blending with and reshaping one another. And as his boyhood anticipation had intensified his love for the actual girl, his mature recreation distills even greater sweetness from that love. Time becomes for him so thoroughly imbued with the “progress of recollection” (*M*, p. 55) that the months of his romance with Mary seem to unfold naturally within the span of three days in Berlin. His memory skips over the “blank unmemorable stretches” of his adolescence, illuminating, comingling, and

compressing only those details connected with Mary. It is not simply a life of reminiscence, but one that is "much more real, more intense than that lived by his shadow" in the German pension (*M*, p. 55).

Ganin's evolving vision of the past must end, however, as surely as his love affair had. Like the narrator of "The Admiralty Spire," he had felt the chill of impending separation even when he and Mary were in love, and practiced nostalgia from a premature sense of "something unimaginably dear and gone forever" (*M*, p. 70). Having often imagined their final parting, he felt, when it actually occurred on a train platform, "as though [it] had all happened at some time before" (*M*, p. 75). Ganin re-experiences this familiar loss when the same scene brings his memories of Mary to a conclusion: the creative pattern of recollection in which he has lived for three days ends and the unorganized flow of Berlin time continues. Desperate to extend his romance and so compose the chaotic present, Ganin concludes that he and Mary must renew their love when she arrives the following morning. It is an uncharacteristically bold ambition—Nabokov's early memorists do not dream of Humbert Humbert's reincarnation of a child lover—and it is, of course, hopeless. Repressing his amazement that his sloe-eyed sweetheart could have married a man with a "sparse little beard and shiny, plump nose" (*M*, p. 52), Ganin acts to neutralize him. After getting this feverishly expectant neighbor drunk, he leads him to bed and resets his alarm clock so that he will miss Mary's train. By arriving in the husband's stead, Ganin would attempt a similar leap across the abyss of time, cancelling not four hours but nine intervening years. As he walks to the station, however, the "sober light" of the Berlin morning persuades him that *his* Mary belongs to a past that can be remembered but never relived. For the first time the city appears not as a vague dreamscape, but in vivid, intrusive particularity. The raw yellow sheen of construction timber seems "more alive than the most lifelike dream of the past," and Ganin realizes with merciless clarity that, apart from his reveries, "no Mary existed nor could exist" (*M*, p. 114). Thus, as his lover's train pulls in, he boards another himself, one that is headed not toward his lost Russia, but westward into the future, toward Bavaria, Provence, "and then—the sea." Yet as he leaves Berlin, he has at last learned to be its "guide." Casting a retrospective "loving eye" upon colored posters, workmen, a half-finished house, he is creating future recollections that, like his memories of Mary, may one day unite with others in a marvelous chemistry to sustain him in an unspecified future.

## NOTES

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Putnam, 1966), p. 73. All future references to this volume are noted by page number with the designation *SM*.
2. During the 1970s Nabokov and his son, Dmitri, collaborated on the translation of 38 of his Russian stories, originally published in European journals between 1924 and 1940. These short works, most of which had never before been rendered in English, are collected in three volumes, published in New York by McGraw-Hill: *A Russian Beauty* (1973), *Tyrants Destroyed* (1975), and *Details of a Sunset* (1976). Three other stories of Nabokov's Berlin years—"Spring in Fialta" (1936), "The Aurelian" (1930) and "Cloud, Castle, Lake" (1937)—had already been translated by Peter Pertzov with the author's assistance and were published along with ten English tales in *Nabokov's Dozen* (1958). References to these works of fiction are noted by page number in the text, along with the appropriate abbreviation: *RB*, *TD*, *DS*, *ND*. Since there was sometimes a lapse of several years between the writing and initial publication of these early works, I have noted the date of composition for each story under discussion.
3. Nabokov published eighteen stories before he completed his first full-length novel, *King, Queen, Knave*, in 1928. Apart from a few scattered articles on individual stories, the only extended examination of Nabokov's earliest work is Marina Naumann's monograph *Blue Evenings in Berlin: Nabokov's Short Stories of the 1920's* (New York: New York University Press, 1978). While this work provides some valuable biographical information on composition and publication, its approach is more descriptive than interpretive. Naumann classifies the stories generically, according to "technique," as "realistic," "symbolic," or "realistic-symbolic," an organizational principle that severely limits her exploration of particular themes. She does, however, offer plausible explanations for Nabokov's early attraction to the short story: besides the relative ease of publishing short fictions in *émigré* journals (most often *Rul*), there was Nabokov's admiration for a rich tradition of Russian short story writers that includes Gogol, Turgenev, and Chekhov (Naumann, p. 7).
4. Nabokov demonstrated his own high regard for this piece by making it the title work in his 1930 story collection *The Return of Chorb* (*Vozvrashchenie Chorba*) and, forty-five years later, by reworking an earlier English translation that he found "too tame in style." *DS*, p. 58.
5. Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 60. All future references to this volume are noted by page number with the designation *M*.

6. During a televised interview in 1966, Nabokov stated that "the greatest masterpieces of twentieth century prose are, in this order: Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kafka's *Transformation*, Bely's *St. Petersburg*, and the first half of Proust's fairy tale, *In Search of Lost Time*." Quoted from Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 398.
7. J. E. Rivers, "Proust, Nabokov, and *Ada*," in *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Phyllis A. Roth (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984), p. 141. Nabokov's disdain for critics who sought to document influences on his work is legendary. In his foreward to the English version of *Invitation to a Beheading* (New York: Putnam, 1959), he writes: "I could never understand why every book of mine invariably sends reviewers scurrying in search of more or less celebrated names for the purpose of passionate comparison" (p. 6). Among twenty such names that he lists is Proust's.
8. Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980), p. 208. Subsequent references to this volume are noted by page number in the text.
9. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 154. Future references are noted by page number with the designation *SO*.