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Spatialized time, synchrony and the art of memory in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

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The works of Vladimir Nabokov address the notions of time and space in relation to the art of writing, tracing the multifaceted dimensions of the temporal pattern in which art operates and its visual translations. For Nabokov, the synchronic design and appreciation of the novel is preferred to the traditional diachronic approach. Hence, the literary work is regarded as a primarily spatial structure which should be perceived with a photographic eye. This paper will investigate concepts such as manifold awareness, transparency, spatial and temporal folding, the presence of ekphrasis and the role of memory in achieving synchrony. I will explore how in Speak, Memory, *the desire to simultaneously grasp the disparate elements of life in an undistorted state is expressed through imagery which collapses the past and the present into a singular intense sensation by means of "cosmic synchronization".*

Keywords*: spatialized time, memory, ekphrasis, cosmic synchronization*

1. Introduction

When creating or assessing the aesthetic value of a work of art, the individual is often faced with situations of limited experience. The instantaneous, artistic core of a literary text cannot be completely comprehended because the written word must be read in a linear manner, perceived in space and time. In his works, Nabokov expresses his dissatisfaction with this fragmentary nature of literature and aspires to an absolute form of experience in which time and space would be merged and hence the realities exposed in the written text would be mentally reorganized and evoked simultaneously. The diachronic structure of literature would then be transformed into a synchronic, spatial entity that the reader could apprehend instantaneously, like a painting. In order to achieve this experience, Nabokov suggests rereading as a technique for accessing the initial vision of the writer as well as a mental reorganization of fragmentary details in order to recover the mental landscape of the literary work.

Memory serves for Nabokov as an invaluable means of juxtaposing different perspectives, events, consequently accessing multiple points in space and time or, as

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the writer terms it, achieving "manifold awareness" and "transparency". The result is a single frame of vision which would account for the analogy that the writer makes between visual arts and literature. Taking into consideration his training as a painter, Nabokov consciously incorporates into his work elements of ekphrasis, synaesthesia together with cinematographic techniques to paint a world of "cosmic synchronization". The patterns organized by memory which are used in the writing process disrupt the linear narrative and incite the mental awareness of the reader. For Nabokov, a good reader is always a rereader and the optimal reading and writing is that which transcends materiality.

2. "One cannot read a book, one can only reread it": the synchronic/ diachronic appreciation of literature

In one of his lectures on literature entitled "Good Readers and Good Writers", Nabokov tells his students: "[c]uriously enough one cannot read a book: one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, an active and creative reader is a rereader." (Nabokov 2002, 3). He explains that whereas reading a book implies the complicated process of moving our eyes from left to right, processing the words laid down on the sheet of paper in order to envisage the plot only to further discover the hidden messages that lie beneath the surface, in painting and other visual arts this process of discovery is not limited by space and time. There is no certain order in which the elements of a painting must be acknowledged although both written text and painting contain elements of depth. The human eye can grasp the whole painting and afterwards enjoy its details whereas one must get acquainted with a book and reread it before making judgements of value.

Attaining a global vision of the diverse memories that form one's life is central to the autobiography *Speak, Memory*, originally entitled *The Anthemion*, a honeysuckle ornament made of elaborate interlacements which would have suggested exactly the need to apprehend all parts of the whole in order to understand their consonance. As White observes, "Nabokov is making the case for closing the semiotic gap by a synchronous appreciation of the work of literary art enabled by repeated reading, thorough which the reader constructs the work in imaginary space and as such transcends the materiality of the book itself" (White 2017, 105-106). Thus, Nabokov advocates for a synchronic appreciation of literature which would free the consciousness from any constraints. Not only literature should be perceived in this manner but life itself is an aesthetic experience, proof being the literary features of the autobiography.

According to Nabokov, the reader who experiences the text several times escapes linearity and gains a mental awareness of the original vision of the author. The fragmentation of the literary work given by its diachronicity can be overcome by changing the perspective. Several images are conjured up in this respect. A vivid

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metaphor used to explain the nature of life and art would be the image of a broken ceramic pottery:

> I do not doubt that among those slightly convex chips of majolica ware found by our child there was one whose border of scrollwork fitted exactly, and continued, the pattern of a fragment I had found in 1903 on the same shore, and that the two tallied with a third my mother had found on that Mentone beach in 1882, and with a fourth piece of the same pottery that had been found by her mother a hundred years ago-and so on, until this assortment of parts, if it all had been preserved, might have been put together to make the complete, the absolutely complete bowl, broken by some Italian child, God knows where and when. (Nabokov 1989, 298)

Although the pieces of pottery are scattered across the world just as the important events in life are disorderly arranged in the mind, one has to take each piece and unite it to the next one until the holistic vision is achieved. Nevertheless, cracks in the ceramic may remain, hence the dissatisfaction. In Nabokov's perspective, life can similarly be described as fragmented and distorted even when seen in a linear manner. In another childhood memory, a fence made up of boards which "had been brought from some other place where they had been used, apparently, as the enclosure of an itinerant circus" (Nabokov 1989, 209) displays painted animal parts arranged disorderly. Arguably, the absurd spectacle of "a tawny haunch, a zebra's head, the leg of an elephant" (Nabokov 1989, 209) suggests that even if the work of art is disjointed, the whole can be deduced from the fragment. It is known that Nabokov was a great admirer of James Joyce and supported alternatives to the diachronic flow of the plot. In this respect, his approach to writing aims to find harmony in the distorted, separate threads of consciousness.

3. Recapturing the past through "cosmic synchronization" and "manifold awareness"

Memory plays a pivotal role in the autobiography of Vladimir Nabokov. The autobiography could be read as a tribute to the supreme achievement of Mnemosyne of fashioning powerful images filled with meaning that recapture the past. In the context of temporal fragmentation, these mnemonic images seem to transcend time by rearranging and connecting the fragments of the past in a complex pattern. Thus, memory, time and literature seem to converge in what Nabokov calls "the meeting point of an impersonal art form and a very personal life story" (Nabokov qtd. in Boyd 1991, 149), in which the recovery of the past becomes an elusive hunt for memories.

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Instead of a rigid chronological and geographical progression, *Speak, Memory* relies on a more complex structure. The autobiography records the main events in the life of the author up the age of forty, tracing his privileged childhood in his beloved Vyra estate in Russia and the relocation of his family to Europe in 1919 due to the Bolshevik revolution. The book concludes with the first glimpse of the liner *Champlain* that would allow Nabokov, his wife and their son to escape from wartime France to New York in 1940. Nevertheless, the events narrated are interwoven in an anachronistic manner shifting from his family circle as a boy and adolescent to covering his multicultural education or his affective life. Marking events such as the first poetic urge, inspired by a raindrop falling off a leaf after a storm, his first love or his first loss of a member of the family are equally invoked. Thus, "memory is seen as a process of reconstruction, not reappearance" (Winograd 1994, 243). It involves a reinterpretation of the past and a creation of "cosmic synchronization" with the aid of imagination:

> That summer I was still far too young to evolve any wealth of "cosmic synchronization" (to quote my philosopher again). But I did discover, at least, that a person hoping to become a poet must have the capacity of thinking of several things at a time. In the course of the languid rambles that accompanied the making of my first poem, I ran into the village schoolmaster[…] I registered simultaneously and with equal clarity not only his wilting flowers, his flowing tie and the blackheads on the fleshy volutes of his nostrils, but also the dull little voice of a cuckoo coming from afar, and the flash of a Queen of Spain settling on the road, and the remembered impression of the pictures (enlarged agricultural pests and bearded Russian writers) in the well-aerated classrooms of the village school which I had once or twice visited (Nabokov 1989, 206-207).

The combination of details, the spatialized visualization of events can be traced even in the organization of chapters, centered on the chronophobia expressed from the first chapter, and in the embedment of texts that allows multiple points in time to be accessed simultaneously through memory. Cosmic synchronization cannot be possible without the ability to apprehend the superimposition of events. Nabokov terms this type of perception "manifold awareness". It corresponds to the ultimate creative thrill described in the lecture "The Art of Literature and Commonsense" as "a sudden live image constructed in a flash out of dissimilar units which are apprehended all at once in a stellar explosion of the mind" (Nabokov 2002, 379). The simultaneous state of mind leads to transparency, a clear vision of multiple events gathered in a single frame. Nabokov implies that the reader as well is required to attain manifold awareness in order to have a transparent vision of a literary work. So, although manifold awareness is a prerequisite for the artist, who can experience a plethora of sensations and therefore has a keen sense of

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appreciating the aesthetic value, the reader should sharpen his perception in order to mentally visualize the initial, non-linear image behind the linear text.

4. Ecphrastic encounters: photography, mnemonic imagery and lapidoptery

When asked in an interview "What language do you think in?" Nabokov answered "I don't think in any language. I think in images." (Nabokov 1990, 12). This remark applies to *Speak, Memory* whose ekphrastic nature is reflected in the numerous implicit or explicit references to photography, painting and cinema. The clearest examples are the authentic photographs and charts added to the final edition of the autobiography in its attempt to visualize the past. All these visual metaphors allow the narrator to spatialize time and to be self-reflexive about the problem of remembering. Since the flow of time is not presented as linear, but it takes the form of images, the pictorial style permits a release of the events from the hold of time with the aim of examining them and revealing their significance. Remembering the past is characterized by visual intensity and precision: "With great clarity I can see her sitting at a table" (Nabokov 1989, 32). Therefore, the text constructs a utopia in which the past can be brought into the present with great accuracy and time is abolished.

Essential to this ideal is the use of mnemonic images. The reoccurring description of the jewels passed on in the family or of an expensive cane which remind of the Russian Revolution are relevant in this respect. The training in mnemonic imagery and synesthetic experience seems to have come from the childhood drawing lessons given by Mr. Cummings. Arguably, their impact stretches to the whole structure of the book since, in a similar manner to drawing, the autobiography seems to elaborate on detail and draw a circular movement around it. The hunt for butterflies, described as elusive creatures, could be interpreted as the pursuit for retrieving mnemonic images. Equally, their colorful wings could be emblematic of synesthesia, colored hearing. However, the ironic parallel between himself under the scalpel of the doctor and the moth pierced by pins produces identification with the creatures he pursues. The hunter himself might be the prey, consumed by memory. The individual appears not so much subject, but rather subjected to memory.

Speak, Memory opens with a traumatic experience which is essential in the understanding of memory, creativity and time. Namely, a "young chronophobiac" (Nabokov 1989, 19) watches for the first time a homemade film taken a few weeks before he was born. He realizes in horror that although he did not exist, nobody mourned his absence. This ephemeral nature of life is clearly expressed by the deduction that "our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" (Nabokov 1989, 19). It could be said that the nothingness before birth mingles with that which follows death. The image of the beam of light of a movie projector cutting through the darkness of a cinema auditorium serves as a metaphor

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for life, suggesting a spectral world in which the subject is a simple spectator, absent and without control. It equally foreshadows the access to a reflexive consciousness through memories that pierce through the dark prison of time against which the individual rebels. Thus, from the beginning, there is a centrality of visual techniques and an intense desire to break the walls of time by means of accessing memories.

One of the ways of depicting memory is as a camera, lens or scanning gaze. The cinematic projection from the first page is opposed to the magic lantern slides from the eighth chapter: "translucent miniatures, pocket wonderlands, neat little worlds of hushed luminous hues! In later years, I rediscovered the same precise and silent beauty at the radiant bottom of a microscope's magic shaft" (Nabokov 1989, 154). The luminous disc, a metaphor for memory, projects through the magic lantern various portraits. These pictures relate directly to the mnemonic images that appear when the past returns with intensity. According to Moraru, "remembrance plays the tape of time, breaks up the motion picture continuum into pieces that the narrator (re)-views one by one as a spectator watching [...] the silent show of his life" (Moraru 2005, 52). The slides function as a system of memory that, unlike film, allows the individual to be master of his past.

Nevertheless, the mind can grasp the past only with the assistance of imagination. Nabokov views "the objective existence of all events as a form of impure imagination" (Nabokov 1990, 154). That is to say, human reason will always have a distorted perception, it is through imagination that the aesthetic value can be registered. The use of film and photography themselves are linked with the process of imagination and creativity. According to Wyllie, "the channel of light acts as a link between the real and the imaginary, serving as an amorphous bridge between two worlds" (Wyllie 2005, 228). The juxtaposition of imagination and science in this device shatters the boundaries between the two, inviting a search for the autobiographical truth outside factual accuracy. The image of the magic lantern illustrates the deconstruction and reconstruction of memories that characterize this reflexive text in which reality and fiction are merged.

5. The art of memory and the folding of time

A vacillation between artistic freedom of imagination and factual recordings can be traced. A relevant example of the conflict between memory and art is the depiction of Mademoiselle O. Chapter five includes the statement that "[t]he man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle" (Nabokov 1989, 77). The deconstruction of light into coloured fragments in the following excerpt reflects the portrait of Mademoiselle as a combination of reality and fiction: "On the white window ledges, on the long window seats covered with faded calico, the sun breaks into geometrical gems after passing through rhomboids and squares of stained glass. This is the time when Mademoiselle is at her very best." (Nabokov 1989, 89). The past should be analysed

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and submitted to the deconstructing prism of the imagination in order for it to reappear in its entire intensity. Thus, in *Speak, Memory* the act of remembering is characterized by visual intensity and is a voluntary, conscious effort.

The act of accessing memory is directly related to the moment of acquiring consciousness. Actually, the first epiphany presented in the autobiography concerns the awareness of time. At the age of four years old, on the occasion of his mother's birthday, the child is confronted with the formula of his own age. By comparing his age with that of his parents the child undergoes a second baptism. He is inserted in the element of time and sees his "diminutive self as celebrating, on that August day 1903, the birth of sentient life" (Nabokov 1989, 22), of becoming conscious of his environment and of himself. A duality between the remembering and the remembered self can be inferred. Nivat states that "*Speak, Memory* is Nabokov's dialogue with his own self in the presence of the reader" (Nivat 1995, 674). The retrospective knowledge that the elderly, narrating "I" has of having been there without knowing it merges with the positive emotion of the four-year-old boy, the narrated "I", at acknowledging the age of his parents. He realizes that each of them is a separate individual, not "a tender incognito" (Nabokov 1989, 20). This episode marks the synchronic encounter of the past and present self.

The treatment of time in *Speak, Memory* has been compared by critics to that of Marcel Proust. Both authors are in search of the lost time and both aim to break a time-bound reality by paradoxically giving temporality a central role. However, opposite to the proustian involuntary memory, founded on sensorial experience, remembering is a voluntary act, based on creative consciousness. Foster argues that "Nabokov prefers to stress deliberation and conscious lucidity as the royal road to memory, and therefore tends to bypass the Madeleine episode and the doctrine of involuntary memory" (Foster 1993, 124). The emphasis falls on the deliberate effort required to connect past and present by means of various strategies and sources. Thus, creative consciousness becomes a window both into time and out of it.

Whereas empirical remembrance is associated with the spherical prison of time without exits, the act of writing breaks temporal boundaries. Through creation, time ceases to exist: "I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip" (Nabokov 1989, 120). It could be said that memory allows journeys through time, while autobiography, like a folded rug, can put distant moments in contact to create new patterns other than those woven into the fabric. An instance which shows the sinuous design of the autobiography is the episode in which general Kuropatkin, a friend of the family, amuses the five-year-old child with a handful of matches. Fifteen years later, they connect again when Kuropatkin, in a rustic disguise after escaping Soviet imprisonment, asks Nabokov the father for a light. The theme of the matches reappears as the narrator notices that they had vanished, just as the armies lead by the general. Thus, the art of memory in the

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autobiography of Nabokov could be resumed in the metaphor of the magic carpet, reference to the creative process which is at the basis of patterning and timelessness.

6. Conclusions

Speak, Memory displays a special concern with the synchronic design and apprehension of the novel as a spatial entity organized by memory, with the vacillation between the imagination of an artist and the fidelity of a memorialist in recording his past. Various ecphrastic devices are used in order to deconstruct and rearrange the fragments of the past, from the cinematic motif and lepidopteran analyses to pictorialism in mnemonic images. Nabokov emphasizes the importance of rereading in experiencing manifold awareness and the folding of the past and the present in a cosmic synchronization. Eventually, the interest lies in finding patterns which are hidden in reality, art and nature. The retrieval of these patterns is done by means of a voluntary effort of analysing past events and through the very act of writing. In the end, Nabokov asserts the spatiality of the reading and writing process, likening the synchronic assimilation of the literary work to the transcendence experienced during the writing process.

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