

## The Watermark of a Self in Narrating the Past: A Study of Autobiographical Memory in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

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### Abstract

Autobiographies are not merely literary productions but mental functions, stories continuously narrated, owned and believed by the self. By broadening the locus of autobiography from literary productions to mental functions, the connection between its Greek constituent parts: autos (self), bios (life), and graphé (writing), can be clarified and new vantage points become possible for studying the self and its narrative framing. In the genre of autobiography Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* stands out in unraveling the ways in which memory speaks the self. The free indirect style voice of narration and bridging the epistemic gap between the past and the present, both innate to the act of remembering, are masterly used by Nabokov. This article, following Mark Rowlands' approach to memory, studies *Speak, Memory* in order to explore the narrative structure of autobiographical memory and the constitution of the autobiographical sense of self. This study argues that in *Speak, Memory*, the self emerges as a narrative thematic pattern across time by being purported in, and at the same time transcending clusters of first-personal narratives that reconstruct the past.

### Keywords

Autobiographical Memory; Sense of Self; Memory Narratives; Free Indirect Style;  
Thematic Designs.

### 1. Introduction

What is easier than writing about oneself, or in Kant's terms (67), "the dear old self"? If not accused of egotism, and in some cases perjury, the writer is not challenged in her production. This is the common belief about autobiographical writing. Despite its seeming convenience, autobiography still suffers from ambivalences of definition and framework. This indecision discloses an internal complication, a complication perhaps hinted at in the Greek aphorism "know

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thyself”, or the massive cloud of philosophical discussion hovering over the notion of self. James Olney locates the origin of critical approaches to auto-biography in contesting the first element: the self, as the originator of the latter two (Olney 21).

For a long time, ocular terminologies and mirror metaphors of self-reflection had been dominant in the metaphysics of the self and, as a result, autobiographical studies (see Hagberg 16-43). Embedded in these ocular terms and metaphors are the implications of looking to an image of the self (as an object) by the self (as a subject) and identifying with an *image* of the self. However, with the deterioration of the Cartesian notion of a substantial self and in the hands of philosophers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as post-structuralists and Wittgenstein, the ocular self was substituted with a linguistic self and the visual act of identification recognized as a misidentification.

By substituting ocular terminologies such as self-reflection and self-representation in autobiographical analysis with *self-narration*, the metaphysical questions of an ontological self will be appropriately bracketed. In this way autobiographies get closer to what they truly are, for in a closer look it can be noticed that a certain mental act is shared between all forms of autobiographical writing: *narrating* a life through memories. Interestingly, as Mark Rowlands has pointed out, memories and, as a result, autobiographies made by them, do not answer metaphysical questions (Rowlands 79). In fact, autobiographies summon memories to answer these phenomenological questions: what is it like to be me? What is it like to have lived the life that I have? And in doing so autobiographies unveil the interrelationship between memory and the self.

In autobiographical studies Gusdorf was one of the pioneers in shifting the focus from the metaphysics of the self in autobiography to the subjective sense of the self. He sees autobiography as a subjective reconstruction of a dead past: “The narrative offers us the testimony of a man about himself, the contest of being in dialogue with itself” (27). Along with acknowledging the subjectivity in autobiography, its secure place within the genre of historical writing and its claims of referentiality and rendering objective truth were challenged as well. Accordingly, later scholars in the field proposed approaching autobiography as an act of narrative self-invention and subjective composition (see Misch, Olney, and Eakin). In line with these approaches, the significance of narrative self-invention is also recognized and employed in other fields dealing with the notion of “self”. This was largely due to the introduction of *autobiographical memory*. Current studies show that our mind constantly creates an autobiographical sense of self via autobiographical memory. In recent years, autobiographical memory

as an essential mental function is receiving great attention in related fields focused on studying self-knowledge.

Despite their significant correlation, autobiographical memory and the sense of self are rarely pursued in addressing autobiographical texts. However, as Gary Hagberg maintains, autobiographies are “instructive reminders, against the deceptions … of what we do” (Hagberg 31). In other words, autobiographies best unveil the correlation between the sense of self, memory, and narration. Drawing from theoretical elaborations of Mark Rowlands and Peter Goldie on autobiographical memory, the purpose of the present study is to explore the constitution of the subjective sense of self in the narrative structure of autobiographical memory within Vladimir Nabokov’s *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1999).

Among the great number of autobiographies, *Speak, Memory* is one of the works that stands out for its unique structure and foregrounding the significance of form in self-narration. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov deviates from the established conventions of autobiography. Traditionally, historical narratives such as autobiographies, memoirs, and biographies, and as accounts of real people and true events, demand chronological order and temporal transparency; *Speak, Memory*, however, dismisses linear time and pursues thematic designs across time juxtaposing time slices in order to design narrative patterns. Consequently, unlike standard autobiographies that narrate a life story in a chronological order, in *Speak, Memory* each chapter can be read independently of the others and also of its autobiographical spine (the fact that they were primarily single and random publications underwrites this characteristic).

Most studies on *Speak, Memory* tend to associate these peculiar characteristics with the modernist, and later post-modernist, *styles* of writing. In fact, the majority of the critical literature have approached the book from an aesthetic point of view and within the backdrop of the contemporary innovative movements emphasizing the tension between objective truth of history and subjective truth of self-narration in autobiography. For example, Sala claims in *Speak, memory*, Nabokov deviates from generic conventions of historical writing and invites the reader to participate in his “game of interpretation” of memory designs (Sala 30). Diaz, addressing autobiography’s inherent contestation between narrative temporal indeterminacy and its aesthetic truth and historical temporal determinacy and referential truth in *Speak, Memory* with a narratological approach, asserts that the self of Nabokov’s autobiography becomes a hybrid embodiment of these opposites (Diaz 108-110). In analyzing *Speak, Memory*’s temporal complexity, Cooper connects what has been described as the “timelessness” of the work to “the pursuit of an intersubjective

practice of memory" (39). She believes "timelessness" is achieved through the narrative integration of multiple perspectives including the reader's. The transformations that emerge in the subsequent versions of Nabokov's autobiography mark how Nabokov overcomes autobiographical solipsism through intersubjective practice of memory. Pieldner, too, in recognizing the diverse nature of autobiographical writing in converging history and fiction, observes that the self in *Speak, Memory* is "an illustration" of Paul de Man's observation of autobiography as "de-facement" and a constant alternation between revealing and disfiguring (Pieldner 81).

In this study, however, Nabokov's thematic forms are sourced back to the epistemic forms of memory. It is claimed that Nabokov's superlative thematic designs are not aesthetic interventions of the writer but an essential part of the mental act of remembering and our autobiographical sense of self. In other words, *Speak, Memory* is not so much faithful to the rules of the genre as to how memory and autobiographical thinking constructs a unified sense of self in general. Indeed, the title that Nabokov has chosen for his life story shows that he finds the self being spoken by the memory.

## **2. Autobiographical Memory and the Sense of Self**

Bernsten and Rubin define autobiographical memory as one's knowledge not only of specific past episodes but also of whole life periods, as well as the overall course of one's life (333-336). Autobiographical memory is a mental capacity that, as Michaelian asserts, "summarizes, reconstructs, interprets, and condenses distinct moments from the personal past to produce a coherent overall narrative" (Michaelian et al). Episodic memories are not only the basic comprising parts of autobiographical memories, but due to the fact that among different kinds of memories only episodic memories contain the experience of the self (the self *remembers being present* in them), they are the main contributors to personal identity and a unified sense of self through time (Rowlands 45). Conway and Jobson have provided an illustrated framework that shows episodic memories cluster and expand, from minor to major narrative frames, and generate an overall life story (56). In this way, by splicing these narrative frames, autobiographical memory forms an overall life story of the self. Therefore, the autobiographical sense of self has a narrative structure and is always a work in progress. It is important to notice that these narratives do not follow one another in a fixed linear order; rather the life story is formed through the dynamic interactions and clustering of memories across time.

However, still a question remains unresolved. In selecting, reconstructing and organizing the above parts, in other words, narrating, we still need a narrating self. To put it differently, autobiographical memory presupposes a unified self that already owns identity, then how can it be claimed that autobiographical memory *constitutes* a sense of self and personal identity?

In finding the locus of the sense of self, thus answering this question, Rowlands studies the presence of the self in episodic memories. The self is installed in and scattered over the content of episodic memories as the conjoined voice of both the narrator now and the narrated character in the past (Rowlands 41). The reason of this necessarily converged presence is not to be found in the past episode that only contains the past self, but in the narrative structure of remembering this episode in the present. Recent studies on memories have substituted the preservation theories of episodic memory, which characterized the act of episodic remembering as a *retrieval* of the contents of the past, with generation theories supporting the *reconstruction* of possible pasts (see Michaelian). Researches in neuro science buttress these suppositions by showing that in the act of remembering, a long-term memory has to go under the same amorphousness in order to be retrieved; thus, it again becomes labile and susceptible to change before being reconsolidated. By studying the proteins that connect the neurons and neuron ensembles, these studies observed that "consolidation of a short-term memory can occur only if ... protein synthesis occurs. It has recently become clear that the same process of protein synthesis occurs when long-term memories are accessed" (Rowlands 122). Rowlands finds this observation close to Plato's analogy of "the wax of memory" and maintains: "Put in terms of Plato's model, we might think of recall as always involving a re-softening of the wax" (25). As a result, with every act of remembering and episodic retrieval the episode should be reconstructed and re-narrated by the present self. The recurrent changes of memories are a result of this process.

The reconstruction of the past memories (buttressed by science) in narratives of the present also sheds light on constitution of the unified sense of self in memory. Rowlands applies Wittgenstein's concept of state-of-affairs (Wittgenstein 4.26) to the mental act of remembering (Rowlands 171). The events of the past are encountered states-of-affairs, but they are not identical with the content of the memory. Rowlands identifies these states-of-affairs as the unobtainable referents, in Fregean terms, from which different *senses* are created in the act of remembering: "*I* always remember the state-of-affairs of the past in

a certain way, manner, or mode" (Rowlands 176). Remembering is necessarily first-personal and grammatically structured as "I remember (X) Oing"; for example, "I remember (my sister) falling from the tree". Consequently, when the non-mental states-of-affairs of past events become mental thorough first-personal narrative modes of presentation, the presence of the self becomes grammatically signed into the remembered content as the conjoined narrative voice of the narrator (the self now recreating) and the character (the self in the past being recreated): "The act of remembering has inserted me into the content of my memory. The reconstructive sculpting of content out of the marble of episode is what makes the content mine" (Rowlands 186). Accordingly, the act of remembering conjoins the present self and the past self in first-personal narrative modes of presentation and reconstructions of the past. Thus, by recreating the past in narrative frames and designing a coherent overall life story, we extend ourselves in time and acquire a unified sense of self through time. It can be said simply that a great part of what we know as the self is a collection of stories told by it and about it through memories.

In addition, in the overall life story, episodic memories are remembered *in a way* to serve the coherency of the autobiographical narrative of the self as a whole. As a result, in narrating the past in new modes of presentation, many alterations motivated by the present self are introduced to the states-of-affairs of the past, serving the preservation of an ongoing personal identity, and the *narrative coherency* of this identity. These alternations can be motivated by emotions such as: protection, explanation, satisfaction, remorse, forgiveness, nostalgia, etc. Conveyed in the subjective modes of presentations of the narrator in narrating the past, these standpoints in recreating the past constitute the ways one understands oneself through time: "not as a substratum, substance or thing but as, rather, a network of related episodes of self-understanding" (Rowlands 83).

Thus, according to Rowlands, autobiographical memory does not preserve a past record of a self, but in the act of remembering, the present self, purported in the necessary presence of "I" in the grammar of remembering, is signed in the recreated past narrative episodes providing an overall narrative sense of self through a network of related first-personal narrative frames. Recalling the question autobiographies are supposed to answer: "what is it like to be me and to have lived the life I have?" we observe that autobiographical memory does so by speaking the self through reconstructed clusters of diverse self-narratives. These features will now be explored in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*.

### 3. Summoning Memory in Writing a Life

Although an autobiography is the story of a life, the title is what this story signifies for the writer in a grain. In a letter to Edmund Wilson, Nabokov announces that he is writing “a new type of autobiography—a scientific attempt to unravel and trace back all the tangled threads of one’s personality”, under the provisional title *The Person in Question* (Nabokov & Wilson 215). As this announcement indicates, for Nabokov his autobiography is first and foremost an unravelling of the self. Interestingly, for Nabokov his autobiography represents a scientific attempt in unfolding the self, rather than a figurative, or a literary one. In the foreword of *Speak, Memory* he discloses other initial adoptions in finding a suitable title for the English version of his book, these temporary options were as follows: *Conclusive evidence*; *Speak, Mnemosyne*; *The Anthemion*; and finally *Speak, Memory* (*Speak, Memory* 4). The connection between autobiographical memory and a subjective sense of self is implied in all these choices.

The first preliminary title displays the centrality of personhood and identity. The second title: *Conclusive evidence* and the following revelatory explanation: “conclusive evidence of my having existed” (*Speak, Memory* 4) is very direct in showing Nabokov’s avowal in his autobiographical exertion; an autobiography (either as a mental or a textual formation) is a signature, a handprint, a witness of an existence. A resonance of this avowal is seen in chapter nine of *Speak, Memory* when Nabokov describes his first artistic attempt as “hardly anything more than a sign I made of being alive. ... It was a phenomenon of orientation rather than of art” (169). In a sense, any autobiography is an extension of the simple claim “I have been here”.

In the third attempt, the writer asks Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, to speak of him into his own ears, to tell him who he is. Nabokov is not the omniscient narrator, not the substantial self with an epistemic authority over itself through time; he is narrated by Mnemosyne. *Anthemion*, the next provisional title, is a very significant and thematic metaphor in *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov defines anthemion as “the name of a honeysuckle ornament, consisting of elaborate interlacements and expanding clusters” (*Speak, Memory* 4). At the heart of this elemental metaphor is the idea of clusters of forms and details, and this idea reappears in *Speak, Memory* in many facets and bears significant aspects of remembering and the autobiographical sense of self which Nabokov’s insightful scientific attempt grasped. Taking *Anthemion* as a metaphor of the self, the autobiographical sense of self is an expanding creation and not a preserved identity or a pure object of consciousness which is to be portrayed and copied in an autobiography. It *emerges* as clusters of autobiographical

narratives, each containing the first-personal point of view, conjoin and purport the overall sense of self that transcends the details. Finally, and in the finalized title: *Speak, Memory*, the word memory, simple and familiar as it is, is what one uses when referring to that constant habit of defining oneself through time; memory simply speaks the self.

According to the aforementioned textual and theoretical notions, we can extract the following elemental characteristics of Nabokov's approach to the ways in which memory reconstructs a life story: memory as reconstruction, memory as clusters of narrative frames, and memory as a means to establish the subjective sense of self through time. These characteristic (all contracted in the metaphor of the anthemion) will now be pursued in the narrative structure of Nabokov's memories.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov is very conscious of the reconstructive nature of remembering. The foreword carries us back in time, to 1936, when he started writing the autobiography, while surrounded by random objects: "various maps, timetables, a collection of matchboxes, a chip of ruby glass", and how "dummies chosen at random" transform into elaborate clusters of patterns, and by "means of intense concentration", a "neutral smudge might be forced to come into beautiful focus so that the sudden view could be identified" (*Speak, Memory* 4). However, autobiographies, unlike fiction, are not conceived on the writer's desk; Nabokov already owned his autobiography before writing it. In the foreword to *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov asserts although he had written and published different chapters of his autobiography at random, "They have been neatly filling numbered gaps in my mind, which followed the present order of chapters" (*Speak, Memory* 4). These delineations show that for Nabokov remembering is recreating details from the existing crude forms of the soft wax of memory.

The structure of the book's chapters maintains memory's clustered pattern. As the titles show, there is no homogeneity and no definite temporal order in the chapters. Each chapter is built upon a focal theme: characters (Chapter two: Portrait of my Mother, Chapter three: Portrait of my Uncle, Chapter five: Mademoiselle, Chapter seven: Colette, Chapter twelve: Tamara); lifespans (Chapter one: The Perfect Past, Chapter thirteen: Cambridge Years, Chapter fourteen: Exile); educations (Chapter four: My English Education, Chapter nine: My Russian Education); artistic achievements (Chapter eleven: My First Poem), metaphors that are to be discovered through the chapter ( Chapter eight: Lantern Slides , Chapter ten: Curtain-raiser); places (Chapter fifteen: Gardens and Parks); and lifelong passions (Chapter six: Butterflies). Patterns start with a smudge, gradually the details find their place, and at last the image becomes elaborate. Each chapter is itself an accumulation of memories, more fragmentary in the

childhood years “in which recollections “possesses a naturally plastic form in one’s memory”, and narratively solid in later years “when “Mnemosyne begins to get choosy and crabbed” (*Speak, Memory* 13).

In a much quoted passage of *Speak, Memory* Nabokov declares: “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” (*Speak, Memory* 106). To put it in another way, he dismisses time order for the sake of thematic designs that are revealed through time. This is not merely a figurative style adopted by Nabokov. On the contrary, to Nabokov, linear chronological plots “endow life with a logic it never has”; he believes the true experience of existence is “the stormy element of chance” (*The Man from the USSR* 340). Nabokov also mentions that finding “thematic designs through one’s life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography” (*Speak, Memory* 16). It is not surprising that Nabokov wanted to name his autobiography *Anthemion*, for in *Speak, Memory* the self is a thematic pattern that emerges through the lines of the book. Thematic patterns are not only integral to *Speak, Memory*, but to autobiographical memory and the resultant sense of self in general. Accordingly, from memory as narrative reconstruction, we are led to the second characteristic of autobiographical memory in Nabokov: memory as clusters of narrative frames creating patterns across time. Finally, in correlation with the above two features the third characteristic: memory as means to establish the sense of self, will be accomplished in *Speak, Memory* as the overall story forms a transcending pattern recognized as the self. The narrative structure of this triple correlation will be discussed further.

#### **4. Free Indirect Style, Epistemic Gap, and Thematic Designs in Double Scenarios of Memory**

The thematic patterns that Nabokov believed comprise the essence of autobiography, emerge as a result of memory’s non-linear perspective and the interaction of different narratives across time, and adds to the credit of Nabokov’s scientific endeavor in unraveling the ways of memory. This can be clarified by the convergence of the two perspectives of the self in autobiographical memory: the present self *remembering* an episode of the past as the narrator and the self *being remembered in a certain way* as the character by its presence in the content of the memory (discussed above as the conjoined presence of the self in the content of the memory).

Peter Goldie associates the gap between the two different perspectives with *free indirect style*. He claims this term is not exclusive to literary narratives; it is used much more in everyday life in our sense of self-persistence in time. Goldie states that this gap is ironic (another narrative terminology) in nature, because

the self as now has knowledge of things now that she didn't have in the past. (48). In remembering, the past becomes reconstructed in first-personal narrative senses marked with and including new realizations. In this process, on the one hand, the dual voice of the free indirect style bridges the distance between senses of self as then and the self as now, both purported in the first-personal point of view, and, on the other, the self as now reaches an epistemic realization in its retrospective remembering and narrating the past which is hidden from the self as then caught in the "stormy element of chance". In memory reconstructions, thematic designs are drawn with this epistemic realization and as the self connects dots of events across time, contributing to self-understanding; to quote Rowlands: "understanding oneself as a transcending subjective sense is achieved by the way various specific self-understandings are connected in the overall life story" (83).

As many scholars have noticed, the most pervasive, ironic, epistemic gap in *Speak, Memory* is *loss*, which is commonly defined as no longer having what once was had. In 'Portrait of my Mother' Nabokov remembers his mother's constant avocation: "'Vot zapomni [now remember]' ... As if feeling that in a few years the tangible part of her world would perish, she cultivated an extraordinary consciousness of the various time marks distributed throughout our country place. She cherished her own past with the same retrospective fervor that I now do her image and my past" (*Speak, Memory* 25). The term "as if" does not signify a possibility but an imported premonition of what the writer is well aware of at the time of writing his autobiography: the loss of a "harmonious world of a perfect childhood" (13), a calm past, a homeland, and its replacement by chaos, demise, and exile: "a preposterous and humiliating sense of utter insecurity" (191).

The next twenty years, described in only three chapters, represents a lifespan in which the loss of a bygone life forms and becomes realized. In chapter twelve Nabokov aligns this loss with another loss: "The loss of my country was equated for me with the loss of my love" (*Speak, Memory* 191). The story of his love for Tamara is left without a closure: "no matter how I worry the screws of memory, I cannot recall the way Tamara and I parted" (187). In departing from both, the young Nabokov, the self as then, did not know that he was never to return. The separation happened gradually but permanently only from a farther point of view. With loss comes nostalgia, and nostalgia is a feeling that foregrounds the distance between the time of remembering-the present, and the content of the memory which is the past. To put it another way, nostalgia is the ironic narration of the past from the present point of view.

It is proposed by Tilmann Habermas that in the narrative development of autobiographical memory, certain metaphoric concepts appear that connect different lifespans and preserve the overall thematic coherence of the life story (Habermas 33). In *Speak, Memory* such metaphors play an essential role. In Nabokov's nostalgic retrospection Vyra (the country house of the writer's mother) represents the lost order and peace of childhood. Coupled with Vyra as the metaphor of a perfect past, Nabokov in his masterful use of memory uses the ironic gap of remembering to create memories in *thematic double scenarios* as he blends happy ending memories of his peaceful years with similar narratives that imply a destructive outcome. Notice the ominous tone in the description of life at Vyra: "Everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (*Speak, Memory* 56).

Some important instances of these double scenarios are associated with the death of his loved-ones. In *Speak, Memory* the memories of the death of loved ones are silenced, as they are silenced in Nabokov's dreams, like "a shameful family secret" (*Speak, Memory* 34), yet conveyed. The happy moments of seeing the father from the window being tossed to the air, never failing to be cached again is the parallel scenario of another memory which does include death. The twist comes at the end; Nabokov remembers his father's last toss as "reclining as if for good". As the memory proceeds, it is channeled into another episode. The observer sees an angel on a "vaulted ceiling of a church", tapers of people in the church making "a swarm of minute flames", and hears the "priest chants of eternal repose" (19). The happy memory of the last toss fuses with a memory of "a funeral", silenced and implicit. Two different memories are associated with one another in order to create a single pattern: a *thematic design*, which can be only realized in retrospective narration. The memory of that day is perpetually tinted by the knowledge of the second memory and the real last time. The first memory can never be revisited without the experience of the second leaving its mark on the first.

While remembering being read nighttime stories by his mother, Nabokov reminisces her hand resting on the book "with its familiar pigeon-blood ruby and diamond ring (within the limpid facets of which, had I been a better crystal-gazer, I might have seen a room, people, lights, trees in the rain—a whole period of émigré life for which that ring was to pay)" (*Speak, Memory* 59). This acknowledgement integrates the memories of the difficult future years into the peaceful past.

In another instance, while portraying Yuri, the memory of a dangerous game they played on the swing as children is immediately followed by the death of his cousin as a cavalry soldier. In their game, one would lie down on the sand

beneath the swing and the other would swish above the other's face. Nabokov recounts seeing the dead body of Yuri years later: "his skull being pushed back by the impact of several bullets, which had hit him like the iron board of a monstrous swing" (*Speak, Memory* 155).

Indeed, in the "magic carpet" of *Speak, Memory* none of Nabokov's portrayals have proper temporal narrative beginnings and ends, they appear as themes through time and not in time. Themes, he asserts: "[are] meant for the delectation of the very expert solver" (228). Nabokov proclaims while the simple reader is satisfied with the apparent scenario, a sophisticated reader would enjoy the roundabout route; that is to say, she would find the implied double scenario and decode the hidden thematic design.

The narrative structure of loss and nostalgia is perhaps best described in Nabokov's rendering of Mademoiselle and her approach to the past. Nabokov finishes the chapter of the Mademoiselle by remembering the last time he sees her, years later in early twenties and in a visit to Lausanne: "She spoke as warmly of her life in Russia as if it were her own lost homeland". Nabokov recalls that she had substituted the picture of a Swiss castle that she owned in Russia with that of a Russian Troika. This image reminds us of her confused arrival to Russia and her horrid journey on the troika. Nevertheless, like her old pictures this picture too, according to Mademoiselle, tells the story of a sweet past now lost and missed; Nabokov comments: "One is always at home in one's past" (87). The Mademoiselle is always lost in the present (echoed in her call: "Giddy-eh? [where?]?" [72], the only Russian words that she knew), but she is safe in the stories of the past. There are two significant memories that are closely associated with the portrait of Mademoiselle in the writer's mind and Nabokov's realization of the nature of memories, the past, and identity.

In the first memory Nabokov realizes that what he assumed was another of Mademoiselle's exaggerated stories of her past, the story in which she recalled: "Il pleut toujours en Suisse", was actually true from a certain perspective: "a lone light dimly diluted the darkness and transformed the mist into a visible drizzle" (88). The second memory depicts a scene in which mademoiselle was not even present: "Below, a wide ripple, almost a wave, and something vaguely white attracted my eye. As I came quite close to the lapping water, I saw what it was—an aged swan, a large, uncouth, dodo-like creature, making ridiculous efforts to hoist himself into a moored boat, he could not do it" (*Speak, Memory* 88). The dodo-like swan and its grotesque resemblance to a perfect swan, symbolizes the idealized duplicate that Mademoiselle had created of herself and her life in the past.

What makes these memories epiphanic for Nabokov is that they reflect how one owns an identity based on the life story she herself has fashioned, and whatever the lost truth of this past was, its subjective reconstruction narrates the truth of the person one is. Nabokov realizes that what was missing in his portrayals is not the truth of the past, but *Mademoiselle's truth* of her past, something which can never be grasped in a third-person reduction. This realization comes with a price: "something, in short, that I could appreciate only after the things and beings that I had most loved in the security of my childhood had been turned to ashes or shot through the heart". It is then that Nabokov understands Mademoiselle: "that swan whose agony was so much closer to artistic truth than a drooping dancer's pale arms" (*Speak, Memory* 88). Only after the writer's experience of losses and his compensatory revisiting of the past in the attempt of its retrieval, the artistry of this subjective creation is grasped. Interestingly, not unlike Mademoiselle's idealization of the past, Nabokov has titled his first chapter "The Perfect Past".

### **5. Thematic Metaphors of the Self**

Nabokov believed memory narrates a life in thematic designs, and even the self is an emerging design like an anthemion. We have observed that this is supported by epistemological theories of self and autobiographical memory, for the subjective sense of self emerges as these stories, always in the conjoining first-person voice, cluster and form a transcending major thematic design: a self. The significance of epistemic metaphors of loss have already been discussed. In *Speak, memory*, in line with the anthemion metaphor, certain other metaphors will appear as laconic themes of the writer's overall sense of self in relation with memory and *Time*. Some of these metaphors are briefly discussed in the following.

Butterflies play a significant role in Nabokov's personal identity; as Brian Boyd, his biographer, points out "Vladimir Nabokov made butterflies his lifelong personal mark" (Boyd 74). In *Speak, Memory* butterflies are rivets reminiscent of different fragments of Nabokov's life: "I have hunted butterflies in various climes and disguises: as a pretty boy in knickerbockers and sailor cap; as a lanky cosmopolitan expatriate in flannel bags and beret; as a fat hatless old man in shorts" (*Speak, Memory* 95). Their significance goes beyond a lifelong occupation. Butterflies are deeply connected to Nabokov's subjective sense of existence, both in and beyond time. The pug named after Nabokov is not an ordinary butterfly; he asserts: "Nabokov's Pug ..., which I boxed one night in 1943 ..., fits most philosophically into the thematic spiral that began in a wood on the Oredzh around 1910—or perhaps even earlier, on that Nova Zemblan river a century and a half ago" (95-96). Butterflies are the enduring threads that

join his life to his father's and his predecessors in a digression; they become Nabokov's personal timeless symbols, themselves transcending *lives* and *times*.

Another brilliant metaphor that echoes the anthemion metaphor and reflects Nabokov's sense of self in relation to time, presented near the end of the book, is the metaphor of broken china patterns. Nabokov remembers an episode in which he and his family look for pieces of pottery washed by the sea:

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 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, and now mended by these rivets of bronze.

(*Speak, Memory* 242)

In this metaphor fragments and pieces of memories and lives are juxtaposed in developing designs across time. The lost time-marks of the past, a lost homeland, or a lost parent, are patched together; and this pattern becomes an anthemion in the arabesque of a greater design in progress, with no beginnings or end, containing and overpassing Nabokov and his life story.

Finally, in the last paragraph of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov recalls walking with his child, the child amid his parents and holding their hands. This memory is analogous to an opening memory in the very first chapter: "The perfect Past", in which Nabokov, then a toddler, is walking with his parents in a similar manner. The old path of oaklings, the landmark of a "perfect past" (and the setting of the birth of his consciousness), leading to the detailed treasured memories of Nabokov, is substituted in this memory with a new path leading to the sea, and more importantly to a mystery: "Find What the Sailor Has Hidden"; the ship is waiting to take them to a new phase of life. Nabokov finishes his autobiography with this implied riddle; a riddle no longer about the hidden designs of the past but about theunnarrated future. These words are metaphorically referring to time, the self, and memory. The irony of the story of the self is that it will eventually find what is hidden by time, but "the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen" (*Speak, Memory* 300). The patterns and designs are nonexistent in the randomness of experience of the present, only with experiencing the present, and later remembering and reconstructing it as the past they can be found. However, once seen they become molded in the anthemion of the self.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

In *Speak, Memory* Vladimir Nabokov unfolds the ways memory works in autobiographical remembering. Nabokov's memory reconstructs the past in clusters of narrative frames purporting the subjective sense of self through time transcended in the overall life story. Rather than following the timespans of a life in a horizontal temporal order, Nabokov follows thematic designs through time and puts together clusters of his memories from different lifespans in a vertical path and double scenarios. Nabokov also foregrounds the significant role of metaphors in preserving the overall coherency of the narrative of the self. *Speak, Memory* is an acknowledgement of the fact that memory speaks the self for the self. As Nabokov beautifully articulates: "Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap" (*Speak, Memory* 7), construing that the self is not an object referent but a narration, a watermark, and a thematic design emerging through one's life story.

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