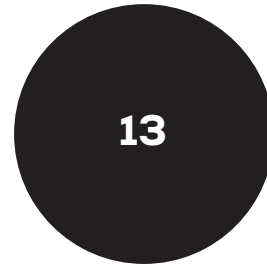




INSTYTUT
KULTURY
POLSKIEJ



View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.

title:

*The Specter of the Author, a Flawed Doppelgänger.
Photographs in Nabokov's Autobiography.*

author:

Adam Lipszyc, transl. Arthur Barys

source:

View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 13 (2016)

URL:

<http://pismowidok.org/index.php/one/article/view/334/859>

publisher:

Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences
Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw
View. Foundation for Visual Culture

Adam Lipszyc

The Specter of the Author, a Flawed Doppelgänger. Photographs in Nabokov's Autobiography.

Translated by Arthur Barys

For Paweł, who lent me this book.

In his answer to a question posed by Eleanor Wachtel regarding the role of the numerous photographs with which his books are encrusted, W.G. Sebald explained that they had two primary purposes: the "verification" of the narrator's story and to immediately slow down the passage of time, to "arrest" with the image the flow of the story.¹ Other remarks made by Sebald allow us to somewhat complicate these explanations. The fact that Sebald's approach to the idea of "verification" is far from naïve is evident in part of his answer to Wachtel's question. In it, the writer compares the photographs presented in his books to such measures employed by 19th century realist authors as revealing to the reader that the story presented below had been found in some authentic manuscript discovered "on top of a cupboard in this or that town and such a house and so on and so forth." The photograph could be considered a more effective means of verifying the story, because the reader is more readily convinced of the authenticity of a photograph, but this comparison to the efforts made by realist writers obviously suggests that one should treat the claimed authenticity of the photographs with suspicion. Sebald mentions this directly elsewhere: "The function of photographs is to make the improbable seem authentic, but at the same time they introduce the possibility of the counterfeit. And this is a very complicated, self-contradictory process which finally leads either consciously in the head of the reader or subliminally to a feeling of continuous irritation – which, I hope, somewhat corresponds to the feeling I myself have."² Moreover, Sebald is known for the particular skill with which he was able to sustain this feeling of "irritation," drawing the reader into endless meditations on paradoxes and the limits encountered by our cognitive efforts.

Sebald's comment on the arresting purpose of photographs in his narratives also warrants further examination. The writer formulates the thought somewhat more distinctly elsewhere: "The installation of images – be they actual or written images – is also an attempt to resist the inevitability of the end, at least for a moment."³ This heroic trait that purportedly lies in the very act of including images in the narrative is complemented by a phenomenon that Sebald mentions in the interview with Eleanor Wachtel. Addressing one of the most crucial themes of his writing, the author says:

I have always had at the back of my mind this notion that of course these people aren't really gone, they just hover somewhere at the perimeter of our lives and keep coming in on brief visits. And photographs are for me, as it were, one of the emanations of the dead, especially these older photographs of people no longer with us. Nevertheless, through these pictures, they do have what seems to me sort of a spectral presence.⁴

It would thus appear that, from this perspective, photographs can in fact resist the inevitability of the end, and in two mutually complementary ways, at that: on the one hand, they arrest the passage of time, and on the other, they are personifications of the departed. This is not to ascribe all sorts of resurrective abilities to photographs, as the presence that is achieved through them remains, after all, "spectral."

It is precisely this spectral theme that Sebald expands on in a more subversive and melancholic manner in the essay "Kafka Goes to the Movies," contained in the volume titled *Campo Santo*. Among other observations, we read the following:

We are so moved by photographic images because of the curious aura of another world that sometimes emanates from them. Kafka, as many of his diary notes show, could fix such pictures in the mental snapshots he took with his sympathetic but ice-cold eye.



1. To fotografia, zrobiona w 1955 r. przez uprzedniego amerykańskiego turystę, przedstawia kamienicę Nabokowów z różowego granitu, zdobioną freskami i stropami ornamentowanymi we włoskim stylu, w Sanki Petersburgu, obecnie Leningradzie, przy ulicy Morskaj 47, obok ul. Herzena. Aleksander Iwanowicz Herzen (1812-1870) był słynnym filozofem (chyba więc nie przypadkiem ma do jego imienia upamiętnienie przez postać w powieści), a zarząca aktualnym autoksem autobusów w Błox i dław (Raczy minione i szczytania), jednej z ulubionych książek mojego ojca. Mój pokój zregulował się na drugim piętrze, nad wykazem Lipy stojące rzedem wówczas nie istniały. Ci sąsiedni parawanice zadłmają teraz wschodnie narożnie okno pokoju na pierwszym piętrze, w którym po prostu na ziemi. Po nacjonalizacji w naszym domu mieściło się posłowo detektka, a następnie szkoła architektury. Surochodni przy kowężniku należy zapewne do fotografa.

From the Polish edition of Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

Having provided an example of the type of photographic observation to which Kafka subjects the Yiddish theater actress Frau Tschissik, Sebald continues:

We may conjecture that the erotic aura of such pictures – snapshots taken, so to speak, without permission – is due to their proximity to death. For the very reason that looking at one's fellow men with so pitiless a gaze is forbidden, one has to look again and again. The all-revealing, all-penetrating gaze is subject to compulsive repetition, always wanting to reassure itself that it really did see what it saw. Nothing is left but looking, an obsession in which real time is suspended while, as we sometimes feel in dreams, the dead, the living, and the still unborn come together on the same plane.⁵

But how exactly are we to understand this "aura of another world" and the "proximity to death"? What this appears to mean is that when we capture a snapshot view of a living person, we look at him as if he had been dead for years and we were looking back upon him from some distant future. Though we might capture him in the prime of his life, by that very action we emphasize the inevitability of the end, which seems at once to be in close proximity to the instant isolated in the image and which must – or, more appropriately, has always had to – put an end to all of this. We thus arrest time at the cost of shifting the living into the spectral past in which they occupy the same plane as those who have actually departed, retaining only their spectral presence. As Sebald himself observes, it is at this point that we return once again to the issue of "verification": the photographic gaze must constantly "reassure itself that it really did see what it saw," as by looking we at once make an object more permanent and less real.⁶

In that same essay Sebald reveals both sides of the coin: weird things can also happen to the person looking at the picture. Sebald points out that Kafka's recurring use of the image of seemingly identical pairs of assistants and court functionaries is a verbalization of the fear of the upcoming age of technical reproduction, and thus a fear of photography as a particularly distinct manifestation of such reproduction. This observation allows Sebald to introduce into the discussion the motif of the doppelgänger. He writes:

In the Romantic period the doppelgänger, which first aroused a fear of mechanical appliances, was still a haunting and exceptional phenomenon; now it is everywhere. The whole technique of photographic copying ultimately depends on the principle of making a perfect duplicate of the original, of potentially infinite copying.

This has catastrophic consequences for the viewer:

And because the copy lasted long after what it had copied was gone, there was an uneasy suspicion that the original, whether it was human or a natural scene, was less authentic than the copy, that the copy was eroding the original, in the same way as a man meeting his doppelgänger is said to feel his real self destroyed.⁷

Therefore, as Sebald speculates, if Kafka had seen *The Student of Prague*, popular in his time, then “it would have been almost inevitable for him to recognize his own story in that of the student Balduin who is pursued by his own likeness.”⁸ By encountering a photographic reproduction, the viewer himself would thus also be submitted to spectralization, making him “horrified to become aware of the progressive derealization of his own person.” “Kafka, who often felt like a ghost among his fellow men,” must have seen himself in what Sebald describes as the “ghostly” character of many early films.⁹

Specters, doppelgängers, and the sense of our own unreality haunting us, in parallel or alternately to the sense that what we are looking at is unreal, are themes that are consistently present not only in Sebald’s own work, but also in that of a writer whom the author of *Austerlitz* regarded as a fundamental point of reference, namely, Vladimir Nabokov. Sebald, as we know, frequently references the author and his oeuvre, even making him a guardian angel of sorts for all émigrés in *The Emigrants*. Of particular importance to him was Nabokov’s autobiography, a “wonderful book” which Sebald “utterly adored.”¹⁰ He devoted the essay “Dream Textures,” written a year before his sketch on Kafka and cinema, to this book. Using great precision, Sebald points out Nabokov’s haunting doubts about “whether that Arcadian land [of his childhood] ever really existed.” He also posits the hypothesis that the fundamental subject of Nabokov’s interest is, generally speaking, “the study of spirits.”¹¹ The author himself is a ghost of sorts: not only because “Ghosts

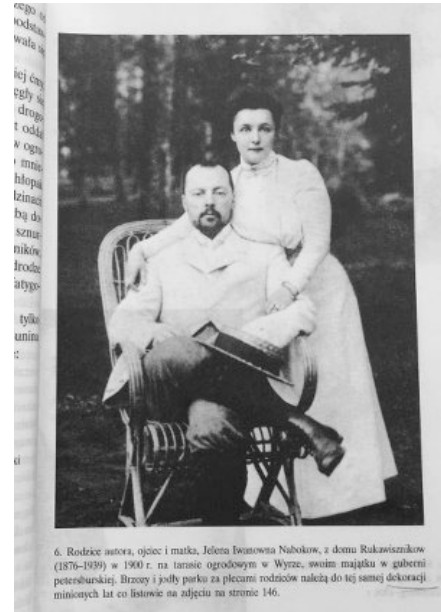
and writers meet in their concern for the past – their own and that of those who were once dear to them,” but also because, as an emigrant, Nabokov had permanently lost the “certainty of [his] own reality.”¹² In light of the recurring themes encountered in Sebald’s musings on photography, it is hardly surprising to find such a passage in an essay devoted to the author of *Lolita*, in which he draws a connection between him and the essay on Kafka and film: “The strange unreality of such an existence in a foreign land seems to me nowhere more clearly expressed than in Nabokov’s remark, made in passing, that he had appeared as an extra in evening dress in several of the films shot in Berlin at that time, which frequently included doppelgängers and such shadowy figures among their characters.”¹³ This passage is all the less surprising considering the fact that the first chapter of Nabokov’s autobiography opens with with a masterful excerpt, one quoted by Sebald at the beginning of his essay, about a “young chronophobic” who panics as he watches home movies made before his birth: everything seemed familiar enough, except he himself was missing and, what is worse, no one was mourning his absence. This sense of panic is entirely reasonable: if our loved ones could so easily go about living without us, then did we ever actually appear in this world? But if the complex of problems haunting the author of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is in fact so powerful, as are the questions involved with the perception of photography, particularly pictures located within a text that makes more or less auto-ironic claims to authenticity, then it seems to be a rather good idea to examine how the photographic (or cinematic) metaphor, references to particular photographs, and, perhaps most interestingly of all, actual pictures operate in Nabokov’s autobiography.¹⁴

Though there aren’t many passages in this book in which Nabokov mentions photographs or movies in their metaphorical capacity, they certainly warrant our attention. The figure of the photograph is most typically used in reference to the mnemonic registration of something doomed to be lost or the mechanism by which we recall that which has been remembered. Nabokov writes about his mother:

“*Vot zapomni* [now remember],” she would say in conspiratorial tones as she drew my attention to this or that loved thing in Vyra [i.e., the Nabokovs’ country estate] – a lark ascending the curds-and-whey sky of a dull spring day, *heat lightning taking pictures of a distant line of trees in the night*, the palette of maple leaves on brown

sand, a small bird's cuneate footprints on new snow. 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. Thus, in a way, I inherited an exquisite simulacrum – the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate – and this proved a splendid training for the endurance of later losses (p. 40; emphasis added).

Inheriting his mother's perspective, along with the "exquisite simulacrum" of her own memories, Nabokov would thus practice looking back in a photographic manner upon his own childhood, of which nothing would soon be left aside from unreal estate (the real estate having been lost in the wake of the revolution and the family's emigration). Even if this is true – which, of course, cannot be ruled out – the author ascribes this photographic perspective to his mother from the point of view of his own loss. One might have similar doubts about the description of comparable practices engaged in by the young Nabokov as he roamed about his parents' rooms in their St. Petersburg apartment. Here the photographic is subtler, but no less clear: "As often as not, they used to be out at that time, and in the gathering dusk the place acted upon my young senses in a curiously teleological way, as if this accumulation of familiar things in the dark were doing its utmost to form the definite and permanent image that repeated exposure did finally leave in my mind" (p. 89). Nabokov sarcastically mourns the fact that we do not commit to microfilm "all our memories" (p. 15), as he had recorded a few things of his own; all of chapter eight, which he devotes to his home preceptors, can be stylized as a "slide" show (p. 153) during which the author presents the images of successive tutors, thus providing an elegant metaphor for the dull projections organized regularly by one of them. In the finale of this chapter this presentation ultimately turns into what is initially a silent, and later sound, quasi-film screened by Nabokov for himself and the reader (p. 171–172).



From the Polish edition of Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

The author of these passages thus seems to place great trust in the registrational and evocative mnemonic power of photography and cinema. Yet Nabokov is at once perfectly aware of the fact that the mnemonic slides he projects for us are always marred by a spectral border, in two senses. First, it is the border of death, which – in a paradox that is already familiar to us – appears at the very moment that the images resist the inevitability of death. The most important example of this is likely the beautiful image that closes the first book of the chapter, in which Nabokov’s vision of his father being tossed into the air by grateful peasants transforms into the vision of a cadaver resting in an open coffin (p. 31).¹⁵ The bitter awareness of this paradox is expressed once more in the finale of chapter three, where Nabokov stubbornly denies reality and attempts – even at the cost of his own unreality – to freeze time and save his loved ones:

I see again my schoolroom in Vyra, the blue roses of the wallpaper, the open window. Its reflection fills the oval mirror above the leathern couch where my uncle sits, gloating over a tattered book. A sense of security, of well-being, of summer warmth pervades my memory. That robust reality makes a ghost of the present. 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 (p. 77).

The previous chapter ends with an admission that is a gloomy reversal of these luminous images: “Whenever in my dreams I see the dead, they always appear silent, bothered, strangely depressed. (...) They sit apart, frowning at the floor, as if death were a dark taint, a shameful family secret” (p. 50). Sebald, again: Nothing is left but looking, an obsession in which real time is suspended while, as we sometimes feel in dreams, the dead, the living, and the still unborn come together on the same plane.¹⁶

Secondly, the border marring the mnemonic images is the border of unreality. Not only – or not primarily – because these images could be falsified, but because it is no longer certain that anything actually corresponded to them. Perhaps the spectral émigré is watching a movie about his own conjured past, surveying nothing but his unreal estate, an inheritance as immaterial as it is unreal. A subtle hint that, despite his lofty words about the “robust reality” of the past, Nabokov is never freed

of the doubts mentioned by Sebald, can be found, appropriately enough, in a passage about a certain photograph:

Among the trivial souvenirs acquired at Biarritz before leaving, my favorite was not the small bull of black stone and not the sonorous seashell but something which now seems almost symbolic – a meerschaum penholder with a tiny peephole of crystal in its ornamental part. One held it quite close to one's eye, screwing up the other, and when one had got rid of the shimmer of one's own lashes, a miraculous photographic view of the bay and of the line of cliffs ending in a lighthouse could be seen inside (p. 151).

If it seems "almost symbolic, it is because the emigrant writer views the images of his memories, in which his real childhood has transformed into an unreal fairytale, a delightful yet illusory apparition inside a souvenir."¹⁷

Nabokov's book was initially released under the title *Conclusive Evidence*, i.e., as Nabokov explains, "conclusive evidence of my having existed" (p. 11). Evidence that is not entirely conclusive, as proven by the very fact that, according to the subtitle used in the final edition, the autobiography had to be "revisited," and the old title replaced with the old-fashioned and solemn *Speak, Memory*. Interestingly enough, a certain photograph is mentioned in the very first paragraph of the foreword that explains the complex story that led to the book's writing. Nabokov informs the reader that the first version of the earliest written chapter was published in Paris in 1936 in a periodical titled *Mesures*, run by Jean Paulhan, adding: "A photograph (published recently in Gisèle Freund's *James Joyce in Paris*) commemorates this event, except that I am wrongly identified (in the *Mesures* group relaxing around a garden table of stone) as 'Audiberti'" (p.9).¹⁸ And so at the very point of departure we find the author correcting the false identification of his own image and making a persistent effort to present conclusive evidence that he had, in fact, existed, an effort marked by the sarcastic awareness that the entire endeavor is rather doomed to fail and, even more, that the testimonies presented may even on occasion weaken the defendant's case. Yet there is nothing left to do but to grin and bear it – even if that grin is incorrectly captioned – and present the evidence. The case rests on the seventeen photographs which illustrate the book.

Yet the picture we encounter first, right after reading the foreword, isn't a photograph at all. As is evident from the initials "V.N." and the date (1965) in the bottom right corner, this is the author's sketch of his family's summer estate, where the lion's share of the events described in the book take place. The first photograph is found on the other side of the page: it is a picture of the family's city home. Evidently wary of the verifying powers of photography, or at least unwilling to cede control over the matter even for a moment, Nabokov captions most of the photos contained in this book with comically elaborate passages – almost mini-essays – that describe in detail the figures and objects depicted in the photograph. Such is the case even with this first image depicting a house in St. Petersburg. In contrast to the freehand map of the estate on the previous page, this photograph, like all the pictures in the book, was not taken by Vladimir Nabokov. According to the caption, this picture was taken in 1955 by "an obliging American tourist" (p. 17). The schematic drawing of Nabokov's childhood paradise which he himself sketched from memory is thus immediately followed by someone else's depiction of the author's home at a time when he could no longer see the building with his own eyes, though he sometimes fancied the notion of visiting his homeland "with a false passport, under an assumed name" (p. 250). It is almost as if, by means of the photograph, he were making that trip after all, and as if, at the very start, he were entertaining another version of his fortunes: the possibility that he had ultimately stayed in Russia and that all the rest of his life had been a spectral fantasy. It would appear that his is immediately irritated by the mediation of the obliging photographer, as he pedantically mentions an unwelcome intrusion in the photograph: "The little sedan at the curb belongs presumably to the photographer" (p. 17). Irritated or not, Nabokov says that if he is not there anymore, the only image of his family home available to him is inevitably disrupted by the circumstances in which it was acquired. Yet there is another disruption of seemingly equal relevance. In a lordly yet self-deprecating gesture, Nabokov exorcises the specter of nostalgia, complaining contemptuously about the row of lindens, those "green upstarts" that weren't there in his childhood and which – of course! – "hide the second-floor east-corner window of the room where I was born" (p. 17). Despite all this photographic precision, the location of the beginning cannot be seen, and the evidence for the existence of Vladimir Nabokov remains highly inconclusive, which he himself explains to us at the very beginning of his story.

Now that the source has been muddied, the author proceeds to develop his ostensibly stable photonarrative, marching at an even pace through the generations as if nothing had happened. We should perhaps observe that from this point on, the arrangement of the pictures adheres rather precisely to the chronological order, while the story itself, particularly in the early stages of the book, does not hew to chronology, instead wandering about the realm of his childhood, pursuing various narrative threads and images, and sometimes making repeat approaches to key events. The narrator of this capricious, fragmented narrative continues to remind us of his being embedded in the present and of the challenges inherent in the mnemonic process, which is often indistinguishable from the process of producing retroactive fantasies. This anachronizing narrative, full of omissions and loops, matter patched up with colorful splotches of imagination, wraps itself around the axis formed by a series of photographs which, from this perspective, appear (at least ostensibly) to be a stabilizing moment by which the story is anchored into the order of reality. But the beginning of the book is not the only place in which Nabokov sends the reader a self-deprecating signal regarding the very possibility of such stabilization. Other minor but highly significant perturbations are encountered at later points.

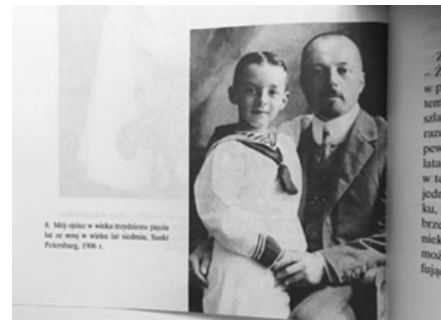
For the time being, in full keeping with the ostentatiously snobbish tone in which Nabokov explains his illustrious, aristocratic, and at once progressive lineage and connections, at the threshold of chapter four we are served, on one page, stylish photos of his paternal grandfather and grandmother, captioned with terse, factual statements. Next, right after the beginning of chapter five, we are given a portrait of the author's maternal grandmother (his grandfather didn't deserve equal treatment, perhaps because the writer's mother feared him; p. 66), and on the next page – a picture of his father in his youth, accompanied by his three brothers. Both the photographs, along with their captions, deserve a bit of attention. Chapter five – the one first published in its original form by Paulhan – is devoted in its entirety to the governess who is referred to throughout the story as "Mademoiselle." Nabokov opens this tender yet ironic description with an observation that further complicates the entire autobiographical endeavor. Namely, by lending his own memories to characters in his stories – to the various literary versions, copies, and doppelgängers of himself – the author contributes to a peculiar erosion of these recollections, which simultaneously shed their "warmth" as they subsequently give

the impression of being some else's property. The consequences are serious: when this sort of alienation occurs, we truly have no way of knowing what belongs to us and what belongs to our literary incarnation; what is a memory and what is fiction. And we have no clue whether we exist or have ever existed at all. In his description of this phenomenon, one that purportedly pertains to the main character of this chapter to a significant degree, Nabokov borrows an image from the realm of cinema: "Houses have crumbled in my memory as soundlessly as they did in the mute films of yore, and the portrait of my old French governess, whom I once lent to a boy in one of my books, is fading fast, now that it is engulfed in the description of a childhood entirely unrelated to my own. The man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle" (p.95). But it would be incorrect to assume that this charming admission was followed by some veracious story: quite the opposite, in fact. This chapter, perhaps even more so than the others, is replete with moments that have been conjured up intentionally and indeed presented as fantasies, making the power and indispensability of a vivid imagination apparent time and again. It is all the more interesting, therefore, that immediately following the beginning of the chapter we encounter a full-page photograph of an older woman. This leads to a game of representations, one likely intended by the author. We may initially believe, before we read the caption beneath the photograph ("The author's maternal grandmother," p. 96), that the woman in the image is Mademoiselle. We are given a photographic image that we will later find hard to shake – isn't that how the images of different figures in our childhood memories overlap? – but are immediately informed of its falseness. We never do see a photograph of Mademoiselle: Nabokov merely tells us about her, generously patching the narrative with his own fantasies. What he wants to salvage is not the "true" image of Mademoiselle, the one that corresponds to reality, as much as the mnemonic-imaginary likeness that is a part of his own constructed and constantly reconstructed identity. In these circumstances, a picture could spoil everything.

The caption beneath the photograph depicting his father and his brother, printed on the back of a photograph of his grandmother, conceals a noteworthy detail that is unfortunately absent from the Polish edition of the book. It reads: "The author's father (...) as a schoolboy around 1885 with his three brothers (from *left to right* Dmitri, Konstantin, and Sergey)" (p. 96). The italicization of the words *left* and *right*,

omitted in the Polish translation, comes from Nabokov himself, and it is precisely this aspect that I wish to discuss. With this comical, superfluous emphasis, Nabokov crosses the boundaries of the dry, factual register and once again draws our attention to himself and his voice, just as he did with his capricious remarks about the lindens and the car in the caption beneath the first picture. These italicizations convey a hint of a mocking tone directed at the reader (“Were it not for me, my dears, you couldn’t tell my uncles apart”), the people in the picture (“It’s genuinely hard to tell them apart in those schoolboy uniforms”), and perhaps himself as well (“Now, let me think: which one was which again?”). Though there isn’t much of a family resemblance among his uncles, by pointing out that in order for us to distinguish them, he must raise his voice somewhat, Nabokov evokes the motif of the doppelgänger, who will shortly play a fundamental role in this photostory.

Yet in the next picture he once again presents his father (p. 128), now a mature, confident man accompanied by his wife. The author’s parents, whom he idealizes in his memoirs, are not depicted in individual portraits. Nor are there any official photographs of his father, an active politician and writer, accompanied by coworkers or opponents, which is all the more striking considering that one such picture is mentioned in the text (p. 175). His father only appears alongside his brothers, his wife,



From the Polish edition of Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

seven-year-old Vladimir (the picture on the back of his parents’ portrait, p. 129), and in the company of his entire family (p. 140); he is thus depicted as a dedicated family man that is at once strong and proud. The photograph of the author and his father, a picture that is not accompanied by an analogous photo with his mother but by a shot of Vladimir with his younger brother (discussed somewhat later; p. 129 again), indicates the patriarchal orientation of the story and gives an unambiguous hint about which son would be the chosen heir to the throne (namely me). Besides this picture with her husband and the entire family, the author’s mother make one more appearance as an object of aesthetic admiration in a reproduction of a pastel portrait, the only one of its kind in the book (p. 161), and immediately after it in a picture with her brother Ruka (p. 162), who perhaps owes this distinction to the fact that he made Vladimir his heir.

The caption underneath the photograph of his mother and father openly emphasizes the staged, theatrical nature of the recollections recounted in this book. As Nabokov writes in the last sentence: "The birches and firs of the park behind my parents belong to the same backdrop of past summers as the foliage of photograph facing p. 192" (i.e., the family picture; p. 128). His grandmother's tenderness towards the author's sisters, depicted in the family's group photo, is also exposed as fake ("My paternal grandmother is holding, in a decorative but precarious cluster, my two little sisters whom she never held in real life"; p. 140), though in this case he can at least maintain that he knows the true story, even if he can no longer show it. Our attention is also drawn to the previous sentence in the elaborate caption underneath this group photo: "My mother has placed Photophobic Trainy upon the iron table mentioned in connection with mushrooms in Chapter 2" (p. 140). This chapter also describes his mother's fondness for brown dachshunds and their constant presence in photographs: "In the family albums illustrating her young years, there was hardly a group that did not include one such animal—usually with some part of its flexible body blurred and always with the strange, paranoiac eyes dachshunds have in snapshots" (p. 48). It appears that these paranoid animals simply refused to submit to this spectralizing operation. At any rate, his sisters and the dachshund appear only in one more photograph, one depicting the author and all his siblings, and which I will examine below (p. 202) The photophobic dachshund in this picture is "Box II," whose grandparents – as Nabokov informs us in an act of extreme bragadociousness – "had been Dr. Anton Chekhov's Quina and Brom" (p. 48). It was this creature that accompanied the author's mother in her exile and as such joined the ranks of those who had "emigrated," irrevocably losing their identities and becoming specters of themselves, ill-fitted to their own clothes and perhaps even to their own skins: "he could be still seen going for reluctant walks with his mistress, waddling far behind in a huff, tremendously old and furious with his long Czech muzzle of wire—an émigré dog in a patched and ill-fitting coat" (ibid.).

Having appeared as the heir to the throne accompanied by his father and, with an angered expression, in a group photo ("I am perched on the bench arm, hating my collar and Stresa", to which his parents were traveling; p. 140), Nabokov can finally present an individual portrait of himself as an oh-so-dashing sixteen-year-old (p. 194). But it seems that the more important portrait, one particularly relevant in

this sequence of images, is the next one, separating chapters eleven and twelve (p. 227). As we recall, from the very beginning of the book, i.e., from the moment in which he produces a photograph in which he is incorrectly identified, Nabokov has been collecting proof of his own existence as much as he has been gathering evidence to question, or at least raise doubts about, his own identity. He explains in the foreword the mistakes he, a person born in 1899, makes in calculating dates and his own age at the time of this or that event, all because of his "inclination to equate in retrospect my age with that of the century" (p. 13); he also emphasizes the associated challenges caused by the change from the Julian Calendar to the Gregorian Calendar. In doing so, he accentuates the moments that prevent him from smoothly embedding his own identity in a stable narrative. A similar purpose is served by the concealment of his birthplace in the photo – or rather the revelation of that concealment in the picture's caption – as well as the note that he had nearly been named Victor by accident at his baptism (p. 21). It is these meditations on his own identity that chapter eleven augments with a new motif.

This chapter contains a self-deprecating yet enormously bumptious story about the creative torment the young Nabokov allegedly suffered as he composed his first poem. Though the author mocks his rapture and the quality of the result, he seems to be quite serious about this story as the narrative of the birth of a literary subject. He presents this birth as the disintegration and ultimate questioning of his own self. When the juvenile poet had finished reciting the piece to his mother, who was moved to tears, she passed him a mirror so that he could see the blood smeared on his cheek, the result of the battle he had just waged with a mosquito in his poetic absent-mindedness. Something special happens at this moment: "But I saw more than that. Looking into my own eyes, I had the shocking sensation of finding the mere dregs of my usual self, odds and ends of an evaporated identity which it took my reason quite an effort to gather again in the glass" (p. 227). Even if this is as much a memory as it is a retroactive fantasy, the matter is, of course, of the utmost importance: by entering the space of writing, Nabokov loses his identity, and then proceeds to reconstruct it artificially and



From the Polish edition of Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

disassemble it in his successive literary endeavors. That much is clear. Yet this makes the picture placed immediately after these words particularly powerful and relevant. Here we have a remarkably stylish young man, dressed in white, with a cigarette and oar in his hand, gazing directly into the lens as he poses in a boat. The caption is breathtakingly snobbish: "The author in Cambridge, Spring 1920. It was not unnatural for a Russian, when gradually discovering the pleasures of the Cam, to prefer, at first, a rowboat to the more proper canoe or punt" (p. 228). This is the second individual portrait of Nabokov found in this book, but the first photo of him as an adult and, crucially, the first photo of him in exile: the story of his ultimate departure from his homeland closes chapter twelve, which this photograph opens. Is this a picture of Vladimir Nabokov? In a sense, yes. More precisely, though, it is a picture of "the author." It is a picture of a person who, having fallen apart, put himself back together in the mirror and proceeded to operate exclusively in a mode of temporary, tentative constructs, as if he had been replaced by that reflection in the mirror. To make matters worse, this is a person who had just lost his identity in yet another fundamental way: his own person had been replaced by his émigré specter. It is this composite authorial/émigré specter that glows in this photograph. Is he not shrouded in the same milky mist that veiled Frau Tschissik when she was photographed by the gaze of Franz Kafka? The person we see in the picture is a playboy aristocrat with an oar in his hand, but at the same time – and this is no secret the one showing us the photo – he is a person/print, a simulacrum with a highly uncertain ontological status. As the author, this individual will be constantly reinventing himself, partly studying or even exploiting his émigré condition, and partly making a desperate effort to resist it. Any hopes of reclaiming himself are, however, out of the question.

And yet this state of cohesion is sustained by someone's eye – or so the author wishes were true or would at least have us believe. In the final chapters of the book, Nabokov repeatedly turns to his wife, Véra, never mentioning her name but also using the most direct and intimate "you" (which he also does sporadically in earlier portions of the text). She is also identified as the photographer behind the third and final individual portrait of Nabokov in the book, this one – at least according to the author – unposed and taken surreptitiously (p. 255). Among the meticulously cataloged props surrounding Nabokov as he drafts the manuscript of *The Defense* are "family photos," though it is impossible to discern who is depicted in the images.

On the next page we again observe Nabokov, now accompanied by his son Dmitri, through Véra's eye (p. 256), before finally seeing Véra herself in a photograph next to that of her son on a reproduction of a page in their Nansen passport, a document that testifies to their complete uprooting and which allowed her and Nabokov to leave Europe in 1940, ultimately confirming their spectral, emigrant status. And if Sebald is correct in claiming that Nabokov's passion for butterflies¹⁹ was something of an offshoot of the study of spirits in which he engaged in his writing, then it seems only appropriate that this reproduction of passport photos is preceded by pictures of butterflies captured and cataloged by Nabokov (p. 275). When he addresses in the foreword the complicated process of writing the book, Nabokov compares the spectralizing transformations of the text – and, implicitly, the spectralizing metamorphosis of his own identity – to the metamorphosis of a butterfly. He writes: "This re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place, proved to be a diabolical task, but some consolation was given me by the thought that such multiple metamorphosis, familiar to butterflies, had not been tried by any human before" (p. 12–13).

And yet there is something else, something that seems particularly relevant. If, as we have seen, Nabokov repeatedly found himself mistakenly equating his age with that of the century, then it's worth bearing in mind that the writer did in fact have a peer of the twentieth century in his family: it was his brother Sergey, one year Vladimir's junior. This brother is a true specter in Nabokov's book. He addresses Véra numerous times with the words "you and I," and says "he and I" once in reference to their son, but there is only one other person who is given the distinction of an analogous compound: "my brother and I" is said a number of times, and one time "Sergey and I." This is not to say that Nabokov portrayed the brothers' relationship as being exceptionally amiable. On the contrary: though the two share preceptors and inevitably spend a lot of time in each other's company, it is constantly emphasized that Sergey's interests are completely different from Vladimir's, that he is worse at sports, and that he is generally delicate and shy (and left-handed, at that). Like uncle Ruka, Sergey spoke with a stammer, yet, despite this and the fact that Sergey was the



From the Polish edition of Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

only one to learn a song written by his uncle, he was ignored by the latter, who made Vladimir his heir (p. 69). Like his uncle Konstantin, Sergey was a homosexual: the subject of their uncle's homosexuality is brought up by way of a passage about "photographs of young British officers" in Konstantin's flat (p. 60). This aristocratic understatement linking homosexuality and photographic prints may have an additional meaning. As one may conclude from a reading of the novel *Pale Fire*, whose main character is a homosexual, Nabokov frequently thought about this orientation in the context of his endless musings on doppelgängers and twins, reflections and prints, specters and shadows, perhaps understanding homosexuality as "the love of that which is similar."

At any rate, the motif of the shadow and doppelgänger makes a completely explicit appearance in the context of the author's comment about Sergey. Now that the brother has played the role of the more taciturn and consistently weaker companion in various episodes – so silent is he that it's not always certain he even exists ("Was he asleep? Was he there at all?"; p. 145); what we do know is that he's a "first-rate actor" (p. 241), so perhaps he can manipulate his own identity – Nabokov only proceeds in chapter twelve to sketch his profile. He writes, for instance: "Except for the two or three poor little adventures I have sketched in earlier chapters, his boyhood and mine seldom mingled. He *is a mere shadow* in the background of my richest and most detailed recollections. I was the coddled one; he, the witness of coddling" (p. 257; emphasis added). Nabokov thus makes no secret of the fact that he regards his brother as an unfortunate version of himself. This is particularly apparent in the caption underneath their shared photo, placed, meaningfully enough, on the same page as the picture of little Vladimir with his father, who anoints our golden boy as the recipient of his paternal manna. Vladimir poses in his ever so masculine naval outfit, while the younger Sergey, with brighter hair, is dressed in a spectral-white shirt-dress that could equally be worn by a girl. The first sentence of the caption reads: "My brother Sergey and I, aged one and two, respectively (and looking like the same infant, wigless and wigged), in December 1901, in Biarritz" (p. 129). Considering the author's profound fascination with the phenomenon of multiple identities, this is certainly not an offhand remark. Nabokov presents his brother as a defective doppelgänger while self-deprecatingly contemplating the idea that this potential status is an ostensibly victorious yet largely fabricated version of Sergey.

Nabokov's recollections of his brother are tinted with an entirely understandable sense of guilt. The passage devoted to Sergey opens with the sentence: "For various reasons I find it inordinately hard to speak about my other brother" (p. 257; the first, and actually younger, brother was Kirill, to whom Nabokov devotes just over half a short page). This feeling is understandable not just because of what their relationship looked like when they were children, but especially because of the finale of this story: Sergey remained in Europe and died in a concentration camp at the very end of the war.²⁰ To make matters worse, Nabokov didn't say goodbye to his brother before leaving Europe or so much as notify him of his departure:

We again met in the nineteen-thirties, and were on quite amiable terms in 1938–1940, in Paris. He often dropped in for a chat, rue Boileau where I lodged in two shabby rooms with you and our child, but it so happened (he had been away for a while) that he learned of our departure to America only after we had left. My bleakest recollections are associated with Paris, and the relief of leaving it was overwhelming, but I am sorry he had to stutter his astonishment to an indifferent concierge. (...) It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something – compassion, understanding, no matter what – which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem (p. 258).

One may debate the degree to which this is a sincere expression of guilt or simply the patronizing words of a brother who has achieved success and can afford to stoop down and even show remorse, scoring additional points for his humanity. At any rate, his evasive use of "it so happened" sounds rather horrible, and such terribly witty figures as "to stutter his astonishment" seem inappropriate in this context. Similar questions may be posed in regard to the passage in which he uses an ostensibly cinematic metaphor in recounting a memory of his relationship with his brother. One time when roller-skating, he writes, "I kept self-sufficiently overtaking poor gamely stumbling Sergey, one of those galling little pictures that revolve on and on in one's mind" (p. 205). The word "galling" (which the Polish translator renders as *bolesny*, or "painful") may lower Nabokov's moral rating: his lordship is galled by his own sense of guilt. But it could also work to his advantage: perhaps by choosing this word Nabokov is admitting both his own guilt as well as his own haughtiness. He was the one who always felt like the well-behaved boy who,

like a complete narcissist, fantasized about how a reporter would one day snap photos of him as a brilliant goalkeeper (p. 267). And he still feels that way: making it all the more irritating that he continues to overtake Sergey over and over again in that looped film in his mind. And he can't stop.

And yet it is not in the main text, but in the caption to one of the photographs that the feeling of guilt that marks his attitude towards his brother makes itself apparent most clearly and probably most believably. Presenting a picture of himself in the company of all his brothers and sisters, Nabokov writes: "The author aged nineteen, with his brothers and sisters, in Yalta, November 1918. Kirill is seven; Sergey (*unfortunately disfigured by flaws in the picture*), wearing a rimless pince-nez and the uniform of



From the Polish edition of Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

the Yalta Gymnasium, is eighteen; Olga is fifteen; Elena (firmly claspng Box II) is twelve" (p. 215; emphasis added). By drawing the reader's attention to the barely visible flaws on his brother's face, Nabokov turns them into a symbol of Sergey's bleak future as well that of the wrongs he himself committed against him, partly of this own fault, and partly because he was simply loved and successful. Perhaps he would like to show us his brother in a manner that is free of flaws, but he knows that he is unable to do so. He knows that Sergey's image is distorted by his own insufficient understanding, by his own sense of superiority, and by the sense of guilt that those wrongs now evoke in him. A sense of guilt that irrevocably distorts and prevents him from seeing the image of his doppelgänger, or, on the contrary, the image of a wholly real person whose conceited yet self-conscious doppelgänger is the spectral writer Vladimir Nabokov.

Footnotes

1 See W.G. Sebald, *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*, ed. Lynne S. Schwartz (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2007), 41.

2 Carol Jacobs, *Sebald's Vision* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 166. Quoted from W.G. Sebald, »Auf ungeheuer dünnem Eis«: *Gespräche 1971 bis 2001* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verl., 2012), 166.

3 W.G. Sebald, "Wyimki," trans. M. Łukasiewicz, A. Pokojska, *Zeszyty Literackie*, Summer (2012), 43.

4 See Eleanor Wachtel, "Ghost Hunter," in Sebald, *The Emergence of Memory*, 39–40.

5 W.G. Sebald, "Kafka Goes to the Movies," in *Campo Santo*, trans. A. Bell (New York: Random House, 2005), 157.

6 It is perhaps worth examining the key passage of Kafka's description of Frau Tschissik quoted by Sebald: "I usually hate the use of powder, but if this whiteness, like a veil clinging close to the skin and of a slightly cloudy, milky color is the effect of powder, then all women should powder themselves." Though Sebald does not say so literally, this cloudy whiteness brings to his mind the blurring of outlines of figures in photographs. This appears to be confirmed by a passage from the essay "Campo Santo" in which he mentions the dead who wander around Corsica. Not only were they "about a foot shorter than they had been in life," but "their faces blurred and flickered at the edges, just like the faces of actors in an old movie" (Sebald, "Campo Santo," p. 29). Sebald later intercepted this passage and used it in the novel *Austerlitz*, albeit without making this cinematic comparison at that point (See W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. A. Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2011), 54). It is possible, however, that the author was referring to this connection between photography, powder, and death when, elsewhere in *Austerlitz*, he made one character compulsively powder herself and associate this action with the reminiscences of "a Russian writer" whose grandmother suffered from "a similar mania for powder." See *ibid.*, p 62. That writer, naturally, was Vladimir Nabokov.

7 Sebald, "Kafka Goes to the Movies," 158. See the observation by Freud, who quotes Otto Rank: "The double was originally an insurance against the extinction of the self or, as Rank puts it, 'an energetic denial of the power of death,' and it seems likely that the 'immortal' soul was the first double of the body. (...) But these ideas arose on the soil of boundless self-love, the primordial narcissism that dominates the mental life of both the child and primitive man, and when this phase is surmounted, the meaning of the 'double' changes: having once been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death." Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. D. McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 142.

8 Sebald, "Kafka Goes to the Movies," 159. Sebald offers the same speculation in *Vertigo*, where, at the appropriate moment, he includes a still frame from a film depicting a character dueling with his own reflection, which is about to escape the frame of the mirror. See W.G. Sebald, *Vertigo*, trans. Michael Hulse (New York: New Directions, 2016), 151.

9 Sebald, "Kafka Goes to the Movies," 159–160.

10 Wachtel, "Ghost Hunter," 52, and Sebald, "Wyimki," 41.

11 W.G. Sebald, "Dream Textures: A Brief Note on Nabokov," in *Campo Santo*, 142.

12 *Ibid.*, 144 and 143.

13 *Ibid.*, 143. See Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), 161. In an interview conducted by Alfred Appel, Nabokov admits to having earned money through work undertaken by the main character of *Mary* and some figures in one of his short stories. I wish to thank Irena Książopolska of the Franz Kafka University of Muri for drawing my attention to this reference and providing me with a copy of Appel's excellent book on the connections between Nabokov's work and the film world, which also makes mention, though briefly, of the *The Student of Prague* (see Alfred Appel, Jr., *Nabokov's Dark Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 142–143). For the story mentioned in the interview, see Vladimir Nabokov, "The Assistant Producer," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 546–559. Appel points out this particular passage: "German film companies, which kept sprouting like poisonous mushrooms in those days (just before the child of light learned to talk), found cheap labor in hiring those among the Russian émigrés whose only hope and profession was their past—that is, a set of totally unreal people—to represent "real" audiences in pictures. The dovetailing of one phantasm into another produced upon a sensitive person the impression of living in a Hall of Mirrors, or rather a prison of mirrors, and not even knowing which was the glass and which was yourself" (p. 551).

14 See Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989). Subsequent references in the text are cited by page number.

15 Sebald (justifiably) describes this passage as "the finest [Nabokov] ever wrote." See "Dream Textures," 149.

16 Sebald, "Kafka Goes to the Movies," 157.

17 It is also worth mentioning in this context the suggestive passage devoted to the beauty of unenlarged slides. Recalling the slideshows held by his home tutor, Nabokov writes: "Now that I come to think of it, how tawdry and tumid they looked, those jellylike pictures, projected upon the damp linen screen (moisture was supposed to make them blossom more richly), but, on the other hand, what loveliness the glass slides as such revealed when simply held between finger and thumb and raised to the light—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. In the glass of the slide, meant for projection, *a landscape was reduced*, and this fired one's fancy; under the microscope, an insect's organ was magnified for cool study. There is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic" (p. 166–167; emphasis added). Perhaps this reduction could be a handy figure for the status of things that appear in images in our memories, not unlike the photograph placed inside the souvenir from Biarritz. We look at them from afar, through reversed binoculars, and their diminishment questions their reality as much as it stimulates the imagination, the effects of which can no longer be discerned from the operation of the memory; to Nabokov, their intertwining could constitute the source of the artistic gesture. The complementary microscopic moment could correspond to the awed and inquisitive gaze of a person studying the ornamentation of the objects, also transported by the power of magnification to the sphere of phantasmagoria. If I am correct in the connection I draw between reduction, fantasy, memory, and the artistic gesture, then Nabokov's meditations provide new insight into Lévi-Strauss's laconic observation that "the vast majority of works of art are small scale" (Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. G. Weidenfeld (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 23). The "reversed binoculars" perspective is referenced almost directly in a stirring passage recounting Nabokov's visit to Crimea shortly before his final departure from Russia. The author recalls a game he played with a friend that involved describing current events in the past tense, as if they were already part of the biography of a famous writer whose mirrored initials were "V. V." (e.g., "He was in the habit of lighting his cigarette, before smoking it"): "all this delivered with much

pensive, reminiscent fervor which seemed hilarious and harmless to us at the time; but now – now I catch myself wondering if we did not disturb unwittingly some perverse and spiteful demon” (p. 248).

18 <http://contentdm.library.uvic.ca/cdm/singleitem/collection/collection10/id/422/rec/1>, access November 10, 2016.

19 Sebald, “Dream Textures,” 142.

20 Sergey Nabokov recently became the subject of a novel: see Paul Russell, *The Unreal Life of Sergey Nabokov* (Berkeley: Cleis Press, 2011). The title of the novel is a reference, naturally, to the title of Nabokov’s (first English) novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the narrator of which attempts to write the biography of his half-brother, a famous writer. Nabokov himself draws a connection between Sergey and this novel, writing: “That twisted quest for Sebastian Knight (1940), with its glories and self-mate combinations, is really nothing in comparison to the task I balked in the first version of this memoir and am faced with now” (p. 257; the task possibly being to explore the story of Sergey).