

## Nabokov's Thaumatrope: The Superimposition of Memory

Elise Schlecht

Psychologically, the effect that memory and time have on present understanding is undeniable. Quite often one will find oneself in a state of convergence with past and future, the inevitable trails of existence tying one object to the next in an all-encompassing lattice of causal relation. This is an apparent trait of the desire for further purpose in life by those enlightened, those who examine the convergence of events which have culminated in their current position. This extrospection may encompass the most minute detail as a discarded blue pencil which, by its very presence, contributed new meaning to the ponderer standing alone in a dustily furnished guest room. He may wonder what criminal action landed them both in the same sinking ship, how by some strange will his mechanical counterpart had exerted his own will to give the moment meaning, how another's disregard for the innocent shaft has transformed the meager shaft into a mirror, through which the he might view himself as alone but, strangely, companioned. More strangely, he recognizes the endless permutations which have resulted in the localization of a single glance, a glance which begins a new cycle of permutations. Such is the foundation of the writings of Vladimir Nabokov.

Interwoven throughout the fabric of post-imperialist Russian literature lies an undeniable focus on the importance of seemingly random convergence and its effects on the human experience. This principle holds true for the work of Vladimir Nabokov, who examined the cause

who, drawing on his own experiences, share the synesthetic affliction. This bequeathed ability allows his protagonists to examine their surroundings in the scope of both linear and nonlinear time, superimposing memory, experience, and aspiration upon each other in determination of their merging past, present, and future. Such is the prevailing image of Nabokov's novel *Transparent Things*, which, as the title suggests, layers multiple facets of the protagonist's memory upon each other with this ultimate purpose. As canonically the writer employs his craft in expulsion of frustrations, both social and political, so Nabokov did with the dystopian expose, *Bend Sinister*, in which he traced the root of the parallel thought which replicated the ideas of a previous age. The same superimposition of past and present is seen in this text as a subliminal examination of the replication of a defective gene. Such themes trail throughout Nabokov's other works, *The Original of Laura* and *Look at the Harlequins!*, both of which throw a deliberate spotlight on improbable intersection and the perpetuity of memorial affect.

Superimposing the events of the past and present, Nabokov effectively characterizes the very nature of time as nonlinear, a quality enhanced by the persistence of memory. A common occurrence in Nabokovian literature, the protagonist retraces earlier steps, both physically and mentally, "seeing" them without the effect of time, and establishing a beautiful melding of history and presence enhanced by memorial formaldehyde. As he traces the actions of *Transparent Things*' H. Person following his return to the ville in which he met his beloved (now ashen)

remembered, but relived. Throughout such passages, Nabokov makes few distinctions between memory and present reality, cementing his consistent assertions of the blurred nature of the traditionally delineated temporal tenses. His effortless descriptions of temporal relativity effectively blur the past and present, creating an inescapable overlay of the past upon the present, which drives the action of those who experience such effects. It is palpable that the Nabokovian protagonist is often uncomfortable with this overlay, as in recollections of Armande and Iris from *Transparent Things* and *Look at the Harlequins!* respectively, but this discomfort, stemming from the memory of a lost loved one, impacts the individual life as if the memorial vestige were still corporeally apt. These protagonists take great lengths to revisit a “shoddy mountain resort”, and the emotionally infused “villa of [his] beloved” long deceased, the momentous impact of revisitation spiraling them into catastrophically inspired action. (Nabokov, 3, 189) Such influence of the general mannerism, it is proven, is not dulled by the presence of time or contingent upon the detail of inspiration, but is continuously impressed upon its very fabric, the present reality of all affected by the persistence of memory being consistently interlaced. As seamlessly as memories neatly overlap with present perceptions of reality, so do they shape the reality upon which they are impressed.

In the process of developing the permutative structure, one aspect is key- that of mental capacity. It is clear throughout Nabokovian literature that the man who lacks the ability to see from another’s eyes is forever damned to walk in blindness, as he can never understand that which predates him. It is made even more clear that without this direction to steer one’s life, there is nothing but a void between their eyes. As with the example of Iris, Protagonist’s aforementioned lover, without the ability to see experiences from her partner’s eyes, her life was shallow and lacking color. This aspect is traced throughout Nabokovian literature as often as he

traces the root of societal destruction, the defective gene. Innumerable characters, Flora, Marthe, Emmie, Anna, Iris, Mademoiselle, Ivar, Armande, among others have conducted their lives without the color of the past, lending them fated to repeat all errors of the era they have chosen to

but by a curious turn of phrase inhabiting Nabokov's *Lolita*- "I need you, the reader, to imagine us, for we don't really exist if you don't." (Nabokov, 133) This holds true- as he states

of the pattern upon another." (Nabokov, 66) However, if such the effect of superimposition is not

temporally conscious figures with those who reject the treasures of the past, attempting to forge

their own tunnel without spade or explosive. He describ ho` scr? s .fi y s is nm ]

traditionalist philosophy. The culmination of this exercise lies in *Transparent Things*'  
intersection of the dreary H. Person with a mere lilac-hued writing instrument which had been  
long

could also distinguish the glint of a special puddle [...], an oblong puddle invariably acquiring the same form after every shower because of the constant spatulate shape of a depression in the ground. Possibly something of the kind may be said to occur in regard to the imprint we leave in the intimate texture of space.” (Nabokov, 241)

Supplementing the lattice of permutated action, the intersections of the author’s objects of curiosity prove not only to contribute to the delicate improbability of events, but to their meaning in parallel. These grafts of imagerial bone are scattered throughout his texts as pressed floral cuttings, misplaced shoes and clothes. One of the most pressing passages of *Look at the Harlequins!* involves one such object, the notorious “salmon-pink shirt” of the past, which repeatedly haunts the protagonist as he pursues the love of his life. (Nabokov, 138) In accordance with the aforementioned permutative theory of action, it is set that once an intersection has taken place, all actions proceeding said intersection are based in the occurrence of that single event. The detailed history of the salmon-pink shirt is later revealed, it being the possession of an overzealous bridegroom and object of fixation for the young protagonist as he witnessed their wedding night, the shirt draped lackadaisically over the back of a chair. Seemingly, this interaction is null. However, in prequel one witnesses the courtship of gangly



*Invitation to a Beheading*. Throughout these works, such defective genes are consistently replicated so as to embody the failure which arises if a destructive string of permutations is adopted as the primary order. Nabokov writes, "He saw the Toad crouching at the foot of the wall, shaking, dissolving...", further works continuing the idea of the disintegration of those who have followed the track of flawed junctions. (Nabokov, 240) While those who continue on a path cogent of past failures are careful to not repeat them, he crystallizes the imminent danger which presents itself when society is blind to these wrongdoings, when it accepts the unacceptable simply out of tradition, or idiocy, or an uncontrollable radical which has incited the population to somehow forget. Nabokov often parodies the realities of modern pseudo-utopian society, mocking their complete disregard for the lessons of the past which have proven their adopted



healthy myriad of his rather unconventional observations of the human condition. In the practice of chemistry, the behavior of a gas is modeled by a simple formula which combines numerous flexible variables and a universal gas constant- in completion of the formula, the behaviors of the substance are predicted. (Georgia State University Department of Physics & Astronomy)

Nabokovian literature mirrors the purpose and structure of this formula, the value of the gas constant replaced by the reactionary animal tendencies of the order lepidoptera, the theory applied in attempted prediction of the unknown. Appearing consistently throughout his novels,



is one which is not exclusive to Nabokov, tapped by such authors as Alan Moore and Samuel Beckett. The scribings of the three establish the fact that, quite bluntly, “nothing ever ends”. (Moore, 378) Although the corporeal being decays, there is no erasure from time- the memory of the individual consciousness will exist in some dark annal of the human tapestry, waiting to be pulled out and examined. The Nabokovian protagonist knows this as truth, knowing that nothing short of complete obliteration has the power to allow the soul (“if one exists”) to find peace, as in each individual, something of another is retained- the shy smile of a dark-haired errander delivering a paper bundle of flowers to the unhappily married housewife, the salmon pink button-down of an overzealous newlywed nonchalantly draped over a chair, the delicate curve of

Majdanek, ruffled dresses of the children of czars, ancient icons of St. Sixtus the First and Agrippina, all of which color the lives of those who remember, even beyond the seconds of time they inhabited as flesh and blood. Such impacts, maybe a happenstance collision with a seemingly impersonal relic, press meaning into coldness- the momentum of these past lives crush into our own, melding and shaping future action in a manner so that we cannot state with

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