
The Process of Recollection of Memories in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* is a work that focuses as much on the process of recollection of memories as on the memories that are being recollected. Nabokov's patient and repetitive interrogation of his memories shows the confrontation of the narrative with the recollection in an iterative, specular moment that strives for mimetic perfection. He challenges the limits of chronological time, describing time as his "magic carpet" (SM 139), whose pace he can control by folding and unfolding it to superimpose distant images printed on it. One purpose of Nabokov's narrative is to create a sense of timelessness, by making the past collapse into the present. This in turn is representative of the doubling of the self, as Nabokov telescopes time, superimposing the perspective of his present self on the experience of his past self. The formal telescoping of time is signaled by the interactions of light and shade in his narration, transposing form into content. In this essay, I will argue that the diachrony of light and shade in Nabokov's description of the passage expands into a synchrony of the two selves. This can be seen by observing one of the final passages of chapter 8, where Nabokov describes a family gathering in a park. As the language in the passage transitions from being evocative of images of darkness, creating a space of obscurity in which the two selves can be detached from one another, to images of light representing reconnection, we see Nabokov's past and present self come together during the process of recollecting this memory.

The passage begins with a characterization of Nabokov as an outsider in his own vision, which creates a sense of detachment between his past and present self. He says, "Always approach that banquet table from the outside" (SM 171). In this phrase, he is using spatial distance as an analogy for the estrangement of the present self from the past, which is effected by time. He approaches the family from the "depth of the woods" (SM 171) rather than from the house. This phrase creates a sense of Nabokov coming from the darkness, away from others, to where the gathering is taking place. The readers' attention is also drawn to the liminal space between the park and the house – the garden separating the two is described as a "smooth-sanded space" (SM 171). This evokes the image of the sands of time, that is, the years that separate the author from the original gathering. This metaphor of separation is further depicted by the allusion to the tale of the Prodigal Son, which adds resonance to the passage. Nabokov says, "in order to go back thither [he] had to do so with the silent steps of a prodigal" (SM 171). The allusion suggests that Nabokov's metaphorical homecoming through the re-visitation of his memories is not out of nostalgia, but in the hopes of achieving some sort of absolution. Thus, we see that darkness is representative of a phase of detachment, but Nabokov's return to his memories is an attempt to reconnect his two selves, thereby demonstrating the doubling of the self.

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Once Nabokov begins the process of memory recollection, we see a transition from language evoking images of darkness to Nabokov's employment of linguistic chiaroscuro to depict the interactions of light and shade; this serves as a transition from the darkness that Nabokov was in, to the light he is going towards. He describes the people at the gathering as "sharing in the animation of light and shade" (SM 171). This can be paralleled to a phrase mentioned a few lines later where he says, "In the place my current tutor sits, there is a changeful image, a succession of fade-ins and fade-outs" (SM 171). The 'changeful image' and alternations between light and shade represent a composition of various faces and forms. A fade-in re-introduces light, where a particular memory comes into focus, whereas a fade-out plunges us back into shade, where the boundaries of memories are blurred. This signifies a tension between fragmentation and synthesis and the dispersion and recollection of thoughts. During the process of recollection, it seems as though many different moments and series of afternoon gatherings are coalescing into a single, inclusive and enduring scene. This fluidity in Nabokov's thoughts and process of memory recollection is further emphasized when he says, "The pulsation of my thought mingles with that of the leaf shadows and turns Ordo into Max and Max into Lenski... and the whole array of trembling transformations is repeated" (SM 171). The movement of the leaves creates patterns of light and shade on the leaves, representing the simultaneity of memory as one memory morphs into another, but quickly enough to allow him to create a single scene out of many fragmented recollections. Additionally, the syntax also depicts an interaction of the past and present. The momentum of the syntax that propels the reader forward is countered by the use of present participles in the description, such as 'mingles' and 'trembling', which hold the scene in suspension. There is an interaction between the past and the present, since the past is being described using present tense. Thus, the simultaneity of memory serves to bring the past to life.

In the last part of the passage, we see the end of the transition and the beginning of the 'light' phase of the passage, which serves a metaphor for the reconnection of the two selves. Towards the end of the passage, he brings the scene into sharper focus when he says, "the outlines settle at last to their various duties" (SM 171). Thus, the light and shade that have characterized the fluidity of Nabokov's thoughts as they travel between the past and the present are no longer fluid, but have finally settled down. This creates a sense of Nabokov no longer simply observing the remembered scene, but actually and actively becoming a participant, validated by the point that he can hear, "Thirty human hearts drowning mine with their regular beats" (SM 171). If we observe the passage before we come to this phrase, we see a sense of soundlessness, as Nabokov relies wholly on optical techniques in his attempt to recreate the memory. This is seen by the use of phrases like "silent steps", to describe how he approaches the banquet table from the woods, and "mute lips", to describe the conversation that guests at the banquet table are having. However, after we see the above-mentioned phrase, there is an explosion of sound imagery, as Nabokov says, "a torrent of sounds come to life" (SM 171). It seems as though initially Nabokov is simply painting a picture, and using optical techniques to facilitate readers to

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visualize the scene. However, by including sound, he is now bringing the picture to life, adding an additional sensorial dimension that better achieves the effect of lived experience. This marks his transition from an observer to a participant and also serves to dissolve the gap between the past and the present, rivaling life itself; the resulting image, enhanced now by the impact of sound as well rather than just visual techniques, transcends the shifting kaleidoscope of time-bound memories; Nabokov sees them as the “consummation and resolution” of the temporal process, as something that has become “enduring in retrospect” (SM 170). Thus, we see that only after the reconnection of the two selves is the synesthetic impact enhanced, by the inclusion of sound - we see the importance of synesthesia on Nabokov’s process of remembering, as it establishes the connection of his present self to his past self. Thus, images evoking light do not only provide visual clarity, but also allow for the participation of sound, another sense, in the process of remembering, showing a reconnection of the two selves.

Thus, we see that Nabokov depicts the doubling of the self not only by recollecting memories, but also through the process of recollecting them. The tripartite structure of an autobiography is reflected in the structure of the chosen passage. There is a progression from detachment, symbolized by darkness, to a transitory phase, symbolized by the interactions of light and shade, to finally a state of reconnection, symbolized by light. Hence, we see that the process of recollecting memories is also a process of ‘coming to’ for Nabokov as the optical techniques used in the description of the passage, specifically the role of light and shade, serve as metaphors for his own journey in linking his two selves; simultaneously, Nabokov achieves his goal of creating a sense of timelessness as he brings the past alive.

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