

Nabokov's Thaumatrope: The Superimposition of Memory

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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 and effect of his protagonists' standing in all facets of linear and nonlinear time. Such extrapolation of present to encompass both past and future is a result of Nabokov's synesthesia, which allowed him to mentally superimpose ideas and images upon each other, determining their relationship and mutual effect on each other. He extends this superimposition to his protagonists,

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), Person projects his recollections of that summer onto the mountain trail before him—"Again he was panting in her merciless wake. Again she was teasing Jacques, the handsome Swiss boy with fox-red body hair and dreamy eyes. Again she flirted with the eclectic English twins... Hugh, despite his tremendous physique, had neither the legs nor the lungs to keep up with them even in memory." (Nabokov, 89) In this sense, the past is not merely being

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 forget. This is not a quality embodied by any single quotation from these characters or novels, 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 memoirially, "I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another." (Nabokov, 66) However, if such the effect of superimposition is not desired and is discarded, the individual is lost and flat. Nabokov contrasts the vibrancy of his temporally conscious figures with those who reject the treasures of the past, attempting to forge their own tunnel without spade or explosive. He describes one such individual as "crouching at the foot of [a] wall, shaking, dissolving...", their lives peeling apart from the stress of avoidable, yet nevertheless completed failures. (Nabokov, 240) As he states that memory of the past lives on through our objects of curiosity, so it is the will of the individual that will choose to accept or discard the happenings of the past when conducting their own series of vivacious permutations.

In concurrence with the notion of the superimposition of time, the Nabokovian protagonist, and by extension human protagonist, derives her path not from seemingly random chance, but from a stream of permuted action. One of Nabokov's most firmly articulated beliefs is that of the permutation of experience, which translates as the accumulation of meaning through improbable encounter. It is paramount in the Nabokovian philosophy that the intersection of two entities is not a simplistic occurrence. Of note are the painstaking efforts the author exerts throughout his novels in order to cement this assertion, and develop a background for each entity, sentient or otherwise, in magnification of his principle which departs

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 discarded behind the bureau in his equally dreary hotel room. Nabokov narrates, "It was not a hexagonal beauty of Virginia juniper or African cedar, with the maker's name imprinted in silver foil, but a very plain, round, technically faceless old pencil of cheap pine, dyed a dingy lilac. It had been mislaid ten years ago by a carpenter who had not finished examining, let alone fixing, the old desk, having gone away for a tool that he never found." (Nabokov, 6) Through the action of intricately tracing the events preceding the intersection of the two, Nabokov quite forcefully magnifies the lattice of events required to facilitate such a simple encounter as that of man with pencil, a lattice which grows with the complexity of its interacting bodies. Further toying with this notion, Nabokov structures his later works to demonstrate this on a macroscopic scale, one involving the fleeting convergence of two bodies. *The Original*'s title character, Flora, and subsequent supporting character Dr. Philip Wilde, only interact for a brief period, but through this brevity the author is able to demonstrate the permutative effect of any interaction upon its participants. The author states, "one soon got over the shock of seeing that enormously fat creature mince toward the lectern on [...] which he cleared his throat before starting to enchant one with his wit. Laura disregarded The which box was mesmerized by his fame and fortune." (Nabokov, 107) While a seemingly meaningless excerpt, this brevity of interaction serves as a jumping-off place for the continuity of each's existence. Such may be said about any interaction- once completed, the lives affected continue on their individual paths, but each subsequent interaction is based in this infinitesimal experience which can never be expunged or rejected as a facet of the individual's continuing consciousness. This property is seen throughout Nabokov's anthology, yes, but extends to the fit of the human experience- in description, "I

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 Protagonist and his beloved, a scene punctuated not by their unconventional romantics, but by the reappearance of the salmon-pink shirt on Protagonist’s lanky frame. Not so fastidiously do other markings appear- Flora’s “bevy of bird-of-paradise flowers” lend their recipient the connoted eros, rarity, and strangeness, while acting as an emotional hinge estranging the recipient from her rejected husband (Nabokov, 37, Scoble & Field, 78). In a less jarred sense, Nabokov states, “I 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) The aforementioned reappearance of the dreary puddle from *Bend Sinister*'s cheerless beginning exemplifies Nabokov's constant implication of the circular nature of time as it applies to dystopian reality, as it continues the overlay of past upon present, extending the conspicuity of a single interaction and its permutative effect on future happenings. The mere continuity of the puddle's existence cements the endless cycle of mundanity within the society, intensely magnifying the perpetuity of the past which, in this case, continues unaltered. Such execution of these intricate facets of the Nabokovian philosophy drain the text of supposed happenstance, further developing his theory of the continuous effects of past occurrences on the current timeline and its subsequent meaning.

In accordance with the entropic definition of the arrow of time, as one progresses along the (now circular) timeline, the entropy of a system increases. (Georgia State University Department of Physics & Astronomy) Although Nabokov describes time as lacking tenses, the premise stands (as he does not dispute the fact of momentary progression)- each of Nabokov's texts rely on the delicate improbability of intersections at crucial junctures which trace out to proceeding strings of action. It is made glaringly obvious that no one event simply happens- in each case, it is preceded by culminating occurrences, and does not spring from nothingness, much as a pool ball must be shot by a cue and hand, as it is incapable of spontaneous motion. But if this initial shot is flawed, all motion spurred by its momentum will be equally flawed. While many Nabokovian works manipulate the permutated lattice in favor of the “greater good”, the author dedicates much effort in the description of how, if the proper juncture is met, the continuity of memory and past action can and will drive the replication of a defective gene, thus increasing entropy, the chief of such works being the dystopian twins, *Bend Sinister* and

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 lifestyle to be one destined for destruction. In such mockeries it is evident that the purpose of the cycle of time is to exemplify the stagnancy which exists as a result of the denial of memorial value- Nabokov recycles the images of the “special puddle” and trapped “fluffy night-butterfly”, displaying the monotonously redundant endless continuity of error which is fated to occur if the value of memory is not realized. (Nabokov, 240) This traps those unwilling to color their lives in an infinite loop of regret which is largely inescapable- although it has already been established that the ordinary loop of time is inescapable, as consciousness lives on through memory and instilled meaning, this smaller, regretful cycle traps its inhabitant in a “pellucid hell”, the consistent desire to achieve a higher goal without the will to see a successful avenue. (Nabokov, 45)

It would be highly remiss to not address the subject of Nabokov’s lifelong obsession, lepidoptera, and their constant appearances within his texts. Forging them many designations, Nabokov’s lepidoptera (they will not be demeaned by the label of “butterfly”) encapsulate a

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, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Transparent Things*, *Look at the Harlequins!*, and *Speak, Memory* to name a few, the order comes to embody the indelible base of past knowledge and memory. A latter text eloquently details the capture and clipping of a Pieridae specimen, a latter the effect of neglect and deprivation on the small prisoner. In all cases, it is glaring that, no matter how difficult the trial undertaken, experienced, etcetera, the image of the creature is forever indelibly stained on some retina as a Pieridic example of human experimentation. Although all immersed in a kind of hell, these Lepidoptera are always remembered for their emotion; although defeated, the shadows of tipped wings and “stopped” markings are remembered as holy, and their punishers, “brute”. (Nabokov, 45) In this, he comments on humanity- death is an inevitable thing. This is inescapable. However, beyond death, individual consciousnesses are recycled throughout the loop of time, as the lepidopterist’s unfortunate specimen is trapped in a formaldehydic world, as the specimen itself circulates timelessly throughout the scope of Nabokov’s works, as it clarifies philosophies and hypotheses of the young and old. Even with an individual or age deceased, departed (the difference is small), vestiges remain in the form of objects, “... furs, of all her photographs, of her huge English sponge and supply of lavender soap, of her umbrella...” (Nabokov, 137) Yet the greatest retainer of consciousness lies in

memory. A lost marriage lives on in the painful recollection of the husband pretending to “slam down a marble paperweight and crush this little hand... searching for a silly business letter”.

(Nabokov, 1) The anguish of the accidental loss of a loved one is relived in the memory of a wife “prone on the floor, her fair hair spread as if she were flying.” (Nabokov, 81) The point is not that Nabokov’s *Lepidoptera* carry weight in individual storylines, although they do; the point is that these creatures, an object of continuous fixation for the author, replicate his view of the nonlinear, permeating timeloop, serving as physical manifestations through which the trials and tribulations of the past are continuously refreshed and their emotion rewashed over a faded canvas, adding vibrancy and continuation to the endless series of permutations which dictates the conscious future.

Traversing the body of Nabokov’s final work is the concept of linear and spatial self-deletion, a theoretical notion stemming from the permutation of memory even long after death, that man’s only escape from the circle of time lies in the redaction of himself from both primary and secondary realities. A secondary thread of *The Original*, character “Christian name unimportant” pursued this ecstatic avenue of release from the daily mundanities of the primary world, a series of “experiments” transcending the ordinary circular plane in favor of the ocular “private blackboard”. (Nabokov, 93, 127,133) Stating memoirially, “I confess I do not believe in time,” this method served as the author’s (and subsequently bequeathed persona’s) sole relief from the nonlinear track. (Nabokov, 25) The plane to which the bequeathed persona retreats is decidedly primordial, nearly embryonic, consisting of a “dark-plum depth of opacity” demarcated by a “simple vertical line” in amalgam of the body. (Nabokov, 131, 137) The persona, stately, found in the erasure of his own corps an “ecstatic relief,” a kind of “masturbatory joy” stemming from the possibility of escape from the accursed chronological

loop. (Nabokov, 139) The notion that one's existence does not merely end upon corporeal death 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 the small of a sunbather's golden back, such fleeting recollections, shoelaces, strings, photographs and jewelers' boxes permit the persistence of memory. (Nabokov, 20)

It is not common to assert that a life has been forever impacted by physics, but such is the truth in each case. There was once a time, one which cannot be recalled, but a time, at which a thought was transmitted to action, and life created. Does that life begin at conception, at the first heartbeat, at birth, such queries are irrelevant. But from the first thought comes momentum. The motion of this being cannot be drained, nor its acceleration slurred by anything but an exterior force; the First Law of Motion. (Georgia State University Department of Physics & Astronomy) History has proven that such a force cannot be generated physically in this life, as relics of these lives live on in airtight cases- millions of lives have been extinguished throughout human time, but they have not been forgotten. They have not lost their momentum. History is littered with the red of genocide, but still these condemned souls are not lost. They are not at rest. They continue to live on through their memory, their physical vestiges left behind- over 4,000 shoes from

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 certainty that our actions are our own, but derived from a past force which cannot be extinguished by its distance from its point of origin. The collision of a shot pool ball with another does not stifle its force, but transfers it to another- the principle of kinetic momentum. The ending of the first ball's motion does not signify its ultimate termination, but the transfer of its motion to another, which cannot profess that it derived this kinetic ability by its own volition or inexplicably miraculous inspiration. No, even in its slowing the first ball continues to influence the occurrences of the future, in such a manner as the human life. Nabokovian literature proves that such momentary intersection- a seductive glance on a Swiss train, a brief glimpse of liberty- although perceivedly lacking in impact, may in effect reshape the course of one's existence. The possibility for a true end to the influence of this interpersonal momentum lies only in the complete removal of the first pool ball from the game- being motionless is not sufficient, it must be absent from the game in its entirety. In tow, the affecting persona, object, no matter, does blot out- no, such description is not nearly sufficient, neither in its precision, nor its accuracy. "Efface, expunge, erase, delete... rub out, wipe out... obliterate". (Nabokov, 275)

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