

## Time, Photography, and Optical Technology in Nabokov's Speak, Memory

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**Tetyana Lyaskovets,**  
**"Time, Photography, and Optical Technology in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*"**  
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**Abstract:** In her article "Time, Photography, and Optical Technology in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*" Tetyana Lyaskovets discusses how Vladimir Nabokov narrates time in his autobiography by invoking photography and optical instruments. Photography and optical technology function in *Speak, Memory* as metaphors and probe the limits of chronological time. Nabokov portrays time as personal and reversible time that collapses the past and the present and allows one to glimpse the future. Because this temporal collapse is not possible physically but, as Nabokov believes, can be achieved through one's will, he engages optical technologies which provide a spatial form for his project to re-enter his past. Optical technologies become a source of both imagery and narrative structure when Nabokov writes about creating, enlarging, and bringing images closer to the viewer in order to diminish spatial and temporal distances between observer and object. Lyaskovets argues that Nabokov's autobiography narrated through optical metaphors allows us to engage in a response to our own past.

## Tetyana LYASKOVETS

### Time, Photography, and Optical Technology in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

Although the task of narrating time might seem challenging and even impossible because we do not have an organ to perceive time, modernist literature proves otherwise. Given the importance that such writers as, for example, Virginia Woolf, Thomas Mann, and James Joyce ascribe to consciousness, they begin to treat time as the image of the mind and by doing so connect the perception of time with a certain awakening of sight (see, e.g., Ricoeur; Wall). In his representation of time in *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* — published between 1936 and 1966 first as a series of essays and then as a single volume with photographs complementing the last extended edition—Vladimir Nabokov connects to this modernist tradition by transforming an abstract category of time into an entity he urges us to perceive through the sense of sight by weaving time into mortality and writing. In *Speak, Memory* time emerges as a perceptible entity following modernist modalities of spatial form as description, patterning, or flashes of insight and illumination, which have been long recognized in scholarship (see, e.g., Frank; Mitchell). Nor do real photographs, which Nabokov adds in 1966, override verbal images in Nabokov's project to relive his past. As Laurence Petit posits, these photographs are "neither memories no memorials"

(<[http://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/v3\\_04\\_petit.pdf](http://www.nabokovonline.com/uploads/2/3/7/7/23779748/v3_04_petit.pdf)>) and, by being none of these, they subvert Nabokov's autobiographical project in a postmodern manner. Although Petit's insistence on a distinctively postmodern nature of *Speak, Memory* is controversial in a way that it brings to mind Brian Boyd's response to Martin Hägglund's "Chronophilia: Nabokov and the Time of Desire," it is insightful in the way Petit stresses the supremacy of mental pictures over real photographs in *Speak, Memory*.

In the study at hand, I argue that in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov narrates time by invoking photography and optical instruments in order to enhance "seeing" the past. Real photographs — which Nabokov added to his text in 1966 — create an anchoring effect and tune the reader into the photographic mode of perception in order to read through Nabokov's ocular textual images of time. In *Speak, Memory* photography and optical technology function as metaphors which probe the limits of time by creating contexts lifting the individual above the stream of time. Rather than disrupting the inherent temporality of narrative, these figures assist Nabokov's project of creation of a different time, a timelessness glimpsed during the moments of intense remembering illuminated by the narrator's response to his past. In *Speak, Memory*, the narrator "sees" the passing of time as reversible time, a "magic carpet" he likes "to fold ... after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another" similar to how a butterfly folds its symmetrically patterned wings (139). This image of time, which collapses the past and the present, is a succinct, yet capacious response to the enigma of time that challenged Nabokov and his contemporaries, such as Henri Bergson, for example (see, e.g., Glynn; Grishakova; Kern; Toker). We know that Nabokov read Bergson who postulated duration as an overlap and simultaneity of the temporal dimensions of the past, the present, and the future. In tune with Bergson and through the spatial metaphor of time as a "magic carpet," Nabokov counters the traditional, uniform clock time ("I confess I do not believe in time" [139]) that progresses successively and irreversibly from the past into the future at a constant pace with a personal, reversible time that is simultaneously past and present. Time becomes a personal thing ("my magic carpet" [139]), whose pace the writer can control by folding and unfolding it to superimpose distant images imprinted on it.

A connection between time, perception, and seeing in particular, is not immediate or obvious. After all, what stimulus does time produce as evidence that it just is? Which of the six faculties such as hearing or touch is responsible for our perception of time? Nabokov's answer to this deficiency of human sensibility is sight — physical and mental. Nabokov was a visually attuned writer who claimed that he thought in images. Notable in this — ocular — respect is, for example, his comment on Joyce's narrative technique of stream of consciousness that it "exaggerates the verbal side of thought" (*Lectures* 289) and Nabokov argues instead that people do not think "always in words but also in images" (*Lectures* 289). In *Speak, Memory*, he connects sight and writing when he says that it was an urge to make others see "whatever" he "saw before" him that caused his composing of his first poem (221). As a result of this visual thinking, Nabokov's texts create a narrative paradigm that evokes the tem-

poral through an ocular appeal. Nabokov's narratives translate the temporal into the visual and by doing so they make this temporal perceptible and, for this reason, more understandable. In *Speak, Memory* it is photography and visual technologies which lend a spatial form to Nabokov's representation of time.

Although Nabokov is a master of word-painting, the translation of the temporal into the visual is not particular only to him or modernist writers in general and it has a longer history. Jonathan Crary traces back the establishment of the ocular regime to the nineteenth century and connects it with the discovery of the photographic apparatus. The photographic camera becomes an extension of the observer and makes the observing subject inseparable from the observed object. It is through the observer's body and consciousness that "temporality and vision become inseparable ... The shifting processes of one's own subjectivity experienced in time ... become synonymous with the act of seeing, dissolving the Cartesian ideal of an observer completely focused on an object" (Crary 98). Crary's account that portrays external time as embodied through photography and photographic apparatus allows us to locate Nabokov's introspective portrayal of time within a broader cultural paradigm of the visual. It also allows us to connect Nabokov's engagement with photographic and optical metaphors in *Speak, Memory* with his growing up during the time when photography, the microscope, or the slide projector were among the dominant popular optical technologies: "the figure of the photograph becomes a privileged technological vehicle" and it was at that time when modern writers worked "through the paradoxical impulse of modernity" (Harris 138). In a study that connects technologies, sensibilities, and narratives, Stefanie Harris argues that "the contemporaneous technological regimes ... affect the narrative strategies of representation when so-called technological metaphors function in excess of themselves—these technologies are 'transported' into the novel—and the structure of the text reveals new strategies to adapt itself to the times and the logistics of alternative medial possibilities and the social realities they construct" (137-38). We observe this penetration of technology into *Speak, Memory* when Nabokov embraces photography and ocular devices to narrate the collapse of temporal dimensions. Nabokov rethinks photographs and optics into metaphors which not only portray a reversible nature of personal time, but allow for an authorial control of time.

Already as a child, Nabokov took an interest in the microscope, the slide projector, and photography and one of these early photographic technologies—tintype—shows up in chapter nine when Nabokov praises his excellent visual memory: as a boy, he was able "to tintype" ten pages of his homework in his "brain," whereas "nowadays it would take" him "two hours" (*Speak* 181). The popularity of these tintype photographs (patented in 1856) can be explained to some extent by the fact that they were produced immediately after they were taken. And it is of course the immediacy of a tintype production that informs Nabokov's metaphor of his memorizing fast. Along with a metaphorical evocation of popular ocular technologies, *Speak, Memory* contains direct references to them. For example, he portrays the microscope as an innovative tool in chapter six when writing about his "ardent adolescent interest in butterflies and moths" (124) and advocates it for use by British lepidopterists who based their classifications "on the microscopic study of organs" as opposed to the Germans "who did their best to ignore the new trends" (124). Nabokov's interest in microscopy extends to narration with regard to detail, and he wrote over and over that an artist with talent pays attention to every tiny detail of life: "the good memoirist ... does his best to preserve the utmost truth of the detail. One of the ways he achieves his intent is to find the right spot on his canvas for placing the right patch of remembered color" (*Strong* 186) and he referred to the passion of science and the precision of poetry. It is fair to claim that Nabokov's early experience with the microscope and photography, along with his life-long devotion to lepidoptery, might inform his choice of optical imagery when he talks about his childhood and time in *Speak, Memory*.

Along with Nabokov's close familiarity with optical instruments and photography during his childhood, there is another reason why they lend themselves readily as a source of time imagery in *Speak, Memory*. Inherent in photography and optical technology, there are qualities which would appeal to Nabokov's vision of how a writer can work through the theme of time. Optical instruments emphasize the recreation of images, their treatment enlarges or diminishes these images, authorial control over the images, and the viewer's accessibility to the objects distant either in time or space. Along with all these qualities — for Nabokov to "re-enter" his past (*Speak* 86) — photography embodies the collapse of time by transposing the past photographed moment into the present. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov

embraces this potential of optics and photography and expresses it through its peculiar ocular language, through which it additionally insists on chronological time being a nuisance that can be disregarded, at least for a moment: "So little did ordinary measures of existence mean" (*Speak* 223). Unlike clocks, photographs possess qualities which appeal to Nabokov's sense of reversible time. He is fascinated, for example, with what Christian Metz later will call "the timelessness of photography" meaning that photography no longer differentiates between successive temporal dimensions due to its inherent silence and immobility (157). In chapter five, in the Mademoiselle story, Nabokov makes the bells recede and disappear completely when he brings together the snow-covered Russian steppe of his childhood and "the blue-white road" in New England: "All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy's rear-vision mirror ... Sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers" (*Speak* 99-100). E.L. McCallum articulates this temporal collapse peculiar to photography by saying that it "offer[s] itself as the taint of time, bouncing the past into the future like the silver backing on a mirror that bounces our image back to our eyes" (paragraph 6). In these contemporary accounts of photography, photograph emerges as a perceptible entity — an object — that, owing to its silence, immobility, and visual appeal, encapsulates time that is simultaneously past and present. And it is this atemporal, collapsible time represented as a foldable carpet by Nabokov that he is after in his project to "relive" his childhood through his narrative (*Speak* 76). Reading Nabokov's autobiography, my question is whether Nabokov's metaphors show us a way to peer beyond our chronological, mortal time?

Looking, seeing, time, photography, and a simple optical device — a lens enlarging a tiny photograph — all come together in chapter seven of *Speak, Memory* featuring an episode with a souvenir penholder from Biarritz. In this chapter Nabokov recollects his childhood trips to France and Biarritz and says that his favorite souvenir from that place and time was "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" (*Speak* 151). Why is this trivial souvenir "symbolic"? Is it meaningful because through a pen that it holds a penholder connects the narrator to writing? Or is it the lens that lends significance to a meerschaum penholder because the "peephole of crystal" allows one to enlarge and access a photographed past moment many times, although through a focused and intense looking only? Nabokov provides us with a tiny clue saying that "the process of recreating that penholder and the microcosm in its eyelet stimulates ... [his] memory to a last effort" (151). This recreation of both things helps him remember the name of Colette's dog Floss (152). Does this mean that the souvenir is "symbolic" because it represents the way the narrator's memory operates through images? It helps him, for example, bring back an image of a desired moment from his past similar to how the photograph of a bay, inserted into a penholder, recreates another past moment. The crystal, through which one looks at the photograph, allows for enlarging and bringing the image of this past closer to the observer. So does the narrator's memory: it creates a sensation of the past coming back to life. And finally, the narrator accesses his past consciously, as if through the "peephole of crystal" which suggests focused and channeled looking. Both themes — that of image recreation and manipulation and that of intense looking — are crucial to understand Nabokov's optical metaphors in their relation to time representation. I argue that it is this ability of photography and optical devices to manipulate images by changing their sizes and by bringing these images closer to the observer in space or time that fascinates Nabokov and that lends a spatial form to his images of reversible time. Optical devices also became a source of time imagery because they required the observer to practice focused looking. And, according to Nabokov, it is attentive looking that frees a moment from the order of passing time and has it recreated in us.

The penholder episode suggests the ocularity of Nabokov's memory as detailed by John Burt Foster in *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*. Foster posits that Nabokov's visualized retrospective experience replaces "an evanescent past with a perennial one that, at least rhetorically, could be made to suggest permanence" (187). Because photography fixes retrospective experiences as intangible images, it readily lends itself to Nabokov as a metaphor of retained, and for this reason, perennial past. This metaphorical rather than direct function of photography in *Speak, Memory* becomes clear once we remember that it is "the process of recreating that penholder and the microcosm in its eyelet" (*Speak* 151) rather than the real photograph of the bay itself that allows for the narra-

tor's mental return. Nabokov values photographs for what they do rather for what they feature. It is their potential to counter linear, successive time by collapsing temporal dimensions rather than their being memorials of the past that appeals to him. That is why as objects, photographs are inferior to memories. *Speak, Memory* remind us of this inferiority more than once. Thus, reading about the last lodgings of Nabokov's mother in Prague, we come across "the dim little photographs in crumbling frames she liked to have near her couch" (49). Nabokov adds, however, that "she did not really need them, for nothing had been lost" because it is in one's memory and consciousness that our dead dwell (49). Instead of mentioning his mother's photograph as a valuable possession of his own, Nabokov says that "with great clarity" he "can see her sitting at a table and serenely considering the laid-out cards of a game of solitaire" (50). These lines substitute a real picture of Nabokov's mother, which we know he had, with a mental image conjured by the narrator's consciousness and love. And it is this conscious and affective response that stimulates the narrator's memory, illuminates his creativity, and points towards immortality: "It is certainly ... at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits, from the past, from the past and its castle tower. And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction" (50). Nabokov's statement about us having a chance to free a dear moment from the order of time and, through this moment, to look beyond our mortality brings us back to the penholder episode. If the ability of the writer's memory and art to reanimate the past is comparable to photography as the episode suggests, then an optical device of a crystal lens represents conscious, focused looking that this return requires.

Photography's ability to collapse time informs Nabokov's choice of expressive language. In the foreword, Nabokov talks about his chess problem that once appeared in an émigré daily. He goes on saying that someday one will be able to "look it up ... in one of those blessed libraries where old newspapers are microfilmed, as all our memories should be" (*Speak* 15). Thus already in the very beginning of his narrative Nabokov positions himself as a visual writer by talking about microfilmed memories. He says that microfilming is a tool that allows us to preserve the past, and then, as he relives his childhood through his memoir, he imbues his own pictorial images with the "blessed" photographic quality of the perennial past (31). He does so, for example, when he visualizes his father's "marvelous case of levitation" observed back then through an open window (31). To thank Nabokov's father for granting their requests, the villagers used to toss him up: "There, for an instant, the figure of my father in his wind-rippled white summer suit would be displayed, gloriously sprawling in mid-air, his limbs in a curiously casual attitude, his handsome, imperturbable features turned to the sky" (31). Framed by a window, this still image of a moving body communicates the narrator's tenderness and love to counter both Nabokov's loss of his father and Nabokov's piercing nostalgia for his childhood, illuminated in his memory by his father's presence.

The photographic quality of the father's image reveals itself not only through its framed stillness or through the preservation of this image in the narrator's mental archive of microfilmed memories, but also through the uncanny ways in which it foreshadows the future death of the narrator's father. "Features turned to the sky" (31) do both, they suggest and they mourn Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov's assassination at the political conference in Berlin on 28 March 1922. Although photography's connection to the future is subtle if not obscure, some authors indicate the ways in which photographs are capable of connecting the observer to the future, the traces of which are imprinted on the photographic image. Geoffrey Batchen argues along these lines and suggests that along with such obvious functions as, for example, a "faithful replication of what it sees," the photograph offers us a "simultaneous articulation of past, present, and future" (76). Batchen finds implicit articulations of this temporal collapse which he describes as "this dizzying temporal convolution" in the two classical accounts of photography — in Walter Benjamin's "A Little History of Photography" and Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida*. Batchen points to Benjamin's "'irresistible urge'" (507) to search a picture of Karl Dauthendey and his fiancée for signs of her future suicide: this "urge" is an attempt to see the future in the photograph by actually looking back (78).

Nabokov's recreation of his father's levitation as observed through an open window builds on this quality of a photograph to bring in the future into the temporal collapse, which Butchen calls a "dizzying temporal convolution" (78). Nabokov's narrative, however, takes us through and beyond this temporal photographic collapse and lifts his father above the stream of mortal time: "And then there he

would be, on his last and loftiest flight, reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiacal personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church while below, one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist of incense, and the priest chants of eternal repose, and the funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there among the swimming light, in the open coffin" (*Speak* 31-32). We see that in this passage Nabokov abandons his photographic language: by comparing the image of his father tossed in the air to an angel or a saint in the church fresco, he insists on lifting him above his death and above his "funeral lilies" (32) and by doing so he locates him in the immortal time where no one dies. At this point, Nabokov changes his mode of narration because it is something more powerful than just photography—his mortal love and his art which allow him to peer beyond mortal time. Reanimating in a similar ocular way his uncle Ruka and situating him in atemporal time in chapter three, Nabokov calls this other time "a robust reality" that "makes a ghost of the present" (77). In this other time "everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (77).

Why does Nabokov call this virtual reality "robust" (*Speak* 50)? What gives this "unreal estate," which is neither simply of the past nor of the present, vigor and vitality to become real, at least for a moment? (40). It is something more than just precision and a visual, photographic directness of these "robust" images that allows both the reader and the writer to experience acutely the treasured moments of the narrator's past. As the passage suggests, this return into the past requires "a wing-stroke of the will" (33) and this will and effort take a form of focused looking one also practices, for example, when looking through a photographic lens or a microscope or when zooming or focusing the lens. Nabokov introduces this imperative of focused looking and its role in remembering when he describes his effort of correcting inaccuracies or "amnesic defects" in the Russian version of *Speak, Memory*: "I discovered that sometimes, by means of intense concentration, the neutral smudge might be forced to come into beautiful focus so that the sudden view could be identified, and the anonymous servant named" (*Speak* 12). In retrospect, the optical language of this passage brings us back to the meerschaum penholder episode, with its photograph and the name of Colette's dog remembered and retrieved through an act of intense concentration, both mental and physical. Thus, a simple lens inserted into a penholder receives its significance and becomes "symbolic" owing to the conscious act of looking, essential to freeing the moment from the order of time.

Not only does focused looking allow one to re-enter the past, but, similar to a photograph, it directs us towards the future. We see this happening in chapter ten, where Nabokov describes a summer in the countryside when he was in love with a peasant girl. The narrator recalls "one particular sunset" significant for its beauty and for one particular "family of serene clouds in miniature" that "occupied a very small sector of the enormous sky and had a peculiar neatness of something seen through the wrong end of a telescope" (213). Nabokov finishes by saying that that "fantastically reduced but faultlessly shaped" group of clouds represented his "marvelous tomorrow ready to be delivered to" him (213). Is it possible to see anything through the wrong end of a telescope? Nabokov needs this impossible seeing to show that time and future can be envisaged from the present moment, but only on condition that one undertakes an effort and looks into it attentively. Another condition of this impossible seeing would be the person's ability to recognize a diminished picture of the future in larger scenery. Only exercising focused, channeled looking the observer has a chance to connect to the observed object, as Crary argues in his account on photography (98). However, unlike Crary's account Nabokov's passage locates this object in the future.

Optical instruments and photography figure in *Speak, Memory* not only as images which emphasize focused looking. Nabokov values them for another quality, namely for their ability to create a virtual reality by enlarging images or by retrieving these images from the past. The motif of image manipulation that helps one remove temporal distinctions appears in chapter eight. By telling us a story of young Nabokov's enchantment with slides, it suggests that similar to a slide projector the human mind is capable of creating a virtual reality that collapses the past and the present. These tiny "jellylike pictures" preserve "neat little worlds," which he admits to rediscover later "at the radiant bottom of a microscope's magic shaft" (166). Further, he brings together transformations achieved through an optical device and similar transformations fulfilled by the human mind. Nabokov finds both artistic and insists that both slides and microscope stimulate our imagination because they resize im-

ages: "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" (167). As a writer, Nabokov values this artistic control over his images and, through his narrative, insists on enlarging or diminishing not only images, but time distances as well. This is how he collapses the distance between the past and the present in his lantern-slide show episode.

Chapter eight of *Speak, Memory* is organized around a motif of a slide—a picture on a photographic film or a glass plate that can be manipulated through a projector. In the narration the slide is a dominant theme already in the first sentence that alerts our visual sensibility through its medium-specific language: "I am going to show a few slides, but first let me indicate the where and the when of the matter" (153). "The where" and "the when" align the spatial and temporal dimensions which these words denote with an object such as slide. The slide becomes both a central image and an ocular structural device that renders unwritable time as "the magic-lantern sequence" (155). Following a short aside on home education in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, there comes a gallery of humorously touching vignettes — slides, in Nabokov's words — of the little Nabokovs' tutors. "In the magic-lantern sequence that follows," begins the projectionist, "my first slide shows a young man we called Ordo, the enlightened son of a Greek Catholic deacon" (155-56). The ocular atmosphere of the chapter becomes denser when the slide show, which by this point has been only a metaphor of temporal collapse and begins to designate a real event. Nabokov tells us about an educational slide show performed by one of the tutors, Lenski, who arranged to illustrate Lermontov's narrative poem with four slides: "A fifth I had clumsily broken just before the performance" confesses the narrator (163).

Although Nabokov puts much tenderness in the description of Lenski's "awful idea of showing, on alternate Sundays, Educational Magic-Lantern Projections" at the Nabokovs' St. Petersburg house, it is the graphic slides of tutors which seem to be the ultimate purpose of chapter eight: "The next picture looks as if it had come on the screen upside down. It shows our third tutor standing on his head. He was a large, formidably athletic Lett" (157). The dense succession of narrated images invoked through technology specific language stimulates the readers' visual imagination and prepares them for the most important act of visualization and reanimation. The narrator invites us to participate in the visualization of the dearest figure that his book carefully and lovingly retrieves from the past again and again — the author's father: "I visualize my father on a summer day in the country vying with Max in marksmanship — riddling with pistol bullets a rusty NO HUNTING sign in our woods" (158).

Whereas Nabokov's description of the naïve slide show organized by his tutor Lenski features humorously the atmosphere of boredom and monotony: "some of the spectators" even "started to project the black shadows of their raised hands upon the frightened white screen" and one boy "managed to silhouette his foot" (165), the strong lyrical tone of the following passage affirms the importance of slides as a powerful means of memory stimulation: "When at last the slide was found and flashed onto the screen, I was reminded of a journey, in my early childhood, through the long, dark St. Gothard Tunnel, which our train entered during a thunderstorm ... I should add that during this and the following, still more crowded, still more awful Sunday afternoon sessions, I was haunted by the reverberations of certain family tales I had heard" (165). By describing a slide show as a tool that helps to remember and that nourishes memory and imagination, this passage echoes Nabokov's description of a souvenir penholder from Biarritz. Both episodes, that of Lenski's slide show and that of the penholder indicate that no matter how Nabokov treats real slides, projectors, photographs, and narrated images inspired by these media — humorously, negligently, or nostalgically — he remains sensitive to technologies which enhance vision. More important than this, however, is that, Nabokov uses these ocular devices as metaphors of attentive looking that allows for a "delicate" exchange between reality and imagination (166). For Nabokov it is at their "meeting place" that one can see through a fissure in time. And it is this seeing that lifts magically an individual above the stream of our mortal time:

Now that I come to think of it, how tawdry and tumid they looked, those jellylike pictures ... 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. (166)

Besides voicing Nabokov's favorite idea of art that exercises precision of science, the above passage establishes a connection between observation ("a microscope's magic shaft"), visual image ("jellylike pictures"), and time and place (indicated by "neat little worlds" and "the dimensional scale of the world"). By portraying time and place, first, as accessed through observation and then imprisoned in an image, the passage connects to the episode that describes how Nabokov's mother taught him to look closer at things. She believed that close and attentive looking would allow her son to reconstruct a bigger picture later through tiny, yet significant details that are the "time marks" (40). Nabokov suggests that similar to the lens of a microscope, the narrative is able to magnify the particulars and, by doing so, not only to translate otherwise non-representable time into a lived experience, but also, similar to a photographic image or a slide, to allow for a multiple access to the lived.

In Nabokov's narrative the functioning of metaphors of technology inscribe the physically impossible reversal of time. Providing Nabokov with a spatial form that enacts a desired collapse of the past, the present, and the future, the use of optical metaphors suggests that there is a possibility to experience a moment as freed from the order of time. However, it is not technology that gives an access to this impossible time. For Nabokov, human love assisted by will and ability to observe is superior to any ocular device: "To love with all one's soul and to leave the rest to fate" was "the simple rule" his mother "heeded" (40). This affective response ("she drew my attention to this or that loved thing in Vyra" [40]) fulfills magically what technology fails to give us: it allows us to see through the fissure of time at the moments of our intense gratitude to those whom we love. Nabokov describes these divine moments of seeing as "the highest enjoyment of timelessness ... And the highest enjoyment of timelessness — in a landscape selected at random — is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy, and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern — to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal" (*Speak* 139).

In conclusion, photography and optical technology function in *Speak, Memory* as metaphors and probe the limits of chronological time. Nabokov portrays time as personal and reversible time that collapses the past and the present and allows one to glimpse the future. Because this temporal collapse is not possible physically but, as Nabokov believes, can be achieved through one's will, he engages optical technologies which provide a spatial form for his project to re-enter his past. Optical technologies become a source of both imagery and narrative structure when Nabokov writes about creating, enlarging, and bringing images closer to the viewer in order to diminish spatial and temporal distances between observer and object. Nabokov's autobiography narrated through optical metaphors allows us to engage in a response to our own past.

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