



## Writing Objects, Writing Memories: Making Nabokov's Memory Speak

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In Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical writings,<sup>1</sup> objects hold a special role, as they seem to be endowed with the power not only to activate the mnemonic process, but to anchor it, and allow for its further amplification. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard insisted upon the importance of spatializing memory to retain remembrances: "Memories are motionless, and the more securely they are fixed in space, the sounder they are" (Bachelard 10). Interestingly enough, Nabokov viewed his memories in spatial terms, as a home, or the home he lost forever in exile: "je suis dépaysé partout et toujours. C'est mon état, c'est mon emploi, c'est ma vie. *Je suis chez moi dans des souvenirs très personnels*, qui n'ont quelque fois aucun rapport avec une Russie géographique, nationale, physique, politique" ("Apostrophes" interview on French TV, my emphasis).

The importance of space in the remembering process is largely illustrated in Nabokov's memoirs, but more importantly, the textual mnemonic space often seems to open up, or expand, thanks to objects.

After a brief analysis of how Nabokov's revisions of his autobiographical texts show an amplification of memory thanks to objects, this paper focuses on metatextual objects such as pencils or penholders in his memoirs, because they conflate the "power to recall"<sup>2</sup> that objects

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov's autobiographical texts cross linguistic borders just like the author himself repeatedly crossed geographical ones. They include a 1936 short story composed in French, "Mademoiselle O" (self-translated into English in 1943); short stories in English written between 1947 and 1950; the first version of his memoir *Conclusive Evidence* (1951), which includes the previously mentioned short stories, slightly revised; *Drurie Berega* [Other Shores] (1954) a version of that memoir which Nabokov translated into Russian himself, and expanded; *Speak, Memory* (1966), the final text of his autobiography, re-titled and thoroughly revised after writing the Russian text.

<sup>2</sup> This power was listed—among many others—by Françoise Bertrand Dorléac in the introduction to the exhibition catalog for *Les choses*, the Louvre exhibit she curated in 2022-2023: "les artistes ont été les premiers à prendre les choses au sérieux. Depuis le début, ils les ont vues comme des signes vivants pleins de pouvoirs, de charme et de sens, doués pour faire imaginer, penser, croire, douter, se rappeler, agir" (Bertrand Dorléac 19, my emphasis).

have, and the power to trigger writing. By investigating these writing tools, this study delves into the interplay of the mnemonic and writing processes in Nabokov's autobiographical works.

### **1. The mnemonic power of objects**

Nabokov wrote his first recognized autobiographical text in French, in 1936 in Paris, at a time when he was in financial dire straits, frantically trying to find a way to feed his family and enable his Jewish wife and two-year-old son leave Germany for good. After Hitler's access to power, most of Berlin's Russian émigrés left for Paris, which became the new émigré capital. It is there that Nabokov published most of his Russian novels, and also where he tried, until World War Two broke, to make his place in French letters.<sup>3</sup> He befriended Jean Paulhan who introduced him to the literary circle of the *Mesures* magazine, where Nabokov's short story, entitled "Mademoiselle O," was published in April 1936. This short story is centered on the writer's French governess,<sup>4</sup> who came to live with the Nabokovs in the 1905-1906 winter to teach French to Vladimir (7 years old) and his brother Sergey (6 years old). That winter was the only winter that the family spent in their countryside estate of Vyra.<sup>5</sup> The Vyra mansion and estate was Nabokov's favorite place on earth, and where he spent the most blissful days of his privileged youth. By mid-May, when the lilacs started to bloom, the family would leave the city where they wintered to spend the whole summer in their estate, located some 75 km south of the imperial capital. The very large wooden mansion (called "*le château*" by Mademoiselle) and its surrounding park, immersed in lush nature, are the backdrop of most of his autobiography *Speak, Memory*, even though the author did not live there for the largest part of the year. Vyra, and the adjoining estates of Rozhdestveno (belonging to his maternal grand-parents) and Batovo (owned by his paternal grand-mother), concentrate Nabokov's happiest memories: his discovery of butterflies—a lifelong passion—, his encounter with French literature—read to him by Mademoiselle every afternoon on Vyra's veranda—, his first poem, inspired by Vyra's nature, and his first, intense, experience of falling in love and making love.

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<sup>3</sup> It is also the place where the metamorphosis from Russian to English took place, as he wrote his first novel in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in Paris, in 1939.

<sup>4</sup> Cécile Miauton actually was a Swiss citizen (from the Vaud *canton*), but spent most of her youth in Paris.

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov's father, a leading figure of the Kadet party (the Constitutional Democratic Party), was a prominent actor in the 1905 Revolution, and sent his family to live in a safer place than Saint-Petersburg.

As he was conjuring up the memories of his French governess, Nabokov plunged back into the places of his childhood, peopled by many characters and objects. As he evokes the setting of scenes from his past, many lost objects appear, recreated through all of the senses: the waxed oilcloth on which his sweaty hand would stick as he was writing his *dictées*, the straw chairs emitting a particular smell in the heated veranda, the sound of Mademoiselle unwrapping a Suchard chocolate, perceived through the thin wall between his and her bedrooms, the flavor of the licorice she would cut with her little knife, the familiar bench changing color and shifting climate when seen through the variously colored rhomboid glass panes of the veranda. If one compares the initial version in French of this colorful *diaporama* to the English version, one can note how the author amplified the description of each garden vignette, and how he added two colored panes, the green one and the untainted one, in the English text:

Le jardin, vu à travers ces verres colorés, devenait singulièrement immobile et silencieux, comme s'il était occupé à s'admirer lui-même, plongé dans un cristal enchanté : si on le regardait par le verre bleu, c'était aussitôt un paysage sous-marin ; puis on passait au rouge et la verdure au-dessus du sable rose prenait une teinte lie-de-vin ; le jaune, enfin, centuplait la flamme du soleil. (*Nouvelles complètes* 666)

The garden when viewed through these magic glasses grew strangely still and aloof. If one looked through blue glass, the sand turned to cinders while inky trees swam in a tropical sky. The yellow created an amber world infused with an extra strong brew of sunshine. The red made the foliage drip ruby dark upon a pink footpath. The green soaked greenery in a greener green. And when, after such richness, one turned to a small square of normal, savorless glass, with its lone mosquito or lame daddy longlegs, it was like taking a draught of water when one is not thirsty, and one saw a matter-of-fact white bench under familiar trees. But of all the windows this is the pane through which in later years parched nostalgia longed to peer. (*Speak, Memory* 449)

The amplification process at work here not only adds visual elements to the evocation of the garden (sand, trees, foliage, footpath, bench), but also develops the network of color-based metaphors in different directions: the tropical setting of the blue color reverberates with images of ashes and ink, the rather conventional sun-imagery used for the yellow is enriched with references pointing to a precious stone (“amber”) and beer (“brew”), two objects whose color and transparency are called upon. In a similar vein drawing upon taste, the wine-color of the French text<sup>6</sup> seems to be expanded through the verb “drip,” itself alliteratively dripping through the color “**ru**dy **dar**k”. As for the color green, this time the expansion process manifests itself via a polyptoton (“green,”

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<sup>6</sup> One could see in the presence of wine in the French text and beer in the English text Nabokov’s adapting to the cultural references of his readership.

“greenery,” “greener green”) which superposes layers of green just like what young Nabokov was contemplating. Contrary to the French text, the English version also singles out the “normal” glasspane, in order to cast it against all the other “magic glasses” listed before. The insistence on the normalcy of the view (“normal,” “familiar,” “with its”), associated with insipid elements—water, banal home insects that were uninteresting for the avid lepidopterist—in fact works as a *trompe-l’oeil* device, as this expansion in turn reveals that what was deemed too familiar is now what the writer in exile longs for—the banality of the bench of his beloved garden.

It is worth noting that paradoxically it was in America, where he was spatially and temporally further away from his native Russia than when he wrote his first autobiographical short story in French in 1936 in Paris, that Nabokov’s memories fully unfolded themselves, preserving his past in the glass marble of time, in the autobiographical mode, as opposed to fiction (see further). One can observe the amplification of the reminiscing process through writing when one compares the 1936 French text of “Mademoiselle O” and the sixth chapter of *Speak, Memory*. The amplification process is especially to be seen through the depiction of objects:

Si j’étais même aujourd’hui le citoyen paisible d’une Russie qui me laisserait poursuivre ma vocation en toute liberté, ce serait avec la même angoisse que je rappellerais la forme première, l’image vraie des choses et des êtres qui vieilliraient autour de moi. Car cette vérité que je cherche, je ne l’ai connue que dans mon enfance et tout le peu de bien qui se trouve dans mes livres n’en est que le reflet. C’est la vieille lampe qu’on apporte entre chien et loup ; son reflet renvoyé par la fenêtre qui dans un moment se cachera pour la nuit derrière ses volets de bois ; puis l’abat-jour rose descendant sur la lampe qui tout de suite anime les petites marquises qui ornent, dans des médaillons de soie, ses volants vermeils. Le miroir ovale suspendu au mur suivant un angle tel que les meubles et le parquet jaune qu’il reflète semblent lui glisser des bras et tomber éternellement dans un abîme de lumière ; le cliquetis délicat des cristaux du lustre, lorsqu’on remue quelque chose dans une chambre en haut ; les gravures inoubliables sur les murs, — les mêmes qu’il m’arrive de rencontrer encore dans quelque chambre d’hôtel ou quelque salle d’attente, comme si je les voulais collectionner à nouveau pour en orner une demeure où je reviendrais un jour ; la Diane en marbre qui, de son coin, semble regarder de biais mon tricycle d’enfant. Je me rappelle pêle-mêle toutes ces choses comme si mon passé venait de se réveiller en sursaut, les joues brûlantes, les cheveux mêlés, les yeux un peu fous, — mais quand je veux mettre un peu d’ordre dans mon souvenir, sa couleur et son éclat m’échappent. (*Nouvelles complètes* 663)

The reflection on exile and memory, which opens this quote and places people and things on the same plane (“l’image vraie *des choses et des êtres qui vieilliraient* autour de moi”), is not to be found in the 1943 story in English “Mademoiselle O,” nor in 1966 *Speak, Memory*. Instead, the

first section of the chapter ends on the evocation of snow,<sup>7</sup> and the next section opens as follows, directly in the heart of *things*<sup>8</sup>:

A large, **alabaster-based** kerosene lamp is steered into the gloaming. Gently it floats and comes down; the hand of memory, now in a footman's white glove, places it in the center of a round table. The flame is nicely adjusted, and a rosy, silk-flounced lamp shade, **with inset glimpses of rococo winter sports**, crowns the **readjusted (cotton wool in Casimir's ear)** light. Revealed: a warm, bright, **stylish ("Russian Empire")** drawing room in a snow-muffled house—soon to be termed *le chateau*—built by my mother's grandfather, who, being afraid of fires, had the staircase fashioned of iron, so that when the house did get burned to the ground, sometime after the Soviet Revolution, those fine-wrought steps, with the sky shining through their openwork risers, remained standing, all alone but still leading up.

Some more about that **drawing** room, please. **The gleaming white moldings of the furniture, the embroidered roses of its upholstery. The white piano.** The oval mirror. Hanging on taut cords, its pure brow inclined, it strives to retain the falling furniture and a slope of bright floor that keep slipping from its embrace. The chandelier pendants. These emit a delicate tinkling (**things are being moved in the upstairs room where Mademoiselle will dwell**). (*Speak, Memory* 444)

This excerpt illustrates the two stages of the mnemonic expansion process entailed by Nabokov's writing and revising of his autobiographical short story: material was added to the French story when it was translated into English in 1943, and then the English text was enriched with yet more elements (in bold) at the time the autobiography was revised in the 1960s. For example, the "old lamp" is now "a large, alabaster-based kerosene lamp"; the anonymous "*on*" bringing the lamp is fleshed out as a footman, the very "hand of memory," now "white-gloved"; the history of the house, and of its only remnant—the iron staircase—is inserted into the depiction; more objects and more details of the drawing room now people its description (the moldings of the furniture, the

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<sup>7</sup> Instead of one paragraph linking that reflection on exile with the evocation of the old lamp, the sub-chapter ends on the description of the moon in the snowy night during which Mademoiselle came to Russia, and merges with the present of writing in the United States [the parts in bold indicate the additions Nabokov made to the text of the 1943 English short story "Mademoiselle O" when he was revising *Conclusive Evidence* (1951) into *Speak, Memory* (1966)]: "Very lovely, very lonesome. But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? **How did I get here?** Somehow, the two sleighs have slipped away, **leaving behind a passportless spy** standing on the blue-white road **in his New England snowboots and stormcoat**. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my **old** blood singing. All is still, spellbound, enthralled by **the moon, fancy's rear-vision mirror**. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, **sixty years** crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers" (*Speak, Memory* 443-44).

<sup>8</sup> The parts in bold in the following quote indicate the additions Nabokov made to the text of the 1943 English short story "Mademoiselle O" when he was revising *Conclusive Evidence* (1951) into *Speak, Memory* (1966).

decoration of the upholstery, the piano). The mirror—a key object in Nabokov’s aesthetics—is also a locus for reformulation, this time through a shift in personification, as it is no longer the furniture that is slipping, but the mirror (with a “pure brow”) that “strives to retain the falling furniture.” One can also see how elements that had been suppressed in the 1943 translation of the short story are conjured up again: as he evokes the “delicate tinkling” of the chandelier, Nabokov restores the source of the movement, that of things moved upstairs to accommodate his new governess. Such an emphasis on the *life* of objects (moving due to the motion of other things, or being personified) confers a sense of immediacy, of vividness to the autobiographical text. Instead of creating a museographic effect relegating objects to an irretrievable past, the emphasis on the liveliness of things, of their potential to trigger the mnemonic process, allows, on the contrary, to make one’s past life be *felt* again, momentarily annihilating the loss, thanks to the writing process.

In the introduction to this paper, I recalled Bachelard’s insistence upon the key importance of spatializing memory to retain remembrances, and it seems that, in Nabokov’s case, objects work as both anchors and triggers, both starting-points and centers around which the author’s memory could start expanding. Indeed, surprisingly enough, and despite the longer temporal gap between the scenes evoked and the moment of writing, Nabokov *added* details to objects in the successive versions of his autobiography, as if, by screwing on the microscope of his memory, he was sharpening the vision of his past in an attempt to get closer to the ever-receding real. Memories unfold and anchor themselves in space thanks to objects, thanks to ever more precise, ever more minute details about their size, material, reflections, or color, somehow removing the film of oblivion that the years have laid over them.

Time is a major theme in Nabokov’s work, and has attracted a lot of critical attention.<sup>9</sup> If Nabokov’s reflections on time culminated in the fourth part of *Ada*,<sup>10</sup> taking the form of an essay entitled “The Texture of Time,” the capacity for the human mind to travel through time via memory and imagination has been a constant source of reflection for him, and the convoluted temporal structures of his later work often mirror his interest in time. Because of exile, Nabokov acutely

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<sup>9</sup> The second volume of Brian Boyd’s biography of Nabokov (*The American Years*, 1991) provides many insights into Nabokov’s experience, vision and philosophy of time (see the book’s index entries: time, freedom within, 539; time, and irretrievability of past, 628-29; time, and timelessness, 150, 152, 154, 163-65; time, transcendence of, 228, 594-96).

<sup>10</sup> The fourth part of the novel is actually what he wrote first.

experienced the impossibility of going back in *space* to the wonderland of his childhood, and that experience of an irretrievable loss of places and objects may explain why he often said that his home was in his memories. At the beginning of the penultimate chapter of *Speak, Memory*, the author describes his life in terms of a personal helical version of Hegel's triad:

A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life. The twenty years I spent in my native Russia (1899-1919) take care of the thesis arc. Twenty-one years of voluntary exile in England, Germany and France (1919-1940) supply the obvious antithesis. The period spent in my adopted country (1940-1960) forms a synthesis—and a new thesis. (*Speak, Memory* 594)

It is interesting to note that Nabokov relates the Hegelian spiral with a mundane object, a glass marble from his childhood. That object was actually evoked at an earlier stage of his autobiography, in the short story "First Love," later to become the chapter of *Speak, Memory* dedicated to little Colette (Claude Desprès), whom he had met on the Biarritz *Grande Plage* in 1909. In the last paragraph of that chapter, Nabokov recalls the last time he saw Colette, in a Parisian park, on his way back to St. Petersburg, and it is then that he mentions the marble. However, he does not conjure up the marble because he actually handled it while he was in Colette's company, but because a detail in her outfit made him *remember* it—the marble is a memory inside the memory:

She carried a hoop and a short stick to drive it with, and everything about her was extremely proper and stylish in an autumnal, Parisian, *tenue-de-ville-pour-fillette* way. She took from her governess and slipped into my brother's hand a farewell present, a box of sugar-coated almonds, meant, I knew, solely for me; and instantly she was off, tap-tapping her glinting hoop through light and shade, around and around a fountain choked with dead leaves, near which I stood. The leaves mingle in my memory with the leather of her shoes and gloves, and *there was, I remember, some detail in her attire (perhaps a ribbon on her Scottish cap, or the pattern of her stockings) that reminded me then of the rainbow spiral in a glass marble.* I still seem to be holding that wisp of iridescence, not knowing exactly where to fit it, while she runs with her hoop ever faster around me and finally dissolves among the slender shadows cast on the graveled path by the interlaced arches of its low looped fence. (*Speak, Memory* 489, my emphasis)

Interestingly enough, the remembered glass marble then becomes tangible, indicating that the recalled *memory* of that object at the moment of writing that scene has the power of making the marble as present as the other elements that were present then: "I still seem to be *holding that wisp of iridescence*, not knowing exactly where to fit it, while she runs with her hoop ever faster around me." In addition, the whole paragraph is structured upon circular lines, as if spiraling up: Colette's spinning loop, going "around and around" the fountain, the marble with its spiral, the "arches" of the "looped fence" along the garden path, themselves duplicated by their shadows. The noticeable recurrence of words containing double "o" letters seems to be duplicating the infinite

quality of this spiraling movement: “loop” (used three times), “took,” “stood,” “looped.” The iridescent spiral inside the glass ball encapsulates what the text itself is doing, so that, even though the chapter ends on the word “fence,” the feeling is not at all that of closure or arrest, but of the soft dissolve of the film of memory, preserved in words. One of the missions of literature for Nabokov indeed was to preserve the mundane things from everyday life that are bound to be erased as years go by. Nabokov’s own experience of loss through exile probably explains why this point was so dear to him.

It is, however, interesting to note that Nabokov did not consider writing *per se* as a way to preserve one’s past. On the contrary, he repeatedly lamented the loss of his personal memories once he had bestowed them upon his *fictional* characters: “some recollections, perhaps intellectual rather than emotional, are very brittle and sometimes apt to lose the flavor of reality when they are immersed by the novelist in his book, when they are given away to characters” (*Strong Opinions* 12).<sup>11</sup> It is an idea that even opens his 1936 short story in French, “Mademoiselle O.” In this incipit, the author justifies the writing of the autobiographical text by his will to reclaim or even salvage his past:

[...] c’est vraiment pitoyable de voir comme ces personnages falots sortis du noir clair de lune de l’encrier abusent des belles choses et des chers visages qu’on leur fournit, jusqu’à dépeupler peu à peu notre passé. [...] J’ai souvent observé ce singulier phénomène de disproportion sentimentale lorsque, faisant présent à mes personnages factices non de grands pans de mon passé [...] mais de quelque image dont je croyais pouvoir me défaire sans détriment, j’ai observé, dis-je, que la belle chose que je donnais dépérissait dans le milieu d’imagination où je la mettais brusquement. Cependant, elle subsistait dans ma mémoire comme si elle m’était devenue étrangère. Bien plus, elle possédait désormais plus d’affinité avec le roman où je l’avais emprisonnée qu’avec ce passé chaud et vivant où elle avait été si bien à l’abri de mon art littéraire. En revanche, comme je viens de le noter, le personnage à qui je faisais don d’un arbre sous lequel j’avais joué, d’un sentier que j’avais parcouru, d’un effet de lumière qui célébrait comme un feu d’artifice quelque événement inoubliable de ma jeunesse en fête, semblait n’y attacher aucun prix ou même prenait l’air gêné de celui qui ne sait que faire de la parure désuète qu’on lui offre. C’est ainsi que le portrait de ma vieille institutrice française [...] ou plutôt certains détails de son portrait me semblent perdus à jamais, enlisés qu’ils sont dans la description d’une enfance qui m’est totalement étrangère. Or, l’idée m’est venue de sauver ce qui reste de cette image [...]. (*Nouvelles complètes* 657-58)

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<sup>11</sup> He also wrote: “Memory is, really, in itself, a tool, one of the many tools that an artist uses; and some recollections, perhaps intellectual rather than emotional, are very brittle and sometimes apt to lose the flavor of reality when they are immersed by the novelist in his book, when they are given away to characters” (*Strong Opinions* 10).



Nabokov here describes a form of double loss of the objects or people from his past: a loss provoked by exile and the passing of time, and a loss entailed by the fictionalization of one's memories, which further severs the bond with reality. His autobiographical project is thus an attempt at countering this double loss, this dispossession of one's remembrances.<sup>12</sup> Among the objects he laments having given away to his characters, one finds the colored pencils of his childhood: "Alas, these pencils, too, have been distributed among the characters in my books to keep fictitious children busy; they are not quite my own now" ("Mademoiselle O," *Stories* 483).<sup>13</sup> Let us now examine how these pencils, and other writing utensils from his past, are re-possessed through the autobiographical project.

## 2. Writing objects

Nabokov's memoirs teem with various objects used for writing: pencils, pens, penholder, new nibs for a fountain pen, a pencil sharpener, writing notebooks (*cahiers*), notecards... These objects draw attention to the act of writing and therefore have a metatextual aura. Moreover, they seem to encapsulate the writing project of Nabokov in *Speak, Memory*, a book which he would have liked to entitle "Speak, Mnemosyne."<sup>14</sup> By thus making Mnemosyne, mother of all Muses, dictate his text, Nabokov wished to place his autobiography on the Parnassus Mountain, next to Orpheus's poems. And indeed, his evocation of the colored pencils of his childhood not only resorts to poetic devices (alliteration, rhythmical effects produced by the variation in syntactic length, striking

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Claude Lanne notes: "Le trait le plus pathétique de l'autobiographie nabokovienne est la lutte qu'elle engage contre l'effet aliénant de la fiction pour le sujet réel, l'auteur saisi dans sa personnalité empirique. Sauver les vivants et les morts de l'oubli par la parole mémorative, mais aussi sauver l'auteur vivant de la désagrégation causée par l'action « dévorante » de la fiction, tel est le double but de l'écriture autobiographique" (Lanne 412).

<sup>13</sup> "Alas, these pencils, too, have been distributed among the characters in my books to keep fictitious children busy; they are not quite my own now. Somewhere, in the apartment house of a chapter, in the hired room of a paragraph, I have also placed that tilted mirror, and the lamp, and the chandelier drops. Few things are left, many have been squandered. Have I given away Box I (son and husband of Loulou, the housekeeper's pet), that old brown dachshund fast asleep on the sofa? No, I think he is still mine. His grizzled muzzle, with the wart at the puckered corner of the mouth, is tucked into the curve of his hock, and from time to time a deep sigh distends his ribs. He is so old and his sleep is so thickly padded with dreams (about chewable slippers and a few last smells) that he does not stir when faint bells jingle outside" (*Speak, Memory* 445).

<sup>14</sup> His publisher vehemently objected to that erudite title.

imagery), but also reveals the poetic potential of these ordinary objects, from which imaginary worlds can spring:

Colored pencils. Their detailed spectrum advertised on the box but never completely represented by those inside. [...] Now the colored pencils in action. The green one, by a mere whirl of the wrist, could be made to produce a ruffled tree, or the eddy left by a submerged crocodile. The blue one drew a simple line across the page—and the horizon of all seas was there. A nondescript blunt one kept getting into one's way. The brown one was always broken, and so was the red, but sometimes, just after it had snapped, one could still make it serve by holding it so that the loose tip was propped, none too securely, by a jutting splinter. The little purple fellow, a special favorite of mine, had got worn down so short as to become scarcely manageable. The white one alone, that lanky albino among pencils, kept its original length, or at least did so until I discovered that, far from being a fraud leaving no mark on the page, it was the ideal implement since I could imagine whatever I wished while I scrawled. (*Speak, Memory* 444-45)

In this recollection, Nabokov stresses not only the remembered object, but rather the remembered *use* of it—the twirling gesture applied to the green, the pencil “always getting in one's way” when one is drawing, the red pencil with a broken tip that can still be used thanks to a splinter. So doing, the recollected object is once again not treated as a mere prop in the recreated setting of one's lost past, because the treatment of the object is of an experiential, tactile kind, which makes the text tap into similar recollections in the reader's memory. Such treatment of objects through experience and sensations illuminates the power of objects to trigger reminiscence, not only within the author's memory, but also within that of the reader.

Another instance of what I call a “metatextual object” to be found in Nabokov's memoirs is a present he receives from his mother during one of his childhood illnesses:

Now the object proved to be a giant polygonal Faber pencil, four feet long and correspondingly thick. It had been hanging as a showpiece in the shop's window, and she presumed I had coveted it, as I coveted all things that were not quite purchasable. The shopman had been obliged to ring up an agent, a “Doctor” Libner (as if the transaction possessed indeed some pathological import). For an awful moment, I wondered whether the point was made of real graphite. It was. And some years later I satisfied myself, by drilling a hole in the side, that the lead went right through the whole length—a perfect case of art for art's sake on the part of Faber and Dr. Libner since the pencil was far too big for use and, indeed, was not meant to be used. (*Speak, Memory* 384)

Nabokov had already “lent” that present to the protagonist of *The Gift*, his 1938 Russian masterpiece: “Suddenly the door opened and Mother came in, smiling and holding a long, brown paper package like a halberd. From it emerged a Faber pencil a yard long and of corresponding thickness: a display giant that had hung horizontally in the window as an advertisement and had once happened to arouse my whimsical greed” (*The Gift* 23). The amplification process analyzed above is again illustrated here, but this time it stems from a previous *fictional* text. What I would

like to underscore here is the different function of this writing object from a metatextual point of view. Indeed, this giant pencil, even though an enlarged exact replica of a normal pencil, could hardly be used to write with, and therefore both is a case of art for art's case and a completely useless, bogus writing tool. The mention of this object in the novel and in the autobiography however recalls, as Yuri Leving underscored, that Nabokov's fascination for models is meta-artistic:

Modeling as a reproduction of reality in a small-scale format, or by creating the text of a novel, has an additional aesthetic aspect for Nabokov. The construction of an alternate reality produces a secondary model of the copied object in the realm of art. In other words, the master model builder and the artist are faced with similar tasks. [...] The modeler must be particularly accurate when it comes to details, and Nabokov left an interesting example of this punctiliousness. (Leving 64)

The description of this giant pencil, and of young Nabokov's own need to check that all the details of the models were accurate, indeed mirrors the writer's own obsession with details and exactness, as reflected in the excerpts quoted above, especially in the ones taken from the last stage of his autobiographical writings: the expansion process observed above indeed lodged itself in the refining of details in terms of color, shape, material, or odor. What is also worth noting about the giant pencil is that it is an advertising object, meant to arouse the desire of the passer-by to purchase a pencil, and therefore to write.<sup>15</sup> This passage could also be seen as a form of arch metatextual emblem, a form of advertising for the art of writing.

Contrary to many other objects to be found in Nabokov's texts, the pencils recalled above are not personified or subjectified through various processes revealing the underlying agency in things. However, even if these writing tools are not presented as subjects or agents, they have a "style," as Marielle Macé would put it,<sup>16</sup> or a "mode of existence" of their own—to borrow one of Bruno Latour's key concepts (Latour 2013): each one of these pencils is described as an individual ("the little purple fellow," "the lanky albino among pencils"). As exposed above, Nabokov felt that writing his autobiography somehow managed to salvage the people and objects from his past that he had "distributed" among the characters in his fiction, and that autobiographical writing could

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<sup>15</sup> With the composition of *Lolita* (1947-1953), Nabokov started to systematically use pencils to write his texts, at the same time as he began to use index cards instead of regular paper.

<sup>16</sup> I am referring to Marielle Macé's concept of "style" that she develops in *Styles: Critique de nos formes de vie* (2016). In it, she defines *style* as a system of forms that she does not limit to aesthetic aspects but extends to all the commonplace manners, habits, bodily movements and rhythms that are part and parcel of *any form of living* (Macé 31), and that I choose to extend to objects.

perform a sort of magic trick—that of preserving the life of the things and figures from his youth. In *Speak, Memory*, he even compares the pencil—the writing instrument he favored—to a magic wand, as he evokes the power of writing through the words of an invented philosopher, Vivian Bloodmark (an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov):

Vivian Bloodmark, a philosophical friend of mine, in later years, used to say that while the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time. Lost in thought, he taps his knee with *his wandlike pencil*, and at the same instant a car (New York license plate) passes along the road, a child bangs the screen door of a neighboring porch, an old man yawns in a misty Turkestan orchard, a granule of cinder-gray sand is rolled by the wind on Venus, a Docteur Jacques Hirsch in Grenoble puts on his reading glasses, and trillions of other such trifles occur—all forming an instantaneous and transparent organism of events, of which the poet (sitting in a lawn chair, at Ithaca, N.Y.) is the nucleus. (*Speak, Memory* 544, my emphasis)

In the case of Nabokov, who was both a scientist—a recognized lepidopterist—and a poet, the magic trick of autobiographical writing is of a different kind from the one described in this excerpt, as the text does not encompass several events happening at one point in time, nor everything one can grasp in a specific location. The memoir does strive for exhaustivity in order to salvage as many things and people from his past as possible, using the writing process as a mnemonic tool, but the author mostly screws the microscope of memory on specific things, and often on writing objects. By focusing thus on all the details of writing paraphernalia, Nabokov's autobiographical texts provide a *mise-en-abyme* of the very mnemonic function of memoir-writing. Significantly enough, among these writing objects he evokes, one finds a penholder, which is itself a souvenir from a vacation the family spent in Biarritz in 1909:

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. (*Speak, Memory* 488)



Turn of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century postcard of Biarritz, France. Author's collection.

With this avatar of a microscope in his hands, Nabokov could literally see again the beach where he had met his first love. In this excerpt, Nabokov vividly and sensorially describes how one must “[get] rid of the shimmer of one’s own lashes” to see the view, and so doing he directly taps into the readers’ memories of their first handling of optical devices. This evocation enhances the idea of *magic* that underpins the description of this commercial object. Moreover, one should note the material of which the penholder is made. Indeed, meerschaum (literally “sea foam” in German), or sepiolite, is a soft white clay mineral, often carved to make pipes. No such penholder made in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century has yet been documented; it is therefore probable that, in the process of recreating his past, this material was chosen by Nabokov for its very name, since meerschaum/sea foam mirrors the penholder’s contents—the view of the frothy waves on the Biarritz beach, which magically appears through the crystal peephole of the device. This magical penholder therefore contains both the image printed on the author’s memory and holds the symbolic pen with which he wrote the text. The fact that Nabokov says that the object he cherished seems “almost symbolic” could also indicate that the symbolism may not be so obviously limited to writing, and that another layer may be found in this *souvenir*. Indeed, *souvenir*, in French, means both *memory* and

*souvenir*, the object meant to preserve the connection to a memory. That word therefore embeds the notion of remembrance into an ordinary object. As Susan Stewart showed, the souvenir “is an object arising out of the necessarily insatiable demands of nostalgia” (Stewart 135); it connects its owner to “events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby exist only through the invention of narrative” (*Ibid.*). Nabokov’s souvenir penholder carved out of “sea foam” therefore powerfully connects the mnemonic narrative of a lost sea shore with the action of writing.

To confirm the interplay between the writing and remembering processes, Nabokov ends his evocation of the penholder on the very mnemonic power that the souvenir has on him:

And now a delightful thing happens. The process of recreating that penholder and the microcosm in its eyelet stimulates my memory to a last effort. I try again to recall the name of Colette’s dog-and, triumphantly, along those remote beaches, over the glossy evening sands of the past, where each footprint slowly fills up with sunset water, here it comes, here it comes, echoing and vibrating: Floss, Floss, Floss! (*Speak, Memory* 488)

## **Conclusion**

Objects and commodities contribute to shaping our identity; they act as objective correlatives of what we were, what we are, and what we intend to be: their importance in autobiographical texts therefore simply echoes their key-importance in the constitution of one’s sense of self. As Christopher Tilley has shown in his *Handbook of Material Culture*, “through things we can understand ourselves and others” (Tilley 61). For millennia, objects have been one of the media through which individuals and societies have been able to express themselves: it should thus not be a surprise that authors rely upon them when they write about their own past, their own selves. In addition, objects are endowed with what Arjun Appadurai has called a “social life” (Appadurai 15). Their silent presence (or absence) provides insight into the structure and system of values of various social groups, and with New Materialism, things have begun to be considered as *agents*, and not as mere passive objects. If one examines in detail how Nabokov describes the life of objects in his autobiography—an examination but sketched in this paper—one can sense a form of true awareness of the ontology of objects. In many instances, Nabokov underscores the agency of things, a notion that has changed the way objects have been thought about and studied. Daniel Miller, for instance, in *Home Possessions*, explains that “with the evidence that the very longevity of homes and material culture may create a sense that agency lies in these things rather than in the relatively transient persons who occupy or own them. Having thereby established the idea that material culture and homes can be viewed as agents” (Miller 119). In the field of these New Materialism” studies, one should underscore the key role of Bruno Latour in promoting an

approach based on networks of agents that include *both animate and inanimate forms*, notably in his book entitled *We Have Never Been Modern*, in which he develops the concept of “actant” (Latour 1993 86-89). An actant can be defined as a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman. An actant is that which has efficacy, that can *do* things, that has enough coherence to make a difference, to produce effects, or even alter the course of events. In these approaches, the studies of other cultures have often worked as eye-openers for Western thinkers, providing “an alternative route to the larger sense of objectification rooted in the study of material culture” (Miller 120).<sup>17</sup> Remarkably enough, through his attentive approach to ordinary things, Nabokov had already sensed that this other way to relate to objects was possible. This intuition originates in Nabokov’s past, and more specifically in his childhood. As Jane Bennett recalls in *Vibrant Matter*, the “vitality” of matter “already found expression in childhood experiences of a world populated by animate things rather than passive objects” (Bennett vii). In his autobiography, Nabokov accordingly revives the animate objects of his past, as when he evokes his struggling with insomnia as a child, and recalls the “fragile glass object, which had been secretly sharing [his] vigil” and which “vibrate[s] in dismay on its shelf” as Mademoiselle’s heavy steps pound the wooden floors (*Speak, Memory* 452). The subjectification process of the little glass object observed here was added to the French initial text in its translation into English. In fact, the nighttime life of objects, reminding us of the toys’ restlessness in *The Nutcracker*,<sup>18</sup> is a recurring theme in Nabokov’s fiction.<sup>19</sup> Animated objects, animals and plants are a recurring feature of children’s stories<sup>20</sup> that contribute to children’s belief in the magic hidden in one’s surroundings, that only quiet and sharp eyes can detect (quite often these animated creatures are very small). As

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<sup>17</sup> Miller notably quotes the work of Alfred Gell (*Art and Agency* 1998) on the agency of artworks and artifacts, which concludes on the example of the Maori house as the distributed bodies, minds and histories of the persons connected with them.

<sup>18</sup> Tchaikovsky’s 1892 ballet, or the 1816 tale by Hoffmann on which it is based.

<sup>19</sup> In *The Eye*, the panoptic narrator remarks: “It is amusing to catch another’s room by surprise. The furniture froze in amazement when I switched on the light. Somebody had left a letter on the table; the empty envelope lay there like an old useless mother, and the little sheet of note paper seemed to be sitting up like a robust babe” (*The Eye* 61).

<sup>20</sup> These recurrent animated figures are also present in toys, like the Jack-in-the-Box. In *Alice in Wonderland*, which Nabokov knew intimately because he translated it into Russian in 1922, all these animated figures are gathered: talking flowers and animals, living playing cards. In addition, as Nabokov himself hints at in his essay “Man and Things,” the animation of objects should also be related to Spiritism practices; in “The Vane Sisters,” the dead sisters communicate to the narrator via objects and things (the icicles, the parking meter), and the narrator reluctantly looks for signs of dead Cynthia in his ordinary surroundings: “Every now and then I would glance around to see how the objects in my room were behaving” (*Stories* 659).

anthropologists and folktale specialists have established, these stories about animated plants, animals and objects reenact the age-old link to a spirited world that shaped the beliefs, culture and cognition of the first human populations. By contrast, research has shown how the concurrent development of science and capitalism contributed to a severance of the magic-based ancestral link of humans to their surroundings. By subjectifying objects in his writings, Nabokov prolongs the childhood imagining of animated objects found in many children's books and contributes to revive and maintain a link to our surroundings not based on exploitation or objectification.

American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi puts forward another function for things, explaining "why we need them" (Csikszentmihalyi 20). According to his research, things do not "make life better in any material sense, but instead serve to stabilize our minds in that they "organize our experience" (Csikszentmihalyi 22) by anchoring our identity which is constantly under the stress of "psychic entropy" in time and in society, a process he calls "objectifying the self in three major ways," defined as thus:

[artefacts] do so first by demonstrating the owner's power [...] and place in the social hierarchy. Second, objects reveal the continuity of the self through time, by providing foci of involvement in the present, mementos and souvenirs of the past, and signposts to future goals. Third, objects give concrete evidence of one's place in a social network as symbols of valued relationships. In these three ways, objects stabilize our sense of who we are; they give a permanent shape to our views of ourselves that otherwise would quickly dissolve in the flux of consciousness. (Csikszentmihalyi 24)

Now, in the case of an exile such as Nabokov, who lost all the objects that could "stabilize [his] sense of who [he is]," one can still see how objects "organized his experience," and anchored his identity. However, his attention to objects did not necessarily retain personal possessions. In an interview with Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nabokov spoke about the way his memory worked and about what his attention would typically retain. Here, as illustrated in many of his texts, he mentions anonymous, discarded mute things that most people overlook, let alone memorize: "I look out the window and I see there, on the platform, a little pebble, a cherry pit, a silver paper; I see these things so well in this combination that I think I will recall them forever" (*Think, Write, Speak* 168). Studies on memorization processes have shown that emotions play a major role in the act of remembering, and if Nabokov recalled such objects so distinctly, it is probably because he was somewhat moved by their mute and neglected mode of existence, and because he profoundly cared for them. Nabokov's repeated emphasis on the life of mundane objects intimates that he was receptive to their "vibrant matter," albeit fragile or minute, that he could sense their vitality, and therefore attend to them.



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