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Who Speaks in Memory? Self-Reference, Life-Story, and the Autobiography-Game in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

Abstract: As best evidences of our narrative identity language-games, autobiographies unveil the illusive power of language in purporting a unitary self. Drawing upon Ludwig Wittgenstein's no-reference view of "I" and studying its use as a necessary formal tie in autobiographical memory, it is contended that sense of self through time is constituted in narrating and being narrated in memories. It is argued that Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* illustrates the lack of reference of the first-person pronoun in autobiographical memory, its formal and inventive emergence, and its diversity in narrative compositions. As the title hints, the self does not speak in memory; it is spoken in autobiographical language-games of composition.

Keywords: autobiography, autobiographical memory, hermeneutic remembering, narrating the self, Vladimir Nabokov, Ludwig Wittgenstein

1. Introduction

Autobiography is equivocal. It defies definitions and framework, and at the same time it seems obvious. James Olney, one of the most distinguished figures in autobiographical studies, calls this a "paradox" and says: "everyone knows what an autobiography is, but no two observers, no matter how assured they may be, are in agreement" (Olney 7; qtd. in Stelzig 60). These conflicting characteristics are in line with the same features of the self, the cornerstone of autobiography. In the same way everybody has a sense of *what it is to be a self* while not knowing what a *self*

is. Thus, it can be deduced that it is the convenience of the “dear self,” as Kant puts it (1949, 67), that gives meaning to auto-bio-graphy, and it is the complications of the self that render autobiography problematic, to the extent of becoming impossible (see de Man 31–33). Autobiography runs deep in our existence; in the words of George Misch: “Autobiography is one of the innovations brought by cultural advance, and yet it springs from the most natural source, the joy in self-communication and in enlisting in the sympathetic understanding of others” (16). Due to its correlation with a sense of self evinced in narrative self-reference, in recent years, autobiographical study has progressively broadened as autobiographical acts have been adopted by psychology, philosophy, cognitive science, etc. to explain human behaviors beyond written texts. Autobiographies, then, are not mere books: they are as familiar, intricate, ancient, philosophical, and fundamental as selves and self-communication.

Our diachronic sense of self, usually called personal identity, or what makes one the same person through time, is only one of the senses of self that we own, albeit an essential one. Due to its diachronic features inducing connectedness, and evaluative and emotional depth, this kind of self-perception, is narrative in structure. In simple words, we have a narrative understanding of ourselves and others, and each one of us owns a life-story that expands over time. It is autobiographical memory that equips us to configure this kind of self-perception. Autobiographical memory is a mental capacity that composes a coherent overall life-story by clustering memories of the past and possible future scenarios. The introduction of autobiographical memory to studies of self-identity, along with theories of memory as self-invention substituting the preceding assumptions of memory as past-reservation, has led to narrative theories of identity.¹ The claim that “identity itself is a life-story” (McAdams 95; qtd. in Davenport 3) makes autobiography a “discourse of identity” (Eakin 2004, 122). One of the important contestations faced by narrative identity concerns the identification and reidentification question: what does this unified “I” of life-stories denote? In order to avoid the complications of self-identification and bracketing the question of the reference of “I” from the subjective sense of self, some philosophers such as Marya Schechtman and Christine M. Korsgaard (see Davenport 14–16; Rowlands 93–103) have attempted to differentiate between the metaphysical self, or what the self is, and the practical self, or the way we understand ourselves as a person which they believe is necessarily narrative (Davenport 14). However, as Davenport points out (18–19), the two notions are so intertwined, with the latter presupposing the former, that separating them is not possible (19). What keeps the life-story together, gives it coherence, and makes it significant and meaningful for *me* is that it is *my* life-story, “I” narrate it,” and “I” narrate *myself* in it. As narratives founded on self-reference, autobiographies significantly reopen the massive cloud of debates condensed in this “drop of grammar” (Hamilton 5).

Here, and in response to the separation of theory and practice in studying the self, it is fruitful to draw upon Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later philosophical method,

which is against drawing such lines between philosophical language and practical language, or between a hidden inner self and an outer experienced self. In his revolutionary transition, Wittgenstein famously asserts that “meaning is use” (qtd. in Child 86). Accordingly, for understanding the meaning of self, instead of looking for the referent of “I” or neglecting its reference all together, we should look for how it is used in identity narratives. The main transitional ideas of Wittgenstein on the notion of self, such as the “counter-intuitive” (O’Brien 42) idea of lack of reference of the first-person pronoun “I” were proposed in the *Blue and Brown Books*. For the mature Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations*, the self would be a cluster of context-sensitive uses played according to the rules of its language-games. Within the framework of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, we can analyze autobiographies to unravel the illusive power of language that purports a transparent unity of the self, and expose “I”’s false claims of substantiality, unity, and fixity of reference. As Garry Hagberg contends, autobiographies are “reminders of what we actually, contra the picture, say and do” in our identity language-games (31). Hagberg in his inspirational work *Describing Ourselves* maintains that by denouncing the pervasive Cartesian ocular terminology of looking into an image of the self by the self in autobiography it can be realized that the self is a variegated linguistic use.

Wittgenstein’s no-reference view of the first-person pronoun comprise our core argument in this article. The aspiration is to investigate what this contention and its application to the narrative structure of autobiographical memory can reveal about one of the most celebrated and unique autobiographies of all time: *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov. *Speak, Memory* is renowned for its unique structure and foregrounding the significance of form in memory and self-narration. This distinctiveness has led to extensive critical attention to its central themes such as memory and time (see Moraru); and nostalgia and loss (see Diaz; Ramin and Nazockdast), as well as its significant stylistic features, including ocular tropes (see Lyaskovetz; Oliver); thematic patterns (see Blackwell and Johnson); nonlinearity of narrative progression (see Moraru; Shields); deception and doubling (see Durantaye; Cooper; Roth); and convergences of fact and fiction (see Shields; Sagan; Wisniewski; Green). The majority of these studies approach Nabokov’s style in the backdrop of the contemporary innovative movements of his time, namely modernism (see Foster; Sala; Diaz; Pieldner) and Bergsonism (see Glynn). In this study, however, and in adopting the most recent theories of self-narration, Nabokov’s narrative forms are sourced back to autobiographical memory and identity’s narrative language-games. In substituting the ontological self with a narrative one, Nabokov’s central features can be explained in a new way, revealing the Wittgensteinian essence of his narrative diversities and autobiography-game.

2. Self-Reference in Autobiography and Autobiographical Memory

Philippe Lejeune believes the identicalness of the referent in the three facets of “self” in autobiography: the narrator, the character, and the author outside the text can be summarized (rather from the point of view of the reader) in the “unquestionable reference” of the proper name (43). However, with recent theories of reference claiming meaning not to be monolithically fixed in reference and conveyed through semantic values of context dependent senses (Reimer), the importance of multiplicity and contextuality of reference are recognized, and the validity of identicalness of the proper name and its substitutes questioned. The most apparent and significant epistemological difference between the proper name and “I” is that unlike proper names that can refer to the person in third-person point of view, “I” can only be used in the first-person point of view and only for self-reference. In commonsense as well, when a person uses her name to self-refer, it implies dissociation: “name-use [in self-reference] can imply a sense of seeing oneself as others do” (Hamilton 26). Correspondingly, proper names entail social structures such as gender, nationality, class, and religion. Therefore, although as readers we look to the name of the author to know who is speaking the “I” in autobiography, by neglecting the difference between I-use and the use of the proper name, we also neglect the significance of the first-person pronoun in what makes autobiography a discourse of personal identity. Before discussing “I” in autobiography, we should explore I-use in autobiography’s source: autobiographical memory and the language-games of personal identity.

The unique function of “I” results from the significant ways in which it refers. I-use is the manifestation of self-consciousness (Hamilton 33). We humans, as self-conscious beings, use “I” for a variety of self-ascriptions believing it to consistently and invariably denote what we know as the self. Wittgenstein, however, negates the denotation of “I” and its reference “to a bodiless something, an inner, metaphysically hidden ego” (1958, 59). In discussing the diverse meanings of “I,” he differentiates between using “I” as subject and using “I” as object and derives a foundational distinction between these two kinds of self-ascription (1969). As it can be conjectured, the first group adopts a first-person point of view towards self-ascriptions and the second a third-person point of view. In the cases of I-use as object, one may misidentify oneself with another person (e.g. one’s hair with another’s). However, subjective I-uses such as “I have toothache” (67) are “immune to error through misidentification” (a term later coined by Shoemaker and generally initialized as IEM). Wittgenstein rejects the referentiality of “I” all together due to the very guaranteed identification in this category and says: “there is no question of recognizing a person when I say ‘I have toothache’” (1969, 66–67). Assuming that “I” cannot misidentify, its use does not convey any knowledge and identification of its referent either. When there is no knowledge and identification there can be no reference at all.

Episodic memories that constitute autobiographical memory,² unlike other forms of memory, also employ “I” as subject and are cases of IEM (Hamilton 42–51; Evans 179–191, 215–225, 240–249; Shoemaker) in the sense that you cannot remember an episodic memory without it having you in that content (the same structure is applicable to future narrative scenarios but hereafter omitted for the sake of our focus on past memories). IEM cases, including memory judgements, have been increasingly determined essential for constituting personal identity (see Evans 210–211; Hamilton 52, 186). The claim is that, counter to our expectations, the very non-reference and non-discriminatory characteristic of I-use in IEM of remembering leads to a subjective sense of self through time: “I cannot think about anything without there being something – myself – which in central cases I do not need to discriminate at all” (Hamilton 52). “I” in episodic memory is always a part of a narrative. Our episodic memories and anticipated scenarios of the future are narratives that cluster, connect, and form a life-story extended in time.³ In the act of remembering, the first-person pronoun binds two very different perspectives of the self in relation to the episode: the present “I” remembering and the “I” being remembered in the content of the memory.⁴ Peter Goldie associates this convergence of the two different perspectives with the “Free Indirect Style” (hereafter abbreviated as FIS) in narrative literature. Consequently, the “I” of autobiographical memory is the convergence of the “I” as now and the “I” as then, appearing to be unified in the FIS of narration. Goldie’s Observation of FIS in remembering is on a par with Hamilton’s IEM of I-use as subject in memory: within the first-person point of view of remembering, I-use as subject conjoins the present “I” and a past “I” in a seemingly unified “I” in its FIS exactly because it does not designate a numerical unity between them. Its very lack of reference and identification makes it possible for I-use as subject to play an *a priori* and formal, in autobiographical memory a narrative, role without the requirement to latch on a unified and persistent self. Accordingly, I-use as a narrative first-person point of view plays the key role in constituting unity of consciousness over time and a sense of personal identity in autobiographical memory (Hamilton 8,93). This narrative non-referential I-use has two important contributions for personal identity.

The first is related to how self-analysis emerges from an ironic standpoint toward the past. Within this nonlinear and dual perspective, one internal to the narrative (the remembered self), the other external (the remembering self), an ironic epistemic gap “is opened up,” Goldie explains, “because one now knows what one did not know then,” and has a “different stance” towards the memory, and then “bridged” (36, 39) in the conjoined voice of the first-person pronoun. The point of view of the narrative is constantly that of the first-person and the dramatic irony is conveyed in the way the memory is narrated, hence remembered; for example, in the nonlinear way the events of individual memories are linked with future outcomes and their evaluative analysis from the present point of view (26–55) resulting in the emergence of thematic patterns across time in one’s life-story.

Another implication of the no-reference view of I-use as subject in memory narratives is that via the ironic epistemic gaps of episodic memories, diverse and variegated narrative senses of self-appear, clustered around the unchanging first-person point of view, forming a life-story. As a result, I-use in autobiographical memory is 'narratively' diverse, for each "I" emerges in a different context. We can say the continuous I-use as subject in memory is the "real-tie" (Hamilton borrows J.S. Mill's term, 101) of diverse memory narratives, constituting the sense of a *self* through time; *The teller effect*, Eakin calls it, where there is no free-standing teller (2004, 128). We learn to use "I" in this way in self-communication and identity language-games via the set rules in our forms of life (see Child 6). Without the FIS opening up and bridging the ironic gaps, narrative analysis, thematic depth and consistency, and self-understanding would not be possible. Hence, our sense of self is a cluster of narratives with I-use at play in our autobiographical identity language-games.

As aesthetic renditions of these language-games, in denouncing a referent self, and seeing "I" as only use, autobiography does not become an alienated discourse. On the contrary, it is in autobiography that we can see how I-use in memory instates personal identity. Anscombe uses a brilliant excerpt from Ambrose Pierce as an analogy of the diversities and deceptions of "I" at play in self-reference:

'I' is the first letter of the alphabet, the first word of the language, the first thought of the mind, the first object of the affections. In grammar it is a pronoun of the first-person and singular number. Its plural is said to be we. But how there can be more than one myself is doubtless clearer to the grammarians than it is to the author of this incomparable dictionary. Conception of two myselfs is difficult but fine. The frank yet graceful use of 'I' distinguishes a good author from a bad; the latter carries it with the manner of a thief trying to cloak his loot. (qtd. in Anscombe 31–32)

Autobiographies not only testify to the diversities of the narrative "I," but also, by foregrounding the role of "I" as the narrator, they expose the significance of style in the formation of sense of self. Autobiographies are best reminders that selves are not referents but, to a great extent, narratives in formation. Thus, autobiographies can *speak self* the best.

3. Understanding Nabokov's Ambivalent Memory: An Overview

The "poetry of memory" (Nivat 673) was one of the most important thematic and structural features of modernist literature (see Foster, Moraru). Memory is the medium in which the modernist subject finds her identity woven within the fabric of time and in the attempt to illustrate an aesthetic time (Moraru 175), develops an aesthetic self-understanding. George Nivat in comparing Nabokov's autobiography

with both his Russian peers and the celebrated European practitioners maintains that the western autobiographers use autobiography, in an Augustinian tradition, for a semi-spiritual self-discovery. However, Nivat asserts, "Always hiding emotion under many strata of games, devices, and veils," Nabokov is not writing a "confession" (674).⁵ As a famous gamester, Nabokov in his autobiography is not in an avowed and forthright quest for an inner self. In a letter to Edmond Wilson, Nabokov wrote that he is writing "a new type of autobiography – a scientific attempt to unravel and trace back all the tangled threads of one's personality" (Nabokov and Wilson 215). He had also told his editor at Doubleday, that he is planning to write "a new kind of autobiography, or rather a new hybrid between that and a novel" (qtd. in Green 89). Nabokov's scientific and artistic works have always borrowed from one another as he believed optimally "their landscape is one and the same" (Sagan 250). Simultaneously, *Speak, Memory* is far from a conventional autobiography and the generic rules of historical writing in its convergence of fact and fiction. Therefore, based on Nabokov's accounts of his autobiography, we are dealing with a true life-story that is written with scientific exactitude and fictional imaginativeness, if such a thing is possible. As a matter of fact, memory in *Speak, Memory* resolves this polarity.

In *Strong Opinions*, Nabokov differentiates a good memoirist from a bad one believing that a bad memoirist "retouches" the past, whereas a good memoirist "does his best to preserve the utmost truth of the detail" (186; also qtd. in Wiśniewski 308). Paradoxically, in the same book he asserts: "I do not believe that 'history' exists apart from the historian" (Nabokov 1981, 138; see Green 90). In order to understand these ambivalences, we need to understand Nabokov's account of memory. Nabokov does not value what Moraru calls "mimetic realism" in remembering (177). As, for Nabokov, finding "thematic designs through one's life should be [...] the true purpose of autobiography" (1999, 16). Nabokov's memory is a nonlinear and, borrowing the term from Moraru, "hermeneutic" reconstruction of the past (178). To observe memory scientifically, within the backdrop of our theoretical discussion, is to recognize that it does not record and retrieve the past but narratively reconstructs it.⁶ Memory is not "a veridical recording of events, not something you can read 'in one of those blessed libraries where old newspapers are microfilmed,'" Husain writes, quoting Nabokov in his cognitive study of memory (1927). Furthermore, I-use in autobiography does not refer to a self that historically exists and persists in memories but a narrative role that, in turn, constitutes a narrative sense of self in a life-story. In this regard, Nabokov's belief that "the best part of a writer's biography is not the record of his adventures but the story of his style" (1981, 155) is in a sense scientific and accurate. In his scientific attempt, Nabokov unravels the narrative structure of the self by foregrounding how it is constituted in nonlinear, hermeneutic, and thematically consistent compositions of memory.

4. *Speak, Memory*, Points of View, and the First-Person Hermeneutic Remembering

Many of Nabokov's novels are titled after the names of his characters. In *Speak, Memory*'s first-person point of view, however, the use of his name emphasizes the narrator's position in shared identities such as nationality and patrimony, the roles that one is born into. For instance, in the one rare occasion that the writer refers to his first name, he is comparing its Russianness with the name of his cousin Yuri (Nabokov 1999, 152). Another name adopted by the author that particularly unveils the communal significance of the proper name is Vladimir Sirin, Nabokov's pen name in the years of exile in Europe. The name of a singing bird borrowed from Russian mythology, the emergence of Sirin is concomitant with the loss of home and when the shared national roots have gained new significance. Interestingly, although the general reader knows Sirin is his penname, Nabokov refers to it only in third-person, subtly suggesting a division and a doubleness between the first-personal "I" and its past as Sirin⁷ (Nabokov's doubles will be discussed below).

Yet there is more to the use of diverse narrative points of view in *Speak, Memory*. The first chapter begins with first-person plural: "The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness" (1999, 9). David Shields believes that, by "contemplatively" addressing "humanity" in the opening line of his autobiography, Nabokov is laying the keystone of understanding "life," which is the "signature" of autobiography (46). Shields contrasts this opening line with that of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* which starts with a "parodic" introduction of the character: "Sebastian Knight was born on the thirty-first of December, 1899, in the former capital of my country" (5), asserting it is "the movements of the human mind" that starts *Speak, Memory* and not random places and dates (46). By rejecting to start with an individualistic "I," Nabokov prefigures the common ground of ungraspable correlations between consciousness, time, and the self and presents his autobiography as an attempt to narrate over them.

The dominant first-person narrative point of view emerges immediately after, for autobiography is after all an exclamation of "I"'s presence and existence. Existence for Nabokov is synonymous with consciousness. Boyd recites Nabokov in one of his interviews: when he was asked: "What surprises you most in life?" he answered "the miracle of consciousness: that sudden window opening onto a sunlit landscape amidst the night of non-being" (qtd. in Boyd 42). This dominant theme is conveyed in *Speak, Memory* through metaphors of emerging forms amid voids, light amid darkness, and lives amid nothingness (examples of all three can be found in *Speak, Memory* 9–10). In the contemplative opening of the first chapter, Nabokov asserted that "our" consciousness is inevitably imprisoned by time. Temporality of existence crops up the primal void into "before" and "after" states, similar to the absolute beginning and ending of a story. Paradoxically, in recounting the story of

one's life – in autobiographical memory and from the first-person point of view, these absolute marks cannot be included. The darkness, in fact, from the first-person point of view, is the penultimate moment before the emergence of self-consciousness and after its disappearance. The story of one's existence in *Speak, Memory*, appropriately, begins not with consciousness per se but with self-consciousness and remembering this birth in I-thoughts: "the inner knowledge that I was I" (1999, 10). The emphasis on the first-person "I" is by no means accidental here. The prequel to self-consciousness's full awakening, Nabokov remembers, is a "series of spaced flashes," "the intervals between them gradually diminishing until bright blocks of perception are formed, affording memory a slippery hold" (1999, 10). Only after these sporadic fragments appears his first true autobiographical memory. This opening memory, which the author calls his "sentinel birth," is declared more miraculous than his baptism into a proper name, or his actual birth of which he has no memories, for it celebrates the miracle of self-consciousness – the light. The first narratively solid memory is not only acknowledged as the beginning of his life-story by the author, but also the inauguration of the first-person point of view and self-consciousness expressed in I-use in that memory (1999, 11) and concomitant with the beginning of sense of self. The firmer "hold" of memory comes with unity of consciousness being constituted in stronger ties of first-person point of view installed in the progressively more elaborate narratives of autobiographical memory filing the gaps between fragmented flashes and providing more solid continuity. This "I" does not denote an emanating light within, but creates "bright blocks" by building stronger narrative connections.

Nabokov's first memory also marks his consciousness of time in becoming aware of the age of his parents in relation to his (1999, 10); this concern with time is at the heart of *Speak, Memory*. In his comparative analysis of Proust and Nabokov's aesthetic time, Moraru says that both authors give a central place to time in their autobiographical works. However, while Proust celebrates "continuous time as a means to surpass time itself," Nabokov "fractures [...] its contingent continuity" (Moraru 182). By breaking the continuity of time in his pursuit of patterns across time, Moraru claims, Nabokov departs from time as "a generic reality" and creates an ecstatic/aesthetic world beyond it (182). Borrowing Proust's words in elucidating his own configuration of aesthetic time, Moraru believes what Nabokov "achieves is not mere a transcription of recollections, but a true 'hermeneutics' of the past [...]. The 'laborious deciphering' of the 'inner book of unknown symbols,' the technique of 'reading backwards' if rigorously conducted, leads to subjective 'revelations' and 'visions' through which we are 'able to emerge from ourselves'" (179). Moraru's insightful observations of Nabokov's aesthetic rendition of memory are in line with autobiographical remembering and its contribution to narrative identity and sense of self through time. Memories "feed on time" (Moraru 180), for they unfold in the "then" and "there" of individual narratives. Via juxtaposing these narrative time-slices and creating an overall life-story the

self is ‘extended through time.’ However, remembering also breaks the linearity of continuous time by necessarily being narrated in FIS and forming an interconnected cluster of memories rather than a continuum; hence, autobiographical remembering is hermeneutic. The difference is between a narrator who takes what he remembers as *the past* and the narrator who recognizes the true ways of Mnemosyne and foregrounds the diversities of narrative points of view (“reading backwards”) that lead to thematic connections across time (deciphering “symbols,” “revelations,” and “visions”), thus gaining an intricate sense of self in this hermeneutic style (“the emerging self”). As *Speak, Memory* has gone under many ‘revisitings,’ first written in English, then translated to Russian, later rewritten in English, Nabokov’s hermeneutic style has become more elaborate and sophisticated.

In the same vein, Shields associates the thematic structure of *Speak, Memory* with patterns created by memory “which is the structure of the book.”⁸ This “rupture” of temporality is, according to Shields, essential in autobiography, for an autobiography should be about “the process by which it, and its author, came to be.” In defining narrative identities, Schechtman contends autobiographical memory unfolds in characterization rather than temporal continuity (100). By understanding the self not as a substantial and unified thing that connects time-slices through its persisting presence but a narrative, the meaning of life-story changes from being a realistic collection of sequence of events in one’s life to a metafictional life in progress. In the magic carpet of one’s life, not only do past memories transcend linear time and connect across time with the ones in the future of the past, but also with the future of the present, to the narratives of anticipation, for they are all parts of one story: that of *me*, conjoining who I am, who I was, and who I am going to be (see Foster’s notion of “anticipatory memory” 52–69). In other words, Nabokov rejects time by exposing that its linearity collapses in our narrative sense of self. It is worth mentioning that yet again, Nabokov frustrates expectations and set rules by addressing his last chapter to “you”- his wife Vera.⁹ If in the other chapters, Nabokov is in “dialogue with his own self in the presence of the reader” (Nivat 674), the last moves beyond this personal level and becomes a manifestation of self-communication and sharing one’s stories in a more public level of language-games.¹⁰

5. Narrative Compositions of “I”: Stories of the Self in *Speak, Memory* and Ocular Metaphors of Narrative Points of View

It was argued earlier that what we call sense of self and personal identity over time is the conjunction of contextually diverse narrations of the self-latched in the use of the “same sounding ‘I’”(a term borrowed from Kant *A363* by Hamilton in deriving this observation) and constituted in the hermeneutic reconstructions of the past. As such, the “I” is both the narrator and the narrated character and the past

always a story told in the present; as Goldie puts it: "I tell it the way I remember it, and I remember it the way I tell it" (48). In preserving the coherency of a life-story, we take what we remember as 'the past' and ignore the additional narrative changes and imports. In *Speak, Memory*, "I" as the narrator is manifestly both the fictionist creating and the man remembering to the extent that Nabokov does not mind sending envoys to memory-like episodes in which he was not present at all.¹¹ For Nabokov imagination is rooted in memory (Boyd 113), because both are founded upon 'composition.' Boyd believes one of the main themes of Nabokov is an immanent disjunction between the consciousness of the character and his world (159). Temporal disjunction of consciousness is the source of memory compositions as well. Not only are individual memories narrative compositions that unfold within the backdrop of an ironic temporal gap between the self and its past, but the sense of a unified self is itself an overall story constituted by these narratives and narrated by a non-referential "I." In other words, as a consequence of this subjective disjunction, "I" becomes the composer and the primal composition itself.

All through *Speak, Memory* we can see how self-identities are aligned with stories and are in turn stories told and believed. Uncle Ruka identifies with Sophie, a character from his childhood storybooks who "n'etait pas jolie" (1999, 56). Nabokov's mother relishes the past and strives to impeccably preserve the illusory worlds of her loved ones (25, 31–33). In Chapter Ten, Nabokov identifies his cousin with the cavalier fictional characters they use to role-play (155). Mademoiselle too identifies with the beautiful but forsaken Anna Karenina. Her memories from her past are filled with improbabilities that the writer always assumed were desperate fictitious intrusions to create a perfect past to compensate for her pathetic present state. Only later Nabokov realizes that Mademoiselle is not a liar; if, to Nabokov, in her contrived past she emerged as a failing dodo rather than the swan, he adds, that swan is close to "her truth" (88). Mademoiselle sees herself as the swan, and within the disjunctive and incomprehensible world she lives, that is the identity-story she tells and believes. In stories of the self we only have metaphors – selves – for there is no fixed reference or model called *the self*, and the persisting "I" is an unchanging deceiving mask worn alongside its harlequin patterns of multiplicity.

In *Speak, Memory* the disjunction and diversities of the self are often expressed in ocular terms as Nabokov seems to be "watching" his life "like a movie" (Moraru 188). In modernist literature with its reliance on recording subjective mental states and their interactions with conscious or even subconscious dimensions, visual perception becomes an important trope for conveying the subjective point of view and its struggles with an alienated world.¹² Modern technologies in cinematography and photography are also an important influence on modernist art as they become literary vehicles in these works (Lyaskovets 3). Furthermore, the significance of Henry Bergson and his spatial metaphor of time cannot be neglected in modernists' understanding memory in terms of a spatial record of the past similar to a photograph (see Michael Glynn). The abundant ocular terms in Nabokov's works

have been studied extensively, not only in *Speak, Memory* in which they receive full expression, but also in his fictional works and poetry (see Gomez). Nabokov himself recognized his tendency to “think in images” (1980, 289; qtd. in Lyaskovets 2), and both his passion for painting and scientific designs as a lepidopterist evince his strong visual perception. In *Speak, Memory*, and under the above mentioned influences, one use of the ocular jargon is for metaphorical illustrations of perceptions of time, memory, and the self. Moraru believes Nabokov uses visual terms as metaphors “to appropriate memory as a scanning beam” (188). In other words, by transfixing his memories and putting them under the microscope Nabokov is able to magnify them and thus find the details which he is collecting for his thematic patterns. In putting “time” under the microscope, temporality’s past, present, and future become one in the “magic carpet” that Nabokov likes “to fold [...] after use, ‘in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another’ like a butterfly that folds its symmetrically patterned wings” (Nabokov, 1999 106; Lyaskovets 139).

In emerging philosophical shifts of the second half of the 20th century, the idea of the world being the “world that I see” reliant upon ontological objects of knowledge changed to a world constituted in language as the limit of thought (Hagberg 9). In line with these changes, the self was no longer the invisible eye that sees everything, even itself in “introspection,” but a linguistic use formed in communication. Autobiographical memories, as narrative practices, are essentially different from photographs and other visual records of past. Unlike photos, memories are not supplements; we do not need to find ourselves in them for we emerge in narrating them and being narrated through them. Correspondingly, in studying Nabokov’s ocular jargon, Lyaskovets says photographs as objects are actually inferior to memories (5). For instance, Lyaskovets refers to Nabokov’s memory of his mother’s last lodging filled with photographs, but then Nabokov concludes “she did not really need them, for nothing had been lost” (49). Nabokov’s mother did not need her time marks like the actors that don’t really need their lines, for memories are a great part of selves. On par with this observation, it is important to point out that one of the most intricate ways that Nabokov uses ocular terms to convey disjunction and diversity is as *metaphors of narrative points of view*. As identities are stories told out of the disjunctions of the self, these metaphors foreground the essential detachment that surrounds consciousness. In the same manner, in *The Eye*, one of Nabokov’s most manifestly ocular fictions, we see that the eye, or in Russian translation of the title the spy, is sarcastically referring to an “unreliable narrator who conveys an intentionally distorted reality in conjunction with duplicitous perceptions of himself” (Oliver 93).¹³ Correspondingly, in Nabokov’s ocular terminology, the “eye” can be taken as a metaphor of the narrative point of view of the “I”: the eye is not really the eye that *sees* an ontological world outside but an “I” that is inevitably disjoined from the empirical reality and attempts to reconstruct it and *narrate over* this disjunction. Therefore, the truly photographic

and transparent reality is lost in the past and our memories are, borrowing from Nabokov's ocular terminology, inevitably "tinted" (Wiśniewski 310). In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov tells us that in his childhood he enjoyed seeing the world through *harlequin patterns* of the veranda and not the transparent "normal, savorless glass" (1999, 79). Based on his works, especially his autobiography, we see that for Nabokov all existence is harlequin; an important theme in Nabokov that can be best understood in Wittgenstein's framework.

6. Deceptions, Doubles, and the Harlequin Self in Nabokov's Autobiography-Game

As a scientist, Nabokov does not negate the notion of reality. However, he invites us to understand reality in its full depth. In *Strong Opinions* he defines true reality as "an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable" (11). Nabokov distinguishes "average reality" from "true reality" defining average reality as the reality of general ideas and imitated conceptions (1981, 93; seen in Green 92). In Wittgensteinian terms, this is the reality produced under the influence of the unifying illusions of language veiling the inherent diversities. In average reality we take appearances as facts. True reality is the one that exposes the gaps and foregrounds the contrived nature of definitions and certitudes. Nabokov says: "Paradoxically, the only real, authentic worlds are of course, those that seem unusual" (1981, 118; Green 92). Perhaps it is from nature that Nabokov learns this lesson about "reality." In *Fine Lines*, Stephen H. Blackwell and Kurt Johnson assert for Nabokov art and science both, in close observation, expose a "necessarily incomplete understanding" (1). Accordingly, Nabokov did not see the playful diversity in his style as a matter of artificial distortion; he says "my purpose is not to be facetiously flashy or grotesquely obscure but to express what I feel and think with the utmost truthfulness and perception" (1981, 179; Blackwell and Johnson 5). That is why there is no fixed reality to Nabokov's worlds but "phantoms" (Nivat 684) and doubles.

The inherent diversities that Nabokov discovers in the real world find expression in his narrative parallelisms and doubles that are not just limited to that of his characters (present in nearly all of his works, most significantly in *Despair*, *Lolita*, and *Pale Fire*), but also include time, places, worlds, and minds (Roth 6). Wiśniewski believes Nabokov's fictions are "alternative versions of his personal past" (307). Furthermore, Nabokov told a biographer that "the past is my double" (qtd. in Gomez 103; Field 86). As time flows and present turns into past, it is lost; however, the past leaves its trace – a watermark (Nabokov 1999) – like the patterns on a butterfly's wing that bears the trace of the past of the species. Memories are an important part of this trace, distinct from the present narrating "I," but latched to it, like a double is psychologically latched to a character. In this way, the self is

not unified, complete, and one, but diverse and conjoined in I-use, and no matter how alienated, still a part of what is called the self. Perhaps, this is why Nabokov believed the artificial use of the doppelganger is “a frightful bore” (1981, 83; Gomez 104), for Nabokov’s ingenious doppelgangers are rather psychological doubles and tropes for the diversities of the self. The illusion of a unified self is created in the seemingly consistent use of “I” as its signifier;¹⁴ however, autobiographies expose the falsity of claims of unity via their contextually diverse narratives of the self. “I” in autobiographical memory both opens up and then bridges (Goldie 36–39) this division between the first-person and third-person perspective of the present self as narrator and the past self as character, deceptively concealing the doubleness of the past in relation with the present.

Thomas Karshan claims that Nabokov’s signature theme and idea is “play” (see Karshan). In discussing this theme and in a review of Karshan’s insightful book Durantaye refers to Wittgenstein’s notion of game and his extension of the word to all forms of language-use calling them language-games (the idea behind this notion is that there are no necessary and sufficient conditions behind uniform use of words, only family resemblances; contractual rules assign context-sensitive meanings to words with language concealing the diversities under false unities and constructed definitions). Wittgenstein’s view of hidden diversities behind deceptive unities is in accordance with Durantaye’s claim that Nabokov uses games in the sense of “deceptive play, play which does not present itself as such” (603). As diversity for Nabokov is the truth of reality, he comes to the observation that “everything in the world plays” (qtd. in Durantaye 509). The inherent diversities of “true reality” were masterly conveyed in Nabokov’s thematic compositions. He believed only the unsophisticated will “miss the point” of diversity and look for the “thetic” and the apparent (1999, 228). Boyd attests: “[Nabokov] disliked the impulse to impose easy meaning – a generalization [...] on a complex and recalcitrant reality” (87). Nabokov first found these beautiful forms in studying nature. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov maintains: “Its phenomena showed an artistic perfection [...]. I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception” (95). The “stab of wonder” of discovering mimicry in nature is also compared with the moment of birth of mind in realizing its artistic composition (233). This is why Durantaye believes Nabokov is not just deceptive; he is “mimetically deceptive” (604).

On a deeper level than his fictions, *Speak, Memory* is the acknowledgement that the past, and temporality in general, is not the linear flow of time-slices. Borrowing the words from *Ada*, *Speak, Memory* upholds that the time we live through, once it slips into the past, “ceases to mean the orderly alternation of linked events,” and becomes instead “a constant accumulation of images” out of which we can make what we choose (Nabokov 1969, 545; Boyd 286). The reality of things is their compositional forms, and Nabokov’s true reality is found in the way he narrates the past and himself with it- in the “story of his style” (Green

99). It is not surprising then that Nabokov wanted to name his own autobiography anthemion. The self in *Speak, Memory*, minted in the narratives of autobiographical memory, is not an external and independent referent obtained in every use of “I,” but a narrative thematic pattern, drawn and told by the voice of “I.” In narrating oneself, each episodic memory, each lifetime period and lifespan is a detail and a twist of this seemingly unified, yet ongoing pattern. In another brilliant rendition, Nabokov declares: “Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me, the anonymous roller that pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life’s foolscap” (1999, 14). In this metaphor, parallel with the anthemion metaphor, Nabokov’s self is not a historical referent detached from his memory narratives, but the master theme that evolves in his hermeneutic reconstruction of the past and through his life-story.¹⁵

In Chapter Twelve, Nabokov speaks of a game he used to play with a friend, when he was only nineteen: “The idea consisted of parodizing a biographic approach projected, as it were, into the future and thus transforming the very specious present into a kind of paralyzed past.” He then continues “now I catch myself wondering if we did not disturb unwittingly some perverse and spiteful demon” (Nabokov 1999, 193–194). When he was young, Nabokov mocked the fusions of present and past and the artificiality of narrative composition, but now he realizes that he himself is the teller and the told in a game whose rules indicate that in ‘real life’ too life-stories constitute a great part of who people are. Thus, autobiography is a game of composition in the deceptive and “demonic” voice of “I,” a mask that creates the illusion of a unified self. The “I” of autobiography and autobiographical memory is the harlequin that Nabokov also found in mimicry. The metaphor of the harlequin achieves its full form in Nabokov’s last work, *Look at the Harlequins*: “Look at the harlequins! [...] All around you. Trees are harlequins, words are harlequins. So are situations and sums. [...] Come on! Play! Invent the world! Invent reality!” (1970 8–9). Not surprisingly, Nabokov finishes his autobiography with yet another game and a riddle: “Find what the sailor has hidden” (1999, 243) which hints at what the future has in store for the author. Another example of the playfulness of life (Boyd 155), Nabokov’s riddle reminds us that time itself is a part of us as we play along inventing realities.

7. Conclusion

In this article it was argued that “I” in autobiographical remembering does not build a referential link to a substantial self. The I-use as subject in autobiographical memory which is tantamount to the *Free Indirect Style* of narration conjoins the “I,” the narrator now remembering, and the “I,” the character then being remembered, through a formal unity that does not designate a unitary referent self. Thus,

clusters of memory narratives bearing diverse narrative I-uses conjoin and form an overall life-story via the unified voice of “I,” leading to a unitary self-effect and a sense of self through time. Consequently, selves are narratives told and believed in reciprocal identity language-games. The narrative “I,” albeit a foundational illusion, is the most essential linguistic move we play. In line with the new studies on autobiographical memory and narrative identities delineated above, it was contended that Nabokov in his hermeneutic remembering foregrounds the nonlinearity and thematically consistent structure of autobiographical memory that constitutes a narrative sense of self based on self-characterization *across* time rather than ‘within’ the sequence of time-slices. Nabokov thus acutely shows that the function of memory in an autobiography is not to retrieve the past, but to reconstruct it in FIS that fractures the continuity of time leading to emergent revelations and thematic patterns. By unraveling the structural form of autobiographical memory, Nabokov illustrates how his “self” unfolds not only in memory narratives that recount the “record of his adventures,” but also in “the story of his style” (1981, 155).

Nabokov’s belief that in the close look, the world is not comprised of monolithic appearances but of diverse, deceptive, and playful forms can also be traced in the narrative structure of autobiographical memory; in *Speak, Memory* and within the temporal disjunction of the remembering self in relation with its past, memory composition form making the past selves doubles of the present, composed by a necessarily non-referential “I” that connects diverse narratives in its deceptive unified voice without designating a referential unified self. In Wittgensteinian terms, *Speak, Memory* reminds us that autobiographical memory plays the *game* of inventing a “real” self and unmasking the harlequin “I.” The self in Nabokov’s autobiography emerges as the primal thematic design interwoven in the fabrics of his narrative style. As Nabokov believed “true reality” is inherently incomplete, diverse, and variegated, *Speak, Memory* invites us to see beyond the veil of the “average reality” of the self. Like Nabokov’s harlequin master composer that hides its multiplicity behind his deceitful mask of uniformity, the “I” in *Speak, Memory* ties the composer and the compositions in its narrative first-person point of view and “invents reality.” In conclusion, based on our Wittgensteinian reading of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov in his autobiography unravels how in our identity language-games we play the game of composition and find meaningful forms and connections in a disjointed world; the formal first-person point of view is the essential rule of this game, and the “self” its greatest artistic creation. It is worth mentioning that an important aspect of *Speak, Memory* that was left untouched in our study is the way Nabokov moves beyond individual lives and binds life-stories across history and generations in the great design that is life. Reciprocating life-stories and forming collective memories is at the heart of our identity language-games. Hence, in order to understand them well, we should acknowledge the communicative significance of our identity stories, and, in a Nabokovian vein, contract the image to let more beautiful patterns emerge.

Notes

1. On narrative identity see Davenport, Eakin, Schechtman, McIntyre, Korsgaard.
2. For more explanation on different types of memory and why episodic memories are considered the building blocks of autobiographical memory see Rowlands 35–49 and Hamilton 44–45.
3. For more on the narrative structure of memory see Conway and Jobson 54–59; Goldie 2–24, 26–55.
4. For a different epistemological analysis of the first-person in episodic memories and the presence of the self, see Rowlands 169–189; Ramin and Nazockdast 26.
5. Unlike Nabokov, Nivat contends, Tolstoy “as a man of nature, an aristocratic companion to the Russian peasant or the free Cossack, but also as a ‘Christian pilgrim,’ avidly seeking his own salvation” combines the traditional Russian tradition of Aristocratic writing and the spiritual European one (673).
6. For neurological discussions that support this observation see Rowland 104–106.
7. In an interview, Nabokov addresses Sirin as his “Russian” name and says “Don’t be bewildered by the presence of this combined team: Nabokov is here, of course, and so is Sirin, and someone else” (qtd. in Shrayer 111).
8. In comparing the titles of *Speak, Memory* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Shields infers that whereas the latter biography is ironically claiming to be “real,” the former foregrounds the its fictive nature by claiming that “memory is the active agent” and Nabokov is simply “the conduit of these recollections” (50–51).
9. A conclusive last chapter in third-person narrative voice of a “fictitious reviewer” was not published (*Selected Letters* 105).
10. Nivat believes this change is a movement from his life as a boy and his parents, now gone, to his role as a father and husband to the living wife and son and his life ahead, strengthened in the symmetrical correlation between his first memory and this last counted memory (674).
11. An example is the episode of Mademoiselle’s arrival in Chapter Five (1999, 72).
12. Lyaskovets says modernist authors “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” (2).
13. Oliver explains: “the central thematic tensions within *The Eye* are forces of visionary imagination juxtaposed against empirical optical observation as Smurov’s imaginative recreation of reality is constantly thwarted against pervasive glimpses and reflections of his ‘real’ self, which finds an antithesis between optics and imagination” (47).

14. The distortion of pronouns finds a brilliant expression in *Lolita*: "I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us" (446).
15. Green says: "Writing was, for Nabokov, a method of self-analysis. In its duality, in the process of shaping a world by depicting it, he came to know himself as both a subjective and objective self" (99).

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