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V. Nabokov. Auto-bio-grafiia (review)

Vladimir Mylnikov

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Reviews

Maria Malikova. *V. Nabokov. Auto-bio-grafiia*. St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2002. 234pp. ISBN 5-7331-0270-5.

Review by Vladimir Mylnikov, Defense Languages Institute, Monterey, CA

Maria Malikova's monograph is the first extended Russian study of Nabokov's three memoirs: *Conclusive Evidence*, *Speak, Memory*, and *Drugie berega* (*Other Shores*). It is the first to cover the entire corpus of Nabokov's autobiographies (not just the Russian *Drugie berega* or the English *Speak, Memory*) and to treat them as integral parts of a single, integrated organism. Malikova also examines the fictional biographies in Nabokov's Russian novels. The volume concludes with the sixteenth and final chapter of *Conclusive Evidence* (in Sergey Ilyin's translation), which Nabokov omitted from all of the published versions. It appeared only in commemoration of the author's centenary in 1999.

Malikova, whose approach is primarily theoretical, opens with a definition of the autobiographical genre and addresses the issues inherent in reading Nabokov's work. She also examines the Russian autobiographical tradition, both "classical" and "modernist," and explores problems of intertextuality. Structural and stylistic elements of Nabokov's autobiography and the nature of its poetics are also probed, as well as those psychological and psycho-physiological features of Nabokov's memory that significantly influence and form his autobiographical style.

Malikova begins with a paradox: *Speak, Memory*, although "the ideal introduction" to the whole of Nabokov's oeuvre, is, in a sense marginal to that oeuvre. *Drugie berega/Speak, Memory*, mainly due to the popularity of the memoir genre, is often read as the most "simple" and "humane" of all Nabokov's works, but, in fact, the book is far more complicated than it appears. Its dominant feature is that Nabokov explicitly directs and imposes on the reader his method of reading, which can be misleading because it forces the reader to imitate the writer. Malikova suggests a different approach: the reader must oppose "the author's tyranny," conflate the fictional and factual reading codes, and, finally, consider the parodic nature of "autobiographic intertextuality."

The first chapter traces the evolution of Nabokov's autobiography, including the unfinished project "Speak On, America," and illustrates how the changes

are reflected in its poetics. The presence or absence of certain passages in the Russian, French (the chapter “Mademoiselle O”), and English versions are determined by the reading audiences and their familiarity with the subject. Sometimes a fact unknown to the reader decides the choice. Both American versions (*CE* and *SM*) contain a passage about the mysterious émigré writer Sirin, but it is excluded from the Russian version due to its familiarity among Russian émigrés. On similar grounds, Chapter 11 of *CE* and *SM* (the memoirist’s first poem) is not included in *Drugie berega* because its literary subtexts are so obvious to the Russian reader as to be banal. At the same time Nabokov chooses the title *Drugie berega* for *Speak, Memory* because for the Russian reader it alludes to Pushkin’s poems.

The intertextual and cultural contexts that influence the choice of the autobiography’s themes and motifs form the subject of the second chapter. Nabokov’s autobiographical style is aptly described as prose written by a poet, in which the lyrical element is foregrounded by the traditional rhetoric trope of the apostrophe. The latter is explicitly introduced only in the final chapter, where the narrator directly addresses his wife. Malikova stresses that Nabokov utilizes the trope in the most important parts of his biographical and autobiographical narration, where it acts as a signal for the *memento mori* theme. The addressee often becomes inseparable from the narrator. As Malikova observes, the apostrophe is characteristic of the Russian memoir tradition. On the other hand, Nabokov’s autobiography stands in contrast to the usual Russian émigré literature of memoirs in that it intentionally ignores crucial themes of the genre. Nabokov’s autobiography thus belongs both to traditional Russian fictional autobiography and to the modernist mode.

Malikova devotes particular attention to the “reading motif” in Russian modernist autobiography in an effort “to illustrate intertextual strategies in *DB*,” and concludes that it determines the poetics of *DB*—reading the reality of the past as text. One supposes that the idea is to bring Nabokov’s autobiography closer to the Russian modernistic tradition, since the author goes on to stress the typological similarity of *DB* to Boris Pasternak’s autobiographical prose, arguing that both texts are united in their opposition to “the literature of facts” or “the literature of ‘human document.’” In both, the narrator is depicted not in action or reflection, but as an “organ of vision and writing.”

The third chapter, “The Poet’s Life as a Pastiche of His Art,” moves on to Nabokov’s fictional biographies—*Despair*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and the life of Chernyshevsky. Malikova surveys recent readings of *Despair*, as well as those by Nabokov’s contemporaries, and argues that the novel parodies the Russian émigré literature of “human document” written by

feeble Proustian imitators, who, being deeply self-centered, lack a detailed vision of the outer world. The author sees the Chernyshevsky biography as a practice run of key stylistic strategies (recurrent themes in the life of the main character and their gradual unfolding) that later becomes the major structural principle of *SM*. The second important stylistic point, one that is broadly used in *CE/SM*, is the fictionalization of fact. Analyzing the parodic aspect of Godunov-Cherdyntsev's biographical work, the author offers the thought-provoking observation that a successful parody must maintain a certain distance between the writer and the object of his parody (as in the case of Godunov-Cherdyntsev and Chernyshevsky). If the writer has an affection toward the object of his parody, his writing unwittingly becomes imitative. This in turn suggests how biography becomes autobiography (as in the case of the biographer V. and his brother Sebastian). This process of biography becoming autobiography is the foundation of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, which, it is asserted, combines "all the themes of the autobiographical genre"—a thesis that is asserted rather than fully supported. Analyzing the biographer V.'s writing strategies, and how his biography step-by-step transforms itself into autobiography, Malikova interestingly suggests that the biographer V. could be one of the Sebastian's characters.

Chapter 4 brings the main focus back to Nabokov's autobiography and investigates aspects of the writer's memory. After defining the dominant feature of his memoirs as "the assertion of writer's power over the past, over memory and over the readers," the author rather unexpectedly moves on to photography and its role in Nabokov's memoirs. Photography is chosen as an analogy to autobiographical writing because, in both cases, their objectivity is assumed *a priori*. For Nabokov, however, photographs represent a false verisimilitude rather than truth—an assertion that is defended by a rather extravagant interpretation of the picture captions in *Speak, Memory* that reveal Nabokov's "distrust of the language of photography." *SM*'s selection of photographs is pragmatically rather than aesthetically motivated. The pictures of Nabokov's relatives are decorative (an anachronistic view with little regard for aesthetic value). They foreground the priority of the public over the private.

The chapter also addresses the question of truth, a subject that is crucial for the memoir genre. Malikova asserts that in the modernist era, autobiography has undergone a reversal of polarities. Classical fictional autobiographical writing has come to be viewed as "untruthful" (*nepravdivaia*) whereas "lyrical truth" has become the usual criterion. Since Nabokov followed the traditional form of fictional autobiography, his memoir was often read as "untruthful." For Nabokov himself the criterion of autobiographical truth was irrelevant.

“Metaphorical truth” is the only truth. She concludes that “autobiography is neither a ‘truthful’ past, nor a fantasy, but rather a discourse of the past where events are expressed through tropes.”

The penultimate section, “Ars Memorativa,” deals with the mechanisms of Nabokov’s memory. Malikova argues that Nabokov’s memory “stores” its past in “convenient compartments”—in “symbols, emblems, formulas, theatrical images, chess problems, genealogy, heraldry, and entomological taxonomy,” and calls them “signs of memory” (*memorativnye znaki*). She also suggests that Nabokov’s memory, to some extent, was that of a mnemonist (who preserves images of the past in formulas or clusters), and it was “intellectual” by nature—it sees only what it can describe. Nabokov’s stylistic search through the past for recurrent themes, metaphors, and reductions of the most private events into patterns and symbols are seen as “negative gestures” (the trope of preterition). Malikova suggests that the psychological basis of this trope is rooted in Nabokov’s feelings of pain or guilt (over his brother Sergei, his uncle Vasilii, and a dead friend). The writer sublimates his memories into negative gestures in order to avoid strong emotional outbreaks caused by these feelings.

The final chapter focuses on specific features of Nabokov’s memory in contrast to those manifested in Vasily Rozanov’s autobiographical writings. The Nabokov/Rozanov contrast neatly demonstrates the polarities within the autobiographical genre in Russian modernist literature. Malikova notes that memory, the central theme in *DB*, is repeatedly compared to vision. For Nabokov, recollection often means seeing. Memory is often linked with various optical objects—glass, mirrors, magic lanterns, prisms, stereoscopes, microscopes—and, in some passages, it imitates cinematographic film. The abundance of visual metaphors is a feature that connects Nabokov to the Russian modernistic tradition where the visual aspect has priority. Rozanov’s autobiographical writing is oriented to the present rather than the past. The present moment and the circumstances of writing are essential parts of the text’s poetics and often conflict with the writer’s meditations or recollections. The exact recording of the moment of recollection shows that now the current focus is directed to the act of recollection and not what is recollected.

In the brief “Conclusion,” the researcher asserts that Nabokov and Rozanov “constitute the two poles of the Russian autobiographical tradition” and respectively represent the “visual” and “visceral” principles of the memoir form. Nabokov’s “fictional” and “lyrical” memoirs are deliberately archaic and oriented to tradition with certain dominant visual and multi-cultural codes. The reality of the past is read as text in the intertextual context, which is often marked as parodic. Nabokov’s parodic intertextual strategy is unique. While

plainly following tradition, the writer adopts only selected elements, while he treats other elements of the tradition ironically. Rozanov's autobiographical writing is distanced from any literary tradition and is introspective, meta-reflective, and intimate ("visceral").

Maria Malikova's monograph is well-researched. Little-known materials both from Nabokov's archives and from émigré criticism are utilized to strengthen her arguments. The approach is objective and avoids the exaggerated reverence that flavors much Russian Nabokov criticism. Malikova's monograph is a valuable contribution to Nabokov studies, as well as to the theoretical problems of the memoir genre.

V.V. Nabokov. *Stikhotvoreniia*. Introduction and commentaries by Maria Malikova. Novaia biblioteka poeta. St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2002. 656 pp. ISBN 5-7331-0160-1.

Review by Vladimir Mylnikov, Defense Languages Institute, Monterey, CA

This handsome scholarly volume contains the vast majority of Nabokov's poetic oeuvre—nearly 600 poems, including his translations into Russian of poems by others, plus his own 27 original English-language poems (omitting only the long poem "Pale Fire"). Nearly one-third of the book is devoted to Nabokov's translations from Russian (and French) into English. The only notable Russian omissions (due to copyright problems) are the 40-odd older poems first published in the 1979 Ardis *Stikhi* collection, and the early verse dramas. Titles of the missing "Ardis" poems are separately listed so the reader has a record of all of the "non-dramatic" verse. The volume also contains the poems and fragments that Nabokov incorporated into his prose works. Also included is the Pushkin/Nabokov "collaboration"—the final scene to Pushkin's unfinished dramatic piece, *Rusalka*, written by Nabokov in 1942. An appendix includes four items that were excluded from the 1916 *Stikhi*.

Malikova's 50-page introductory essay, "A Forgotten Poet," is a survey of Nabokov's poetry and its scholarship. Some may find her assessment of Nabokov as a poet to be overly cool, although she concedes the poems from the 1930s onward are of a different order. Malikova's introduction covers the essential events from Nabokov's "poetical biography," beginning with a brief analysis of the first printed editions, followed by an interesting discussion of the role of the English poets of the Georgian era (mainly Rupert Brooke) during Nabokov's most prolific poetic period, the Cambridge years. Malikova