Truth be told, I have taught Nabokov primarily to the current generation of college students. I cannot speak to the ways that classroom dynamics have shifted over generations. And while I imagine that the students in my classroom are different from those who sat in Nabokov’s own lecture halls (in short: more diverse, online, and in debt), I have come to think that there are also certain curious affinities between Nabokov and this new generation. These affinities come into sharper focus, I think, when the work in question is Nabokov’s autobiography *Speak, Memory.*

Consider Nabokov’s authorial persona. Students may bristle at his avowedly tyrannical level of control over his works and their reception (he likened himself to a “perfect dictator” and his characters to “galley slaves”). But while Nabokov positioned himself as the God-like creator of an entire universe, where everything is set in motion at his behest and meaning resides firmly in his hands, this can be seen as a compensatory move, charged with an awareness of *losing* such authorial power. Pitched out of the insular community of Russian émigré writers and readers in Western Europe, Nabokov was forced to confront the limits of singular control over his works upon entering the literary marketplace in America. The production of the physical book, to be sold as a commodity that must compete for readers’ attention alongside new media, is a collaborative process shaped by market forces as well as aesthetic concerns—a process that Nabokov could not fully control but increasingly tried to. During his American period, Nabokov made use of
various forms adjacent to the text itself to reassert authorial control: forewords, indexes, book covers, annotations, commentaries, and interviews. In these paratextual elements, he performs the role of the fearsome writer, often to comic effect.

These dynamics of the literary marketplace have only intensified with the rise of social media. The cultivation of a commanding authorial persona with “strong opinions” is, after all, a requisite for the contemporary author in the age of the Internet. If a student today were to say that Nabokov was “trolling” his interviewers, they wouldn’t be entirely wrong. Or we can imagine that the public feud between Nabokov and Edmund Wilson might transpire today online at an accelerated pace and with others chiming in. And while Nabokov placed the precarious position of the author at the center of works like *Pale Fire*, the logic of contemporary social media multiplies the ways in which an author can lose control over their work once it has been published. Indeed, this may be an aspect of Nabokov’s authorial anxiety that our students understand rather well. The awareness of being read (and thus, potentially, misread) is one that social media sites train their users in. Twitter, in particular, breeds an acute sense of self-awareness about how one’s statements will be read, assessed, and commented upon—a process of critical judgment that the author and the wider public can see play out in real time.

This is also a generation for whom the idea of continually reworking one’s self-narrative over a thirty-year period, as Nabokov did, is not so outlandish. The accretion of each new selfie creates a composite self-portrait that shifts over time. Today’s students are adept at self-fashioning, at crafting a version of the self through text and image for a public audience. As such, they are also highly attuned to the practices of deception at the heart of Nabokov’s poetics. Given the ways in which people have come to perform versions of the self online (whether idealized, fictionalized, professionalized, ironized, or something else entirely) and, in the process, submit themselves to various forms of scrutiny, it is no great surprise that autofiction has been ascendant for the last decade or so (including, in the Anglo-American sphere, writers such as Rachel Cusk, Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, and, more recently in the Russophone sphere, Dmitry Danilov, Alexander Stessin, and Oksana Vasyakina). While what constitutes the new genre of autofiction (and what separates it from autobiography or the autobiographical novel) remains somewhat ill defined, a core element is an intentional blurring of the boundaries between autobiography and fiction. The verifiable truth claims typical of the autobiographical pact
are thrown into deliberate confusion. It is worth noting that Nabokov conceived of his own autobiography as something wholly new, in similar terms. In 1946, he wrote to an editor at Doubleday that it would be “a new kind of autobiography, or rather a new hybrid between that and a novel.” Lest we forget, “Mademoiselle O”—which Nabokov later called the “cornerstone” of his autobiography—was first published as a short story.

All of which is to say that, from certain perspectives, Nabokov could be seen as standing at the beginning of a literary period that is still unfolding, rather than the end of a previous one. Drawing out the connections between Nabokov’s autobiographical project and contemporary forms of self-representation recognizable to our students can make for a productive framework. To be clear, I am not suggesting that these forms are identical, nor that my approach to teaching Nabokov (or any author, for that matter) consists solely of foregrounding what is shared or familiar and papering over difference. I offer this comparative approach as a strategy for helping students understand what the text shares with other examples of self-narrative, thus also sharpening our sense of what is distinctive about Nabokov’s autobiography.

In courses on “Picturing the Self” and “Photography and Narration,” I usually teach Nabokov’s autobiography broadly conceived, including not only the self-narrative Speak, Memory but also the attendant forms that Nabokov utilized to project his authorial persona and assert control over the text’s reception. While working on the autobiography in 1947, Nabokov wrote to Edmund Wilson that it would be “a scientific attempt to unravel and trace back all the tangled threads of one’s personality.” There are undoubtedly many ways to untangle these threads and help students find the hidden pattern woven in the carpet, but I have found that one productive way to encourage this process is through an investigation of the relationship between the primary text and the paratextual elements. In Nabokov’s foreword, the hand-drawn map of his childhood estate, the playful index, and his (unpublished) fictional review “On Conclusive Evidence,” we can see quite vividly how Nabokov tries to train us to read in a particular fashion, to find the thematic patterns embedded in the text. Whereas exploring the role of paratexts that Nabokov did not himself create, such as the book cover and photographs, can also reveal the ways in which the material book is a product of collaboration rather than singular control.

Part of what motivates my focus on the paratexts when teaching Nabokov’s autobiography is that these elements are new additions that distinguish Speak,
Memory from its predecessors. Indeed, one thing to acknowledge at the outset of teaching this text is that there are multiple versions of it. Like its author’s migratory path, the autobiography had its own circuitous and multilingual journey. As mentioned above, the chapter “Mademoiselle O,” originally written in French, was first published as a short story in the French literary journal Mesures in 1936. After his arrival in America in 1940, Nabokov published the story in English (translated by Hilda Ward and revised by Nabokov) in The Atlantic Monthly in 1943; a different version was published in his short story collection Nine Stories (1947). During this period, Nabokov also published a series of autobiographical pieces for The New Yorker that, together with the latest version of “Mademoiselle O,” would go on to comprise the book-length memoir Conclusive Evidence (1951). In 1954, Nabokov translated his memoir into Russian and expanded it, giving it the title Drugie berega (Other shores). To conclude this exercise in autobiographical self-translation, in 1966 he published Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited. As he put it, this version was a “re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English retelling of Russian memories in the first place.” He intended to write a second volume of memoirs (possible titles included Speak On, Memory and Speak, America), but it never materialized.

What does it suggest that Nabokov continually worked on his self-narrative, across different languages and forms, over several decades? Looking at the text’s publication history with students can open up preliminary discussions about autobiography as a genre and how such generic expectations might be confounded by this text. One aspect of Speak, Memory that students may find surprising is that the autobiography does not proceed in chronological fashion, nor does it focus on the biographical or historical events that one might expect. Nabokov maintained that the “true purpose of autobiography” is following the “thematic designs” of one’s life. Each chapter is roughly organized around a theme. Within each chapter our author moves around freely in time, and across the chapters various patterns recur. The autobiography focuses primarily on his inner life, the workings of memory, and his development as an artist.

In our first session on Speak, Memory, we also spend some time thinking about how the map at the beginning of the text prepares us for Nabokov’s autobiography. The map introduces the reader to Nabokov’s visual poetics as well as his subtle sleights of hand. Drawn by Nabokov, the map pictures the Vyra, Rozhdestveno, and Batovo estates where he spent his childhood. Why
include a map? I share with them that Nabokov, as a university professor, often drew maps and diagrams to help his undergraduate students properly visualize the kinds of details that “yield the sensual spark without which a book is dead.” As part of his lectures, he supplied his students with, for example, a hand-drawn chart of Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus’s itineraries through Dublin in *Ulysses*. In a more student-centered classroom, we might invite our students to create such maps and diagrams themselves as a creative exercise in close reading. Indeed, I like to encourage the students to annotate Nabokov’s map as they read *Speak, Memory* to visually track the locations of key events and thus to be able to see the density of patterns and coincidences that mark his childhood landscape. To take one location identified on the map as an example: the *chemin du Pendu* (“the path of the hanged”) on the Batovo estate. In Chapter 3, Nabokov shares with the reader his hypothesis that Pushkin fought a duel with the Decembrist Kondraty Fyodorovich Ryleev on the grounds of the Batovo estate in 1820. The path, beloved by Ryleev, acquired its name when he was later executed. Marking this duel on our map, we can better appreciate the detail in Chapter 10 that Nabokov and his cousin Yuri would fight mock duels as children “in a green avenue where a duel was rumored to have been fought many dim years ago.” While here Nabokov draws connections to a literary father figure, he also relives an event that his own father experienced on the same path. In 1907 on the chemin du Pendu Nabokov found two Amur hawkmoths, rare for that region; twenty-five years earlier on the same spot his father netted a Peacock butterfly, also scarcely encountered in those parts. Such repetitions, scattered throughout the text, can be profitably charted on the map itself.

Given the pedagogical significance Nabokov placed on such diagrams, I find it worthwhile to dwell on this prefatory map in my own classroom. Several of the threads that will structure our sessions on *Speak, Memory* can be spun out of this seemingly straightforward image. The sketch of the butterfly, after all, invites us to read the map beyond its utilitarian purpose, and instead as an artistic image to be interpreted. This is the *Parnassius mnemosyne* butterfly that Nabokov will later pursue in Vyra, on the banks of the Oredezh River. With its reference to both poetry (Mount Parnassus) and the goddess of memory (Mnemosyne), the butterfly conjures up the themes of memory, metamorphosis, and artistic creation that will run throughout the text. Given that the autobiography is organized around thematic patterns, it is useful to get students to track recurring themes or images as they read so that they can
see the pattern emerge for themselves. The butterfly on the map is a good springboard for this kind of approach; one can ask students to create a list of other moments in the text where butterflies (and associated themes of
metamorphosis, migration, etc.) appear.

A consideration of the map’s relation to the text can also lead to a discussion of Nabokov’s strong visual memory, cultivated from an early age by his mother. In the second chapter, he describes his mother’s injunction to remember beloved visual details of their Vyra estate: *vot zamponni*. Thus, he “inherited an exquisite simulacrum” of the past that protected against later physical losses. But before the more final separation occasioned by revolution and emigration, he experiences his first aches of nostalgia for home while away in the Adriatic for the summer as a child. His response is to draw on his pillow a map of the estate, similar perhaps to the one at the beginning of our text. Early on, the idea that one can only return through art begins to take shape. We see this as well with a painting of a beechwood forest that Nabokov, as a child, imagines “climbing into.” He manages this magical feat by the chapter’s end, as we see him walking through a beech forest with the artist Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, who taught him about the “precision of linear expression,” a technique that has helped him with the “camera-lucida needs of literary composition.”

Or we might compare the map with another prefatory visual image: the photograph of the Nabokovs’ St. Petersburg home that ushers us into the first chapter. In an extensive caption, Nabokov amends this photograph (taken in 1955, long after his departure) to reveal the ways in which this image fails to capture the space as he remembers it. The lindens on the street were not there before and now obscure our view of the window of the room where he was born. The street and city have changed their names. The house has taken on new identities; after the Nabokovs fled, it became the Danish mission and then a school of architecture. Through his own verbal portrait, we begin to see the house as it was and are allowed to enter. Whether stepping into a carefully detailed painting, revisiting old haunts through a map, or infusing the mechanical medium of photography with memory, he is able to escape the “prison of time” through his painterly recreation of the past.

The map acts as a threshold to the text, inviting us to step back into this lost realm. But what kind of entryway is it? Inevitably, at least one student notices that the traditional compass points have been inverted: South is at the top, North at the bottom. The map literally disorients you. Is there a jolt of pleasure once we realize we have been looking at it the wrong way around? Or frustration
with having been made to stumble before reaching the first page? Why disorient us in this way? With this subtle shift, Nabokov estranges our perspective. The inversion of the map seems to concede, once again, that he cannot return by a regular route; we are encouraged to see this as imagined geography, one that only he can grant us access to. The map also offers a foretaste of the kind of deception that Nabokov prizes in art and nature: “Let visitors trip.”

I ask the class to look out for other moments of artistic deception as they continue to read. For, if we don’t read carefully, we are certainly in danger of tripping during one particularly vertiginous passage as Nabokov seamlessly leaps from a bog in Russia around 1910 to Longs Peak, Colorado, in 1943 on a hunt for butterflies. Indeed, it is the natural world, with its “mysteries of mimicry,” that offers a model for art. He finds a “game of intricate enchantment and deception” in the way a type of butterfly resembles a leaf and experiences a “stab of wonder” when a disguised insect or bird suddenly becomes visible within a “tangle of twigs.”

We see something akin to this game of mimicry in a photograph of Nabokov, taken by his wife Véra, included in the autobiography. Given our students’ familiarity with creating self-portraits through photographs and captions on social media, it is generally worth lingering over how Nabokov treats these images. Photography and autobiography have in common that they claim to represent a real-life referent. How do the authorial photographs included help to support Nabokov’s self-narrative? We discuss the tension between seeing photographs as evidentiary documents due to the indexical trace and as constructed images that are not necessarily more reliable than other forms of representation. Students are attentive to how a photograph’s meaning can be shaped by the context it is placed in, especially if there is a caption. They note that while the caption often seems neutral, simply a written transcription of what is visible, it can produce an entirely new narrative. In this context, students often point to the length of Nabokov’s captions, and we discuss the ways that the author tries to shape our readings of these images through textual mediation. What kind of narrative does he spin out of these images? The caption accompanying Véra’s snapshot of Nabokov in profile at his desk, for example, gives us an opportunity to see how Nabokov reads himself. In the caption, Nabokov informs us that he is writing The Luzhin Defense (Zashchita Luzhina, 1929). He draws our attention the tablecloth’s checkerboard pattern, highly appropriate for this novel about chess. Not only does Nabokov point to how the photograph’s elements draw together many of the thematic
threads of his life (“Seldom does a casual snapshot compendiate a life so precisely”), but the image itself is teeming with patterns on the tablecloth, the wallpaper, and Nabokov’s sweater.\(^{22}\) It is as if he, like the butterfly, can mimetically blend into his densely patterned surroundings.

Discerning the pattern within the disordered jumble is, for Nabokov, “the closest reproduction of the mind’s birth.”\(^{23}\) This is the “blissful shock” that his son Dmitri will have in the final passage of the autobiography once he finds “what the sailor has hidden” in the “scrambled picture” of the harbor, a shock that mirrors our own aesthetic appreciation of seeing the patterns emerge.\(^{24}\) But if, upon reaching the end, the student has not found what the author has hidden, Nabokov is ready with more clues. As we know, for Nabokov there are only re-readers. It is only now, once we have read to the end, that we can hold the entire picture in our mind’s eye and begin to inspect it more closely. Here it can be useful to spend time on the index, an element that seems perfunctory at first glance but is given pride of place in the poem that concludes the Foreword: “Through the window of that index / Climbs a rose / And sometimes a gentle wind ex / Ponto blows.”\(^{25}\) As a class, we consider what an index does and why Nabokov might engage the index at all.\(^{26}\) (It can also be compared with the index in *Pale Fire*, if one is teaching this text as well.) The index is not often thought of as a constitutive part of the artwork, which makes Nabokov’s unorthodox use of it deserving of our attention. It offers yet another example of the extent of Nabokov’s control over the various parts of the material book. No element is too small. I suggest to my students that the index stages a game of cross-referencing that illuminates the connection between different themes in the text.\(^{27}\) The list, after all, is one of Nabokov’s preferred genres; the spatial organization of the list allows him to collapse time and “superimpose one part of the pattern upon another,” as he does with his “magic carpet.”\(^{28}\) One can use the index to send students back into the text, as they follow any cross-referenced entries that seem significant. A new picture emerges. For example, the entry for “Colored hearing” lists a page reference (34–36) and then instructs us to also see “Stained glass.” If we turn to the “Stained glass” entry, we are given another page number (105) and directed on to the entries for “Jewels” and “Pavilion.” *Jewels* gives us more page references (36, 81, 111, 143, 188, 252), as does *Pavilion* (215–216, 230). In small groups, students can revisit these passages and discuss what binds these themes together. One might even take a cue from Nabokov’s own pedagogical practice and ask students to visually map out how these themes intersect, as he does in his lecture notes for *Bleak House*.\(^{29}\) Although,
rather than have the instructor provide such a diagram to the students, it seems more valuable for the students to produce it themselves. Following the scavenger hunt through the index grants insight into Nabokov’s sense of the autobiography’s internal structure, but the work of interpretation and analysis still falls to them as readers.

Once we have finished the autobiography, as the culmination of our focus on paratextual elements, I ask students to design their own book cover for Speak, Memory.30 Thinking about the book cover as what Gérard Genette calls “a threshold,” we briefly look at various existing book covers of Speak, Memory to consider how they visually represent, interpret, and prepare the reader for the text.31 While we have explored how the other paratextual elements helped Nabokov direct readers’ interpretations, the book cover is one aspect of the material book that threatens to elude his grasp.32 Recognizing the power of the book cover to shape a reader’s interpretation of the text, Nabokov often provided specific directives to his publishers about his covers. In 1950, for example, he wrote to John Fischer concerning the cover for Conclusive Evidence: “Who is designing the jacket? I trust there is no ‘Russian’ stuff—churches, pagodas, samovars—being considered. I am raising this question only because I have had something of the sort inflicted upon me by an English publisher.”33 Noting the abundance of letters dedicated to the details of book cover design in Nabokov’s correspondence with his publishers, John M. Kopper has suggested that Nabokov “saw the book cover not as a marketing device but as an interpretive statement controlling a reader’s entry into the work.”34 While this may be how Nabokov saw it, my students have been quick to point out that the cover is a central part of advertising a book. The cover attracts the reader, who then advertises it to the public as they hold it in their hands at a café, on the subway, or—increasingly—on social media. In recent years, it has been noted how online retail and social media, Instagram in particular, are shaping book cover design.35 What catches the eye while scrolling on a small screen? Awash in targeted ads, content generated by algorithms, and posts by “influencers,” my students are, unsurprisingly, interested in the dynamics of consumer culture. But they tend to see the works we read in the literature classroom as divorced from the marketplace, a view no doubt encouraged by Nabokov and other modernist writers. Dwelling on Nabokov’s involvement with his publishers over aspects of the book’s design and promotion provides a way for students to think further about how the writer navigated the uneasy relationship between art and commerce.36
Given our focus on the visuality of Nabokov’s text, students are by this point well primed to think about questions of representation. Designing a book cover is an act of interpretation on the part of the reader. What should go on the cover? How would the various elements be arranged and why? What aspects of the text elude or frustrate visual representation? Students often produce covers that feature elements we typically associate with Nabokov: chess, butterflies, patterns, spiral structures. I also ask students to reflect on their choices in a short “Artist’s Statement” that accompanies their cover. This creative assignment invites students to consider the book as a whole, drawing together the various threads and interconnected strands to create their own image that attempts to encapsulate the text. It offers students an alternative form of analysis that helps prepare them for writing more traditional papers, as they are able to test out and explore ideas in a low-stakes, creative format.

No definitive version of the book’s cover can be said to exist. In teaching Nabokov, I find this fact a helpful counterweight to the idea of Nabokov as authorial tyrant. It gives license to students’ interpretations; their role as a reader (or a book cover designer) helps to make the book, too. It is a moment of collaboration between the reader and Nabokov—one that can be compared to the sweaty embrace between author and reader atop a mountain imagined by the author in his programmatic essay “Good Readers and Good Writers.” This assignment thus offers an opportunity for students to think critically about Nabokov’s approach to the author-reader relationship—as well as their own. They might, after all, have a different theory of how this dynamic operates. Some resist the readerly position of following all the clues or solving the puzzles to be rewarded with an embrace from the controlling author, while others want to read Nabokov on terms that the author expressly denies. For that matter, the implications of the author-reader embrace may feel different when the work in question is, say, *Lolita* rather than *Speak, Memory*.38

On the subject of Nabokov’s imagined reader, there is one final paratextual element that one might introduce when teaching the autobiography. Nabokov initially considered publishing an additional chapter to conclude the text: “Chapter Sixteen” or “On Conclusive Evidence,” in which he poses as the book’s reviewer. In a letter to his editor at *The New Yorker*, Nabokov wrote that this final chapter is

the most important one of the series (indeed, the whole book was written with this conclusion and summit in view) since therein are carefully
gathered and analyzed (by a fictitious reviewer) the various themes running throughout the book—all the intricate threads that I have been at pains to follow through each piece.39

Nabokov’s mock reader here bears no similarity to the invented John Ray, Jr., whose foreword to Humbert’s manuscript attempts to frame the text as a psychiatric “case history” with a “general lesson” about “general trends,” nor to Charles Kinbote, whose commentary engulfs John Shade’s poem in Pale Fire.40 Much can be done with the fact that Nabokov’s ideal reader is, simply, himself. As he put it in an interview, the author “clashes with readerdom because he is his own ideal reader and those other readers are so very often mere lip-moving ghosts and amnesiacs.”41 However, after casting aspersions on the general reader, he goes on to offer a qualification: the good reader will “make fierce efforts when wrestling with a difficult author,” for which they will ultimately be rewarded.42 Ascending a mountain differs from being locked in battle, but both visions of the author-reader relationship involve a level of physical exertion on the part of the reader.

Thus, it is no surprise that Nabokov ultimately left out the review at the end of his autobiography—it resolves too neatly all the puzzles and patterns that readers are supposed to struggle through themselves. Nonetheless, the review offers insight into how Nabokov would like to be read and can be a useful example for students in this regard, but it is also important to remind them of their own agency as readers. To reinforce this, one could ask students to write their own reviews, either mimicking the style of Nabokov’s or experimenting with different interpretive approaches.

My emphasis here has largely been on the paratextual elements, for these are parts of the book where the relationship between author, reader, and text comes into sharp focus. As the paratexts frame the text proper, they provide a meeting point between author and reader. The autobiography, as a work of authorial self-fashioning, heightens the stakes of being misread or misinterpreted. Thus, we see how Nabokov attempts to shape the reader’s interpretation of the text through a host of paratextual elements, but there remain moments where that control potentially slips away. Engaging with Nabokov’s vision of the author-reader relationship can help students become more cognizant of how that relationship structures his text, their own implied position as readers, as well as the different modes of reading available to them. By understanding the rules of the game, readers can also choose to play it differently.
Notes

7 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 12.
8 Ibid., 27.
10 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 197.
11 Ibid., 156, 12, 75.
12 Ibid., 210.
13 Ibid., 40.
14 Ibid., 76.
15 Ibid., 86.
16 Ibid., 92.
17 Ibid., 20.
18 Incidentally, Brian Boyd has pointed out that the map contains inaccuracies. See Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays* (New York: Columbia UP, 2011), 299–300.
19 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 139.
20 Ibid., 137–139.
21 Ibid., 124–125, 298.
22 Ibid., 257.
23 Ibid., 298.
24 Ibid., 309–310.
25 Ibid., 16.
26 This exercise also has a practical function: it alerts students to the value of an index in general, an often-overlooked tool they can use in their research to get a quick overview of what a scholarly book contains.
28 Nabokov, Speak, Memory, 139.


30 In my experience, I have found it easiest to ask students to draw their design on a piece of paper. While today’s students are often presumed to be “digital natives,” using design programs like InDesign or Photoshop still involves a learning curve. If going this route, instructors should make sure that a suitable program is freely accessible to students and be prepared to provide a tutorial.


33 Nabokov, Selected Letters, 107.


36 For useful background on Nabokov and his publishers, see chapter 4, “Publication,” in White, Nabokov and His Books.

37 Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, 2.


39 Nabokov, Selected Letters, 95.


41 Nabokov, Strong Opinions, 183.

42 Ibid., 183.