

An Heirloom of Memory: The Symbolization of Jewels in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*

Cate Goodin
Russian 280: Russia & the West
November 5, 2022

In Vladimir Nabokov's 1947 autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov presents his childhood nostalgically, not just for time passed but, more poignantly, for time lost. Nabokov emphasizes that his aristocratic money in pre-Revolution life holds no significance in nostalgia. Yet, despite insisting upon its unimportance, the prevalence of material goods in these memories appears to subvert this claim. But as Nabokov relishes in memories of the opulence, he utilizes its abundance as symbolism in an attempt to reckon with his lost childhood. First we will evaluate Nabokov's caveat for the effect of his wealth on nostalgia. Then we will explore Nabokov's complicated relationship with his affluence, leading to the poetic fashion in which he tracks his family's jewelry from importance in the past, to role in the future.

Though it might seem contradictory to the prevalence of money in his memories, Nabokov explains of his aristocratic loss: "The nostalgia I have been cherishing all these years is a hypertrophied sense of lost child-hood, not sorrow for lost banknotes."¹ Nabokov presents these lines in their own separate section to stand out. The direct prose cuts the reader with its force, straying from Nabokov's otherwise poetic style. Preceding the statement, he also breaks the fourth wall, explaining that his ensuing assertion pertains to "who, because he lost a fortune in some crash, thinks he understands me."² Nabokov possesses a self-awareness of how his cataloging of childhood could be perceived, but he undercuts any initial assumption that he longs for "lost banknotes."

Throughout the autobiography, Nabokov weaves accounts of his childhood with the objects and places that surround him. Countless descriptions greet the reader that could lend to a

¹ Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov - Novels and Memoirs, 1941-1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister, Speak Memory, an Autobiography Revisited* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 419.

² Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov - Novels and Memoirs, 1941-1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister, Speak Memory, an Autobiography Revisited* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 418.

spoiled perception of Nabokov. He recalls his mother, “from a secret compartment in the wall of her dressing room...would produce a mass of jewelry for my bedtime amusement.”³ Here Nabokov introduces the reader to the extreme wealth of his youth. Particularly, the jewels are hidden in a “secret compartment,” adding to the view of a hoarding aristocracy. The jewelry presents itself originally as a toy for “bedtime amusement,” out of touch with the experiences of many Russians. Later, Nabokov returns to the subject of jewelry when remembering his mother’s bedtime stories: “she would place upon it her hand... [a] diamond ring.”⁴ Once again, a familiar activity becomes tainted by his aristocratic lifestyle: a bedtime story reminds Nabokov of a “diamond ring.” The continual mention of jewelry seems to refute Nabokov’s earlier statement on what truly mattered in “lost child-hood,” yet looking upon the relationships paired with the materialism upholds his perspective on loss.

Though Nabokov remembers his aristocratic life through the luxury that surrounds him, he focuses on the formative moments connected to and symbolized in the material goods. He continues the recollection of bedtime jewels: “those flashing tiaras and chokers and rings seemed to me hardly inferior in mystery and enchantment to the illumination in the city during imperial times.”⁵ The jewels undertake a new meaning. This early encounter of the “flashing... rings” represents a life before the Russian Revolution. Particularly he relates the “illumination” to that of St. Petersburg “during imperial times.” This line epitomizes Nabokov’s upbringing. When looking back on memories of childhood before 1917, money surrounded him; there is no way for

³ Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov - Novels and Memoirs, 1941-1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister, Speak Memory, an Autobiography Revisited* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 382.

⁴ Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov - Novels and Memoirs, 1941-1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister, Speak Memory, an Autobiography Revisited* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 424-425.

⁵ Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov - Novels and Memoirs, 1941-1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister, Speak Memory, an Autobiography Revisited* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 382.

him to construct an accurate life story without it. But his emphasis on luxury becomes a means of aesthetic symbolism, illustrated in his further reflection on the “diamond ring”: “Had I been a better crystal-gazer, I might have seen a room, people, lights, trees in the rain—a whole period of emigre life for which that ring was to pay.”⁶ The ring supported his family financially in exile from post-Revolution Russia. Even though Nabokov explicitly emphasizes the ring’s worth in how it could—and would—“pay” for later emigration, Nabokov sees experience within it and “people,” returning to the idea that he lost “child-hood” from the Revolution, not “banknotes.” The ring becomes an object through which he tracks his youth and sense of irrecoverable experiences.

Nabokov implants his lost time and ensuing story into a tangible object, making his life full of literary symbolism. In an earlier memory of matches, Nabokov lets the reader in on an important detail of his recollections: “What pleases me is the evolution of the match theme.”⁷ It is not the significance of the objects themselves that interest Nabokov, but rather the “evolution” of these objects through life. In an attempt to explain his childhood, Nabokov establishes the affluent environment that surrounded him, but he uses it as a mode for literary development, emphasizing experiences within the wealth—opposed to monetary value. While the frequency of material goods in *Speak, Memory* appears hypocritical to Nabokov’s claim of their triviality, Nabokov’s focus on the memories that they represent bolsters the depth of his story and loss. When reading the autobiography through that lens, one can collect many instances of nostalgia for childhood relationships and innocence symbolized within the lush objects of his youth. From

⁶ Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov - Novels and Memoirs, 1941-1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister, Speak Memory, an Autobiography Revisited* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 424-425.

⁷ Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, *Vladimir Nabokov - Novels and Memoirs, 1941-1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister, Speak Memory, an Autobiography Revisited* (New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996), 375.

a tumultuous upbringing, Nabokov reckons with his affluent past in the way he knows best: turn it into art.

Bibliography

Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Vladimir Nabokov - Novels and Memoirs, 1941-1951: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Bend Sinister, Speak Memory, an Autobiography Revisited*. New York, NY: Literary Classics of the United States, 1996.