



The Time before Death

Twentieth-Century Memoirs

Constantin V. Ponomareff

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159

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Allgemeinen und
Vergleichenden Literaturwissenschaft

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Constantin V. Ponomareff



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1. Introduction

The twentieth century was a tragic century, a century in which the view of man as a benign and enlightened being seemed lost forever amid the atrocities of two World Wars and numerous holocausts. Perhaps Christianity's obsession with evil and the salvation of a sinful humanity was far closer to the image of man.

And yet, human beings have survived all the evil spawned by the twentieth century. In this context, *Twentieth-Century Memoirs* gives us an intimate sense of the human cost of this survival, but also of the survival of the good in human beings. Goethe had put it well in the first part of his *Faust*:

Ein guter Mensch in seinem dunklen Drange
Ist sich des rechten Weges wohl bewußt.

(A worthy soul through the dark urge within it
Is well aware of the appointed course.) (Walter Arndt, tr.)

Hence, though many of these autobiographical writings are both witness to and an indictment of human brutality, they are also an assertion of human worth. For that alone they deserve their place in the history of twentieth-century life.

Autobiographies always revolve around a profound personal need, be it the expression of some inner psychological problem, or a traumatic or social experience whose emotional impact energizes the whole. The autobiographical reminiscences in this collection of essays were written by major twentieth-century writers who were each in their own way aware of the historical and tragic realities of their century. Given the catastrophic nature of twentieth-century life, it comes as no surprise that the overpowering historical and social traumas should have shaped most of these memoirs, some in more pathological ways than others.

In writing these essays, I have tried to let the memoirs speak for themselves, even though they are, of course, not exempt from the traditional pitfalls of autobiography. At times the memoirs played havoc with memory, truth and morality. Some writers were selective as perhaps they must be, when the trauma of loss and grief pushed everything else aside. By the same token, the trauma of loss could, on occasion, inspire an author to relive and to transmit as much as memory could bear of a now bygone past. In some cases what was left out was intentional, self-serving and dishonest and, in some extreme instances, a writer would for personal reasons even deny his

past. At times the truth only came out after a lifetime of self-concealment, of spiritual and moral anguish – and what could be more sincere than anguish in whatever form? – or the truth might be forced into silence by the oppressive political climate surrounding a writer. At still other times, the memory was so traumatic that the self sought relief in flight, in hiding from life or in suicide.

Autobiography offered these writers the means for asserting the reality of their own existence and of the significance of their creative work in a world gone berserk. And the weapons they used to establish themselves and leave their mark were ideological, socio-political, moral and aesthetic. Of these the ideological response was sometimes the most suspect when it tailored the memoir to suit a political cause. Other social and political critiques of twentieth-century society had real cultural substance to them. Moral and social indictment were perhaps the most potent means for stirring up the conscience of a humanity found wanting. There were also poetic or aesthetic responses – some more suspect than others – as well as the pathological fallout from the spiritual and moral devastation of the century.

It is not surprising, given the inhuman temper of the century, to find in all these writers at a deeper emotional level a partial or total rejection of the contemporary world. Not everyone denied their social environment outright. Some, though they rejected the inhuman aspects of European society, believed or hoped that a moral change was still possible. Others, who repudiated a totalitarian society, still believed that their world, imperfect as it was, could still be changed for the better. After all is said and done, these memoirs leave us with tragic personal histories which, each in their own way, give us a more intimate sense of the fevered beat of a century in upheaval.

2. The Metaphor of Loss in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*¹

In the field of Russian letters Sergey Aksakov, Alexander Herzen and Leo Tolstoy have left us with memorable memoirs of 19th-century Russian life. In the 20th century, Maxim Gorky, Ivan Bunin and Konstantin Paustovsky wrote of childhood and beyond. The most memorable of Russian memoirs, however, perhaps because it is also the closest and the most relevant to our time, is Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*.

Speak, Memory was the product of some twenty years of work, from 1946 to 1966. Nabokov (1899-1977) wrote it first in English as *Conclusive Evidence* which appeared in 1951. He rewrote it into Russian as *Drugie berega* (Other Shores), publishing it in 1954. His revised, final and definitive version came out in English in 1966 as *Speak, Memory*.

Nabokov's memoir, rich in personal memorabilia very close to his heart, is one of the finest things he ever wrote, comparable to the best of his fiction, especially *The Defense*, *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Pale Fire*. As an autobiography, *Speak, Memory* is the tragic account, by now only too well known, of the Russian white émigré experience of having to leave Russia after the Revolution of 1917, sometimes forever, and having to eke out a living in Berlin, Paris or elsewhere. But it can also stand for all the displaced people and refugees of the 20th and early 21st centuries who share Nabokov's profound sense of exile, each in their way.

Nabokov was, in the end, more fortunate than some of his émigré compatriots. After he and his family left Russia in 1919, he was able to complete his university education in Cambridge, become one of the best-known young Russian émigré writers in Europe, and fortunate enough to escape the gathering Nazi holocaust and war, and leave for the United States in 1940, where he established himself as an American writer in his own right and was soon to become financially independent.

Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* is full of poignant reminiscences of family history, family life, of governesses and tutors, English, French and Russian, coming and going, bringing with them upper class European culture. And though movingly described in everyday terms that were to haunt Nabokov through a lifetime, the reality of a way of life that his memoir was able to evoke was furthermore enhanced metaphorically by a more profound and pervasive feeling of loss, all the more acute when faced with the intensity of

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited*. (New York: Wideview Perigee Books, 1966).

remembrance, a remembrance all the more painful because “the kind of Russian family to which I belonged – [is] a kind now extinct – ...”

It was the loss, the absence, the haunting imagery of a lost world, the sense of emptiness and nothingness – not the loving details of a life remembered – that came to define the traumatic reality in Nabokov’s autobiography. He pointed to the metaphorical quality of his reminiscences himself: “Thus, in a way, I inherited an exquisite simulacrum – the beauty of intangible property, unreal estate – and this proved a splendid training for the endurance of later losses.”

This traumatic feeling of loss was coupled with a sense of the precariousness of human existence. The very first line of Nabokov’s first chapter, which brings to mind yet another line in one of Turgenev’s letters to Pauline Viardot, said as much: “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.”

Though Nabokov expressed his love for this now extinct world of his childhood in the realistic details of a bygone time, it was what Nabokov made of their deeper psychological and philosophical significance to himself that shaped the much more real and elegiac undercurrent of *Speak, Memory*. Once again, he did leave us a hint of his metaphorical vision when he remarked: “To fix correctly, in terms of time, some of my childhood recollections, I have to go by comets and eclipses, as historians do when they tackle the fragments of a saga.”

Thus the spiritual autobiographical account in *Speak, Memory*, lies in its imagery and metaphor, in what lies beyond the concrete and visible data of Nabokov’s life. The story of General Kuropatkin’s matches is a case in point. Nabokov himself encouraged a metaphorical reading of his life when, in the context of Kuropatkin’s story, he observed: “the following of such thematic designs through one’s life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography.”

In his second chapter, which gives us a loving portrait of his remarkable mother, he reiterated the same idea in his belief that our visible world can never quite sum up what we intuit as a metaphysical dimension beyond our ken:

It is certainly not then – not in dreams – but when one is wide awake, at moments of robust joy and achievement, on the highest terrace of consciousness, that mortality has a chance to peer beyond its own limits from the mast, from the past and its castle tower. And although nothing much can be seen through the mist, there is somehow the blissful feeling that one is looking in the right direction.