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Consciousness as Creative Force and Prison Cell in Nabokov's "Mademoiselle O"

Claus-Peter Neumann

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Consciousness as Creative Force and Prison Cell in Nabokov's "Mademoiselle O"

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Abstract

Published in five essentially different versions, on some occasions as short story, on others as part of his autobiography, Nabokov's "Mademoiselle O" challenges the boundaries between the two genres. An analysis of how plot, titular character and narrative voice relate to each other in the 1947 version, published in identical form both as independent short story and as chapter of the memoir *Conclusive Evidence*, yields insights into Nabokov's conception of the interrelation between memory and imagination. In this conception human consciousness reveals itself as a conditioning force acting on memory, suggesting the ontological impossibility of all autobiography. However, tensions created by textual passages that provide a contrast to the narrator's version of events insinuate that consciousness has its limits, thus showing a

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way of saving memory from fiction, albeit on a subliminal level that undermines the narrative voice itself.

In the voluminous, multilingual, and diverse oeuvre of Vladimir Nabokov, two notions appear again and again, thus occupying an important position in the author's aesthetic world: imagination, together with its correlates design and conscious creation, on the one hand, and memory, on the other. That imagination is one of the human faculties most highly held by the author hardly needs any proof. Alfred Appel affirms that Nabokov is "a writer who believes passionately in the primacy of the imagination" (quoted in Nabokov, 1973: 77).

This frequently stated preference for imagination notwithstanding, Nabokov's repeatedly rewriting of his own memoirs, resulting in three considerably different versions -*Conclusive Evidence*, *Drugie Berega*, and *Speak, Memory*- also suggests a singular preoccupation with the issue of recollection. Intuitively, one could feel inclined to place the two phenomena of memory and imagination at opposite ends of the spectrum of human mental activity, or at least consider them complementary, the former commonly (and innocently) being associated with experiences directly taken from real life, while the latter implies the act of fabrication. On the face of it, thus, each of

the two concepts would find ideal expression in one of two ostensibly discrete modes of writing: autobiography and fiction, respectively.

An exploration of Nabokov's literary world, however, reveals that this apparent dichotomy of memory and imagination (as any dichotomy in these post-structurally enlightened times) is an all too convenient simplification. Rather, in Nabokov's oeuvre, the two notions enter into a complex relationship into which a short and ostensibly unassuming work of the author's, "Mademoiselle O", may provide considerable insight.

Admittedly, "Mademoiselle O" may not be among the best-known of Nabokov's writings, but its very unusual publishing history hints at peculiar processes that promise to make this story especially relevant for an analysis of the place of memory, imagination, and their interrelations in Nabokov's aesthetics. Initially written in French, "Mademoiselle O" first appeared 1936 in the literary magazine *Mesures* as a memoir (see Foster, 1993: 9), and was revised and translated into English by Nabokov seven years later for *The Atlantic Monthly* (Foster, 1993: 110). A second English version of "Mademoiselle O" was published in 1947 as part of Nabokov's *Nine Stories*, a collection that provides a generic frame for it, shifting its genre status from memoir to fictional short story. But merely four

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years later, in 1951, Nabokov incorporated this 1947 version of "Mademoiselle O" into the first edition of his autobiography, *Conclusive Evidence*, thereby decidedly changing the story's frame of reference, moving it away from the terrain of fiction back into the domain of memory. Yet another variant of "Mademoiselle O" appeared in Nabokov's 1955 Russian translation plus revision of his autobiography, *Drugie Berega*, apparently fixing the generic status of the story once and for all. Not to be intimidated by generic boundaries, however, Nabokov republished the 1947 version of "Mademoiselle O" (of *Nine Stories* and *Conclusive Evidence*) in a new collection of fictional short stories, *Nabokov's Dozen* (1958), once again unsettling its membership to any particular genre, though adding in a footnote a reference to an autobiographical background. Today, "Mademoiselle O" remains in print in two different, simultaneously coexisting versions: as the fifth chapter of the third revision of Nabokov's autobiography, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (1967), and as a short story, in the 1947 version, recently republished in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (1995).

This peculiar publishing history leaves "Mademoiselle O" in an unwonted generic position, continually transgressing the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. And it is this

crossing and re-crossing of boundaries, this fusion or confusion of genres that makes the story an intriguing piece of writing, suggesting that a closer look at “Mademoiselle O” might yield some further insight into the status of memory, imagination, and their complex interrelations in Nabokov’s poetics. (note 1)

On the plot level, the story is about a woman with the enigmatic name of O. (note 2) In 1905 Mademoiselle O comes to the narrator’s estate in Russia to work as a governess for him and his younger brother. Interestingly, 1905 is also the year of the first Russian revolution, but the atrocious events involved are mentioned only in passing, thus making it clear that the historical past is not what the story is concerned with at all. The emphasis is on a much more personal sense of past, concentrating on the narrator’s childhood experiences and his memory of Mademoiselle O.

In comparison to the children’s former governesses, Mademoiselle O turns out to be remarkably strict, speaking to the narrator and his brother in French exclusively and generally giving them a hard time, thereby provoking the narrator’s categorical rejection. Physically, the narrator goes to great lengths to describe her as obese and overall very ugly, with “three wrinkles on her austere forehead; ... beetling brows; ... steely eyes ...;

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vestigial mustache; ... prodigious posterior" (Nabokov, 1996: 480), to quote only the most outstanding features. Mademoiselle O's character is furthermore painted on the one hand as quirky and full of weird mannerisms and on the other hand as extremely sentimental and sensitive, to the point of being touchy, finding offense at just about everything.

The narration explicitly marks Mademoiselle O as quite a pathetic character. However, the context of her story also to some extent humanizes her: She is an exile in Russia, and her knowledge of Russian is confined to one mere word: ("gde"/"where"), which gives expression to her sense of being an outcast, a stranger in a country utterly foreign to her. The fact of her "growing deafness" (490) heightens this sense of isolation, and her feeling left out of things makes her constant edginess understandable. In addition, the narrator describes a number of photographs in Mademoiselle O's room, showing a deceased nephew of hers, a lover who abandoned her for someone else, and a portrait of herself when she was a "slim young brunette clad in a close-fitting dress, with brave eyes and abundant hair" (487), definitely not the picture of corpulence and haggardness she now presents.

The contrast between this portrait and the narrator's personal impression of Mademoiselle O is reflected in a scene the nar-

rator observes after his final visit to her, years after she returned to Switzerland, a scene which allows him to reach a kind of understanding, a final insight into Mademoiselle O's nature: He catches sight of an ugly, old white swan, awkwardly trying to struggle out of a fountain, presenting a pitiable picture in its clumsiness. This combination of the swan (traditionally a symbol of beauty and elegance) and its present state of physical deterioration, a blending astutely expressed by J. E. Rivers's oxymoron "uncouth grace" (Rivers, 2000: 112), makes the narrator finally understand Mademoiselle O's misery. **(note 3)** But this insight does not serve the narrator as a reason to save Mademoiselle O from criticism because the Swiss governess has turned her sense of being miserable into the only trait defining her, and thus she herself- and this seems to be the narrator's final judgment- has turned into a perfectly lamentable person, too lamentable to really arouse compassion. **(note 4)**

In itself, the plot could actually be judged fairly traditional, the main events happening in chronological order and eventually adding up to a final epiphany in the swan episode described above. But when one looks at the space reserved for plot development, one realizes that this is limited to a series of brief anecdotes, taking up less than half of the narration. Most of

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the space is occupied by the narrative voice in which the plot of the story is embedded.

Turning to the narrative voice and analyzing its act of narrating, we reach another level, where the story leaves the realm of narrative convention. Given the story's singular publishing history, the narrative voice is somewhat problematic from the outset. But even when taken as a purely fictional story, the very first sentence gives it a strongly autobiographical feel: "I have often noticed that after I had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured item of my past, it would pine away in the artificial world where I had so abruptly placed it" (480). By positioning himself as the author of novels, transmuting biographical details into fictional elements, the narrative voice and the presence of the author appear to blend.

Things are further complicated by the tenses used by the narrator, continually shifting between past and present: "... Mademoiselle rolled into our existence ... when I was six and my brother five.... There she is now she sits down" (480). A great number of events of the story are told in the present tense (while the intermittent use of past tense continually reminds the reader that the action described belongs to times long gone by). The story is written as if the narrator, while narrating, was actually reliving the events he is relating.

But there is more to it: The narrator does more than merely re-live his past experiences- rather, he is re-inventing, re-imagining them. The first chapter, dealing with Mademoiselle O's trip from the train station to the estate, is narrated as if the narrator had been personally present (which in fact neither the autobiographical Nabokov nor the child protagonist of the story was), his imagined self accompanying Mademoiselle O invisibly, like a ghost. And not only that: Instead of limiting himself to depicting the Russian scenery as it might be offered to him by ostensibly objective memory, the narrator lets his imagination very deliberately paint the landscape -to the extent of selecting the props in a strikingly self-conscious manner: "let me not leave out the moon- for surely there must be a moon" (482). The narrator makes quite a show of his conscious creation of the scenery according to poetical criteria, thereby calling attention to the very act of imagination and narrative creation involved in recapturing a past experience. The presumable object of the narration, the titular character and her trip from train station to the estate, move to the background of this first chapter, virtually escaping the very narrative voice by leaving the reminiscent, re-imagining narrator behind in the snow. The act of narrating moves to the center: at the end of the chapter, the narrator's present crushes in and without any

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kind of transition we are suddenly left with his 'real' presence in the snow, decades after the events described in the story.

This first chapter sets the tone for the remainder of the story, emphasizing that it is about Mademoiselle O only to a certain extent, its actual focus shifting to the narrator's consciously remembering her and, in doing that, re-imagining her, re-creating her. Thus, the story, rather than merely offering an example of nostalgic reminiscence, becomes a representation of a remembering mind in action, a representation in which certain complexities in the interrelation between memory and imagination are brought to the fore.

It is important to note, at this point, that Nabokov's preferred mode of reflecting the workings of the human mind is not the stream of consciousness practiced by many of his contemporaries. In "Mademoiselle O", the narrative voice does not simply allow its memories to flow at liberty in a completely associative way, suggesting an uncontrolled stream of thought running through the subject's mind. According to John Burt Foster, rather than feeling drawn to creating the impression of an immediate rendering of unmediated memory, Nabokov reveals a "predilection for Proust's oldest, noninvoluntary memories" (Foster, 1993: 121). This predilection, however, is not simply a matter of personal taste; to the contrary: it is in-

timately tied to Nabokov's aesthetics as well as to his views on the human being. (note 5) As his biographer Brian Boyd has put it: "The first postulate of Nabokov's philosophy is the primacy of human consciousness" (Boyd, 1990: 293). Applied to the concept of memory as presented in "Mademoiselle O", this means that a present mind is filtering the remembered images of the past through consciousness in order to then organize them into a highly imaginative artistic discourse. The artist's consciousness evokes his memories but also shapes them, re-organizes them, focuses on some details, leaving out others, according to poetic convenience. (note 6)

The first paragraphs of many chapters in the story are dedicated to a careful reconstruction of the setting, during which the narrator's memory, comparable to a camera-eye, focuses on selected details. Thus begins the second chapter: "A kerosene lamp is steered into the gloaming. Gently it floats and comes down; the hand of memory, now in a footman's white cotton glove, places it in the center of a round table.... Revealed: a warm, bright room in a snow-muffled house ..." (482). The remembering subject, demonstrating what Brian Boyd has termed "the directive force of the mind" (Boyd, 1990: 293), behaves like a movie director, telling the cameraman 'memory' to focus on this or that item. In the quoted

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sequence, the narrator gives direct instructions to his own memory: "Some more about that room, please." The artist's present consciousness is foregrounded as the mastermind behind the remembered scenes. The image is evoked of a creating artist who is in complete control of each and every move his memory makes. Or is he really?

May not the narrator's request to receive "some more about that room, please" be a sign of something else? May not that "please" be an expression of the narrator's momentary need of assistance, a plea to his own memory, rather than a polite command, a plea to jump in where the narrator, instead of exerting control, has temporarily lost it? Could there be cracks in the wall so artistically reared up by the supervising consciousness of the narrator?

Here, one must carefully keep apart the figure of the narrator, ostensibly in control of telling the story, from the ultimate arrangement of the details of the plot as presented by the text before us, which at times may be in contrast to the story the narrator seems to want us to conceive. There is a striking passage where the narration is interrupted to give way to a peculiar dialogue between remarks made by Mademoiselle O at their final meeting in Switzerland and the narrator's personal, brief comments in parentheses. At first, these com-

ments, made from the present, appear to be mere corrections: “Those good old days in the château! The dead wax doll we once buried under the oak!’ (No -a wool-stuffed golliwogg.) ‘And that time you and Serge ran away and left me stumbling and howling in the depths of the forest!’ (Exaggerated)” (487). Later you cannot be so sure: The narrator laconically states “(Do not remember),” or hurriedly jumps to his defense: “(Never!),” like a child caught at something forbidden and denying it fervently. Mademoiselle O’s last quote about “the cozy nook in my room” stays uncommented. Instead, it triggers a sequence of memories about that room, which the narrator has previously spared out.

We are faced with a case of what in a later, seemingly unrelated passage, the narrator describes as “competitive reminiscences” (492), differing sets of memories struggling for ascendancy. And in those of Mademoiselle O the relation between the children and herself seems much closer and more tender than the narrator’s conscious memory tries to make us believe. The unmediated juxtaposition of statements and counterstatements made by Mademoiselle O and the narrative voice, respectively, raises considerable doubts about the true degree of control and ultimate authority the narrator has over the story. The interplay of “competitive reminiscences,”

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which the narrator eventually loses, creates a moment of ironic distance, in which the text itself seriously undercuts the narrator's status as sole reference point for the general thrust of the story. (note 7) Momentarily liberated from the control of the narrative voice in this passage, Mademoiselle O appears in a completely different, much more positive light than in the remainder of the narrative, over which, of course, she is forced to once again relinquish control to the narrator.

At the very end of the story, the narrator, for the first time in the narrative, reveals qualms about his portrayal of Mademoiselle O. He wonders: "Have I really salvaged her from fiction?" (493). Throughout the narration, the narrator has striven to present Mademoiselle O in a rather unfavorable light. However, on the textual level, in signals that suggest a contraposition to the narrative controlled by the consciously remembering and re-imagining narrator, a Mademoiselle O shines through who is quite different from the one painted by the narrator, a Mademoiselle O who radiates a kindness and a tenderness which the narrator rejected when he was a child. (note 8) This rejection has been preserved in the narrator throughout his life, has become so much a part of his person that it inevitably preconditions his conscious efforts to recapture the past. What Brian Boyd calls "the cell of person-

ality” (Boyd, 1990: 293) is intimately linked to consciousness, which, apart from being our admirable tool to let our imagination wander through time, is also “the site of our confinement” (307). As Boyd affirms, Nabokov “celebrates the magnitude of human consciousness and at the same time bemoans its paltriness ...” (301). Thus, the narrator’s negative predisposition towards his former governess limits his consciousness in a way that condemns his own vague sense of guilt to remain unrecognized.

The end of the story brings us back to its beginning, where the narrator explicitly states the purpose of his writing about Mademoiselle O as a “desperate attempt to save [her],” the narrator’s despair resulting from a revolt of “the man in [himself] ... against the fictionist ...” (480). The essential nature of memory, itself being the primary fictionist, dooms this attempt to fail from the outset, conferring the story the “tragic dimension” that Frederick Karl denies Nabokov’s writings about his personal past (Karl, 1985: 45). [\(note 9\)](#)

The question about the story’s status as fiction or autobiography has become irrelevant. Being based on the author’s, Nabokov’s personal childhood experiences, the story is undeniably autobiographical, but even so, the transforming power of memory as filtered through the artist’s biased conscious-

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ness will inevitably make it a fiction. The way that the workings of memory are presented by the story, as well as the narrator's final resignation mentioned above, evoke a strong doubt as to whether true autobiography, unadulterated by fictional elements, is at all possible: Due to the nature of human consciousness, memory and imagination are always interwoven, thus converting the story into an expression of what Alfred Kazin has described as Nabokov's sense of "the indissolubility of life with fiction" (Kazin, 1973: 311).

However, the human warmth the fictionist, the imagining memoirist wants to deny Mademoiselle O may survive, albeit on a subliminal level, representing as it were the narrative's unconscious (represented by the textual elements that create tensions between the text and the narrative voice), which is able to circumvent and even mock the filtering consciousness of the narrator. On the level of the narrator's controlling artistic consciousness, his choice of naming the protagonist "O" -also the symbol for the number zero- coincides with the his harsh judgment of the old woman as a non-entity representing nothing but misery, which to him "is not enough to make a permanent soul" (493). But the same choice in a previous passage reveals that on another level something else is going on: When imagining the moon accompanying Mademoiselle

O's arrival at the narrator's estate, he refers to it as "that great heavenly O shining above the Russian wilderness of my past" (482; italics in the original), thereby correlating the old lady's initial and his own childhood in a poetical image which suggests sentiments on the narrator's part quite different from those his final judgment appears to convey. The narrator's appreciation of Mademoiselle O, thus, happens on two separate planes: consciously, he rejects her and condemns her as a deplorable character, but on an emotional level, subverting the disparaging fiction set up by his imagining memory, a sense of profound affection emerges.

Memory in Nabokov's story works on two levels: The surface explicitly shows us the conscious part of it, which imposes its own imagination on the remembered events, thereby to a considerable extent fictionalizing them. But on a subliminal level, a kind of emotional memory, emerging only in imagery and subtle undertones, suggests quite a different story. Both kinds of memory remain side by side, unresolved, unreconciled. Just as the titular protagonist, Mademoiselle O, remains a riddle, both to the narrator and to us: Is she a zero, a nothingness, nothing else but misery? Or is she the moon shining on the narrator's childhood?

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1. This particular analysis will focus on the 1947 version of the story, on the one hand because it is the one that is still in print as a self-sufficient literary work, and on the other hand (and more importantly), because it is the only version that has appeared in identical form both as fictional short story and as part of a biography (in *Conclusive Evidence*), thus ideally embodying the generic shift described above. For a fascinating, meticulous account of the specific variations between the 5 different versions of “Mademoiselle O”, see Foster, 1993: 110-129. For an in-depth interpretation of the original French version see Rivers (2000).
2. As J. E. Rivers establishes, O is not supposed to be a mere initial but rather represents the character’s full name (see Rivers, 2000: 89).
3. For an alternative interpretation of the swan as a symbol of exile and loss, see Foster, 1993: 38-42.
4. This first, albeit superficial, impression of Mademoiselle O given to the reader by this particular version of the story (and indeed by all English and Russian versions) leads J. E. Rivers to commend the original French version as superior to all the others because of its “richness and emotional power of . . . characterization” (Rivers, 2000: 88), creating a “believable, poignant, and funny character” (100), “about whom we care” (99 f.), whereas, according to Rivers, all post-French versions “diminish the central character by omitting key passages on her personality and adding details that make her less sympathetic” (88), eventually leaving the reader “still hungry for character” (99). One may wonder, however, whether explicitness and outspoken involvement of the reader’s emotional identification with a character should be made a dominant criterion of artistic achievement with respect to characteriza-

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tion. Indeed, the 1947 version of "Mademoiselle O" conveys the fullness and complexities of O's character on a much subtler, and therefore maybe much more powerful, level than the French version, as the following analysis should make clear.

5. Here, I disagree with John Burt Foster's interpretation of a scene in which the narrator describes the variously colored window panes of a veranda, evincing a preference for the "normal savorless glass [through which] we saw a matter-of-fact white bench" (487). Foster reads this scene as Nabokov's "prais[ing] memory's utter fidelity to lived experience" (Foster, 1993: 116). However, the narrator's statement that this transparent piece of glass "is the pane through which in later years parched nostalgia *longed* to peer" (emphasis added) suggests that, however much desired, this "utter fidelity" is actually never achieved, which implies skepticism about, rather than praise for, the power of memory.

6. This interpretation quite obviously coincides with Foster's observation that there is "an element of inventiveness in the memoir" (Foster, 1993: 111). However, I would feel inclined to go beyond Foster, discarding what he describes as an "oscillation between categories" (35) on Nabokov's part, a "vacillation between an artist's imaginative freedom and a memorialist's strict fidelity in recording the past." Such a strict fidelity, the above analysis shows, is at least questionable. In "Mademoiselle O", a passage "where the exactness of remembered experience far surpasses the vague gropings of imagination" (111) cannot be established, for the remembering artist's consciousness, a central element in Nabokov's poetics that Foster does not seem to

take into account, always already conditions the memory that is being narrated. Exceptions to this aesthetic principle may be present in the story, but they are entirely different in nature from any potential “exactness of remembered experience,” as the remainder of this analysis will intend to demonstrate.

7. This fact is overlooked by J. E. Rivers, who equates the narrative voice with the real author Nabokov and, as a consequence, disapprovingly reads the narrator’s depiction of Mademoiselle O (in all versions except for the French one) as “Nabokov’s cooling toward this character” (Rivers, 2000: 88). Rivers fails to see that on the textual level, things are far more complicated.

8. This casts considerable doubts on J. E. Rivers’s claims that the French version, which after all is overly explicit in its characterization of Mademoiselle O, and in its description of the narrator’s love for her, “requires a more creative participation on the part of the reader” (Rivers, 2000: 129) than the later versions. The very opposite seems to be true.

9. Karl labels *Speak, Memory* “protected” and claims that “in his own memoir [Nabokov] feared openness” (Karl, 1985: 156), thereby missing the very point Nabokov makes about the constraints set on memory by consciousness and its inescapably fictionalizing nature.