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### Restoration of time: Henry Bergson and Vladimir Nabokov

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**Abstract.** The purpose of the study is to interpret the idea of “restoring time”, common to the texts of the Russian writer Vladimir Nabokov and the French intuitionist philosopher Henri Bergson. The concept of “restoration of time” in Vladimir Nabokov’s texts, viewing it through the lens of Henri Bergson’s philosophy is explored. According to Nabokov “time is essentially memory in the process of its unfolding”. Moreover, that memory itself is a dynamic and never-changing process. Therefore, the conventional notion that restoring the past is simply about retrieving previous “moments” does not hold true in Nabokov’s approach. As a result of studying the phenomenon, it is concluded that in Nabokov’s system the restoration of time (the past) should become the restoration of the very movement of our memories, constantly “flowing” to the present. The reconstruction of time (the past) should focus on capturing the very movement of our memories, which continuously flow from the past to the present. Bergson referred to this movement as the basis of “pure memory” phenomenon, understood as the constant pressure of memories on the present and as the essence of “duration”: genuine inner time, that cannot be divided into moments, but rather is an uninterrupted ever-growing stream of our impressions. Thus, the Bergson’s philosophy effectively addresses numerous Nabokovian issues, both peripheral and central.

**Keywords:** memory, perception, utility, practice, utilitarianism, dream, duration

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## Восстановление времени: Анри Бергсон и Владимир Набоков

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**Аннотация.** Цель исследования – интерпретация идеи «восстановления времени», общей для текстов русского писателя Владимира Набокова и французского философа-интуитивиста Анри Бергсона. Предлагается истолкование мотива «восстановления времени» в текстах Владимира Набокова посредством философии Анри Бергсона. В художественной системе Владимира Набокова «время есть только память в процессе развития», а сама память представляет собой длящийся процесс и никогда не бывает статичной. В связи с этим традиционное представление о том, что реставрация прошлого представляет собой восстановление и запись предыдущих «мгновений», не может считаться релевантной для набоксовской стратегии. По результатам изучения феномена делается вывод, что в системе Набокова восстановление времени (прошлого) должно становиться восстановлением самого движения наших воспоминаний, постоянно «приливающих» к настоящему. Динамику этого процесса Бергсон рассматривал как феномен «чистой памяти», понятого как постоянный «напор» воспоминаний на настоящее и как сущность «длительности»: подлинного внутреннего времени, неделимого на мгновения, непрерывно растущего и становящегося потоком наших впечатлений. Таким образом, бергсоновская философия справедливо претендует на объяснение и философское осмысление большого количества набоксоведческих проблем, как периферийных, так и магистральных.

**Ключевые слова:** память, восприятие, польза, утилитаризм, греза, длительность

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### Introduction

The subject of memory in Nabokov's works is almost of primary importance (Averin, 2003, p. 5). The fact that it was developed by the author since his very first literary experiments renders any full-fledged comprehension of Nabokov's texts close to impossible unless we formulate the essence and goal of his appeal to memory.

Indeed, whenever addressing many specific Nabokov's problems (e.g., the problem of consciousness) one has to consider memory-related concepts. Thus, memory seems to have an expanding quality in Nabokov's world, nearly becoming a metaphysical issue. That is the way memory is represented in works by A. Dolinin (Dolinin, 2019, p. 56), B. Boyd (Boyd, 2001, p. 330), etc. Never-

theless, in our opinion, the actual state of Nabokov studies might not yet go beyond the limits of prolegomena: in order to grasp the nature of memory it is essential to outline its inner workings from philosophical point of view.

There are several approaches to the subject of memory in Nabokov's texts. One is creative memory understood as *anamnesis* (Zlochevskaya, 2012), which is of little interest to us because of its touching only one aspect of the issue. Another approach, to which we are going to adhere, consists of interpreting memory as the category of time: "Philosophically", Nabokov wrote, "Time is but memory in the making" (Nabokov, 2022, p. 556). Therefore, memory should be considered the original time. This last idea brings us to Henri Bergson's philosophy.

The productivity of applying Bergson's philosophy to multiple Nabokov's problems has become obvious and self-evident. Then even stranger it seems that, despite numerous mentions of Bergson in Nabokov studies (from "In search of Nabokov" by Z. Shakhovskaya (Shakhovskaya, 1979, p. 122) to the latest work by G. Barabtarlo "Insomniac Dreams: Experiments with Time by Vladimir Nabokov" (Barabtarlo, 2021, p. 18)), Bergson's theory does not seem to have become an analytical tool typically used by Nabokovian scholars.<sup>1</sup>

Memory is prone to be viewed by researchers of Nabokov's texts as a mean to obtain one's 'personal immortality'. Nabokov's task in this case must involve the restoration of memories, the preservation of the past. However, the principle of this restoration has a tendency of often being misinterpreted. This kind of misconception may originate from the widespread idea of memory as static, akin to books "sitting on bookshelves" (Bergson, 2001, p. 48). However, pure memory, according to Bergson, is an endlessly growing, indivisible *continuity* of our states from birth. Bergson calls it *duration* – the fabric<sup>2</sup> of psychological life (Bergson, 2001, p. 238) – and this brings us closer to what Nabokov meant by 'the texture of time'.<sup>3</sup> It is that 'texture' that becomes the object of 'restoration'.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, let us suggest our hypothesis: it is the very *movement* of memory that is to be restored rather than immobile images of the past<sup>5</sup> [3]. Those images'

<sup>1</sup> However, we shouldn't leave without mention the following articles which are despite the way not seem satisfactory to fulfill the gaps between Bergson and Nabokov in our point of view: Toker, 2002; Glynn, 2007; Mattison, 2013; Lyaskovets, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Metaphor of time as "fabric" is used in the following excerpt from "L'Evolution Creatrice": "Mais quant à la vie psychologique, telle qu'elle se déroule sous les symboles qui la recouvrent, on s'aperçoit sans peine que le temps en est l'*étouffe* même. Il n'y a d'ailleurs pas d'*étouffe* plus résistante ni plus substantielle" (Bergson, 2001, p. 22).

<sup>3</sup> It looks like a rightful move to us to explain "the texture metaphor" now. Pure memory, taking into account its continuous nature, trespasses the present in that particular moment when the existing and past images are interconnected on the basis of their similarity. In that case remembrances construct links, or ornaments – specific orders of internal connection. They design different themes within the 'texture', rendering a branched, extensive pattern of inner time – always homogeneous, albeit diverse.

<sup>4</sup> Bergsonian understanding of time may be found, for example, in the novel "Mary" ("Mashenka"). There the whole way from the past to the present is progressively and integrally restored around one 'prevailing memory' (the image of the heroine).

<sup>5</sup> Compare the enumeration of isolated recollections of 1888, 1883 and 1880 followed by a conclusion by Nabokov in "Texture of Time": "Such images tell us nothing about the texture of time into which they are woven" (Nabokov, 2022, p. 545). Further he wrote that when images

static quality, from this point, deprives pure memory of all its vitality and separates memories from each other: restoration of moments equals restoration of space rather than time. Time, in its turn, is a unified and indivisible becoming, a prolongation of our past into present. Restoration of time means restoration of the movement of memory<sup>6</sup> [4].

According to Bergson, we often go in the wrong direction when interpreting memory. Memories never stand still, inactive and motionless. Never can we apply the word ‘was’ to pure memory – it always *is* and it is always *pressing* our present. Bergson wrote: “In its entirety, probably, it [the past. – *D.B., A.L.*] follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain leave it outside” (Bergson, 2001, p. 42). This quotation addresses problems discussed in “Matter and Memory”.

## Discussion

### “Matter and Memory”

“Matter and Memory” was written by Bergson in 1896. As is well-known, its central problem lies in the overcoming of cartesian dualism which prevented former Western philosophy from finding any common ground between, in Bergson terms, ‘inextensive representations’ (spirit) and ‘extension of images’ (matter). However, Bergson’s dualism is still dualism, clearly distinguishing spirit from matter – but for the fact that it becomes explicitly dynamic and suggests an open interaction between the poles. The connecting thread between matter and spirit, according to the philosopher, is memory.

The *dynamics of the transition* from perception (referred to matter) to recollection (referred to spirit) is going to be most important for our reading of Nabokov. In Bergson’s words, perception is actuated from two different sides: coming from ‘real objects’ (matter) in front and ‘pure memories’ (spirit) from behind to the central point, where our actual activity is to be applied (the present point). However, neither former or latter can be encountered in its pure form because perception is always imbued with memories.

According to Bergson, perception is a preparation for the actual movements of voluntary attention directed at an external image,<sup>7</sup> inside of which one can distinguish centers of the possible action. His idea of perception consists in receiving excitations coming from images and preparing reactions to them. In the philosopher’s view, perception’s function is merely practical: it guides us among material things. The movement of matter (‘concrete extensity’) constitutes an indivisible

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overlap, they form “compound images” (or thematic patterns) and weave the inner texture of time (Nabokov, 2022, p. 566).

<sup>6</sup> Nabokov wrote of Ganin: “Time for him had become the progress of recollection, which unfolded gradually” (Nabokov, 2009, p. 85).

<sup>7</sup> *Image* is a concept that provoked discussion after the publication of “Matter and memory”, which made Bergson state distinctly what he meant by ‘image’: “By ‘image’ we mean a certain existence which is more than that which the idealist calls a ‘representation’, but less than that which the realist calls a ‘thing’, – an existence placed halfway between the ‘thing’ and the ‘representation’” (Bergson, 1992, p. 160).

infinity of images which interpenetrate one another. Bergson calls this movement ‘the universal continuum’ (Bergson, 1992, p. 285). According to him, we perceive only things we can act on, but in order to act we have to ‘inhibit’ the overall movement and distinguish objects within it. Hence, Bergson likens perception to scissors<sup>8</sup> that cut out static bodies from the continuity of a concrete extensity (Bergson, 2001, p. 48).

Therefore, we can differentiate two memory types, one of which Bergson calls *habit-memory*. It is not *memory* proper, but rather a *skill* that helps us complete our everyday tasks more or less automatically. This kind of ‘memory’ is formed by means of constant repetition and fulfills a practical function only (e.g. quotidian movements like tying one’s shoelaces).

Pure perception is opposed to the “radical powerlessness of *pure memory*”, deprived of any practical value (Bergson, 1992, p. 248). It may be constituted by our childhood memories, smells, fragments of what we have seen before, but which are repressed because of their non-applicability to an action. In Bergson’s words, as we move away from practice, “we definitely abandon matter for spirit” (Bergson, 1992, p. 307). Bergson calls pure perception “the plane of actions” and pure memory “the plane of dreams”. Moreover, the latter, being cleared of any utilitarian needs, is also called by Bergson *integral*, or *total*, memory. It is a passive and indivisible accumulation of one’s past experiences, nuanced with all possible hues. Its totality rests not only on the fact that nothing could be removed from it, but also on the fact that pure memory, which flows and persists beyond any choice of ours, integrates in a wide continuity, neither moment of which could be cut off.

We spoke of a memory as being retrieved from the realm of spirit, which is independent from the body, and collecting data besides it. Then, when a memory emerges, it often could, on the one hand, completely succumb to the demands of the instant and “solidify” as an external image; on the other hand, pure memory adds a grain of dream to perception, thus deflecting us to the realm of the unreal, which has no extension and by definition does not physically exist. “The Gift” novel is wholly made of such transitions ‘from fact to fancy’, i.e. from perception to memory. This is admitted in the novel through the citation of Pushkin’s “The Captain’s Daughter”, while speaking of “reality, giving way to fancies” (Nabokov 2002. P. 208). As a matter of fact, for both of them, Nabokov as well as Bergson, “pure memory” and “dream” are synonymous. A memory is born when all action in the moment is stopped: in order to recollect anything, Bergson says, one has to “have the power to value the useless, have the will to dream” (Bergson, 1992, p. 208). Nabokov in his turn calls one’s creative state “energetic idleness”, i.e. the inner workings of consciousness that are of no practical use (Nabokov, 2002, p. 267).

A recollection usually emerges when one perceives resemblance. A vague resemblance of a perceived object to an object from the past can push the present aside its practicalities: “...certain confused recollections, unrelated to the present

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<sup>8</sup> Compare with “Texture of Time”: “Space flutters to the ground, but Time remains between thinker and thumb, when Monsieur Bergson uses his scissors” (Nabokov, 2022, p. 160).

circumstances, may overflow the usefully associated images, making around these a less illuminated fringe which fades away into an immense zone of obscurity” (Bergson, 1992, p. 210). For instance, such recollections can result in violations of the perception. When Luzhin saw that “the urns that stood on stone pedestals at the four corners of the terrace threatened one another across their diagonals”, he replaced the present image (“the urns”) with a recollection of the Bishop chess piece (Nabokov, 2009, p. 337). The recollection seems to shimmer somewhere on the periphery, leaking into the present.<sup>9</sup> In such a case memory performs the function of imagination.<sup>10</sup> However, one’s consciousness can leap into the “plane of dreams” if it moves from the actual object to the periphery. Thus, pure duration can be achieved – i.e. *time* can be *regained*. The more one’s consciousness detaches itself from the present (the plane of actions), the farther it is relegated from homogenous and calculable time, where objects and moments are separated one from another. In the very pit it finds a unified, indivisible, heterogeneous flow, in which memories merge. To quote “The Gift”:

“He walked on toward the shop, but what he had just seen (the sky’s reflection across a dresser with mirror. – *D.B., A.L.*] – whether because it had given him a kindred pleasure or because it had taken him unawares and jolted him (as children in the hayloft fall into the resilient darkness) – released in him that pleasant something which for several days now had been at the murky bottom of his every thought, taking possession of him at the slightest provocation: my collection of poems has been published; and when, as now, his mind tumbled like this, that is, when he recalled the fifty-odd poems that had just come out, he would skim in an instant the entire book, so that in the instantaneous mist of its madly accelerated music one could not make any readable sense of the flicking lines – the familiar words would rush past, swirling amid violent foam (whose seething was transformed into a mighty flowing motion if one fixed one’s eyes on it, as we used to do long ago, looking down at it from a vibrating mill bridge until the bridge turned into a ship’s stem: farewell!) — and this foam, and this flickering, and a separate verse that rushed past all alone, shouting in wild ecstasy from afar, probably calling him home, all of this, together with the creamy white of the cover, was merged in a blissful feeling of exceptional purity. What am I doing! he thought, abruptly, coming to his senses” (Nabokov, 2002, p. 194).

Let us try to outline the principle of this ascension to a memory in Bergson’s view. According to him, a memory is actualized step by step, passing

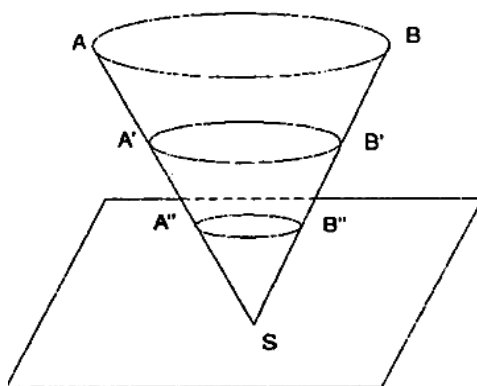
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<sup>9</sup> Compare with “Texture of Time”: “...retrospective image (as seen apart from material restoration) shimmers in an imaginary space” (Nabokov, 2022, p. 545).

<sup>10</sup> The correlation between memory and imagination is beyond the scope of this article. However, it must be noted that Blumbaum, for instance, may have not been totally right when he indicated a discrepancy between Bergson and Nabokov concerning this issue (Blumbaum, 2007). If one bears in mind the fact that Bergson continuously used the word *imagination* synonymously with *dream* and directly underlined that pure memory “imagines” as far as it produces representations (Bergson, 1992, p. 255), one should see that this understanding is close to Nabokov’s: “I would say that imagination is a form of memory”. The difficulty in interpreting this concept lies in Bergson’s occasional use of *imagination* in its Kantian sense, meaning the faculty of mind to combine the impressions of the senses into a transcendental synthesis. Nevertheless, that Bergson considered pure memory the memory that imagines is certain.

through different planes of consciousness. It corresponds to “growing efforts of intellectual expansion”, by means of which memory “reflects upon the object a growing number of suggested images” (Bergson, 1992, p. 268). Expanding to ever widening zones of reality, our attention also grasps more and more memories, and thus our consciousness reaches the stage at which memories become indistinguishable. They are always in formation but never are formed, they flow continuously and know no interruption. This *duration* becomes a boundary to any definition. But when our consciousness tries to localize (define) a memory, it is able to capture only immovable concepts, depriving time of its vitality. That is why our consciousness must preserve its initial syncretic dynamism, which is *duration*.

In order to explain the matter, let us take a picture from “Matter and Memory” (Bergson, 1992, p. 262). An inverted cone, its apex downward, is expanding to an infinite nebulosity of memories with its base. The cone’s sharp apex is aimed at the point of our action (point S), whereas the ascension to a memory is directed from the apex towards the base AB (Figure). If we use the picture, the demonstration of a memory being retrieved from the past might become distinctly easier.



Actualization of memory

For a memory to be introduced into one’s active perception one needs “shining points”, or “dominant memories <...> round which the others form a vague nebulosity” (Bergson, 1992, p. 267). In the case of the given example the image of the collection of poems (A’’B’’) is a such “shining point” – but even it appears only under the influence of another memory. It is the “blindingly white parallelogram of sky” (A’’’B’’’) having “given him a kindred pleasure” that reminds the character of his poems (proximity by similarity of impressions). The circle then expands, adding different levels of units. Of such levels there are four, and on the final one they combine so closely as to become indistinguishable. The pharmacy (the present point S) is completely forgotten: “What am I doing!”, the narrator gasps. The level that is closest to the present (*the reflection of the sky*) invites the next one (*the publication of poems*), which brings to life the third one (*childhood*) with a passing comparison (falling into the hayloft). The third level (A’B’) expands the consciousness to the fourth one, which resides

deeply in the character's psychological becoming and features childhood, and poems, and his mother calling him home, and the river, and the bridge, and the book's cover all blending in "a violent foam" (AB). Level four is where we reach pure memory. Let us trace the whole journey: reflection of the sky (A''B'') → publication (A''B'') → childhood (A'B') → integration of levels (AB). As a matter of fact, Nabokov's metaphor – *the instantaneous mist of madly accelerated music* – describes duration quite fittingly. One's consciousness, expanding to the base, finds itself in an undifferentiated flow, which cannot be expressed by static concepts. Therefore, pure memory can be restored only if its contaminated flow is "captured" directly in its elusive stream.

### Conclusion

The restoration of time does not presuppose any *summation* of the whole entirety of separate memories that are presented in photographic rows. Nor does it imply preservation of 'moments' commonly associated with, for instance, impressionist art: impressionists never portrayed instants themselves but rather the sliding and moving of those instants, that ephemeral nature of theirs (see Nabokov's poem "The Swift"). Memories should come in an uninterrupted melody completely devoid of spatial characteristics – like a continuous line drawn from the past to the present. That is why the "panoramic vision of the past" ("hypermnnesia", according to Georges Poulet (2009)) becomes possible: the string of the past experiences gradually (albeit seemingly 'in a moment') fills the whole interval from birth to the present point.

Let us try to derive some conclusions from the last section of "The Paris Poem". There Nabokov interprets the restoration of one's internal world as a continuous untangling of memories based on their spontaneous similarity. He writes: "...but, by finding congruences with the remote, / to revisit my fountainhead, / to bend and discover in my own childhood / the end of the tangled-up thread. / And carefully then to unravel myself / as a gift, as a marvel unfurled, / and become once again the middle point / of the many-pathed, loud-throated world" (Nabokov, 2008, p. 426). The metaphor of "folding a carpet" is also related to this concept: the gap between "patterns" (similarities) is, in Nabokov's words, "the tangled-up thread". When they coincide, the melodic interval (the tread of time) between them restores.<sup>11</sup>

"Essentially virtual, it (the past. – *D.B., A.L.*) cannot be known as something past unless we *follow and adopt the movement* by which it expands into a present image, thus emerging from obscurity into the light of day", Bergson suggested (Bergson, 1992, p. 244). In "The Paris Poem" memories, like clouds, "*rush*" at the present ("straight at me"). We gradually "untangle" the whole path (the ascending syntax of the last sentence) and restore the whole line when memo-

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<sup>11</sup> This is exactly the perspective that must be applied to the following extract from "Speak, Memory": "I witness with pleasure the supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past" (Nabokov, 2008, p. 259).



ries finally are brought to the light of recognition: “...by all that sparkle and all that power / my present moment to recognize” (Nabokov, 2008, p. 426).

To sum up, Henri Bergson’s philosophy, as far as we are concerned, can provide clues for a whole range of fundamental issues that modern Nabokovians face. It is not only peripheral Nabokov’s topics (like the problems of memory and imagination, impaired perception, etc.) that can be understood in light of Bergsonism but also his major ones. The last frontier of the writer’s work (and here his infatuation with Proust makes an obvious difference), the integration and restoration of time preserved in pure memory, can be most effectively viewed through Bergson’s lens. Thus, on our premise, the actual “restoration of time” presupposes the restoration of an ascending continuous *movement* of pure memories.

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**Bio notes:**

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