

## The Chronotope of “Remembrance” in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Mashenka* and in Grigol Robakidze’s *The Snake’s Skin*

Violeta Avetisian  
Ilia State University  
Tbilisi, Georgia  
[viola\\_av@yahoo.com](mailto:viola_av@yahoo.com)

### Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977) and Grigol Robakidze (1880–1962) are major modernist writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Both of them spent most of their lives in exile and never managed to return home. Their writings were strictly forbidden in the Soviet Russia, becoming available only after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Nabokov was born in Russia, Saint-Petersburg in 1899. In 1917, his life radically changed. After the 1917 February Revolution and Bolshevik Revolution, the Nabokovs were forced to flee Russia. In 1922–1937, Nabokov lived in Berlin, where he published his literary works under pen name of “V. Sirin.” He was known among Russian émigrés. After publishing *Lolita*, in 1955, he became world-famous writer. At that time he lived and worked in America. The last sixteen years of his life Nabokov lived in Switzerland.

Grigol Robakidze was born in 1880, in the village of Sviri, in the western Georgia (at that time – Kutaisi Guberniya of Russian Empire). In 1918, when Georgia became independent, he took part in the national-liberation movement. In 1919, Robakidze got a diplomatic post and represented Georgia as the secretary of the Delegation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia in Paris Peace Conference. In 1921, Soviet Russia took control of Georgia and Georgia lost its independence. In 1931, Robakidze had to flee from his homeland because of his political views. He lived and worked in Germany. The last seventeen years of his life Robakidze spent in Switzerland.

To a great extent, emigration determined these writers’ lives and influenced their world view. Nabokov and Robakidze always kept the image of their motherland in their memories. In most of their works, they are the prototypes of the protagonists. Both writers published their first novels in 1926. Their first novels are autobiographical. Nabokov wrote *Mashenka* while he was living in Berlin. The idea of writing *The Snake’s Skin* came to Robakidze during his trip to Iran in 1917. At that time Robakidze was not in exile but I think that he foresaw his future and *The Snake’s Skin* proves this.

My paper is based on the research carried out on the chronotope of “remembrance,” one of the main chronotopes in the present novels. The main purpose of my study is to determine and compare the role of this chronotope in the narrative structure of the novels.

The term “chronotope” is taken from the theory of relativity, which defines time as the fourth dimension of space. Bakhtin adopted the concept to analyze temporal and spatial literary loops:

We will give the name chronotope (literally, “time space”) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.<sup>1</sup>

The main importance of the chronotope of “remembrance” is that it allows the characters to look back to their past. According to Harry Olufunwa, in the chronotope of “remembrance,” “[...] the notions of space and time are manifested quite differently from their appearance in reality. Particularly as a recollection of the past, memory appears to telescope space and time, the

---

<sup>1</sup> Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” 84.

normal spatial and temporal markers which measure these notions in reality being either absent or radically altered in memory, and as a consequence, particular events become much more marked in their significance.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Conception of Memory in *Mashenka* and *The Snake’s Skin***

In *Mashenka* and *The Snake’s Skin*, the authors use perceptual chronotopes of remembrance/recollection, dream, vision and thought. The nature of each chronotope is determined by the functions they perform. Perceptual chronotope, which is a subjective time and space, depends on the psychological processes that take place in the inner worlds of the characters. It is a form of an artistic image which defines external and internal experience of the subject. In these novels, memory, being determined as opposition of the past/present/future, helps in reproduction of the pictures from the past lives of the protagonists. The chronotope of “remembrance” contributes to display feelings and experiences of the characters in these fictions.

In Nabokov’s novel, the protagonist Lev Glebovich Ganin—a young officer, immerses in his memories when he sees Mashenka’s photo. Alone in his room, in a dirty Berlin pension, Ganin reminisces about his long-lost first love. The photo also brings back memories of Russia; in protagonist’s memory Mashenka and Russia are the two inseparable concepts. In the process of remembering “Ganin literally wakes up in his Berlin exile.”<sup>3</sup> “Like his country—a past irretrievable; no future in sight—Ganin’s state of flux allows him to find comfort in his recollections of Mary [Mashenka – V. A.], and he finds himself delving so deep that the delights of the past are much stronger than the reality of the present.”<sup>4</sup> For the character, “[i]t was not simply reminiscence but a life that was much more real, much more intense than the life lived by his shadow in Berlin. It was a marvelous romance that developed with genuine, tender care,”<sup>5</sup> – writes Nabokov.

In the novel, chronotope of “remembrance” transfers the protagonist from the physical (real) world into the metaphysical one. For the protagonist, the borders between the real world and the world of his memories are erased. In the recreation of his past, Ganin “[...] did not feel time. His shadow lived in the pension [...], he was in Russia, living through his memories, as if it was a reality. The course of his recollection, which was unfolded gradually, was the real time for him.”<sup>6</sup> “And although his affair with Mary [Mashenka – V. A.] in those far-off days had lasted not just for three days, not for a week but for much longer, he did not feel any discrepancy between actual time and that other time in which he relived the past, since his memory did not take account of every moment and skipped over the blank unmemorable stretches, only illuminating those connected with Mary [Mashenka – V. A.]. Thus, no discrepancy existed between the course of life past and life present.”<sup>7</sup> It seemed to Ganin that “[...] the past life, which was perfected, passes evenly through Berlin weekdays.”<sup>8</sup>

The main symbol that transfers the protagonist to the world of his memories is Mashenka’s photo. It should be noted that protagonist’s memory reacts not only to the visual symbols but also to some smells: “Casual odor helped Ganin vividly remember that Russian rainy August, the stream of happiness, which the shadows of his life in Berlin [...] were so annoyingly interrupting.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the space of the chronotope of “remembrance” has a rich color

---

<sup>2</sup> Olufunwa, “Achebe’s Spatial Temporalities: Literary Chronotopes in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*,” 62.

<sup>3</sup> Erofeev, “Russkaya Proza Vladimira Nabokova,” 16-17.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.booklit.com/blog/2008/05/18/vladimir-nabokov-mary/>

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Nabokov, *Mashenka*, 73.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.booklit.com/blog/2008/05/18/vladimir-nabokov-mary/>

<sup>8</sup> Nabokov, *Mashenka*, 73.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 81.

palette. All these particularities of the chronotope emphasize the positive emotions that protagonist's memories cause him.

In *Mashenka*, chronotope of “remembrance” has a chronological order. The protagonist relived the last nine years of his life; from the maturation and the emergence of his primary emotions, dating Mashenka and his arrival in Berlin. Ganin, actually, passes this way again, from the beginning to the end. At the time, the way is mentally coming to the end Ganin realizes that his love for Mashenka no longer exists. Finally, the character has exhausted the memories of his first love and continues his way to the future.

The plot of *The Snake's Skin* is quite complex and confusing. In the novel, Robakidze presents his philosophical reflections on the theme of emigration and exile. The protagonist is a young man Archibald Mekeshi. He is away from his motherland – Georgia. His life is a continuous torture; his father's image and shadows from the past are following him everywhere. It is difficult for the character to get rid of the pain they bring to his life. At the end of the novel, the author returns the protagonist to his motherland. Archibald “gets roots,” – he finds peace, and starts living in the reality, and not in the history of his family.

It should be noted that mythical realism and Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy, especially, the doctrine of “eternal recurrence/return” had a great impact on Robakidze's worldview. Archibald's state can be explained by Nietzsche's words, who thought that in the modern era, the main problem of a man is “the loss of roots.”<sup>10</sup>

Narrative space of *The Snake's Skin* consists of the two worlds: the real world, and the world of Archibald's memories. The story takes place in 1917, but the memories of the protagonist—his mental flashbacks—transfer the action to the distant past. Thus the space and time borders of the story are considerably expanded. The most part of the plot is assigned to the description of the protagonist's condition, who is wandering in a maze of his memories, visions, thoughts, and dreams about the history of his family. Obviously, the chronotope of “remembrance” is the main chronotope in *The Snake's Skin*. Very often, there are no borders between the space of the chronotope of “remembrance” and the rest narrative space of the novel.

Similar to Nabokov's fiction, there are some symbols that contribute to the emergence of memories in *The Snake's Skin*. The main symbols that transfer Archibald Mekeshi from the physical world to the metaphysical one is his father's photo, letters, manuscripts about the history of his family, Georgian music, songs, dance and the word “father” (said by somebody). When Archibald remembers, he “[...] immerses in the history of his family: he dives into an abyss.”<sup>11</sup>

Similar to Nabokov's protagonist, Robakidze's protagonist returns to the past when he feels a familiar smell. Robakidze writes: “Even a layer of a ground has smell of the past. Only by smell, the past can be experienced. You cannot perceive it otherwise. The past can be only returned by a sense of its flavor.”<sup>12</sup>

The chronotope of “remembrance” in *The Snake's Skin*, in contrast to Nabokov's novel, has no chronology. Nabokov's protagonist plunges into his past and then comes back to the present. Robakidze's protagonist plunges into the past and is lost there. Ganin's memory takes him from the present to the past, and then it is gradually bringing him back to the present. Mekeshi's memory throws him to the labyrinth of his memories of the past and is keeping him there for a long time. It is important for Archibald Mekeshi to find his father, whom he has not seen from his childhood. At the end of the story, Robakidze brings the protagonist to his motherland – Georgia. At last, Mekeshi finds his father—he finds his “roots” (a symbol of relationship to land), so he finds himself in this world.

---

<sup>10</sup> Fridrikh Nicshe, *Sochineniya v dvukh tomakh*, t. 1. 149.

<sup>11</sup> Robakidze, *Zmeinaya rubashka*, # 4, 72.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*, # 1, 13.

## Conclusion

In both novels, chronotope of “remembrance” is the main chronotope. The principal way in which memory is represented in the novels is through the analepsis (flashback). In both stories, the chronotope of “remembrance”:

[...] acquires the characteristics of other chronotopes in addition to its own. It takes on the journey element of the road chronotope, representing as it does movement back and forth over time and in space; it resembles the chronotope of encounter because it involves a meeting between the present and the recalled past [...]; it also takes on the characteristics of the threshold chronotope, since memory straddles the recollection of the past, the understanding of the present and the anticipation of the future.”<sup>13</sup>

I think, Nabokov and Robakidze made their heroes live with memories of their past because of a great nostalgia the writers felt for their motherland. In *Mashenka*, the chronotope of “remembrance” is Nabokov’s wish to “rebuild” in his consciousness his “Russian years,” i.e., bring back the “lost paradise.” But, according to the novel, we can suppose that for Nabokov something once lost is lost forever.

According to *The Snake’s Skin*, a person can only be happy when she/he lives in their homeland. But, Archibald Mekeshi’s memories are not his cry for the past; they are his way to the future, i.e., to Georgia.

## Bibliography

- Bakhtin, M. M. “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel.” In *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Translated by Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.
- Erofeyev, Victor. “Russkaya Proza Vladimira Nabokova.” In *Vladimir Nabokov. Sbornik sochinenii v chetiryekh tomakh*, t. 1. 3-33. Moskva: Pravda, 1990.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Mashenka*. Sbornik sochinenii v chetiryekh tomakh, t. 1. Moskva: Pravda, 1990.
- Nicshe, Fridrikh. *Sochineniya v dvukh tomakh*, t. 1. Literaturnie pamyatniki. Sostavlenie, redakciya, vstupitel’naya stat’ya i primechanie K. A. Svasiyana. Moskva: Mysl, 1990.
- Olufunwa, Harry. “Achebe’s Spatial Temporalities: Literary Chronotopes in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*,” *Critical Survey* 17, no. 3 (2005): 62. Accessed February 26, 2013. [http://www.isd300.k12.mn.us/HS/HS\\_DEPT/English/Kris\\_Sandy/College%20in%20the%20Schools/Achebe%20Literary%20Chronotropes.pdf](http://www.isd300.k12.mn.us/HS/HS_DEPT/English/Kris_Sandy/College%20in%20the%20Schools/Achebe%20Literary%20Chronotropes.pdf)
- Robakidze, Grigol. *Zmeinaya rubashka*. Pervod K. Korinteli. *Literaturnaya Gruzija* 1-4. Tbilisi: Samshoblo, 1991.
- Vladimir Nabokov: Mary*. Accessed March 20, 2013. <http://www.booklit.com/blog/2008/05/18/vladimir-nabokov-mary/>

---

<sup>13</sup> Olufunwa, 61.