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Framing Objects: Narrative Museumization of Objects in Vladimir Nabokov and Orhan Pamuk

Orhan Pamuk has time and again named Vladimir Nabokov as one of his favourite writers and various critics will attest to his indebtedness to the Russian writer. This paper aims to look at the way Nabokov and Pamuk frame objects in their narratives as **artefacts** to be conserved, as **museum pieces**. The historical weight, **fragility** and **'transparency'** of these objects are themes in both writers' novels and particularly in their autobiographical works. In *Istanbul: Memories of a City*, Pamuk introduces us to the **'museum house'** of their family apartment with its epistemologically charged objects. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov lets the reader know that the objects, and indeed the people he encountered in his childhood make their way into his fiction; that whole **paragraphs** are woven around a single object. Thus, for both writers the narrative, and indeed books in their entirety become a museum of things that both authors hold dear and want to preserve, and style becomes a method of framing.

For both Nabokov and Pamuk, the past is really a different country; their countries of origin had a change of system in the beginning of the 20th century, Russia becoming a soviet, and Turkey a republic. Nabokov is on the other side of this divide; while he has experienced at first hand the way his country was before in the period of the Russian empire, and having fled has no experience of how it is at the time of his writing; Pamuk, on the other hand has no experience of how it was and yet tries to imagine how it might have been, as he is very much embedded in the present state of things in Turkey. However both writers treat objects as 'transparent things' in an effort to reconstruct in narrative the context in which they were produced, the meaning they had for their owners, and indeed, for those who encounter them much later, in other spaces.

In Nabokov's fiction Russia is mostly represented through the memories of its emigres- it is only in *Speak, Memory* that he goes into detail about the everyday events and objects of the Russia of his childhood. Russia makes an appearance in *Pale Fire* as well, in a phantasmagorical sense, as Zembla, with an array of objects and people identifiable as parodies of objects and people of Tsarist Russia. For Pamuk, almost every object encountered in Istanbul, whether in his novels *The Silent House* or *The Black Book* (which are not set in Ottoman times) has an Ottoman story tell. And indeed, books like *The White Castle* and *My Name is Red* are directly set in Ottoman times, with again, a lot of attention given to everyday objects.

Pamuk's penchant for collecting 'things' and looking at them in narrative is given full flight in *Istanbul: Memories of a City*. It is an autobiographical book, charting the author's relationship with the city and in which the objects themselves, along with where he encounters them, play the role of lieu de memoir. He speaks particularly at length about the family apartment block he grew up in and his way of conveying to the reader his family's republican world view, is to itemize the objects he remembers from this 60's home:

But it wasn't just the unplayed pianos; in each apartment there was also a locked glass cabinet displaying Chinese porcelains, teacups, silver sets, sugar bowls, snuff boxes, crystal glasses, rosewater pitchers, plates and censers which no one ever touched, [...] the turban shelves on which there were no turbans, and the Japanese and Art Nouveau screens behind which nothing was hidden [...] Sitting rooms were not meant to be places where you could hope to sit comfortably; they were like little museums designed to demonstrate to a hypothetical visitor that the householders were Westernised. A person who was not fasting during Ramazan would perhaps suffer fewer pangs of conscience amongst these glass cupboards and dead pianos than he might be if he were sitting cross-legged in a room full of cushions and divans. Although everyone knew it as a freedom from the laws of Islam, no one was quite sure what else Westernisation was good for.¹²

These locked glass cabinets still survive in some Turkish households and reveal a national craze to display- but to display in such a way that forbids interaction with the object. Pamuk's fascination with these glass cabinets can prepare us for the display method that he chooses for the museum that he has actually built in 2012. It is interesting that the envisaged visitor in the above paragraph is the European visitor, but the republican mystique he describes here has already become a thing of the past, and it is now the contemporary Turkish reader looking at this constricted space of the 60's with all its absences and desires to make sense of the earlier years of the republic when religion was pushed to the margins with great effort. This apartment is then, with its glass cabinets and shelves, a blueprint for a museum of the republic and of republican values.

Nabokov's description of his family's drawing room in Tsarist Russia, *Vyra* provides a parallel to Pamuk's homage to the above description of the drawing room that is almost uncanny with its absences. Nabokov's description of *Vyra* provides a vivid contrast to the insipid interior of the Pamuk apartment, and ends with an explanation as to how he preserves these objects in his narrative:³

Some more about that drawing room, please. The gleaming white moldings of the furniture, the embroidered roses of its upholstery. The white piano. The oval mirror. Hanging on taut cords, its pure brow inclined, it strives to retain the falling furniture and a slope of bright floor that keep. The chandelier pendants. These emit a delicate tingling (things are being moved in the upstairs room where Mademoiselle will dwell). Coloured pencils. Their detailed spectrum advertised on the box but never completely represented by those inside (100-101)

¹ Pamuk, *Istanbul*, pp.9-10. Fasting does indeed seem to be a divisive issue when it comes to constructing contemporary Istanbul criteria. In the last couple of decades, Ramadan activities have become one of the signs of rising Ottomanism, during this fasting period various 're-enactments' of Ottoman Istanbul are staged throughout the town.

² 48-49 During our last two Cambridge years, my brother and I used to spend vacations in Berlin, where our parents with the two girls and ten-year-old Kirill occupied one of those large, gloomy, eminently bourgeois apartments that I have let to so many émigré families in my novels and short stories.

³ . Nabokov's description also has that uncanny, unheimlich feeling, not because of the strange use given to things, but because these objects are simulacra of what they would've been in Russia:

Alas, these pencils, too, have been distributed among the characters in my books to keep fictitious children busy: they are not quite my own now. Somewhere, in the apartment house of a chapter, in the hired room of a paragraph, I have also placed that tilted mirror, and the lamp, and the chandelier drops

One may find them in a 'hired room' indeed, object inhabit paragraphs like lodgers, or indeed, as pieces that can be loaned from one museum to another. He remembers a story from his childhood entitled the Headless Horseman and describes a female character from it:

Her twin breasts sinking and swelling in quick, spasmodic breathing, her twin breasts, let me reread, sinking and swelling, her lorgnette directed...

That lorgnette I found afterward in the hands of Madame Bovary, and later Anna Karenin had it, and then it passed into the possession of Chekhov's lady with the Lapdog and was lost by her on the pier at Yalta. When Louise held it, it was directed toward the speckled shadows under the mesquites, where the horsemen of her choice was having an innocent conversation with the daughter of a wealthy haciendado Dona Isidora Covarubio de los Llanos[...] 202

Thus, the eternal and fictional lorgnette, as it were, changes hands between these characters, housed in various novels. It is also a good reminder that fictional objects also have their own materiality, which has an importance resonance for Pamuk who builds a museum out of physical correspondences of fictional objects.

Pamuk's novel *Museum of Innocence* is one such novel that takes this preservation of fictional objects to its teleological sense; Pamuk ends up building the museum that is foretold in the novel and reveals what happens when this fascination with objects, tagging and preservation is taken to teleological ends. In his Istanbul memoir, Pamuk already gives the signals that he is interested in houses that function as museums and in his novel *Museum of Innocence*, he gives full vent to this fancy and conceives of the whole novel as somebody's project of a museum. Orhan Pamuk, as a fictional author, narrates the story of Kemal, who is obsessively, indeed, allegorically in love with Füsün. In the narrative Kemal describes and then collects certain of her possessions, and then hands them over to the fictional author Pamuk, who then fulfills the will by building the museum he has promised to Kemal. The novel opens with a description of their lovemaking and at the same time prepares the reader for the collecting obsession he will have later and how he will make use of these pieces:

I softly bit her ear, her earring must have come free and, for all we knew, hovered in midair before falling of its own accord. Our bliss was so profound that we went on kissing, heedless of the fall of the earring, whose shape I had not even noticed [...] When we met the next day, Füsün told me she had lost one of her earrings. Actually, not long after she had left the preceding afternoon, I'd spotted it nestled in the blue sheets, her initial dangling at its tip, and I was about to put it aside when, by a strange compulsion, I slipped it into my pocket

This is the beginning of the obsession and the compulsive need for preservation of the beloved's things, with a few nods to Lolita. Pamuk has no qualms about pushing the Nabokovian references to its limits. Füsün earring, which is not described to the full in text, is made flesh in the shape of a butterfly in the museum. The museum is full of everyday objects in the shape of butterflies and indeed, the entry ticket has a stylized butterfly on it as well. The objects are displayed in wooden boxes with one glass display front, not unlike the glass cabinets Pamuk talks about in his Istanbul memoirs, and indeed, not unlike the ones used by butterfly collectors. In various interviews Pamuk has said that this set up of wooden boxes made it easier for the museum to travel⁴ as well, so international exposure is planned from its very inception.

The fictional obsession for a girl and a museum designed for her, spawns a novel, spawns a real museum, spawns a museum catalogue in which Pamuk assumes the voice of his fictionalized author-self, the author-self who witnessed Kemal's story and put it on paper. The museum catalogue named *The Innocence of Things*, takes us through the creation of the museum, how Pamuk (both as fictional author-self and possibly as real self) looked for things in junk shops that looked like the things that Fusün and her family used:⁵

It would not be a long stretch of the imagination to suggest that when looking for these pieces of everyday objects and jewellery, Pamuk would've come across pieces pawned in Istanbul by the Russians who fled after the revolution- Nabokov family's ship also went through Istanbul, though it appears they never disembarked. Nabokov in *Speak Memory* conjures up his mother's ring, Russian jewellery, which are the prized possessions of many museums across Europe, including the ones in Istanbul. Revisiting the image of the ring, once connected to precious time alone with the mother, observing her hands while she read her bedtime stories, Nabokov cannot but acknowledge what misery that ring will have to accompany. It is laden with a lot of meaning, and he tries to convey to the reader as many of those layers as possible.

Her words would be spaced portentously, and before turning the page she would place upon it her hand, with its familiar pigeon-blood ruby and diamond ring (within the limpid facets of

⁴ Nabokov's travel case

⁵ I was not much concerned with the first box which was to display the earring that Fusün dropped, but the great problem that I was to face when building the museum appeared immediately with the second box that*. What kind of logic or composition was I to use when placing the objects in the boxes? What shape would the box have? 61The museum builder's trials and tribulations has been documented in Pamuk's memoir, in the person of Koçu the encyclopedist, to whom Pamuk devotes an entire chapter. Koçu is, like Pamuk, an Istanbul lover who devoted his entire life to compiling an encyclopedia of Istanbul (encyclopedist are many in Pamuk's fiction), particularly information of a curious kind, like urban legends and strange inhabitant. Koçu starts as a collector:147-148 It was only after he realized that his collection might have no bounds that he hit on the idea of an encyclopedia, and from then he remained aware of the thingness of his collection. When Professor Semavi Eyice [...] wrote about Koçu after his death, he described his large library piled high with 'material' he kept in envelopes- newspaper cuttings, collections of pictures and photographs, dossiers and notes [...] Unable to synthesize the sad story of the past into a text or to enshrine it in a museum, Koçu spent his last years in an apartment piled high with mountains of paper.

which, had I been a better crystal-gazer, I might have seen a room, people, lights, trees in the rain- a whole period of émigré life for which that ring was to pay). 81

Thus Nabokov reveals the timeless nature of inanimate, everyday objects and their force as lieu de memoir: the ring contains both the memory of his childhood nights, and the tribulations they will have to face as a family in exile. Indeed, as Pamuk's protagonist says as he remembers how he found and pocketed his beloved's earring, he says it was the happiest moment of his life and he did not know it. This looking back, through the object, conflates the present self with the past self, and the past's happiness is tainted because it was not appreciated at the time as it should have been.

When Nabokov talks about the group of emigres trying to forge Russian lives away from their motherland in European capitals, the metaphors he uses reveal that he regards the Russia of his childhood as an already inaccessible civilization, except for the small efforts of these emigres:

I suppose it would be easy for a detached observer to poke fun at all those hardly palpable people who imitated in foreign cities a dead civilization, the remote, almost legendary, almost Sumerian mirages of St. Petersburg and Moscow 1900-1916 (which even then, in the twenties and thirties, sounded like 1916-1900 bc) (282)

Indeed, although not quite so old, inaccessibility makes the Sumerian and Tsarist civilizations as equally remote artifacts (as Nabokov says, the Moscow of the beginning of the 20th century already sounded as if BC) of history to be displayed in a museum.⁶

One such item, pieced together as if it were indeed a relic from Sumerian times, and an item that would not look out of place in Pamuk's museum is a reimaged/reconstructed vase in Nabokov's *Speak Memory*. Before they leave for the States, Nabokov and his wife and son take a stroll on the beach. This is a meaning-laden farewell to the continent, because the shores the family comb will be entirely different, across the Atlantic:

I do not doubt that among those slightly convex chips of majolica ware found by our child there was one whose border of scroll-work fitted exactly, and continued, the pattern of a fragment I had found in 1903 on the same shore, and that the two tallied with a third my mother had found on that Mentone beach in 1882, and with a fourth piece of the same pottery that had been found by *her* mother a hundred years ago- and so on, until this assortment of parts, if all had been preserved, might have been put together to make the complete, the absolutely complete, bowl,

⁶ Like the ring, objects and places that are connected to his mother are very prominent in the book. Nabokov lets the reader know that he learnt to remember and to preserve from his mother, and indeed, her injunctions are nothing short of instructions as how to preserve objects and places in memory, revealing a poetics of museumization: P40 Vot zapomni [now remember] she would say in conspiratorial tones as she drew my attention to this or that loved thing in Vyra [] As if feeling that in a few years the tangible part of her world would perish, she cultivated an extraordinary consciousness of the various time marks distributed throughout our country place. She cherished her own past with the same retrospective fervor that I now do her image and my past. Thus, in a way, I inherited a simulacrum- the intangible property, unreal estate- and this proved a splendid training for the endurance of later losses. Her special tags and imprints became as dear and as sacred to me as they were to her.

broken by some Italian child, God knows where and when, and now mended by *these* rivets of bronze. (308-309)

Nabokov finishes the book with this museum piece, broken but pieced together by a sheer will of connecting the various generations of Nabokovs together. He decides which piece fits where and provides the tag and history of the object as he would have it be. I suggest his wistful 'if all had been preserved' should give enough of an encouragement to Nabokov fans to build a 'Museum of Innocence' in an apartment in St. Petersburg. The innocence in the title of Pamuk's *Museum of Innocence*, refers, I believe, more than anything, to the good intent that we are prone to attribute to things that have faded and no longer have any power- like police badges or even communist party books that are sold as memorabilia. I wonder if in that sense Pamuk can be said to be creating a republican mystique. Indeed, we have entered, in this age where ideologies and capital is multi or supranational, a period in which one is already nostalgic for republican memorabilia, the kind that Pamuk depicts so well in his Istanbul memoir, and physically displays even more eloquently in the physical 'Museum of Innocence'. The museum asks us to find the innocence in these objects: inanimate things that are made to bear meanings by their owners and viewers.

Both Nabokov and Pamuk are interested the space within which an object has been encountered, and how to find ways to re-house that object so that some of the original constellation can be preserved both for the story-teller and his audience. Nabokov settles for the narrative form – if narratives like *Pale Fire* can be called settlement- whereas Pamuk takes tagging and historicizing objects to another level, by preserving things that were encountered not so much by himself, but by his characters. Both efforts point to a fascination with the material world, and the oblique preservation of a past the writers have little access to.

Carry on whose legacy for whom