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## Playing with the Other: The Stories of Mu Xin and Vladimir Nabokov

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Graduate Program in Comparative Literature  
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts  
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PLAYING WITH THE OTHER:  
THE STORIES OF MU XIN AND VLADIMIR NABOKOV

(Spine title: Playing with the Other)

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Meng Wu

Graduate Program in Comparative Literature

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO  
School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

**CERTIFICATE OF EXAMINATION**

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**Meng Wu**

entitled:

**Playing with the Other:  
The Stories of Mu Xin and Vladimir Nabokov**

is accepted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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August 20, 2012

Date

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Jonathan Boulter

Chair of the Thesis Examination Board

## Abstract

This thesis studies the play of the Other in Vladimir Nabokov's short story collection *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* and Mu Xin's short story collection *An Empty Room*. Friedrich Nietzsche's theory on the genealogy of morality provides a framework for the research. This thesis explores the two writer's representation of the other time, the other space, and the self as another, and extends the analysis in the thematic contexts of exile and memory. Examining how Nabokov and Mu Xin cope with "differences" arising in human existence, this thesis argues that such differences are fundamental to their artistic creation. By accommodating the Other in their fictional writing, Nabokov and Mu Xin free the self from temporal, spatial and cultural constraints.

## Keywords

Mu Xin; Vladimir Nabokov; the Other; short fiction; *On the Genealogy of Morality*; *An Empty Room*; *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Călin-Andrei Mihăilescu, my thesis supervisor, for his continuous encouragement and instruction. Without his constructive criticism, I would not have been able to develop this thesis project from a vague idea into its present form.

I extend my gratitude to all faculty members, fellow students and Weldon librarians who have motivated, inspired and supported my research in various ways during the past two years.

Special thanks go to Mr. Dan Murphy, who offered generous help upon my first arriving in Canada, and to Ms. Jillian Slawich, whose friendship has made the Forest City a delightful home.

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## Introduction

When Mu Xin 木心 (1927-2011) passed away in Wuzhen, Zhejiang last winter, admirers mourned for the loss of Chinese literature. Despite his decades-long literary career dating back to the 1940s and his established fame among Chinese diasporic intellectuals in New York since the 1980s, he has been a largely neglected literary figure for various sociopolitical reasons. Most of his works were published in the last five years of his life. Among these works is *An Empty Room*, a short story collection translated into English by Toming Jun Liu and published by New Directions in April, 2011, eight months before his death. Critics such as Chen Danqing 陈丹青 believe that Mu Xin is still a much underestimated, understudied writer. Although Mu Xin's contribution to Chinese literature is an ongoing issue for discussion, it has been widely acknowledged that all his life he firmly rejected ideological thinking in his artistic creation, and, in so doing, he has defended the dignity of art and literature (Chen; qtd in Lin).

Mu Xin's non-ideological writing, his legendary exile, and his thriving creativity in a foreign land, have inspired critics to parallel him with other diasporic writers such as Milan Kundera and Vladimir Nabokov. Mu Xin's intense interest in the quest of the Other in his literary endeavor draws him closer to Nabokov. Meanwhile, Mu Xin's exclusive use of short fiction coincides with Nabokov's high opinion on the short genre. Nabokov calls short fiction "a small Alpine form," and he demonstrates the same concerns and employs the same resources in longer and shorter fictions (Parker

69).

Mu Xin has stated in various places that he wrote fiction in order to enjoy the lives of others, and that he got his first impulse to write stories from his early encounter with the theatre, where he was thrilled to find that one could transcend the tediousness of everyday life as a character in the fictional world (Mu Xin, "Preface" 1-5). Similarly, Nabokov places great importance on the Other in his fiction. He regards his fictional characters as something "outside" his "inner self." He creates characters different from the self, "like the mournful monsters of a cathedral façade—demons placed there merely to show they have been booted out" (*Strong* 19). For Mu Xin and for Nabokov, fiction is the way to explore alternative possibilities of life.

This thesis consists of three chapters. Chapter I analyzes the omnipresence of spatial and temporal play in the short stories of Nabokov and Mu Xin, which leads to the play of the self. Chapter II and Chapter III further discuss the issue of the other time, the other space and the self as another within two thematic frames: exile and memory, two motifs in the literary works of these two writers. My analysis will incorporate textual readings of Mu Xin's and Nabokov's representative short stories, as well as their works of literary criticism. Through a discussion in three parts, I will explore the significance the Other in the artistic world created by Mu Xin and Nabokov in short fiction. In varied ways of playing, these two writers embrace the Other and enrich their literary identities. Thereby, they affirm life in every moment and in every geographical, cultural and social niche.



The question of the Other is a recurring concern for diasporic writers in particular. Diaspora naturally brings out in them an experience of differences. An individual can cope with such differences in two ways: either by holding on to the impression of sameness, secured by the nostalgic thoughts of a homeland, or by enjoying the differences and dispersing the self. For those who reject differences, diaspora is a withering experience, while, for those who are open to the Other, diaspora is a journey of the pollen: it expects a new life at each unexpected temporal or spatial stop.

The main literary corpus of this research consists of two short story collections: *An Empty Room* (2011) by Mu Xin, and *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (1996). There exists a rich body of scholarship on Nabokov's short fiction, which has become an integral branch of his scholarship since the 1960s. By then Nabokov had been widely acknowledged as an important novelist. The publication of *Lolita* in 1955 attracted scholastic attention to previous literary works of Nabokov, largely his short stories. The (re)discovery of Nabokov as a short story writer in the West, as well as the high artistic value of his short prose, generated much research in this field. In the following three decades, various scholars contributed insight into the narrative techniques and thematic paradigms of Nabokovian stories. The theme of the Other, along with memory, exile, and obsession, emerged as a major theme for study.

Vladimir E. Alexandrov was among the first scholars to study the theme of the Other in Nabokov. His 1991 book, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, is a thorough examination of Nabokov's spatial play in relation to otherness. Alexandrov mainly used Nabokov's novels as texts for analysis. His student, Maxim D. Shrayer, brought the idea of "the

other world” to further illuminate the field of Nabokov’s short story studies in his book *The World of Nabokov’s Stories* (1999).

Some scholars engage themselves in the study of the self-other relationship in Nabokov. A prominent scholar in this area is Julian Connolly. In his 1992 book, *Nabokov’s Early Fiction*, Connolly tackles his topic with a detailed discussion of issues such as autonomy, Narcissism, the use of the mask, and the quest of the other. Some other scholars focused their study on the temporal play in Nabokov, such as Yvette Louriá (1974), John Burt Foster (1993) and Hana Píchová (2002). Such studies usually make the temporal play into a part of the study of Nabokovian memory writing. These scholars introduced the idea of a Nabokovian time as an aesthetic dimension, and point at the theme of the Other in Nabokov, but the relationship between temporal and spatial play has not been fully discussed. Much remains to be said about “the other time” and “the other world,” and, finally, their relationship with the Other. Priscilla Meyer, however, in her highly distilled article on Nabokov’s short fiction, associates the theme of “the other world” with the recurring image of Orpheus in Nabokov’s short fiction, a motif that potentially blends the temporal play into the spatial one, thereby opening up the prospect of studying the Nabokovian time, space and otherness with the theme of memory and exile.

Compared with the large volume of research work on Nabokov, only a few of critical works are found on Mu Xin’s side, mainly because of his belated emergence in the public view. Mu Xin’s readership is yet to be cultivated and scholarship of his works is yet to mature. Current critical works on Mu Xin include articles in Western

media, such as *New York Times* and the *New York* magazine, dozens of articles in academic journals in mainland China, a few graduate theses, and essays of critical responses in Taiwan media. However, some renowned writers and critics are working on projects to acclaim Mu Xin's literary accomplishments, including Toming Jun Liu and Chen Danqing.

A major publication on the criticism of Mu Xin's artistic work is a 2001 volume, *The Art of Mu Xin: Landscape Paintings and Prison Notes*, edited by Alexandra Munroe. The book contains articles by Wu Hong and Richard M. Barnhart, which involve the discussion of temporal and spatial otherness as well as the artistic passion to create another world in Mu Xin's writing in relation to his paintings. The most important critical work on Mu Xin so far is done by Toming Jun Liu, a literary critic and the translator of Mu Xin's short story collection. Liu had multiple dialogues with Mu Xin on his art and literature, in which they conversed on the recurring themes of exile and memory. Liu's 2006 article offers the most profound criticism on the significance of Mu Xin as a diasporic writer. In this article, Liu places great emphasis on Mu Xin's vision of literature as a pure creation out of the artist's Dionysian desire of self dispersion. Here, Liu discusses the Nietzschean aesthetics demonstrated in Mu Xin's works. Also in this article, Liu briefly comments on Mu Xin's accommodation of the Other, but this idea is not fully developed.

This research uses Friedrich Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morality*, supplemented with thoughts from other works on Nietzsche's view of the artist and artistic creation, to build up a theoretical framework. This thesis will attempt to

demonstrate that both Nabokov and Mu Xin are value-creating artists that enrich and embrace Otherness. Through playing with the Other, these artists express their affirmation of life.

This thesis is the first thematic study of Mu Xin in comparison with a Western writer. It is my hope that it will make positive contributions to the growing scholarship on Mu Xin, and to the growing scholarship on Nabokovian studies in the Chinese context.

This research may also provide reference to contemporary Chinese writers and critics. In the past thirty years, there has been an increasing anxiety among Chinese writers about the ability of Chinese writers to exert influences upon Western readers. The unprecedented literary practice of Mu Xin and Nabokov is a valuable study sample for the genre of diasporic writing. A study of the Other in Mu Xin and Nabokov may help reveal what it means to keep artistic independence in an increasingly alienating and yet homogenizing global culture.

## Chapter I

### Space, Time and Play in the Short Fiction of Mu Xin and Nabokov

Mu Xin's short story collection *An Empty Room* starts with a text in which a child, playing with his favorite bowl, suddenly loses hold of it and drops it into the river. In the last story that the collection features, there is the recurrent image of a solitary man playing with a coin, which he flips and leaves on a tombstone, expecting an unknown person to continue the game.

In the first story, the childish play causes the loss of the bowl that represents a larger loss to the formerly carefree child: "At that moment, with the floating bowl, only my childhood vanished" (13). In the last story, a random childish act of flipping the coin leads to the discovery of love. The man perceives love as "the fated cycle" of the coin game from which "the Other... cannot break free" (140).

In both cases, the play is childish. The first one leads to a loss; the second one leads to a discovery, only that the coin player is a Nietzschean child in an adult form. Thomas Karshan summarizes the Nietzschean play by quoting from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where Nietzsche comments on the three allegorical metamorphoses of the ideal of spirit from a camel to a lion and, finally, to a child: "The camel is the load-bearing spirit, who unquestioningly carries forward the values of the past. The lion is the critical spirit, which annuls the values of the past, but cannot put new values in their place" (Karshan 34). The child, however, "is innocent and forgetful, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelling wheel, a first motion, a sacred Yes"

(Nietzsche, *Thus* 54-5). The game of creation needs such a “sacred Yes” so that the spirit “wills its own will” and “sundered from the world now wins its own world”

(*Ibid*):

In this world only play, play as artists and children engage in it, exhibits coming-to-be and passing away, structuring and destroying, without any moral additive, in forever equal innocence. Such is the game the aeon plays with itself. Transforming itself into water and earth, it builds towers of sand like a child at the seashore, piles them up and tramples them down... Not hybris but the ever self-renewing impulse to play calls new worlds into being. (Nietzsche, *Philosophy* 62; qtd. in Karshan 32)

In a lecture to a Russian literary circle in Berlin in December 1925, Nabokov commented on his “rapturous vision of play as the essence of existence” (Karshan 1):

Everything in the world plays: the blood in the veins of a lover, the sun on the water, and the musician on a violin. Everything good in life—love, nature, art and domestic puns—is play. And when we actually play—whether we throw peas at a tin battalion or approach the net barrier in tennis, what we feel in our very muscles is the essence of that play which possesses the marvelous juggler who tosses from hand to hand in an unbroken sparkling parabola—the planets of the universe.... People have played ever since they came into being. There are eras—holidays of humanity—when people become especially enamored of games. So it was Ancient Greece, in Ancient Rome, and so it is in our own Europe of today. (qtd. in Karshan 1)<sup>1</sup>

Mu Xin has subtly expressed a similar idea. In “Yikuang Pian” 《遗狂篇》 [Remains of the Wild], Mu Xin describes himself as an innocent child, laughing while playing (*Gelunbiya* 56). Many of Mu Xin’s characters desire the play. So do many characters in Nabokov’s world of fiction. This chapter will explore the art of play in Mu Xin and

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<sup>1</sup> Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Restricted Items, Box 5, Album 15, pp. 93-111; original source listed by Karshan.

Nabokov from three aspects: time, space and role-playing.

### **Play with Space**

Spatial variation is a theme shared by Mu Xin and Nabokov. Both writers have experienced drastic changes in space in their lifetimes: Nabokov was forced into exile from Russia, he traveled to West Europe and to America, and later moved to Switzerland. Similarly, Mu Xin exiled himself from China to America, and did not return his home in Wuzhen, Zhejiang until thirty years later. Such spatial changes are echoed in the fictional writing of these writers. Mu Xin's "Fong Fong No. 4" closes at the musician's departure from China to Europe, thus ending a lifetime characterized by a confused relationship with Fong Fong, a metamorphic, fascinating woman. Mu Xin's "Notes from Underground" features a Chinese artist in New York flipping through notes about his prison experience in a dungeon. In "Tomorrow, I'll Stroll No More," a solitary Chinese man strolls through the streets of Jamaica, New York, lost in reveries. Nabokov is even more at ease with the appropriation of autobiographical traces. Among the many faces of Nabokovian narrators, the face of a Russian émigré intellectual is the most distinctive. The characters in many of the Nabokovian short stories often experience transcontinental trips, such as "That in Aleppo Once" and "Spring in Fialta." An even more complicated version of the spatial hybridity, mixed with cultural hybridity can be found in Nabokov's novelistic writing. Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, for example, is a man whose father was a Swiss citizen of mixed French and Austrian descent, while Humbert, born in Paris, lives in America.

However, transnational spatial changes are of secondary importance to these writers. In Mu Xin, there are many types of spatial changes. Transnational changes are just one of the many. In his short stories, Mu Xin often represents the space as non-space. Places in Mu Xin's stories, are often vague and unidentifiable. In "Fong Fong No. 4," for example, the musician tells Fong Fong that he is going to Europe, but his destination is not mentioned. The reader is let know that the musician travels to London once, but not exactly where and for how long he stays there. Spatial indications are decidedly vague. In "The Moment When Childhood Vanished," the childhood story does not take place in a familiar space such as a family house, but rather in a place far away from the child's home. The whole family takes a trip to a temple to request blessings for their ancestors. During their stay in the temple, the child receives a gift from the master monk: a beautiful bowl. The child grows very fond of the bowl, but drops it into the river as the family returns home on a boat. The story of "Eighteen Passengers on a Bus" takes place on a bus trip, starting from the moment that a group of co-workers boarding the bus and ending with the driver steering the whole bus down to a cliff. The story of "Fellow Passengers" tracks the emotional changes that an unknown passenger experiences throughout a bus ride, as seen from the perspective of another traveler. Places in these stories all happen in a transiting space. Such space triggers stories, but does not work as a container of human memories. This kind of space is renewing as well as depleting.

In his artistic vision, Mu Xin consistently views space in transition. "The Windsor Cemetery Diary" sets the story in another non-place. This time, it is an



unnamed cemetery. The burial place for the dead, however, is endowed with life as the solitary walker and his unknown other bring their human thoughts to the cemetery, and turns it into a playground of the human will and whim. The cemetery is set against the urban background of New York, where the main character deals with his mundane affairs. The place of the urban space is rigid, stable, and lifeless, while the cemetery becomes a transiting space, where the power of life oscillates between the man and the other player. As the coin game continues, the man imagines a love story between him and his other. One winter evening, the two of them meet unexpectedly at the snow covered cemetery. The non-space, also the transiting space, has become a space of desire and of creation. In the afterword of his prose collection *Qiongmeika suixiang lu* 《琼美卡随想录》 [*Thoughts of Jamaica*] (2006), Mu Xin expresses the idea in the following way:

Somebody told me, when an environment appears to be similar to you, it is no longer healthy for you... Jamaica has been too similar to me. Health and harm are two different things. One cannot indulge the self in harmlessness and take it for healthiness... I will move out of Jamaica (169).

These words anticipate Mu Xin's moving out of Jamaica, New York and back to his hometown of Wuzhen, Zhejiang, China in 2006. Only by transiting through space can the individual keep his art alive as an art of difference, rather than a seal of homogeneity.

Nabokov, on the other hand, with all his confidence in the vital powers of play, sets up a contrast between a familiar space with specific, and often real, place names and an uncanny space that is completely unknown. Nabokov represents the present

world in which the characters live as in a liminal space, but there is also an immense world outside that space that is filled with unpredictable knowledge. Nabokov frequently sets up a frame for his characters. For example, the main character in “The Potato Elf” seldom leaves his house; the main character in “The Aurelian” long desires a world trip to complete his lepidopterist collection, but is confined to his unsuccessful business in a small store. In “Ultima Thule,” Nabokov represents life as the familiar and limited space, and death as the unknown and borderless space.

Nabokov’s early short fiction often deals with the theme of a lost Russia. In “A Visit to the Museum,” written in 1938, he represents the desire of returning to Russia as being fulfilled in a cruel way. The narrator of the story is a Russian émigré in France. Upon the request of a friend, he pays a visit to a museum to purchase a portrait for the friend. While taking a walk with the curator, the narrator loses his way, and finds himself in a maze, as the small province-town museum seems to be expanding. The narrator finally makes his way out, but is startled by the view outside. He is no longer in the landscape of France, but surrounded by familiar, snow-covered houses and streets in Russia. He then realizes, to his horror, that this place, despite the memory of the same buildings, is not the Russia in his memory, the Russia he lived in as a child, but the present day Soviet Russia. He has returned to his home country, where he is now homeless. The first half of the story, located in France, the present space of the narrator, is presented realistically. The second half of the story becomes fantastic. Nabokov’s rupturing of the realistic and the fantastic amounts to a narrative break between the two kinds of space, with little or no linkage between them.

The end of the 1930s saw a linguistic transition in Nabokov's literary career. He had to make a decision as to which language he would continue writing in. "A Visit to the Museum" is one of the last stories he wrote in Russian. His narrative techniques were yet to develop, but the theme of a lost Russia had been established, and in this short story he laid the base tone of the theme that would become recurrent in his future writing, namely, Russia, yet a Russia that was not the homeland; rather it was the land of the Other. The homeland in "Museum" does not welcome the returned émigré with a warm embrace, but confronts him with a cold darkness. This unexpected trip to Russia is, for the narrator, the descent to Hell.

What links vague, transiting space in Mu Xin and the uncanny space in Nabokov is the common theme of the other space. In "The Moment When Childhood Vanished," the first setting is the temple on the mountain; the second, a boat on the river. The family comes to the temple from far away home in order to get "*shu-tou*," the blessing for their ancestors. The Buddhist temple, in its reclusive nature, is the other space for the secular visitors, and *shu-tou*, destined to go to the dead, further points to the space of the Other. As part of the ritual of *shu-tou*, the monks read about the blessing for the ancestors. The child notices that there is an imagined mail address in the *shu-tou* so that the ancestors could receive the blessing. The child finds the practice amusing. He brags to his mother about his knowledge regarding *shu-tou*, and his mother comments that it is more important for him to know the way home. This is a portentous comment, an indication that the child will lose his way "home" and will be captured in the space characterized by loss. As the adult voice of the narrator

implies, the child will have a volatile life.

The child loses his innocence as his knowledge grows. In the beginning, the child has no conception of the otherness of space. There is just one place for him in the world, i.e., home, as he often pesters his mother to go home during the stay in the temple. The child's obsession with place names also shows his desire to anchor everything to its right place. The ten-year old demonstrates—and is proud of—his extraordinary ability to name things and, especially, places. He can name seven different types of Buddhist temples: *si*, *miao*, *yuan*, *chan*, *guan*, *gong*, and *an*. The child is like Adam in Eden, until he encounters one strange case: the temple they go to does not fall into his classification of knowledge. According to his knowledge of etymology, the temple should not be called “*an*,” for this term is usually reserved for nunneries. The child is obsessed with the mistake, but no one can offer him an explanation. His mother tries to persuade him that this is just how people call it, that it is the way it is, but the child is not persuaded. The child's notion of space has been embedded with his linguistic knowledge, but now it is being challenged. The child has lived in his small world as the center of the whole family, but now he realizes there is something intrusive that does not belong to his world. The improper name stirs up chaos in the child's knowledge, but this small anarchy is simply a prelude. More chaos is waiting for the child in his future life.

Although bothered by the misnomer of the temple, the child is excited to go home and leave the boredom and confusion of the temple behind. When the family is ready to board the boat, the child remembers that he has left his favorite bowl in the temple

room and he is sullen. The mother then sends a servant back to the temple to get the bowl. The child then happily boards the boat with his family and plays with the bowl by the water. His happiness does not last long. A while later he drops the bowl into the river by accident.

The adult voice of the narrator describes the scene as “a dream from which I couldn’t wake” (13). The bowl has been taken to an unreachable space. And yet, one may wonder which world belongs to the dream, the unknown realm to which the bowl belongs, or THIS world, narrowed down to the space on this little boat. In the text, it is ambiguous. It is noteworthy how the Mother comforts the child:

Someone will find it. Even if it sinks, someone in the future will recover it as long as it doesn’t break.... Eat something. No need to think about it. When you are done with your snack, come inside for some hot tea.... Such things won’t be rare occurrences in the future.  
(13)

These words, anticipating the repetition of the loss of desired objects, sound “ominous” to the child (13). However, these words also promise the hope for the bowl to be “recovered” (13): someone from some other space or time can find the desired object’s active voice.

With the distance between the child and the bowl representing the distance from the remembering subject and the remembered object, and the river flow representing the flow of time that separates the two, the bowl in the flowing space takes an allegorical journey in time. The mother tells the child not to think about the bowl any more, implying a beginning of the journey from the loss and forgetting of the actual object; and the journey expects a symbolic reunion of the child and the bowl, brought

together by the flow of time.

The bowl as an aesthetic object is to make its repeated appearances in Mu Xin's writing, but in varied forms. In "An Empty Room," the bowl takes the form of two lost people, Liang and Mei. In the story, a lonely traveler enters a deserted house in the mountain, and in the room he discovers scattered correspondences between a man called Liang and a woman called Mei. He tries to tell the love story of the couple, and develops multiple possibilities for the narrative. He does not have a conclusion, and he is not convinced by any narrative version he has proposed, but he finds immense pleasure during the composing process. Even the bite from a flea thrills him:

Those fleas that had bitten Liang may have also bitten Mei. A poet once compared the blood of a man and a woman mixed within the living walls of a flea to a marriage temple. What a refined sentiment of tragedy! By coincidence my own blood was mixed in as well, though I was innocent. (32)

In recollection and story telling, the man joins the unknown couple artistically. The artist achieves the consummation with his art object as the blood of three people is mixed in the body of a flea. "The living walls" of a flea has become the other space.

The story of "An Empty Room" reveals the power of recollection. The traveler brings Liang and Mei to life, and restores a remote, unknown past. The traveler is, in the child's mother's words, the one that "restores" the bowl. Anyone with the artistic potentials to recollect time may experience the ecstasy experienced by the traveler in "An Empty Room."

The adult version of the child looking back at his childhood in "The Moment When Childhood Vanished" can be such an artist. The reader is provided with details

that the child is an artist: he prefers poetry to the Confucius textbooks; he rebels against his teacher's utilitarian view that poetry would corrupt the mind of a child. He loves the bowl for its azure blue color and lotus like shape and its literary implication, its reference to a beautiful line from a poem. The mother tells him that the bowl is precious because it is made of high quality material, and it is so expensive that "only a master monk can afford such extravagant gift" (10), but the child pays no attention to its monetary value or the social status of the gift giver. The child artist may be capable of accomplishing what the traveler has accomplished. Through memory of childhood, he can recollect the love and care he enjoyed as a child but was unaware of. He can recollect the aesthetic experience with the bowl and the memory of many precious people and things that the bowl will trigger: his childish love for literature, his mother, and the loving care he received from the whole family. The bowl as a physical object has vanished at that moment, but the bowl as an aesthetic object can still be restored.

### **From Space to Time**

As the blood of the two lovers and the artist join in the disagreeable body of a flea, a story is invented about the past shared by Liang and Mei. The body of the flea exudes a sublime quality: it is not only a marriage temple for the lovers, but also the marriage temple for life and art, of the past and the present, and of space and time.

The conversion from space to time through an aesthetic experience is a recurrent theme in Mu Xin. Space in Mu Xin's stories is often temporal in the final analysis. For example, in "Notes from Underground," an artist is persecuted and imprisoned in

a dungeon cell. In the utmost loneliness, he starts writing. The dungeon abolishes both time and space. The artist is unable to transcend the spatial boundary of the dungeon, but he succeeds in transcending the temporal boundary through artistic imagination. Playing with the self as an aesthetic object, the artist frees himself from the confinement of (non-)time imposed by the dungeon, and thereby minimizes the confinement of (non-)space. In a quiet yet triumphant gesture, the author gives time more privilege than space.

Time replaces space as the dominant theme in Mu Xin's "Fong Fong No. 4." The narrative of Fong Fong's life is largely episodic. In each separate period of time, Fong Fong appears as a different person, and the previous Fong Fong seems to have died. The musician, however, has preserved more continuity in his life. As Fong Fong noticed in her last visit to his place, the musician had hardly changed. It appears that he has not aged despite all the sufferings he went through. For the musician, time is more continuous than it is for Fong Fong's. The two of them are separated by time, rather than space. At the end of the story, the musician sends himself into exile. The vagueness of his journey's destination pushes the spatial change to a temporal one: there is no ending point for this journey, as there is no ending point in time. In an age that is characterized by a "rupture" in both individual and national memory, those who manage to preserve continuity are marginalized, since the majority live with discontinuity. Fong Fong is the image of discontinuity over time. The musician is the Other to Fong Fong, and he is the Other to the society in which he lives. His spatial exile is the metaphor for his temporal otherness.



In “The Windsor Cemetery Diary,” upon the main character’s last visit to the cemetery, there is a reference to childhood: “The cemetery is enveloped in white, whirling snowflakes and seems quite foreign, recalling the snowy wilderness of my now distant childhood” (145). Here space (“distance”) and time (“childhood”) embrace each other; the walker makes his way into a space-time without boundaries.

The free play between space and time is also a prevailing feature in Nabokov’s short fiction. In “A Visit to the Museum,” for example, the main character pays an unexpected visit to Soviet Russia. In a most uncanny situation, an émigré returns to his Russian homeland. He is appalled when he finds that his much-cherished childhood Russia has been ruined by the present day Communist Russia. The fear of dislocation in time is more overwhelming than the mere spatial dislocation.

An even bolder play with space-time is found in “Time and Ebb.” The story, written in 1944, is told by a ninety-year-old scientist who reflects on his first arrival in America from Europe in the 1940s. He recalls the exciting novelty of the many things he had not seen in Europe by then, such as soda parlors, airplanes and skyscrapers, and he compares them with things in the present time, the 2020s. By setting the story six years ahead of his time, Nabokov defamiliarizes the vision of America in his own time.

As Mu Xin and Nabokov have both demonstrated, only an artist can fulfill the transformation between time and space. Considering their common themes of a desired object, the other space, the other time, the quest for recollection, and the significance of artists, a narrative pattern shaped by the myth of Orpheus can provide

a productive reading of their works.

Prisilla Meyer, in her study of Nabokov's short fiction discovers Nabokov's frequent use of the Orpheus myth to structure his stories. For example, "A Visit to the Museum" can be read as the Russian émigré's descent to Hell, and the man returns from Russia the Hell without being able to bring back anyone or anything he had loved (Meyer, "Nabokov" 122). A varied version of the Orpheus myth is the story "The Return of Chorb." The titular character's wife has died in an accident on their honeymoon, resembling the death of Eurydice. The heartbroken husband backtracks to the hotel where they spent their wedding night. In remembrance of his wedding night, Chorb hires a prostitute to play the role of his wife so that he can revive the memory. When Chorb wakes up at midnight, he sees the face of the prostitute and realizes that the prostitute is his wife. In addition to the parallel structure of the tales, in both stories there are clear references to Orpheus. In "A Visit to the Museum," as the visitor walks through the museum, he sees "a bronze Orpheus" in a room full of musical instruments (*Stories* 283). In "The Return of Chorb," Nabokov indicates that outside of the window of the hotel room where Chorb spends the night with the prostitute, also in the room where he spent wedding night, there is a stone statue of Orpheus (*Stories* 153).

Meyer points out that "Chorb has succeeded in leading his wife's spirit back from the moment of her physical death to the beginning of their wedded life, succeeding where Orpheus failed" (123). Meyer attributes the success of Chorb to his indifference towards "the moral aspect" of his wife. He plays with the prostitute's

physical form, but immortalizes the spirit of his wife, which enables him to commune with the spirit in the other world (123). Chorb is an artist unlimited by the physical being. He is open to the non-physical aspect of being. The artistic power in Chorb not only enables him to access the other world, as Meyer has suggested, but also enables him to access the other time.

Nabokov returns to the Orpheus myth in many of his stories. The clash between the subject and the other world is not always as radical as in "A Visit to the Museum." In "Ultima Thule," a poet loses his wife and tries to regain her in poetry. In "Gods," the Orpheus myth blends into a father's memory of a lost son. In this story, Orpheus's trip to Hell is replaced by the father's walk into Nature. The father laments the loss of the son, but believes that his son will hear the fable he has created, for "words have no borders" (49). An imagined reunion is thus created through the power of words.

"The Music" presents a dark Orpheus. The protagonist of the story arrives at a piano recital and sees his former wife in the audience. Recalling their painful relationship, in which he was betrayed by the unfaithful woman, this Orpheus throws a resentful gaze at his Eurydice. The man has spent a long time trying to release himself from the pain of betrayal, but this unexpected meeting with the woman puts him at the risk of repeating the pain. In this story, Hell is not presented as a hideous dark space. The recital room itself is not hellish but hell-ish: it resembles the Hell in the Orpheus myth in that the man gets to confront the lost object of his desire, yet he cannot approach her. The man's alienation from the woman, as well as his vindictive impulse, made the recital room a hell like space. Nevertheless, music provides him

with the chance to grow out of sadness and hatred. In this music-induced epiphany, he decides to forgive everything. Towards the end of the recital, the man, who used to turn a deaf ear to music, finds that “music.... had actually been incredible bliss, a magic glass dome that had embraced and imprisoned him and her” (*Stories* 336). Hence the man returns from Hell, and is able to take his Eurydice with him in art and imagination.

Time is crucial to the Orpheus myth. Orpheus’ effort to take Eurydice back from Hell shows a human will to challenge time. In the trip to the Underground, he courageously brings the present to the past, and tries to bring the past back intact, so that he can resume a happy life with Eurydice. Orpheus is successful in the first half of his trip, as he enchants Hades and his retinue with his irresistible singing voice. Art leads him to a close encounter with the past time. The irony is that he becomes skeptical when he almost reaches success. He doubts if Eurydice is actually walking behind him, and he yearns for physical proof of her existence. He then turns back, and is immediately punished for his loss of faith. It is rather a loss of faith in the power of art than a loss of faith in the power of God, for Orpheus has convinced Gods with his human will via art. Orpheus’s artistic mastery is ruined by his anxiety for proof. He tries to assure himself of the existence of Eurydice by obtaining physical evidence, rather than artistic assurance. He surrenders his artistic power to the artless and lifeless physical world. The apparition of Eurydice is not the original Eurydice in life, but Orpheus’s artistic creation: the creation of a Pygmalion artist. Orpheus has infused life in this Eurydice, but he expels that life. This time, he causes the second and

permanent death of Eurydice. Death of a physical nature is transitory, but an artistic death. The moment the artist ceases to be artistic, art fails, and the tyranny of time takes over.

There is a moment for Orpheus to create art, and yet, he abandons it, and resorts to the empirical being of human life. He gives up the unknown for the known. What he could have done is to dismiss that desire to go back to the original moment in time and enjoy the moment of artistic creation. Orpheus is bewildered by a time “yet to come.”

Nabokov’s Orpheus motif finds its resonance in Mu Xin’s writing. “Fong Fong No. 4” represents Fong Fong as Eurydice and the musician as Orpheus. This Eurydice dies four times. Each return of Fong Fong announces the death of the previous Fong Fong, and the musician is unable to restore any version of her. He can detect slight physical traces of the previous Fong Fong. For example, after more than a decade of silence, Fong Fong visits him in his house, and he recognizes her voice immediately (43). However, when he tries to evoke more memories about her by showing her the music notes she liked, Fong Fong ignores every reminder. The musician fails at every attempt. Only when he abolishes his desire to restore Fong Fong, the real woman, and shifts his desire from the actual woman to the story of the woman, can he unleash his artistic potential and restore Fong Fong in the artistic form. Mu Xin’s Orpheus and Nabokov’s Orpheus view time differently from the mythical Orpheus. The mythical Orpheus seeks linearity in time. He understands time in rigid patterns—the artificial division of time into past, present and future. He loses Eurydice, his artistic creation,

as he tries to follow the unnatural pattern of time. Mu Xin and Nabokov are artists who have confidence in time. They applaud the chaos of time. They actually introduce the chaos for an aesthetic experience.

In Nabokov's "First Love," the narrator joyfully remembers his first love, imagining her return to be the apparition of Eurydice. At the end of the story, the narrator recalls their parting scene:

[I]nstantly she was off, tap-tapping her glinting hoop through light and shade, around and around a fountain choked with dead leaves near which I stood. The leaves mingle in my memory with the leather of her shoes and gloves, and there was, I remember, some details in her attire.... that reminded me then of the rainbow spiral in a glass marble. I still seem to be holding that wisp of iridescence, not knowing exactly where to fit it, while she runs with her hoop ever faster around me and finally dissolves among the slender shadows cast on the graveled path by the interlaced arches of its low looped fence. (*Stories* 611)

The recalled scene transits from the past to the present in a barely perceivable way. The narrator perceives dead leaves and the rainbow spiral as a bridge to a lost past, which connects him and his Eurydice.

Similarly, Mu Xin shows disdain for such a rigid cutting of time. In "The Boy Next Door," Mu Xin satirizes the nostalgic impulse of the main character to go back to the past. The man in the story has lost all his files in a political catastrophe. He tries to restore his memory of childhood, and is inflicted by the lack of archival evidence of his existence. He tries to take a photo of a boy from the neighborhood and use it as his own. His attempt fails. Before he can take the photo, the boy has grown too quickly; his physical features have changed, and he no longer resembles the narrator's

childhood look. Mu Xin denies his character a convenient and pleasant return to the past. Such pleasure cannot be obtained through a mechanical repetition of the past, but it can be obtained through a play with time.

### **Role-playing**

In the preface of the Chinese version of his short story collection, named after *Wensha muyuan riji* 《温莎墓园日记》 [The Windsor Cemetery Diary], Mu Xin comments that he felt the first impulse to write fiction in his childhood when he was watching the local opera, and since then he had always thought it would be tedious to have lived one life only (1-5).

Such a childish impulse for role-playing is shared by Nabokov, but in a less leisurely manner. Karshan has pointed out that Nabokov's writing, especially his idea of literary play, is largely influenced by Lewis Carroll (Karshan 67). The Red Queen's repetitive command—"off with their heads"—is comic and yet points at the cruelty of play. Nabokov mingles "tea-time" playfulness with the cruelty of play in his works. In "The Fight," Nabokov creates a character that takes delight in observing a fierce street fight:

I neither know nor wish to know who was wrong and who was right in this affair.... Or perhaps what matters is not the human pain or joy at all but, rather, the play of shadow and light on a live body, the harmony of trifles assembled on this particular day, at this particular moment, in a unique and inimitable way. (*Stories* 146)

The spectator shows no interest in moral judgment. He solely enjoys the scene as a

beautiful act of play. He holds a tea-time mentality while recounting the cruel scene. The cruelty of the game, for Nabokov, is part of the tea-time enjoyment. He detests the moralization of play, and believes that cruel competition is essential. Below is a brilliant passage elaborating Nabokov's theory of play and competition:

There is no play without competition; which is why some forms of play, as, for example, gymnastic festivals, when a brigade of men or women draw upon the floor regular figures of the same movements, seem insipid, as if lacking in the main thing, which gives play its entrancing, thrilling delight. Which is why the communist system is so absurd, in which everyone is condemned to do the same boring gymnastic exercises as each other, not allowing, that anyone should be better built than his neighbor. (qtd. in Karshan 79)

In his effort to represent the competitiveness of play, Nabokov adopts the device of doubling. Many of his narrators have their double in the story, for example, Victor and his rival Ferdinand in "Spring in Fialta," Timofey Pnin and Vladimir Vladimirovich in *Pnin*, Humbert Humbert and Clare Quilty in *Lolita*, and V. and his brother Sebastian in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

In addition to his play with doubles, Nabokov also presents his fiction as play; indeed, the ultimate competition is set between Nabokov the author and his reader. Nabokov was one of the first writers to use unreliable narrators in story telling, and he is fond of creating tricks and traps for the reader. A classical example is the acrostic hidden in the last paragraph of "Vane Sisters." Michael Maar in *Speak, Nabokov* went as far as to suggest (not without a sense of humor) that Nabokov could have written a literary testament, hidden somewhere, with solutions to all the riddles in his book ("Preface" vii). Moreover, Nabokov is extremely fond of playing with readers through



his protean forms in his fiction. The majority of his stories use the first person narrative voice, through which voice Nabokov speaks in his various versions. He is at times demonic, at times hypocritical, at times feeble. Nabokov invites the reader to be part of the play. One has to be competitive at reading in order to enjoy the Nabokovian game.

Nabokov takes revenge of the communist taming of play and competition by activating the strong, the defiant, and the aggressive. As Karshan puts it, Nabokov “acts out” the nervous self instead of solving it (81). Some of his characters are as resentful as Dostoevsky’s underground man. However, Dostoevsky’s underground man is so absorbed in his self-abhorrence that he negates the self, but Nabokov’s resentful men can live with a double identity. In “Tyrants Destroyed,” the narrator is spiteful to the extent of being murderous, but he eventually redeems himself in art. After writing down his violent thoughts, he believes that he has taken his revenge on tyranny. He affirms play, in this case, the play with words.

Mu Xin’s fiction does not insist as much on doubling. He does not “act out” conflicts. In “Tomorrow, I’ll Stroll No More,” Mu Xin comments through the stroller: “I let things happen to me” (*Empty* 126). These words summarize Mu Xin’s way of responding to forces. The musician in “Fong Fong No. 4” is very reactive in his relationship with Fong Fong throughout his life, but, by turning Fong Fong into an art object and telling her story, the musician switches from the reactive to the active. Like the traveler in “An Empty Room,” who lets his blood be mixed with his story characters, Liang and Mei, Mu Xin also embraces the life of his characters and lives

the their lives, rather than competes with them.

Mu Xin's play, in contrast to Nabokov's play of war, can be described as the play of idleness. While Nabokov retaliates against the communist hostility towards competition, Mu Xin plays with the communist hostility towards idleness. Communist aesthetics praise work and despise idleness. People are supposed to be working and productive all the time. They are encouraged to work for the collective good of the community on weekends, and even sex life is promoted as for the purpose of reproduction for the growth of the country.

Idleness is the privilege of an artist. Idleness is no escape. An artist's idleness can be affirmative. Mu Xin himself lived under house arrest for a long time at the end of the 1970s. Like the dungeon man, he kept his artistic creation alive. He managed to paint at home. He painted every day, but he did not touch upon the realistic topics required by the Authority. All his paintings were landscapes, which had been a significantly marginalized genre since 1949. After the establishment of Communist China, the Realistic school of paintings received full support from the government and all artists were expected to produce artwork to eulogize the value of labor. Laborers and leaders were the only legitimate themes for painting. In such an art environment, artists who chose to deal with the idle faced great risks. The seemingly passive form of life, when put into a context like this, is by no means reactive, but full of active forces. It is the artist's triumph over the Pharisees.

Many of Mu Xin's characters/narrators are such players. The artist in the dungeon is a great player of idleness. Confined to the underground cell, with no one to

communicate to, no family or friends to miss and to be missed by, while expecting more storms to come, the dungeon man resorts to art. He saves ink and paper for writing, and he watches the burning match, imagining it to be an opera scene: “For several months I have been successfully directing the same drama: the ashtray resembles a circular stage on which the matchstick, like a legendary diva, sings her swan song before she slowly falls to the ground and dies” (*Empty* 54). In his flight of fancy the prisoner turns his dungeon into a theatre. The writing and the imagined directing do not make the prisoner a stronger force than the force that has taken him underground, but he transcends the force with art.

In appreciating Mu Xin’s idle play and Nabokov’s anxious play, the reader has to abandon moral judgment. The musician hesitates to judge Fong Fong, for moral judgment corrupts the play. The coin player in the cemetery falls in love with the other player in the game, without the slightest knowledge of who the Other is. Could it be a woman, a man, a Lolita? The reader does not know. The coin player does not know, and he is not concerned. In the aesthetic visions of Mu Xin and Nabokov, desire is a subjective play; the desiring subject is more important than the desired object. The moral values of the play are of no concern to these two writers. What they are interested in is the play itself. By setting aside morality, the writer disperses a share of the self in various forms of role-playing.

## **Conclusion**

The fictional worlds of Mu Xin and Nabokov are full of the Nietzschean vision

of art and play. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, Deleuze summarizes Nietzsche's conception of art in two principles: "[T]he activity of this life serves as a stimulant to the affirmation contained in the work of art itself, to the will to power of the artist as artist," and "art is the highest power of falsehood." Art "magnifies the 'world as error', it sanctifies the lie; the will to deception is turned into a superior ideal" (102). In their stories, Mu Xin and Nabokov twist space and time, and create the other world for their characters, where these characters can converse with art. Mu Xin represents space as a vague zone between being and non-being, while Nabokov focuses his representation of space on the sublimity of the unknown. Meanwhile, by twisting space, these two writers represent time as a more intriguing issue than space in art, and further reveal the fluidity of human existence. The world of art knows no boundaries of time, let alone space. Such a world allows these two writers to transform their diasporic experiences in fiction without nostalgia. Mu Xin and Nabokov bring out full freedom of the world by dispersing themselves in various roles. While the traditional version of Orpheus' story paints him as burdened by his desire for the past, Mu Xin and Nabokov project a reversed version of Orpheus involving many faces. They send him on a travel through time and let him freely recollect his desired object in art and imagination. The two authors demonstrate different art of role-playing in their fiction. Nabokov's play is more competitive and confrontational, while Mu Xin's play is more idle and receptive. Mu Xin's art of play is one of dissolving; Nabokov's, one of boxing. In either way, the writer converts pain into a Dionysian joy.

The two writers affirm Nietzsche's view of the player and artist: "We temporarily abandon life, in order to then temporarily fix our gaze upon it" (Deleuze 25). Both writers oppose the communist aesthetics: the former against the denial of competition, the latter against the communist inclination to realism, and against any ascetic ideal. Their works are significantly affirmative of life, using activities of their lives as stimuli to "invent new possibilities of life" (Deleuze 102-3). When the narrator in "The Moment When Childhood Vanished" laments that the moment of losing the bowl is a dream from which he cannot wake up, Mu Xin watches the scene with a childlike smile and knows that he does not have to wake up. For an artist, the dream is life. On the other hemisphere, Nabokov would pick up a caterpillar, observe its metamorphosis, and imagine a wild metamorphosis of his own.

## Chapter II

### Plays of Exile

#### Nabokov and Exile

From the beginning of his writing career, Nabokov was concerned about the representation of pain induced by exile. In January of 1921 he published his first short story, “The Wood Sprite,” in which he projects the sufferings of exile onto the image of a Forest Elf. The Elf used to live in the Russian forest, but, as the Revolution came and caught speed, the trees were cut down and the Elf was forced to escape his birch cage. He moves from one abode to another, and finally has to flee Russia. He goes across the distant sea, hopefully to land in “some friendly foliage,” only to find himself in a “foreign, terrifying city of stone” (*Stories* 5).

Two of Nabokov's leading themes—the other world and the doubling—insistently recurring in his later work, are already present in “The Wood Sprite.” The encounter between the unnamed narrator and the Elf in the dim candlelight resembles a dream scene, and thus blurs the boundary between the physical world and the imagined world. The narrator calls himself a “dreamer” (*Stories* 3), suggesting that he cannot tell dream from reality. At the end of story, the narrator turns on the light, but cannot see the Elf: “No one!.... Nothing was left but a wondrously subtle scent in the room, of birch, of humid moss” (*Stories* 5).

The narrator feels an uncanny connection between himself and the Elf. He recognizes the Elf immediately despite the darkness in the room: “I knew his

face—oh, how long I had known it!.... [H]ow all this teased and vaguely vexed my memory.... Yes, of course I knew him—perhaps had even been fond of him, only I simply could not place the where and when of our meetings. And we must have met often; otherwise I would not have had such a firm recollection” (*Stories* 3). The face of the Elf reminds him of “the happiness, the echoing, endless, irreplaceable happiness” of his childhood (*Stories* 4). When he was a child, the narrator played in the same woods that the Elf lived in. The Elf has witnessed the narrator’s youth, and now recollects how the forest was destroyed and what violent changes have taken places in Russia. What is the elf but the narrator's double? In a melancholy passage the Elf speaks to his fellow sufferer in exile:

“I know you too are pining.... but your pining, compared to mine, my tempestuous, turbulent pining, is but the even breathing of one who is asleep. And think about it: not one of our Tribe is there left in Rus’. Some of us swirled away like wisps of fog, others scattered over the world. Our native rivers are melancholy; there is no frisky hand to splash up the moon-gleams. Silent are the orphaned bluebells that remain, by chance, unmown, the pale-blue *gusli* that once served my rival, the ethereal Field-Sprite, for his songs. The shaggy, friendly, household spirit, in tears, has forsaken your besmirched, humiliated home, and the groves have withered, the pathetically luminous, magically somber groves” (5).

It is noteworthy how the space of the homeland is represented in this story. The lament made by the Wood Sprite places its emphasis on the natural beauty of that realm. The destruction of old Russia as a political entity is metaphorically turned into the destruction of natural beauty. Russia after the Revolution is lifeless, since other spirits of Nature, such as the Water Sprite and the Field Sprite, have joined the Wood Sprite in exile. As it is demonstrated in this story, Nabokov’s concern for the space in

exile is first and foremost aesthetic. The same idea is revisited in *Speak, Memory*, as well as in many other stories. The pain that accompanies the spatial changes is primarily caused by an aesthetic loss.

For Nabokov, the return of Russia, now a space deprived of life and beauty, is not going to bring out any aesthetic pleasure. Instead, it brings out terror, coldness and darkness. In “A Visit to the Museum,” Nabokov abolishes the impulse of exiles to return to the homeland. However, the horror of the return goes beyond the spatial boundaries of Russia: it can and must be extended to the new land. In the story “Russian Spoken Here,” a family of Russian émigrés in Germany captures a former Bolshevik spy, locks him up in a deserted bathroom, and keeps him as a prisoner for life. In addition to the Nabokovian ironic and comedic tones, the story is also deeply disturbing. The family was a victim of the Bolshevik persecution, but by holding a private court and taking away the freedom of the Bolshevik spy, they turn the foreign land—also the land of freedom—into a prison house. They turn into persecutors, and are therefore no different from the Russian Red Guards. In such a revolt against the oppressive power, these Russian émigrés become “the man of *ressentiment*” in Nietzsche's term: “His soul *squints*, his mind loves dark corners, secret paths and back-doors, everything secretive appeals to him as being *his* world, *his* security, *his* comfort; he knows all about keeping quiet, nor forgetting, waiting, temporarily humbling and abasing himself” (Nietzsche, *Genealogy* 21). The resentful man can find pleasure neither in his homeland nor in the new land. The deserted bathroom at the end of a dark corridor becomes the other world, the hell on earth—and hell is



latent in the spiteful man's mind and soul.

To sum up, Nabokov represents the homeland as an unfamiliar, even dead, land that becomes the exiles' foreign land. In Nabokov's representation of the foreign land, polluted by the desire of vindication and violence, this land becomes the troubled homeland. Neither space is truly home to exiles; each is "the other space" to them. Nabokov compromises the two spaces by offering a unique perspective of the traveler that allows the character to oscillate between the two worlds: the perspective of a traveler. For example, in "First Love," which is part of Nabokov's memoir, *Speak, Memory*, the narrator views the foreign land with much excitement, but he experiences the greatest pleasure while on a moving train, rather than by staying in one place:

When, on such journeys as these, the train changed its pace to a dignified amble and all but grazed house fronts and shop signs, as we passed through some big German town, I used to feel a twofold excitement, which terminal stations could not provide. I saw a city with its toylike trams, linden trees, and brick walls enter the compartment, hobnob with the mirrors, and fill to the brim the windows on the corridor side. This informal contact between train and city was one part of the thrill. The other was putting myself in the place of some passerby who, I imagined, was moved as I would be moved myself to see the long, romantic, auburn cars, with their intervestibular connecting curtains as black as bat wings and their metal lettering copper-bright in the low sun, unhurriedly negotiate an iron bridge across an everyday thoroughfare and then turn, with all windows suddenly ablaze, around a last block of houses. (605)

Nabokov's preference for a traveler's perspective is also shown in "Time and Ebb," in which the narrator recalls his initial encounter with the American landscape as a newcomer and describes the American landscape in comparison with the European

landscape. Nabokovian fiction tends to reject places of immobility. In *Lolita*, the culturally hybrid character, Humbert Humbert, frequently changes his abodes before he is attracted to the house of Charlotte Haze, driven by a lust for Lolita. After the death of Charlotte, Humbert drags Lolita out of her home, and takes her on a long highway journey around America. Nabokov's resistance to a stable space is also demonstrated in *Pnin*. The novel's protagonist, Timofey Pavlovich Pnin, is a Russian émigré scholar. Like Humbert, Pnin never has a permanent abode. However, Pnin's mobility is a passive one. He wants to have a home, but is forced to move around. A refugee from both the Communist regime and the Nazis, Pnin is never able to truly settle down. He is a university professor, but is untenured; he is divorced and lives alone; he constantly struggles with English; he barely reaches professional proficiency in the language, let alone the American way of life. The mishaps and uncertainties of this Russian man in exile are reflected in his spatial changes. He has been living in rented houses ever since his departure from his homeland. Just as he thinks everything is moving toward a bright future, and even thinks of purchasing a house of his own, he is fired from his position. As a result, he has to give up the plan to become a home owner and move to an unknown destination.

Pnin, after thirty-five years of exile and homelessness, naturally desires a home, but his desire is not fulfilled by the author, who abolishes the desire of settling down. Nabokov himself lived the last twenty years of his life in a hotel in Switzerland (the Montreux Palace from 1959 to 1977), where he spent his time writing, playing chess and taking long walks in the mountains, and he never had the Pninian plan to buy a

home (Boyd, "Nabokov"). Nabokov, like the young boy in "First Love," sets himself and his characters forever on the move to maintain the aesthetic pleasure of exile.

Nabokov's denial of home is more visible in his novel, for the novel can present a character's life over a longer time, and thus can fully show the volatility of spatial changes. Short stories are more fragmented, but still the reader can have a glimpse of the character's spatial movement. In addition to Nabokov's preference for a traveler's vision in "First Love," many other fictional characters are homeless. One of them is the titular protagonist in "Lik." Lik is a frail and hypersensitive Russian émigré in Western Europe. He works as a stage actor. He plays a role in a popular French melodrama. As the theatrical company tours around the country, he also changes his abode from one hotel to another. Like many Nabokovian characters, Lik has a double in the story: his buffoon relative, Koldunov. Koldunov's situation stands in sharp contrast to Lik's: he has a family; he is strong and violent; he is poverty stricken; he has a permanent abode, though an extremely squalid one.

Nabokov reinforces the theme of doubling at the end of the story: he strengthens the link between Koldunov and Lik, as he shows that Koldunov is wearing Lik's shoes when committing suicide. Neither Lik nor Koldunov is a likable character, but the narrative has built itself in a way to give the reader a false impression that Lik would die at the end of story. The narrator tells the reader in great details how Lik suffers from loneliness, that he is estranged from his colleagues, and that he has a weak heart. When Lik meets Koldunov, whom he remembers from his childhood as nightmarish bully, the reader expects that Lik would collapse, for the pain and terror

would be unbearable for a weak man like him. However, it is Koldunov who shoots himself at last in utter despair in exile. The surprising ending of the story is one of the Nabokovian devices that shatter the stereotypes of the reader's expectation, but it also underscores Nabokov's affirmation of art. Lik, despite his participation in a poorly written melodrama, is a creative man. He has a passion for art. He attempts to improve his performance through various means. He purchases expensive shoes at his own expense to enhance his stage image, hopefully to bring new theatrical experience to his audience. Koldunov and Lik represent two possible ways of living as a Russian émigré. The artless, immobile Koldunov withers and perishes. Lik's artistic talents and his physical weakness could have made him a more indoor type. A walk in the fresh air is as much exercise as he can enjoy. Lik is naturally more immobile in that sense, and yet, he is the one who is destined to walk in the new shoes and resume a journey. He is destined to be mobile. In the final scene of the story, Lik goes back to Koldunov's home to look for his new shoes, and finds them on Koldunov's dead body. The image foreshadows Lik's destiny: his life is entangled with art and mobility; this exilic artist has to move around to be alive.

By keeping his character on the move, Nabokov resists both the pleasure of the homeland and the pleasure of the new land. The only desirable space, for Nabokov, is the space of artistic creation, the space beyond the physical world, be it Russian or foreign. The space of artistic creation is the underlying theme of Nabokov's 1931 story, "The Aurelian," whose protagonist is Pilgram, an old German who owns an unsuccessful business. Pilgram has never travelled beyond Berlin all his life, but he

has a long cherished, secret plan to travel abroad. He dreams of remote exotic places where he will enrich his butterfly collection. However, he cannot materialize the dream due to his meager financial situation. Already an old man, he grows increasingly anxious. Eventually, he makes enough money by cheating a customer, and he immediately prepares himself for the desired trip but, as irony has it, instead dies from a stroke before his departure.

Pilgram is not an exile; nevertheless, he has nurtured a utopian desire of self-exile. An unpleasant man, he is also a true artist in his aesthetic pursuit of butterfly collections, and in his imagining of the voyage that will never take place. In his dreams, he has “visited the islands of the Blessed, where in the hot ravines that cut the lower slopes of the chestnut- and laurel-clad mountains there occurs a weird local race of the cabbage white” (254). Morally problematic as Pilgram is, Nabokov reveals in the dreamed scenes that this tiny old shop owner is an artist. Moreover, these are dreams of exile, rather than dreams of an expedition, for the dreamer does not dream of a return. The lack of wish to come back is also shown in the way Pilgram deals with his wife: his desire to go is so strong that he does not even wait for his wife to come home and say goodbye. He simply leaves her a short note, telling her that he is going to Spain. Indeed, he does not return, as he dies in the shop. His physical life comes to an end in the space where he has spent all his life. His wife later finds “his back to the counter, among scattered coins, his livid face knocked out of shape by death” (258). Although Pilgram lacked grace in both life and death, Nabokov gives him the privilege to be redeemed in art:

Yes, Pilgram had gone far, very far. Most probably he visited Granada and Murcia and Albarracin, and then traveled farther still, to Surinam or Taprobane; and one can hardly doubt that he saw all the glorious bugs he had longed to see, velvety black butterflies soaring over the jungles, and a tiny moth in Tasmania, and that Chinese “skipper” said to smell of crushed roses when alive, and the short-clubbed beauty that a Mr. Baron had just discovered in Mexico. (258)

Pilgram fulfils his dream and goes in exile. In imagination, he breaks free from the liminal space of the shop inherited from his father—a prison that he has been confined to forever. The moral judgment of the man retreats as the power of art prevails. The pleasure of the imagined exile is so powerful that even death becomes “irrelevant” (258). Pilgram never reaches the place of exile physically; thus his exile remains imaginary. His space of exile is a product of artistic creation. For Nabokov, art creates the only desirable space.

Time constitutes an active part in Nabokov’s play of space in his representation of exilic experience. In “The Wood Sprite,” the narrator remembers his childhood Russia, exuberant and beautiful. In “Lik,” Lik’s fear of old Russia is mingled with his memory of being constantly bullied by Koldunov when they were both school kids. When he learns that Koldunov lives in the same town, he is terrified at the thought that his traumatic past may come alive. For him, the reunion with Koldunov is like the return to the hell-ish Russia; the reunion threatens his mobility in exile, and may draw him back to the time prior to exile. Pilgram in “The Aurelian” competes with time in his persistent desire for exile. He is in both a prison of space—his shop and his home—and a prison of time.

Nabokov’s play on time in exile culminates in those stories where he places the

emphasis on the happiness experienced in exile, such as in “A Guide to Berlin,” “A Letter that Never Reached Russia,” and “Time and Ebb.” “A Letter that Never Reached Russia” has a melancholic beginning. The protagonist, a young Russian émigré in Berlin, is writing a letter to the woman he loved but had to leave behind in St. Petersburg. The man recollects their past relationship in Russia. The nostalgic tone of the letter so far would make the reader think that this is another story about lost love. Nevertheless, the man soon moves away from the past and starts to write about his present life in Berlin. He writes in the letter how he discovers happiness in everyday objects, such as cars, streetlamps and stone steps: “I get such a blissful, melancholy sensation when, late at night, its wheels screeching around the bend, a tram hurtles past, empty” (*Stories* 137-8).

The man is self-conscious of the stereotype and possible moral judgment of the Russian émigré’s behavior: “we authors in exile are supposed to possess a lofty pudicity of expression,” and yet, he wishes to speak “not of the past,” but of the present (*Stories* 137). Moreover, he does not hide the light-heartedness he gains through his aesthetic observation of the present life in exile:

Many fellow exiles of mine denounce indignantly (and in this indignation there is a pinch of pleasure) fashionable abominations, including current dances. But fashion is a creature of man's mediocrity, a certain level of life, the vulgarity of equality, and to denounce it means admitting that mediocrity can create something (whether it be a form of government or a new kind of hairdo) worth making a fuss about. (*Stories* 139)

So he thoroughly enjoys himself in delight. At the end of the letter, he writes: “Listen: I am ideally happy. My happiness is a kind of challenge.... I carry proudly my

ineffable happiness.” Hence he “proudly” “challenge[s]” time in his artistic view of life in exile: “The centuries will roll by....; everything will pass, but.... my happiness will remain, in the moist reflection of a streetlamp.... in everything with which God so generously surrounds human loneliness” (*Stories* 140). The man finds his loneliness joyfully redeemed.

The narrator in “A Letter that Never Reached Russia” does not lose himself lingering in the homeland, nor is he thrilled by the fresh landscape of the new land. He transforms Berlin into an ideal space through his aesthetic lenses. The Berlin that brings him happiness is not the Berlin that everybody else experiences; it is the Berlin as his artistic creation. More importantly, Nabokov articulates his affirmation of life in this piece. The past is not superior to the present. Even though the love affair between the letter writer and the woman he addresses belongs to the past time, the man refuses to be trapped by the past. He invites the woman he loves to share his happiness in the present time. The letter he is writing can never reach Russia or the woman. The man and the woman are separated from each other, both spatially and temporally. However, by sharing his happiness with the woman, the man lives the present with his love, and, in so doing, challenges the temporal boundary.

As previously mentioned, in “Time and Ebb” Nabokov radically twists a spatial representation into a temporal one through the narrative of a man in exile. A similar play of space and time is evident in “A Guide to Berlin.” The story in five parts is meant to be the narrator’s travel guide to the city of Berlin in the 1920s for a friend. Here Nabokov again demonstrates his preference of a traveler’s perspective in his



representation of the place. Similar to the young man writing the letter that can never reach Russia, this travel guide enjoys discovering happiness in everyday objects. He, too, is interested in streetcars, but, in his representation of the streetcar, he brings out a more profound play of time: “The streetcar will vanish in twenty years or so, just as the horse-drawn tram has vanished. Already I feel it has an air of antiquity, a kind of old-fashioned charm” (*Stories* 156). The narrator and his friend are in exile. The friend lacks imagination and is not impressed by the guide. He complains that Berlin is a “boring, foreign city, and expensive to live in”; he blames the guide for being “useless,” and he does not share the narrator’s aesthetic joy in observing everyday objects (*Stories* 159). Nabokov creates an artist and an unimaginative double, and involves them in a pursuit of happiness in exile. Nabokov speaks of his philosophy of literary creation through the narrator:

I think that here lies the sense of literary creation: to portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times; to find in the objects around us the fragrant tenderness that only posterity will discern and appreciate in the far-off times when every trifle of our plain everyday life will become exquisite and festive in its own right: the times when a man who might put on the most ordinary jacket of today will be dressed up for an elegant masquerade. (157)

The artist in this story thus distances himself from the objects through the agency of time. The objects are defamiliarized from the ordinary human gaze. In this way they gain an aesthetic dimension. The play of space via time reaches a climax in the last part of the story, “The Pub,” where the man notices a child in the other room of the pub. He imagines how the space will be seen in the eyes of the boy:

There, under the mirror, the child still sits alone. But he is now looking our way. From there he can see the inside of the tavern—the green island of the billiard table, the ivory ball he is forbidden to touch, the metallic gloss of the bar, a pair of fat truckers at one table and the two of us at another. (*Stories* 159)

Although the image of the mirror recurs often in this story, its significance is fully revealed only in this paragraph. The child sees the interior of the pub space through the agency of the mirror, just like the narrator sees Berlin through the agency of time. One needs—one would think—an agency to develop fresh views of beauty in everyday objects. The narrator further imagines that the child will later replay the scene in his memory:

Whatever happens to him in life, he will always remember the picture he saw every day of his childhood from the little room where he was fed his soup. He will remember the billiard table and the coat-less evening visitor who used to draw back his sharp white elbow and hit the ball with his cue, and the blue-gray cigar smoke, and the din of voices, and my empty right sleeve and scarred face, and his father behind the bar, filling a mug for me from the tap. (159-60)

In the final lines of the story, Nabokov's narrative of space completely gives way to time. Projecting his own image in the child's future memory, the narrator others himself in the form of an external being, and thus he "transcends the personal limits of his own time and space" (Connolly 29). The happiness of exile in a foreign space is to be reached in each artistic moment that is preserved.

In other stories, Nabokov presents time-in-exile in gloomier tones. In "The Doorbell," for instance, plays on the Orpheus motif. Nikolay Galtov, the protagonist, arrives in Germany after many years of misfortune. He is determined to find his lost

mother, who is believed to be a Russian émigrée in Berlin. When he finally finds out her address, he visits the place, expecting an emotional reunion. However, when the mother comes to the door, he realizes that he can hardly recognize her. Her appearance and demeanor are drastically different from his memory. It turns about that the mother has been expecting her young lover that night. Apparently the mother is more concerned about losing her romance than losing her son again. No sooner had Nikolay left her place, than “she flew, her blue dress rustling, to the telephone” to call her lover back (*Stories* 198). Like the protagonist in “The Visit to the Museum,” and like the protagonist in “A Reunion,” Nikolay is the Orpheus whose desires to recapture the past—in this case, a return to his mother—unfulfilled. The past is corrupted by the present. There is no simple return to the past for exiles. Those exiles who are unable to understand this are to be confronted with the harshness of reality. The past is only perfect in memory, or imagination at work, in process, in the present time.

In *Transcending Exile: Conrad, Nabokov, I.B. Singer* (1985), Asher Milbauer offers an insightful comment on Nabokov’s view of time in exile: “Though it is obvious that one cannot forget and lightheartedly dismiss long years of exile, an admission of this kind does not come easily.... This is not to say that the past has to be blocked out completely; rather, it should be seen as an ‘outline—the/ hero of any first chapter’ ” (43). Nabokov is most generous when he lets his fictional characters recollect the past in memory, but, in regards to nostalgia, he is at his most satirical. By giving “a farewell tribute” to the past and embracing the present, Nabokov’s view of

time reflects the Nietzschean disdain of the past: “Your false love for the past is a robbery of the future” (qtd. in Stambaugh 191). For Nabokov, exiles should not cling to the past, but should grasp every moment of the present.

For many expatriates, the linguistic boundary is central to their problem of exile. Nabokov is no exception. Nabokov comments on his own status of exile in *Strong Opinions*: “My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody’s concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English” (*Strong* 15). Throughout his life, Nabokov frequently recalls his agonizing transition from Russian to English as his language of artistic creation; he feels that it is “exceedingly painful—like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion” (*Strong* 54). Critics believe that Nabokov was mainly concerned about readership when he made the decision. Although he sometimes brags that he writes for himself, he acknowledges that a writer can never write in absolute loneliness: “[O]ne also needs some reverberation, if not response, and a moderate multiplication of one’s self throughout a country or countries; and if there be nothing but a void around one’s desk, one would expect it to be at least a sonorous void, and not circumscribed by the walls of a padded cell” (*Strong* 37).

On the other hand, the switch from Russian to a foreign language also provides Nabokov with the opportunity to play with the language. While using the rules of English flawlessly, he challenges the language in his own way. According to the preface of *The Stories*, Nabokov himself translated the majority of his short stories

into English. The rest of the stories were translated by his son, Dmitri Nabokov, in collaboration with or under the guidance of his father. It is, therefore, worthwhile to look into Nabokov's theory of translation in order to further understand his play of and with language. The most representative work of his theory of translation is an essay on the English translation of Pushkin's *Onegin*. Although the main literary text under discussion is Russian verse, Nabokov expresses his fundamental principles of translation in the essay. Here Nabokov is merciless at criticizing existing translators' readiness to sacrifice faithfulness for readability. Among all translation methods, Nabokov particularly detests free translation: "The term 'free translation' smacks of knavery and tyranny. It is when the translator sets out to render the 'spirit'—not the textual sense—that he begins to traduce his author. The clumsiest literal translation is a thousand times more useful than the prettiest paraphrase" ("Problem" 127). He believes that "[t]he person who desires to turn a literary masterpiece into another language, has only one duty to perform, and this is to reproduce with absolute exactitude the whole text, and nothing but the text" (134). He concludes that the ideal translation for *Onegin* should be a literal translation with "copious footnotes"; he expects "footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and certainty"; and he wants "such footnotes and the absolutely literal sense, with no emasculation and no padding" (143).

For Nabokov, the highest principle of translation is the "literal sense." It is reasonable to believe that he uses the same principle in his self-translation, and in his

English writing; after all, translation is involved even when a writer is writing directly in the foreign language. When the exilic writer is writing solely in English, cultural translation is still present. Nabokov's contempt of "readability" in translation shows that he wants to preserve his "otherness" as a writer in linguistic exile. He does not think the target language should be given priority over the original language. So he constantly flirts with English during his linguistic games. For instance, Nabokov is famously fond of obscure words and expressions; his well-known creation of "on the third hand" at the beginning paragraph of *Pnin* vividly creates a comic scene for the reader; his use of the acrostic at the end of "The Vane Sisters" is another example of word play, among myriad others.

Nabokov's repeated self-criticism of his English reveals this combative mentality. He describes his English as something "stiffish" and "artificial," "which may be all right for describing a sunset or an insect, but which cannot conceal the poverty of syntax and paucity of domestic diction when I need the shortest road between warehouse and shops. An old Rolls Royce is not always preferable to a plain Jeep" (*Strong* 106). Nevertheless, the very fineness of his language deconstructs the statement itself. As some critics notice, Nabokov's self-criticism is not very sincere; it is not without affectation, which is common for writers in exiles: "He, like any other mortal, needs encouragement, praise, and refutation of his half-joking and half-serious self-accusations" (Milbauer 58). In response to the foreignness of the language, Nabokov deploys his art of war. He challenges, tames and maneuvers the English language, but, at the same time, maintains his otherness with respect to it.

### **Mu Xin and Exile**

Mu Xin's vision of space in exile is closely related to his vision of an artist's life as a hermit. In his 1998 article, "Chichi gaobai" 《迟迟告白》 [A Belated Confession], Mu Xin recalls a conversation with a remote relative upon Mu Xin's departure to the United States in 1983. Friends and family talked about Mu Xin's plan for the future. The relative wished him good luck with his artistic career in the United States, but was worried that Mu Xin would lose himself in the decadent foreign land: "You'd better leave out the desire for fame and fortune in order to live a happy life" (88). This was and still is a typical concern for most Chinese intellectuals. Mu Xin responded that he intended to live as a hermit in New York. However, he refers to a specific type of hermit life. He points out that there are two types of hermits among Chinese intellectuals. One is "the Tao Qian style," and the other is "the Wang Wei Style." Tao Qian 陶潜 (372?-427), a poet in the late 4<sup>th</sup> century and early 5<sup>th</sup> century, established a literary genre of recluse writing. Tao Qian resigned from his early life as an official, moved to the country, and lived and wrote in solitude. Most of his literary works revolve around the themes of love of nature, the enjoyment of rural landscapes, and the necessity for artists to remain solitary in order to keep their artistic integrity. Tao Qian had a significant influence upon Wang Wei 王维 (701-761). A poet, painter and Zen Buddhist of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, Wang Wei shared Tao Qian's love of nature; however, he did not replicate Tao Qian's lifestyle. Wang Wei held a high position at the Emperor's court, and was actively involved in business and politics. In the outskirts of

Chang'an, the then capital city of the Empire, Wang Wei built his own garden estate, Wangchuan bieve 辋川别业 [the Wangchuan Villa]. He lived between the official life and the artistic life.

According to Mu Xin, Wang Wei's reclusion is more affirmative. Mu Xin elaborates the concept of reclusion and hermits in his stream-of-consciousness story "Tomorrow, I'll Stroll No More":

There used to be many hermits in ancient China, so many that people eventually classified them: the great hermits hid themselves in top administrative positions, the lesser ones concealed themselves in non-government jobs, and the still lesser ones in wilderness. This may sound fine and meaningful, though in practice, neither is a strict category. After all, those who tried to hide in all three situations sought the same thing. (124)

Here Mu Xin satirizes Chinese intellectuals' obsession with hierarchy even in the discussion of reclusion. Reclusion is only meaningful when a hermit breaks free from limitations and boundaries. To break reclusion in three artificial categories is to strengthen spatial boundaries, and, thus, hinder true freedom.

To Mu Xin, Wang Wei's style of reclusion is superior to Tao Qian's, for Wang Wei sets himself free from these spatial limitations. Tao Qian's reclusion relies on a spatial concept; he has to place the self physically in solitude in order to be a hermit. In comparison, Wang Wei does not rely on external, physical stimulants to keep alive his love of nature and art. Wang Wei's reclusion is more of a subjective art of living. Mu Xin applies the same philosophy to his experience in exile. A true hermit can find freedom anywhere. The foreignness of the space in exile should not inflict pain on a free soul.



Therefore, Mu Xin follows the Wang Wei style rather than the Tao Qian style: “I take New York as my Chang’an. Like Wang Wei, I’d befriend myself with social celebrities, and make a business by selling my paintings. Forest Hills is my ‘Wangchuan Villa’. That is how I live as a hermit” (“Chichi” 89). For Mu Xin, space in exile is not necessarily associated with loss or sadness. Instead, he maps the foreign space in terms of an ideal artistic space.

Mu Xin claims that he has lived as a hermit three times in his life. The first time he lived alone in the mountains in order to write; the second time he was imprisoned in a dungeon during the Catastrophe; the third time he found himself in New York. By describing himself as a hermit, Mu Xin reduces the spatial differences between a private villa resort in the bamboo grove of the scenic Mo Gan Mountain in a Southeastern city in the first half of the Twentieth Century; a dungeon cell in the once metropolis of Shanghai in the 1970s; and the suburban house in fin-de-siècle New York. Mu Xin affirms the reclusive experience in all three spaces. The filthy, damp dungeon is as privileged as the villa and Forest Hills, because it triggers his creative desire as much as the others do. In recollection, he sees that he has experienced as much artistic pleasure in the dungeon as he experienced in the other two. In a half-joking manner, he writes about his life as a hermit in the dungeon: “During the Catastrophe, I was imprisoned in a dungeon cell. The dim light from the lamp was my only company. Two years passed, and I was almost scared of freedom. I had food provided, and I didn’t have to worry about mundane affairs. I enjoyed quietness” (“Chichi” 88). He plays with the word yin 隱 [reclusion], which is homonymous

with yin 癮 [addiction]: “Reclusion is addictive. I have been addicted to it twice.... Now I am addicted to it for a third time” (*ibid.*). An artist is doomed to be a hermit, not because he has to isolate the self from other people, as Tao Qian did, but because he has to distance the self from and transcend the physical world so as to enjoy art. A true artist is thoroughly individualistic. Spaces are insignificant to the hermit: the difference between space in exile and space in non-exile collapses under the rule of art.

Mu Xin’s personal vision of space is reflected in his fictional works, where he constantly represents space as non-space. In his stories space carries very little narrative burden. Usually, the author only verbalizes places when he needs a general spatial framework for the story, and his rendering of the space lacks the Nabokovian details. In “The Moment When Childhood Vanished” the author provides only a sketchy setting: there is a temple called “The Sleeping Lion An” located in the mountains; there is a river that connects the temple to the narrator’s home; the narrator loses the bowl in the river. In “Fong Fong No. 4,” the narrator demonstrates no desire to elaborate the space. He merely alludes to space in very general terms, such as the name of the city, the province, or even the continent. In “Notes from Underground” the narrator describes the space simply by comparing it with Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*: “[This] underground is not a basement in nineteenth-century St. Petersburg but in Twentieth-Century China” (Mu Xin, *Empty* 52). In this passage, Mu Xin inherits Dostoevsky’s evasive allusion to space, and places the focus on the subjective experience of the character. By drawing a parallel

between the dungeon in Shanghai and the basement in the exotic land of St. Petersburg, Mu Xin twists the space and makes his character a man in exile at home.

The image of the dungeon is significant in Mu Xin. Its significance lies not in its traumatic implications, but in its artistic implications. In this story, the absence of detailed representation of space is compensated by the prisoner's meticulous observation of objects: "In front of me is a dark blue inkbottle and a gray ashtray made of fine china.... All I had to do was plant the stick gently into the ashes in the ashtray and watch it burn from top to bottom, a tiny bright-red pillar of flame. The pillar would then turn gray, bend, break, and become a circle of ash among ashes" (*Empty* 54). In this scene, Mu Xin demonstrates the power of an artist's subjective desire for art, which fills up the spatial void. When he arrived in the US, he immediately became a "Robinson Crusoe in literature." New York became the new dungeon to him. As the dungeon man is in exile at home, so is Mu Xin. Mu Xin as an artist has never left the dungeon; he is always in exile. However, in his "Wang Wei Style" reclusive life, he has made the dungeon a villa. Whereas Nabokov rejects the idea of a substitute home in exile, Mu Xin does not detest the substitution. He much enjoys his New York abodes. Photos of these houses appear frequently in his books, and are posted on his personal website. A photo of his study is printed on the first page of the Chinese version of his short story collection, *The Windsor Cemetery Diary*; the line beneath the photo reads: "Where these stories were written." Other books contain photos of the author sitting in a corner or taking a walk around the house. In 2008, a collection of critical responses to Mu Xin's literary works was published. The

book has a photo of Mu Xin's self portrait on the cover and a photo of his house in New York on the second page. The line under the photo reads: "Mu Xin's Home." Although Mu Xin is not the author of the book, the contributors in the collection are all his close friends and students, including Liu, and the book is meant to be a tool for marketing as well as assistance for domestic readers. It is highly unlikely that the publisher used the photo and added the line without Mu Xin's approval.

Given this, one may conclude that Mu Xin does not reject the pleasure of a new home in exile. However, the concept of home itself is evasive in Mu Xin: it is home without homesickness. "I will move out of Jamaica," wrote Mu Xin during the same time he lived in his so-called home in New York, for he believes an individual should not be assimilated into his environment (*Qiongmeika* 189). He claims that he likes "the infinite traveling in the conceptual world." "Homesickness is unavoidable," but "[t]he homesickness of literature is the interest in humanity. When someone's homesickness is excessive, he is no more than a homemade clod" (Mu Xin, "Zhongxia" 70).

In numerous cases, Mu Xin has reiterated his disapproval of reading his literary works for biographical information. He insists that literary creation is the writer's desire to "conceal the self" (*Wensha* 5-6). Most of his books contain only images of paintings, illustrations and caricatures. Photographs of real objects are rare. Hence, his willingness to show photos of his "home in New York" is more than just a proud demonstration of the powers of memory. He views this "home" as a spectator does. New York only becomes "a home" when Mu Xin moves out of it. Thus, home is the

other space for Mu Xin, while he is at home in exile.

The first story in the collection, “The Moment My Childhood Vanished,” establishes an “in-search-of-the-lost-time” theme for the whole book. For Nabokov, too, the pain of exile starts with the pain of the loss of happy childhood. Mu Xin expresses something similar in his writing. However, childhood for these two writers is just a beginning of an awakening in time. The past time is like home in space. Mu Xin said: “Homesickness is a human interest,” but an artist’s interest in homesickness should not be larger than humanity (Mu Xin, “Zhongxia” 70). So it is with the past and nostalgia. As it is analyzed earlier, Mu Xin’s and Nabokov’s play of space has a temporal dimension.

Time is a more explicit theme in Mu Xin than in Nabokov. In Nabokov, the theme of spatial exile is often reflected in the characters’ cultural identity; most of the time it is a Russian émigré intellectual. Mu Xin reveals a similar theme in a more subtle way. The musician in “Fong Fong No. 4” does not send himself to spatial exile until the end of the story, but he has always been in temporal exile. He is temporally left behind by Fong Fong and the community. The moment he realizes that Fong Fong has become an object of sexual desire, his response is this: “With a twinge of regret, I thought to myself, What if she were like this when we had first met?” (*Empty* 38). But the temporal distance expands most dramatically during the Catastrophe. The musician sees himself as “still [the] same single self” (*Empty* 43), but time has sped up around him. Fong Fong has moved simultaneously in time, and has made a “great leap” with the community. The musician is unable to catch up with her and the

community.

In “The Windsor Cemetery Diary” it is unknown whether the protagonist, who currently lives in New York, is even a man in exile. Nevertheless, he is in a relationship with a woman who lives in Geneva. The story is also structured as “a text within a text,” which involves the story of the Duke and the Duchess of Windsor. The protagonist is exiled from the other characters. Mu Xin plays with spatial exile, but he does not construct the narrative around the theme. In these texts, the spatial exile is the distance and alienation of a human relationship externalized.

Another theme related to temporal exile is the imagined connection between artists from different times. In “Notes from Underground” the imprisoned artist is inspired by artists such as Wagner, Lermontov, Rousseau and Cézanne. The pleasure of artistic communication helps him to endure the sufferings in the underground prison house—that is, exile in his own homeland. The prisoner’s pleasure is to be repeated and deepened by the narrator in “Weimar in Early Spring.”

“Weimar in Early Spring” is Mu Xin’s tribute to Goethe and his *Faust*. The story is a fictional meeting between Goethe and Heine in the early spring of 1824, eight years before Goethe’s death. The narrator imagines the two writers having a dialogue on a variety of theological, philosophical, and literary topics ranging from the West to the East:

They conversed about the sacred aura that suffuses each season, about the divine competition among the gods, and about a tree south of Dongting Lake. They also spoke of the trees along the road between Jena and Weimar, how the poplar trees had not yet grown leaves, and how enchanting the scenery would be during a midsummer sunset. (*Empty*

105).

The reference to “a tree south of Dongting Lake” subtly alludes to the Chinese background of the narrator. The narrator implies in the story that Heine has inspired Goethe in the creation of the second part of *Faust*, and he takes the theme of inspiration further by articulating his own desire for writing:

Even tonight, a night filled with the same freezing air of spring, I’m still tormented by the desire to write the story of Faust. After all, the ink in which Faust signed his contract with Mephistopheles is not yet dry. And though it’s true Gretchen performs certain deeds, neither Helen nor Euphorion had any active roles assigned to them in the drama. The ending also seems predictable: Faust falls and is rescued. Nonetheless, when things occur and end in mythology, epic, or tragedy, they just occur and end. (*Empty* 106)

The “same freezing air of spring” becomes the portal of time that connects the narrator and Goethe. The narrator feels that he is inspired to rewrite the masterpiece of Goethe. The work posits that a great writer like Goethe could still be inspired by a minor writer like Heine. While being inspired by Goethe, could it be possible that “I,” a minor Chinese writer, inspire and challenge Goethe in the same way? The artistic inspiration and rivalry between “I” at present and a great artist in the past renders a profound question.

Here Mu Xin, again, erases the importance of spatial changes, and takes an audacious step into time. “Weimar in Early Spring” raises a profound issue of exile. Is it necessary for the Robinsons Crusoes in literature to lament the loss of the homeland, the home culture, and the literary tradition they are familiar with? Exilic experiences can be enriching to artists if they draw inspiration from other artists from other spatial,

temporal, cultural and linguistic environments.

Mu Xin is critical of his time. In “The Windsor Cemetery,” he writes: “This has clearly been a most vulgar century—both brutal and overly sentimental” (*Empty* 135).

But his feelings are mixed. In “A Belated Confession,” he writes:

If I were born in the seventeenth century, I might have been an ascetic monk; if I were born in the eighteenth century, I might have been an Enlightener; if I were born in the nineteenth century, I might have been a dandy. I’d rather be born in the early twentieth century so that I could witness the collapse of Fascism, the enemy of Jesus, defeated. Unfortunately, I also had to witness the rape of art and the dying of literature. (“Chichi” 99)

In another passage of that article, Mu Xin writes: “I hate the twentieth century.... What one hundred years of disgrace and indignity. But I have spent my youth in it, a lengthy passage of time colored by my blood. I love it, still” (100). In “Notes from Underground” and “Weimar in Early Spring,” Mu Xin negotiates his love and hate for his time by sending himself into a temporal exile in fiction.

Mu Xin’s idea of temporal exile is fully played out in “Tomorrow, I’ll Stroll No More.” The stroller starts as a Proustian thinker, picking up memory traces that trigger revisits to his youth in China. However, his thoughts about home and the past time are very reflexive and multileveled. In one of the scenes, the stroller is attracted to a certain type of flower in the streets of New York, but is frustrated by his inability to name it in English. He then becomes nostalgic of his mother tongue, and, ultimately, his homeland: “One day I will return to China and will once again be able to call most of the plants by their Chinese names.” The thought cheers him up. However, his thought soon takes a turn: “If one day I return to China, I’ll see the *linglan* hyacinths



again; I'll gaze at them tenderly and obediently, bend my knees to sniff, and gaze again, remembering a flower in the United States that looks so much like them but has no aroma" (*Empty* 123). Here Mu Xin shares Nabokov's theme of the future recollection. Placing the present time in the future, Mu Xin expects that he will think of New York at this moment. As soon as the narrator reaches a psychological state of "being at home," the space in exile becomes the object of a faint nostalgia. To feel nostalgic of Shanghai in the city of New York is nostalgia; to feel nostalgic of New York while remembering Shanghai is a redoubling of nostalgia. Home and exile are thus reversed at the moment of imagination.

Few writers in exile could match Nabokov's linguistic versatility. Mu Xin has never written any prose piece or poem in English, and he openly acknowledged his lack of proficiency in this foreign language. An artist who moved to the United States in his fifties, he had passed his prime time of language acquisition. It is impossible for him to create literary works in the foreign language.

In "Tomorrow, I'll Stroll No More" Mu Xin lets the stroller confess his feelings of frustration: "I often don't have the confidence to identify even common plants and trees such as the maple, azalea, iris, and narcissus, if the variety looks slightly strange to me." He then reflects on the nature of language and communication:

My own name isn't difficult to pronounce, but Westerners have to practice it, spell it out again and again, often smiling as they do so. Courtesy, culture, and the arts make people in this world slightly shy, vaguely apologetic and mildly bashful. In times of peace, people from different national and ethnic backgrounds can still communicate, coexist, cooperate.... When a war breaks out, we don't feel shy or apologetic or bashful toward each other, so of course war

is terrible, so terrible indeed. (*Empty* 120)

Language is created for the original purpose of communication. But it is only a communication within certain boundaries. When the boundaries are broken, and human beings from different spatial, temporal or cultural backgrounds meet, language reveals its warring nature. It is no longer a tool of communication, but a prison house that confines us: “So why are there so many complex, disparate language systems in this world? Animals don’t have such complex language systems and so we’ve assumed they’re dumb and inferior. Humans have created so many language schools, yet they walk in and out them silent and sad” (*Ibid*).

However, Mu Xin never lets his exiled characters be destroyed by such linguistic frustrations. He finds substitutes for language. One of them is music:

Diametrically opposed to war is music. No matter how remote the country is that you travel to, when you hear music, particularly the music of your childhood, it’s as if you’re no longer lost, drifting on a boat during a stormy night, but suddenly floating into the harbor of your homeland, knowing that someone, regardless of wind or rain, is expecting you. (*Ibid.*)

This passage is not as homesick as it appears *prima facie*. The emphasis here is not “the home,” but the idea that music can transcend the spatial, temporal, cultural, and, most importantly, linguistic boundaries, so that those who experience the music may communicate more freely than they do in language. He then gives an example:

I know a handyman, an elderly American man, who sometime works in the basement of my apartment building. He can really whistle. Many times I’ve heard him whistle and it’s the essence of Father Haydn and Mozart the Son, without a hint of Uncle Sam. Once I responded with my own whistling. He stepped closer to listen,

apparently surprised that the whistling of this Chinese man could evoke such a pure tune of the First Viennese School. (*Ibid.*)

In his literary critical articles, Mu Xin frequently talks about the two levels of meanings in things. The first level is what we experience in everyday life. The second is the artistic meaning of the thing, and is, therefore, less apparent and more profound. The second level of meaning can only emerge when the thing loses its first level of meaning. Language leads human beings to the first level of meaning, but music reveals the second level. Mu Xin's confidence in music is an echo of Nietzsche's view of music in *The Birth of Tragedy*. For Nietzsche, music is "in the highest degree a universal language," because it is "related indeed to the universality of concepts"; music is "the immediate language of the will" and "gives the inmost kernel which precedes all forms, or the heart of things" (Nietzsche, *Birth* 100-1).

Mu Xin's confidence in the universality of music extends to his confidence in art in general. Although he only writes in Chinese, he believes that he can find his audience in the West: "The cultural root of China in the East is broken. People ignore literature, and they are blind to literature.... It is decreasing. The cultural root of America in the West is not broken. I turn around, I meet it face to face, and immediately I can hear birds whispering and smell the scents of flowers. It is increasing" ("Chichi" 99). He sharply criticizes Chinese readers and critics from the Mainland and Taiwan, and comments that his works are often misunderstood and distorted. He acknowledges that he found more friends among Western intellectuals. In one of his critical essays, he mentions that some American scholars read in "The Windsor Cemetery Diary" a subtle allusion to the art of the Tang Dynasty poet, Li

Shangyin 李商隐 (813-858), but none of his Chinese readers has discovered it. Some of these Western readers had direct influences upon his works. For example, the title of “The Windsor Cemetery Diary” used to be “The Windsor Cemetery.” A Western scholar suggested that Mu Xin add the word “diary” to the title. Mu Xin accepted the advice happily: “After this revision, this is not just a cold place, but acquires some human aura and temperature” (“Chichi” 97).

“I have long felt that the magnetic field of my art is in the West,” Mu Xin, therefore, explained. He sought and found readers in the West despite his obvious disadvantages in the language. Seven months before he passed away, the English version of his short story collection was published in North America. However, Mu Xin still holds to his role of a hermit. He claims that he writes best in the early morning, a time when “the images of editors, readers, critics and publishers all faded away” and “the surging talents and the desire for lectures, debates and salons calm down” ( “Chichi” 88 ). No matter how passionately he embraces Western culture for the energy and inspiration it has given him in creation, Mu Xin keeps himself in seclusion and in exile.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter explores plays of exile in Nabokov and Mu Xin from three aspects: space, time, and the issue of language in the writer’s request for an artistic career in another cultural and linguistic environment.

In Nabokov’s stories, various types of space are mapped out meticulously.

Nabokov uses great details to play the game of make-believe, creating a vivid simulacrum of “the real space.” His characters act, interact and travel in the fluid space, and experience the joy and pain of exile in the process of space traveling. Mu Xin’s representation of the space is basically impressionistic. This is largely due to his hermit-like view of life in exile, in which spatial differences are of minimal importance. The artistic background of Mu Xin and Nabokov is another explanation of the differences. Nabokov is a lepidopterist, a profession that combines both aesthetic taste and scientific precision. Nabokov, who applies his scientific competence in his spatial representation, is also fond of challenging and playing with the reader. In his fussy mapping of the space, he creates a maze for the reader, and takes delight in seeing his reader finding their way out. Mu Xin’s representation of space may be largely influenced by his background in Chinese landscape painting, a tradition that does not originate in the principal of “simulacra.” Instead, the emphasis is placed on the artist’s subjective feelings of the place. These paintings are produced through recollection. As the artist filters his memory and reconstructs the image, typological details are often omitted, and the artist’s own impression is exemplified.

The major difference in Nabokov’s and Mu Xin’s representation of space in exile should not blind the reader to seeing the commonality in their art of play. Both writers intend to conceal the space. Mu Xin achieves this effect through minimal representations such as evasive allusions and the setting of non-space in his stories. Nabokov achieves the same effect through the opposite way. In his expressive representations of space, Nabokov makes space itself a literary object, indeed a

plaything. His preference of mobility negates the typological importance of the space in description.

Nabokov's play of time is a much-studied literary topic. A disbeliever in time, he plays with it with a fairly free will. When the Nabokovian time enters the space of exile, the writer's own vision of exile is unveiled. Nabokov affirms life in the present moment. Exile, as something in the past, should not arrest or impede present happiness. His aesthetic use of "future recollection" further negates the nostalgic impulse. Those exiles who allow themselves to be lost in nostalgia will be blind to "now", and will still be in mourning in the future.

Like Nabokov, Mu Xin also involves future recollection in his play of exile. This writer views exile as a fundamentally temporal experience, which incorporates space as one of its constituent elements. In so doing, Mu Xin reveals the joyous potentials of exile, and he disperses the desire for exile among his characters: those who are artistic in nature will find pleasure in the exilic experience; those who are morose about the past or the homeland are unable find the equilibrium between pleasure and exile.

For many writers in exile, language barriers can be a great source of frustration. Nabokov overshadows most exilic writers in his prominence as a prose writer in English. Despite the wide acknowledgement of his fine sense of English, Nabokov remains self-conscious and needs external commendations to build up his confidence. Meanwhile, he remains highly faithful to his Russian side. His translation theory shows that he does not surrender Russian to English. Instead, he finds the equilibrium by taming while challenging the foreign language. Mu Xin establishes his literary

career in the United States despite his linguistic disadvantage in English. His faith in art as a universal language allows him to concentrate on writing in his own language, and draws Western readers to him. He is not frustrated by “the other language.” Instead, he lives with it and draws creative energy from it. Of these two writers, Nabokov is more alert to the assimilating effects of English upon his own language. He sees a great risk of sacrificing the original meaning for the sake of readability. Nabokov then responds to the risk by giving emphasis to the original meaning of the Russian texts in translation. For Mu Xin, the major challenge is to find friends and readers through art work. Mu Xin responds to this challenge with his openness. He trusts Toming Jun Liu for translation, and gives him ample freedom to play with the original. Liu, as a translator, advocates Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of translation. For Benjamin, the task of the translator “consists in finding that intended effect [*Intention*] upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original” (Benjamin 76). Benjamin's translation theory is more liberal than Nabokov’s. The English translation of *An Empty Room* is not rigidly faithful to the Chinese version, but it does convey the “intended effects” of the original successfully. Mu Xin embraces this translation theory. Both Nabokov and Mu Xin embrace otherness in their linguistic practice. Nabokov preserves his otherness by rejecting the homogeneous force of the foreign language, while Mu Xin allows his art to absorb otherness in order to grow in a different linguistic context.

In their respective plays of exile, Nabokov and Mu Xin both transcend the temporal and spatial forces that may lead to an identity. Both of them show

disapproval of writers with exilic sentiments. Mu Xin once commented on Ivan Bunin and his “grief-stricken” generation of writers in exile:

There are two factors involved: nationalist sentiment and history-bound understanding. Artists in the early twentieth century still had traces of romantic sentimentalism. It was through the experience of one adverse situation after another that later generations gained so much more talent and dignity. It follows that the power of historical understanding cannot come suddenly; it can come only gradually. Only then can there be such statements as ‘Exile is my aesthetic’ or ‘Paris is more a Prague than Prague itself’. Evidently, their influences grow as their talents grow. (Liu, “Dialogue,” *Art* 141)

Nabokov and Bunin were long time rivals in literature. Nabokov distinguishes himself from Bunin’s romantic tone. A Russian émigré critic criticized Nabokov’s works in 1929, when Nabokov used the pen name Sirin: “How terrifying it is to see life as Sirin sees it! What a joy it is to see life as Bunin sees it!” (qtd. in Shroyer 240). Nevertheless, it is through the seemingly dark world represented in Mu Xin and Nabokov that suffering is turned into a savage energy of life in exile.

In another conversation with Toming Jun Liu, Mu Xin implies that he does not like to be called “a writer in exile.” He acknowledges his exilic status only on the “conceptual” level, and he points out that in the conceptual world, everybody is a traveler, and everybody is in exile. Liu then proposes the word “diaspora,” which comes from the Greek word “pollen,” and, therefore, refers to the dissemination of life like dandelions. Mu Xin accepts it with much pleasure (Liu, “Dialogue,” *Art* 140). This image, indeed, highlights Mu Xin’s affirmation of an artist’s life in exile. The same is true for Nabokov.



## Chapter III

### Plays of Memory

The first text anthologized in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, “The Wood Sprite,” relates the pain of exile to the loss of childhood. Mu Xin's *An Empty Room* has a similar beginning. The very fleetingness of childhood makes it into a perennial object of human memory. Lewis Carroll writes about the innate similarity between childhood and memory in his verse. For him, childhood is something “[w]hose echoes live in memory yet, / Though envious years would say forget” (Carroll 24). Both in Mu Xin and in Nabokov the stories about childhood open up the pivotal theme of memory. This chapter will explore the two writers’ plays of memory, together with its spatial and temporal implications.

#### Nabokov’s Play of Memory

Exile brings Nabokov plenty of mnemonic material for literary creation. In this part I will mainly use two texts, “Mademoiselle O” and “Spring in Fialta,” for the discussion of Nabokov and memory.

The titular protagonist, Mademoiselle O, is based on Nabokov’s own reminiscence of his governess, a French-Swiss lady, from way back in his childhood in Russia. She lived in the household for seven years until 1913. Twenty years later Nabokov visited her in her home in Lausanne, Switzerland during his European exile. After the lady passed away, Nabokov took her as a model for his writing.

The story was first written in French. It was translated into English with major revisions in the process. The revisions of the story witness Nabokov's growth as a writer of memory: during the process, he becomes increasingly confident blending fiction into personal memory. The story is to have a significant impact upon his later fiction. In the opening paragraph, Nabokov comments on the autobiographical weight in the story:

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. Although it lingered on in my mind, its personal warmth, its retrospective appeal had gone and, presently, it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed to be so safe from the intrusion of the artist. Houses have crumbled in my memory as soundlessly as they did in the mute films of yore; and the portrait of my old French governess, whom I once lent to a boy in one of my books, is fading fast, now that it is engulfed in the description of a childhood entirely unrelated to my own. The man in me revolts against the fictionist and here is my desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle. (*Stories* 480)

In this reflexive passage, Nabokov acknowledges his biographical impulse in writing. He is "desperate" to preserve the memory through writing—an impulsive surge of memory, an anxious rendering of personal memory into art.

Although the story is named after Mademoiselle O, it focuses less on the reminiscence of Mademoiselle and more on the memory of the self. In one of the memory scenes about his Russian childhood, the narrator recalls the many lovely things on a spring day, and the memory scene closes at the image of a "ruffled exotic bird with one bloodshot eye on Mademoiselle's hat" (489). In this passage, Mademoiselle retreats into the background of memory. She herself is not the

crystallization of time, but the vehicle for memory. At the center of the narrative interest is the memory of a happy childhood. This can be proved in the development of the story, leading to an autobiography of Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, in which “Mademoiselle O” becomes a Chapter Five, and in which the French governess is one of the many people and things from his memory. Nabokov’s childhood is represented as the totality of these people and things remembered. In his remembrance of Mademoiselle, Nabokov recalls happy scenes from childhood, such as the wistful adventure with his brother, and his father’s library. In “Mademoiselle O,” there is an elaborate passage describing how the child narrator takes comfort in the light that is shed from Mademoiselle’s room when he is suffering from insomnia:

If in the course of years I have got so used to my nightly ordeal as almost to swagger while the familiar axe is coming out of its great velvet-lined case, initially I had no such comfort or defense: I had nothing save a door left slightly ajar into Mademoiselle's room. Its vertical line of meek light was something I could cling to, since in absolute darkness my head would swim, just as the soul dissolves in the blackness of sleep. (*Stories* 488)

If one reads the darkness of the child narrator’s room as a metaphor for amnesia, then the light from Mademoiselle’s room, thrusting into darkness, indicates that Mademoiselle is an index to a more profound memory.

Among the many mnemonic themes the narrator finds in his remembrance of Mademoiselle, he is most concerned about the theme of exile. Mademoiselle is constantly afflicted with homesickness. The narrator recalls her everyday sentiments. Her bedroom is stuffed with mnemonic objects such as photos and paintings that remind her of her home. As the narrator remembers, although Mademoiselle’s room is

right next to his own, “it did not seem to belong to our pleasant, well-aired home” (*Stories* 487). Through memory's heavy folds her bedroom is turned into an island foreign to the Russian house. The narrator had thought that spatial relocation is the major source of affliction of her morose soul, but, in his last visit to Mademoiselle O's home in Switzerland, he realizes that her homesickness is temporal, rather than spatial. Mademoiselle O is as nostalgic at home as she was in a foreign land. She has developed a romantic vision of her years in Russia, despite the many unpleasant incidents she has experienced there, and she speaks of her life in Russia warmly “as if it were her own lost homeland” (*Stories* 492).

It thus appears that the narrator's reminiscences about Mademoiselle O are disguises of his self-centred memory. Upon his visit to Mademoiselle twenty years later, the narrator realizes that there is a connection between him and Mademoiselle; he shares the “fluke move of life in exile” (*Stories* 492). It is also during this visit that the narrator realizes that nostalgia is more temporal than spatial: “One is always at home in one's past, which partly explains those pathetic ladies' posthumous love for another country, which they never had really known and in which none of them had been very content” (*Ibid.*). He notices that Mademoiselle O in her “stouter and gray and totally deaf” self and the “mummy-like” friend are in a romantic recollection of the past; they believe that the past, even if it was in a life of unpleasant exile, is better than the present (*Ibid.*).

The narrator realizes that Mademoiselle is giving a fictional account of the past, but he is not untouched by the sincerity of her creation. He recalls that the

hard-of-hearing Mademoiselle used to claim that she could “hear silence” in a desolate valley of the Alps, and she claims that silence is beautiful. She applies the same power of imagination in her memory. She creates a past, just as she creates the acoustic beauty in silence. The narrator wonders: “Was it, then, silence she heard, that Alpine Silence she had talked about in the past? In that past, she had been lying to herself; now she was lying to me” (*Ibid.*). However, like Mademoiselle O, he, too, lies about memory. In the narrator’s memory, he lies to himself: in spite of her stout, clumsy image and her rigid, gloomy personality, in memory, she attains much aesthetic quality.

A couple of years after the narrator’s visit, he learns that Mademoiselle O has passed away. He immediately connects the image of Mademoiselle with the image of a swan he saw after leaving Mademoiselle’s place:

Below, a wide ripple, almost a wave, and something vaguely white attracted my eye. As I came quite close to the lapping water, I saw what it was: an aged swan, a large, uncouth, dodo like creature, making ridiculous efforts to hoist himself into a moored boat. He could not do it. The heavy, impotent, flapping of his wings, their slippery sound against the rocking and splashing boat, the grey laden with that strange significance which sometimes in dreams is attached to a finger pressed to mute lips and then pointed at something the dreamer has no time to distinguish before walking with a start. (492-493)

The image of the “heavy, impotent” swan trying to “hoist himself into a moored boat” recalls Mademoiselle O in her desperate struggle to live with the vicissitudes of time, and to find a home.

In life Mademoiselle has yearned for stability. In death she is eternalized by the

narrator in his recollection: “[S]he seemed like a rock of grim permanence when compared to the ebb and flow of English governesses and Russian tutors passing through our large household” (489). For the narrator, she is the rock in the ebb and flow of time, promising the recollection of his childhood.

The narrator summarizes Mademoiselle O’s life in the last paragraph: “She had spent all her life in feeling miserable; this misery was her native element; its fluctuations, its varying depths, alone gave her the impression of moving and living” (*Stories* 493). However, putting himself in the scene, and making himself a double of Mademoiselle O, an individual in exile, he thinks about the meaning of life in exile: “What bothers me is that a sense of misery, and nothing else, is not enough to make a permanent soul” (*Ibid.*). Mademoiselle, or the Mademoiselle as remembered, has inspired in Nabokov the imaginative powers of memory. Yet, while she uses that power to lament the past, Nabokov is to use it to affirm the present. Mademoiselle O lives a life in the shadow of death—the severed homeland, the unfulfilled romance, and the faded youth. Nabokov lives a life in the exuberance of the present, despite the loss of a homeland, a first love, a brother, and a father.

The author’s play with memory in “Mademoiselle O” begins with spatial elements, but space retreats as time prevails as a major force in the shaping and moulding of memory. Nabokov’s play of time and space in memory culminates in “Spring in Fialta.” The first person narrator of this story, Victor, is a Russian émigré who made it as a businessman in the German film industry. The story unfolds as Victor recounts the events of his short visit to a town called Fialta in the early 1930s.

There he bumps into Nina, a woman he has loved since their first meeting in Russian more than a decade ago. In the flashback of memories, Victor recalls his brief reunion with Nina on that day, but his account is frequently interrupted by more distant memories from their previous sporadic meetings over the many years. A few days later he learns from a newspaper that Nina has been killed in a car accident shortly after their meeting.

The spatial setting of the story is Fialta, a resort town in Europe. The pronunciation of the place name is reminiscent of Yalta (Foster 145). The town is described as divided into two parts: “Fialta consists of the old town and of the new one; here and there, past and present are interlaced, struggling either to disentangle themselves or to thrust each other out” (Nabokov, *Stories* 426). The phonetic feature indicates a theme of spatial juxtaposition of Russia and Europe, while the spatial pattern of the town poses a temporal juxtaposition of past and present. The spatial changes in the characters are intertwined with the temporal ones. Exile has made it possible for Nina to keep haunting the narrator with her sexual power over time, while the narrator’s own experience as a Russian émigré in Europe has turned Nina not only into an object of sexual desire but also an agency of temporal nostalgia.

Victor comments on the intertwining spatial and temporal elements in his memory of Nina, which makes it even harder for him to define the nature of their relationship: “When we met the pace of life altered at once, all its atoms were recombined, and we lived in another, lighter time-medium, which was measured not by the lengthy separation but by those few meetings out of which a short, supposedly

frivolous life was thus artificially formed” (425). And yet, Victor is aware that his account of the story, and of his own life, is fictional. Fictional memory, one could contend, is his way to connect with Nina.

Nina, represented by the narrator as a careless, forgetful, possibly promiscuous lover, is Other to Victor, just as Fong Fong is Other to the musician. But Victor is a more sentimental and more self-assertive lover than Mu Xin’s musician. He tries to circumscribe Nina in a dream that is half memory, half imagination. Nina’s death ultimately sets him free. Victor sees Nina’s husband’s death as a monster’s “escape with local and temporary injury,” “while Nina, in spite of her long-standing, faithful imitation of them, had turned out after all to be mortal” (429). From Victor’s perspective, Nina is liberated in death, but truly her death liberates Victor from the temporal repetition of desire, frustration, and jealousy.

To fully embrace Nina in a wilful imagination, Victor resorts to writing. In this story, Nabokov involves Victor in an argument over the nature of literature with Ferdinand, Nina’s husband, who is a Franco-Hungarian writer. The two of them diverge on the role of memory in writing. Victor believes that the art of memory is fundamental to literature: “were I a writer, I should allow only my heart to have imagination, and for the rest rely upon memory, that long-drawn sunset shadow of one’s personal truth” (*Stories* 420). However, Ferdinand is interested in invention. Victor describes Ferdinand’s works as “thinking up books,” “penning things that had not really happened in some way or other” (*Ibid.*).

The connection between memory and imagination in literature has been an



important topic in Nabokov's critical essays. One may wonder if Nabokov is expressing his artistic views in this epilogue. Chapter I of this thesis has offered an analysis of Nabokov's art of doubling as well as his tendency to share biographical features with his fictional characters. In this story, both Ferdinand and Victor resemble Nabokov from certain standpoints. For example, like Nabokov, Ferdinand is a culturally hybrid writer, and Ferdinand has a strong inclination to weaving words—such as the use of puns and alliteration; Victor, although a novice writer and plain thinker, shares Nabokov's interest in memory writing, and also Nabokov's cultural identity as a Russian émigré in Germany.

Using Victor's passion for memory, but at the same time criticizing it, Nabokov highlights the fluidity of time, and the potential for memory to crystallize feelings that may have been latent in our experience. Victor's limited artistic talent makes him a less creative narrator. In this story, Nabokov plays with the themes of exile, other times and other spaces, and articulates his own theory of art. Nevertheless, self-identity is exactly what Nabokov is playing with. Nabokov the author, in his own writing, oscillates between Ferdinand's inventiveness and Victor's faithfulness to personal memory. "Spring in Fialta" is claimed to be written by Victor for the memory of Nina. Victor intends to give a chronological account of "real" things happened in the past, but his product of writing is unavoidably mixed with imagination and temporal twists. In one of the memory scenes, for instance, he attempts to provide a description of Nina making her entrance to the doorway, but, instead, an imaginary vision emerges: things appear transparent, "receding" and "diminishing" to the man in

recollection, and he visualizes Nina waving farewell to him instead of offering a welcome hug (*Stories* 426). Time and space become entangled in Victor's memory, for it is contaminated by his current knowledge of Nina's death to come.

In memory scenes like this, Nabokov limits and satirizes Victor's rigid faith in memory. Nabokov's own choice of memory for the theme of writing, which is also self-evident in "Mademoiselle O," affirms Victor's initial interest in memory. And yet, in the creative process, Nabokov increasingly affirms Ferdinand's formalistic concerns and his art of deception. "Spring in Fialta" is not merely a story about a faded relationship, nor is it a story about a personal memory, but it is a story about memory writing, in which Nabokov splits his self, summons a struggle between his literary doubles, and demonstrates to his readers the power and pleasure of othering.

### **Mu Xin's Play of Memory**

Below are the opening lines from the first story in Mu Xin's *An Empty Room*:

If a child knows what he should know and does not know what he should not, his childhood will be very happy. But when I was a child, I did not know what I should know, and I knew what I should not, hence all kinds of bewilderments continue to follow me today. (3)

This sketchy passage traces the twists and turns of human life back to childhood, and thereby introduces a mnemonic theme for the whole book.

As it is analyzed in Chapter I, space in Mu Xin is often represented as non-space: a Buddhist temple far away from home, an empty room in an unnamed mountain, a dungeon cell, a moving bus, a maze of streets in a metropolitan landscape, a nameless

cemetery. All these spaces are characterized by solitude, with very vague geographical references. In Mu Xin's realm of memory, space provides a tempting setting for recollection, but it is a very weak trigger.

In "Tomorrow, I'll Stroll No More," the stroller recalls his previous revisit to his college in Shanghai thirty years after his departure. He went to the place, expecting to embrace a memory of his youth; instead, he was deeply disappointed:

I asked a local about the college and she pointed to a huge gray warehouse used for cold storage and said that was where the college had been. How could it be? How could a street simply vanish? I explored five more streets and found no trace of what I could remember nothing left resembled the past. I stood there foolishly looking for nothing. (*Empty* 123)

Ironically, the past he could not recollect is successfully restored during his stroll in Jamaica, Queens, New York in days of exile. The contrast here negates space as a significant element in memory work.

Although space itself is not a significant mnemonic trigger, in Mu Xin's narrative of memory, space has an important metaphorical function; it provides an image for memory work. In "An Empty Room," the spatial description is used solely for such a purpose. In this story, the narrator/traveler enters an empty room in a deserted temple, discovers love letters and empty Kodak boxes left behind by the previous residents, and tries to restore the memory of the room. The first thing that the traveler notices is the open gate of the deserted temple. Although "[f]allen leaves in the yard and dust floating in the hall indicated that this was another place in ruins" (*Empty* 29). Despite the decaying view, the traveler finds this place very appealing, for he feels that there is

“a human presence.” This is a space with potentials for human memory, and it is open to the traveler to enter the memory of two unknown people. He then goes through “the crisscross of the corridors,” which parallels the nonlinear work of human memory. For a while his effort is infertile, as he goes past two rooms that have no doors, only utter emptiness. His quest yields some hope when he arrives at the third one, with “a screen door ajar” (*Empty* 28), anticipating more profound human memories. As the traveler pushes the door open, he finds an empty room, painted pink, with scattered letters and Kodak boxes on the floor.

The room is empty, like any forgotten past. Unlike it, though, it keeps strong memory traces. This space is overwhelmed with the warmth of human presence because of the pink walls, the scattered letters, and the empty Kodak boxes on the floor. Letters and, especially, photographs carry or suggest archival memory. Yet, the very absence of photos here reminds the traveler of the memorial past.

What makes “An Empty Room” a special story about memory is that it is not a personal past that the traveler tries to dive into. Instead, it is a story about two people, Liang and Mei, a couple that the traveler has never met. He thus sets out to find the reminiscences of others. Since the scattered, unpaginated letters and the empty Kodak film box can provide little information, the narrator cannot actually restore the past; he can only imagine it.

However, during the process of creating such an imaginary memory, the traveler gradually internalizes the Other. The question of memory becomes double folded as time goes by. The imaginary memory about the other grows to be part of the personal

memory of the traveler's self: "A few decades have passed since then. I still remember the surprise I felt when I first pushed open that screen door"; "[I]t was like the welcome of spring, or an unexpected encounter with an old friend" (*Empty* 32). "I record this story in memory of my youth. And still cannot comprehend what it means — which only demonstrates that I haven't made much progress these past few decades" (*Ibid.*). The love story of Liang and Mei is now inseparable from the memory of the traveler's youth. Meanwhile, the uncertainties of Liang and Mei's story, or, in the traveler's own words, his inability to comprehend the full meaning of their story, indicates that one does not have full command of his/her personal memory. There are, inevitably, uncertainties in one's memory. There are things in the past we do not fully know, comprehend or remember. However, those uncertainties open up room for artistic creation.

"An Empty Room" partakes of the Orpheus motif, which I have analyzed in Chapter I. Here the realm of memory is spatially represented as the other world. However, as in many of Mu Xin's other stories, the spatial dimension of the narrative takes a turn and is eventually absorbed into a richer temporal dimension. In the last recollection of the room, the traveler imagines that the body of a flea accommodates the blood of Liang, Mei and his own. Thus the flea has become the ultimate spatial metaphor for memory. The blending of space and time in memory further leads to the melting and merging of self-identity/ies.

The temporal anguish at the beginning piece of the book makes its way into "An Empty Room," and is intensified in "The Boy Next Door." A man deprived of his

archival memory tries to preserve memory by finding substitute objects. He believes archival objects such as childhood photos can help him react to the regressive power of time: “As for childhood photos, well, such photos will always become precious as time passes” (59). He realizes that his desire for archival memory surges in times of self-identity crises, first in his forties, when his parents passed away, then in the post-Catastrophe years, when he lost his home and all his photos. For him, such memory secures a sense of continuity: “When you see someone’s childhood photos next to those of his adulthood, you gradually discover that this child is indeed this youth, and indeed this middle-aged man and this elderly man” (59). These archives are external forces to reassure a sense of self continuity, despite the fact that the man has experienced radical changes through time.

Memory not only helps an individual gain a sense of self-continuity, but also bridges the gap between the self and the other, and thereby smoothes over one's continuity with others:

It is equally fascinating to look at the childhood photographs of your dearest love. You think to yourself: That was a different time, we were both children then, we didn't know each other, and how could I possibly know that I would later meet you, this exquisite you. Or perhaps the two of you became friends as children. Photos of both of you together then would be extraordinary. You'd say: Ah, yes, that was how things were, don't you remember? But I do. (59)

Memory bridges the gap between the self and the Other, and thereby places the self in a stable network in the objective world through a flux of time. In order mediate between past and present, this story's narrator decides to use the photo of Weiliang, a neighbor's boy, as his own childhood image.

As in “An Empty Room,” space in “The Boy Next Door” is used more as a metaphorical device to highlight the temporal theme of memory. For example, when the Catastrophe is over, the narrator attends a party to celebrate his survival. The party is held in a friend’s place: “The party was held in her home as I didn’t have a home anymore and she had built a new home to replace her old one that, like mine, had been destroyed” (*Empty* 60). The loss of an old house synchronizes the loss of a personal past. The friends of the narrator, including the host of the party, and *Jiefu*<sup>2</sup>, all move to a new home, which means that they have synchronized with time. The narrator, however, remains homeless. Like the musician in “Fong Fong No. 4,” this narrator is left behind by the pace of his community in his constant effort of going back to the past. However, as the narrator notices, those who have built a new home share his obsession with archives to preserve a sense of continuity:

On her living room wall hung an enormous photograph of a child.  
 “Is that you?” I asked.  
 “Yes, when I was six.”  
 “Very cute, looks exactly like you.” (*Empty* 60)

Such an enormous childhood photograph on display shows the individual’s compulsive desire to persuade herself that “I am the same person, the same self, after so many misfortunes over time.” And yet, she is not exactly the same as the girl in the photo. For one’s current self, the past self is just like the boy/girl next door. It appears close, but it is distant. The spatial proximity between the narrator and Weiliang promises hopes of accessibility, but the temporal distance between them eliminate

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<sup>2</sup> “Jiefu” means “brother in law.”

such spatial convenience. In his last visit to *Jiefu's* place, he finally gets a chance to meet Weiliang and take photographs with him. While waiting for Weiliang to come, the anxious narrator looks outside the window: "The little guest had not arrived yet. *Jiefu* cleaned the chessboard, then lit an incense stick, inserting it into a vase. Beyond the half-rolled bamboo blinds a ferry boat sounded its long horn" (*Empty* 66).

This sketchy spatial description carries a few metaphorical burdens for the narrative of memory. The "half-rolled bamboo blinds" resonate with the "door ajar" in "An Empty Room," referring to the other realm, and implying a possible discovery of the past. The uncertainties of memory are represented as the half open, half hidden view over the other side of the blinds and the door. The image of a ferry boat on a river coincides with the image in "The Moment My Childhood Vanished." The river flow represents the flux of time. Humans live in the flux of time as boats float on the river. Humans have their own promise faced in a specific direction, and yet, time flows at its own will.

The seemingly soothing sight of *Jiefu* lighting an incense stick has a mnemonic undercurrent. The narrator has had all his photos burned during the Cultural Revolution, and he describes his tragic experience as "a catastrophic fire that would last more than ten years" (*Empty* 60). Fire vehemently destroys memory. The burning incense stick predicts another destruction of the narrator's personal memory: his frustrated effort to use Weiliang's photo as his childhood image.

The narrator has hoped that, by using Weiliang's photo as his own childhood image, he would be able to "defy that catastrophic fire which had destroyed what



should never have been destroyed” (*Empty* 62). Fire is the sweeping external force that destroys archival memory, while water, or the river of time, is a more erosive force. As the ending of the story shows, Weiliang grows up, and the narrator can no longer find traces of his own childhood image in Weiliang. His last effort to preserve an archival memory is denied by time.

“The Boy Next Door” is a man’s unsettled quest for memory to secure a sense of self-identity. He challenges time by collecting mnemonic archives of personal history. The irony here is that the man is obsessed with the authenticity of these objects in order to have a pure memory, but he has lost all authentic objects in the Catastrophe. As a result, he tries to transfer his desire for authenticity of the real thing to the authenticity of a replica. During a conversation with *Jiefu*, they discuss the possibility of taking a photo with the neighbour’s boy. *Jiefu* is concerned that the narrator’s use of Weiliang’s photo as his own image would be unfair to the boy, as it would be the abduction of someone else’s childhood. To avoid embarrassment, *Jiefu* proposes that the narrator take a photo with Weiliang first and then make a portrait based on the child’s image in the photo. The narrator refuses the proposal, since he believes that a portrait has no authenticity. However, he does not realize that the even the photo is twice removed from authenticity: it is in itself a simulacrum of Weiliang, while Weiliang is a simulacrum of the child version of the narrator’s own childhood self. The chain of simulacra breaks as Weiliang makes his appearance as an older kid, physically different from what the narrator has remembered for three years since their last meeting.

The rupture between Weiliang and his earlier self indicates that what the narrator has understood as a continuous selfhood is a fiction. *Jiefu* does not notice the rupture because, for him, the boy preserves continuity through time: “He retained the impression of the boy three years before in his mind and didn’t notice any changes since then” (*Empty* 66). But for the narrator, who has not seen the boy for three years, the rupture is evident. As this character ventures through time, he constantly becomes other to his previous selves. By depending on archival memory, the narrator attempts to find a secured sense of self; instead, what he actually experiences is a helpless sense of a split, for, in order to reclaim oneself from the past, the individual has to think of the past self as other. Memory unavoidably alienates who we are from who we were.

Also trapped in an obsessive quest for memory is the old English couple in “Quiet Afternoon Tea.” They would turn the lights out and recall a peculiar day forty years ago. The wife believes that the husband cheated on her, and she demands a detailed account of his experience during the three hours he was absent from home. The husband firmly denies any accusation of infidelity, but refuses to defend himself by putting forward a narrative of the past. For decades, the two of them repeat the pattern of questions and responses, followed by prolonged silence over their afternoon tea. It is no longer important if the husband did commit adultery; both of them use the afternoon tea as a ritual of mourning the past. By repeating the ritual, they connect themselves with the old time, and thus convince themselves of the continuity of their existence. Their desire to live in the past is also demonstrated in their persistence of

the old-fashioned life style, their hostility to young people, and their spatial immobility: all of their old time neighbours have either passed away or immigrated. Only the two of them remained in the same old house.

The obsession for the past in “The Boy Next Door” is deepened in “Quiet Afternoon Tea.” Time and space in this story are both confining. The house is lifeless: the couple no longer have visitors and “no young person had set foot in this house for a very long time” (*Empty* 75). The narrative time in this story forms a vicious circle. In the time past, on that day forty years ago, the husband was absent from the gaze of the wife from four o’clock to seven o’clock, and that has caused the wife’s decades-long suspicion. In the present time, their afternoon tea and the subsequent ritual of interrogation and silence, also starts from four o’clock and ends at seven o’clock. This old couple, in their single-minded pursuit for a stable sense of self through mnemonic rituals, is locked in this dark space, and in this cyclical time.

One way to thrust through such a vicious circle is forgetfulness. Too much memory burdens human beings with their joys and sorrows from the past, and blinds them to things in the present. In “Fellow Passengers,” Mu Xin writes:

[A] human being isn’t a container. He is more like a pipe through which both joy and sadness flow. A pipe with all sorts of emotions flowing through it until one’s death or until it is emptied. A mad man, then, is someone whose pipe is stuffed, or cracked... He whose pipe thickens must be slow in feeling either joy or sadness. A blocked pipe eventually breaks. (97)

The characters in “The Boy Next Door” and “Quiet Afternoon Tea” are such “blocked pipes” encumbered by memory.

“Fellow Passengers” conveys such an idea through a traveler’s observation with a fellow passenger on a bus ride. While the narrator is boarding the bus, he notices a man involved in an argument about family affairs with his wife. Later the man, saddened and exhausted, gets on the same bus, takes a seat in front of the narrator, sobs bitterly, and later falls asleep. The narrator observes this fellow passenger with much sympathy. And yet, when the bus reaches the destination, the narrator is surprised to find that the fellow passenger seems to have completely forgotten the heartbreaking experience of only a short while before: “The man walked ahead of me toward the ferry, his gait slightly wavering. Suddenly he started twirling his umbrella, making circles and circles—clockwise, counter-clockwise—while he whistled to the rhythm of the twirling” (*Empty* 97). The passenger looks like “the same man with a navy blue jacket and black umbrella,” but he is a different person because of forgetfulness.

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche views forgetfulness as an active ability to suppress damaging memory. Forgetfulness can be beneficial, just as digestion is healthy for the human body. A person without the ability to forget has had his “apparatus of suppression” damaged, and the person thus becomes a dyspeptic (*Genealogy* 35). The character in “Fellow Passengers” is no dyspeptic. The spatial representation in this story also points to the forgetfulness. The story takes place on a moving bus, which takes commuters from the suburbs to the city. The city is separated from the suburbs by a river. As it is mentioned before, Mu Xin frequently uses the river as a metaphor for time in his writing about memory. The final stop of the bus

ride is located by the river, and the last scene of description shows the man happily walking toward the ferry. This man shifts the burden of memory to the river of time. He actively separates the current self from previous saddened self, and he is ready to embrace new aspects of life. However, mere forgetting itself cannot make one happy. If one is too light-hearted and too careless to remember, it also poses a risk to the healthy minds:

[A] living thing can be healthy, strong and fruitful only when bounded by a horizon; if it is incapable of drawing a horizon around itself, and at the same time too self-centered to enclose its own view within that of another, it will pine away slowly or hasten to its timely end. (Nietzsche, "History" 63)

If one does not know how to forget, s/he will be incapable of drawing a horizon; if one does not know how to remember, s/he will be too self-centered, too absorbed in the ephemeral state of becoming. "Too much remembering makes us less able to know or to hold on to experiences such that they can stand out as meaningful; too much forgetting is detrimental in light of our possibilities for freedom" (Acampora 50). Forgetting only superficially promises freedom; meaningful freedom must have an interactive dynamic in which remembering and forgetting each play a role in constituting the subject, enabling it to incorporate its experience, and reconstituting it in lights of what it has been and might become (*Ibid*). Only when the individual can strike a balance between remembering and forgetting can s/he enjoy the freedom of memory and, thereby, frees the self for a more meaningful course.

In "Tomorrow, I'll Stroll No More" Mu Xin plays with memory—voluptuously so. This story consists of four passages tied to and by instances of Proustian

involuntary memory, each triggered by sense impressions. The writer first feels “a sensation like swimming in the air, through waves of breeze” (*Empty* 117); then he finds that “The feeling of swimming in fresh air that inspired you at the start of your stroll will eventually disappear. A breeze—a clear, passing breeze—brings a strong scent of flowers” (*Empty* 121); later he is stimulated by the visual image of “freshly mowed grass” (*Empty* 124). Responding to respected memory traces, the stroller evokes thoughts from a recent memory about a walk in the raining New York to a more remote memory about his youth time in Shanghai, and to a critique of human memories in general.

As I have mentioned in Chapter II, Mu Xin often uses “the stroll” as a metaphor for exile. The stroller’s freedom in spatial changes relates to the randomness of his memory. A stroll differs from a walk in its spontaneity of movement. In this story, Mu Xin shows much openness to involuntary memories triggered by random objects on the stroll; meanwhile, he strolls in and out of the past, enjoying a temporal freedom in reminiscing. In so doing, the stroller unleashes the self from a rigid identity based on space or time. For example, in one of the mnemonic passages, the stroller recalls his last revisit to the college he attended in Shanghai. He visualizes the past self standing in front of the streets, trying to recollect his youth time but frustrated. And yet, the narrative takes a turn, and the “I” finds its present self standing in the streets of New York, lost in recollection. The stroller has given up the obsession of personal archives, and he has given up the obsession of a secured sense of self as in the characters in “The Boy Next Door” and “Quiet Afternoon Tea,” but in his encounters with his

previous selves, he is freer and more at ease than they are.

## Conclusion

In a 1993 interview with Mu Xin on his art of fiction, a literary critic asked Mu Xin about his art of memory:

**TJL:** How do you consider and handle such subjects as “remembrances of things past”? Can you please elaborate on that?

**Mu Xin:** *What interests me is not “things past” but how to achieve simultaneously two I's through remembrance: one is long dead, the other is still living.* According to a traditional custom in China, “the dead take priority.” In the old days, for example, a feudal official traveling with his entourage would have his subordinates drive everyone else to the sides of the road and make them stand in silent awe. But if there was a funeral procession on the same road, the official and his entourage had to make way for the procession; it did not matter if the dead in the coffin was a nobleman or a commoner. My I in the present looks at the I in the past with the same kind of respect. However, the present I often instil into the past I certain “possibilities”; in other words, I let him do, within the realm of fiction, certain things I wanted to do then but did not or could not do. (Liu; Italics mine)

In this half joking manner, Mu Xin acknowledges the importance of three issues: first, memory as a primary material for writing; second, the human presence of memory; third, the deconstruction of self-identity, i.e., the viewing of oneself as other.

Nabokov asks a similar question in “Mademoiselle O.” His answer sounds such:

Have I really salvaged her from fiction? Just before the rhythm I hear falters and fades, I catch myself wondering whether, during the years I knew her, I had not kept utterly missing something in her that was far more she than her chins or her ways or even her French; something perhaps akin to that last glimpse of her, to the radiant deceit she had used in order to have me depart pleased with my own

kindness, or to that swan whose agony was so much closer to artistic truth than a drooping dancer's pale arms; something, in short, that I could appreciate only after the things and beings that *I had most loved in the security of my childhood had been turned to ashes or shot through the heart.* (493; Italics mine)

Nabokov's rendition of memory into art is not unlike Mu Xin's. He is self-conscious of the interception of a personal memory in writing, and he is primarily interested in the salvage of a *human* life. In his mnemonic activities, he transforms Mademoiselle O from the comic-looking, forever miserable French governess into a swan-like dancer. Like Mu Xin, Nabokov emphasizes the "death" of the past: only after the childhood vanished and died can he fully enjoy the play of memory. This is what separates the artists from their pain stricken characters: the artists set aside the nostalgia of an old time, play with the past selves, and use the play as an artistic object for literary creation.

In their shared view of the past self as someone already dead, Mu Xin and Nabokov both affirm the Nietzschean concept of active forgetting. Since Plato, memory has been put to a superior position as opposed to forgetting, for memory was understood as the accumulation of knowledge. Memory is believed to be a crucial part of self-identity, fastened on a grid consisting of space and time. It is often understood as the defining way in which we relate to our own past. Memory is generally thought to be the meeting point of our past and our present, and as guidance for our outlook toward the future. Augustine compares memory to the "the common tie" between divisions of time (qtd. in Shores 209). Diderot believes that there would be no self without memory; the individual would be left with isolated sensations in life, and not



able to form a narrative of the self. John Locke, too, believes that memory ensures continuity of the self; so long as an individual maintains memory about the past, s/he stays the same personal self. John Locke highlights the communicative function of memory; memory gives us a sense of continuity (qtd. in Shores 200-201).

Nietzsche, however, presents a challenge to the existing conception of self and memory. He points out the importance of forgetting in the forming of the subject. He defines forgetting as “the capacity to develop out of oneself in one’s own way, to transform and incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to heal wounds, to replace what has been lost, to recreate broken mould” (Nietzsche, “History” 62). Forgetting is not simply an absence of memory; it evacuates consciousness and allows the subject freedom to engage in other causes. Nietzsche’s affirmation of forgetting opens up room for artistic creation. Forgetting “gives the shape, form, rhythm, texture and depth that makes the seemingly endless stream of possible objects of concern and attention an experience” (Acampora 49). Forgetting also enriches memory, rather than just erases it.

Active forgetting leads to dissolution of the self, but it also promises "its" potential resurrection in a playful recollection of the past. In such plays of memory, Mu Xin and Nabokov defy the confining forces of time and space, and free the self from a fixed identity. Their memory is a Dionysian memory resurrected in fragments after an evacuative forgetting.

Those characters in Mu Xin and Nabokov who are unable to attain a Dionysian memory tend to be bound in a vicious circle of time, such as the lachrymose French

governess and the Chinese intellectual in search of a child's photo. They reject the idea of a dead self in the past, and, in so doing, they constantly live in a time of death. In their lifeless cycle of time, past and present become each other's empty references. In *Lolita*, Nabokov has created a character anxious to recollect his own past. The narrator, himself a literary critic and artist, adopts the comic-sounding, doubling name of Humbert Humbert. The self-consciously narcissistic implication of the name relates to the artist's vision of memory play. The moment an individual starts recalling a past, s/he experiences a sense of estrangement. The past self is isolated from the current self, each being the mirror image of the other. Physically, they are the same—both of them are Humbert. Nevertheless, the past self does not just perform on its own under the gaze of the current self. The past self does not just repeat mechanically its original performances; instead, it can be manipulated at the will of the remembering subject. Hence, it can be Humbert reaching for the other Humbert and dancing with him to celebrate the dissolving of temporal boundaries and enjoy a blissful memory. However, if the individual is warped in the pursuit of "the same self," what is left of this Humbert Humbert is just a dull, empty echo.

The Nabokovian play of memory differs from Mu Xin's in that it tends to involve manifold time. While Nabokov challenges time with his anxious racing into the past and future, Mu Xin challenges time by slowing it down in a calm stroll in and out of the other time. Moreover, Mu Xin's memory demonstrates more Proustian features than Nabokov's. Although Nabokov also adopts involuntary memory in his representation, in many places he takes delight in the non-involuntary memory as a

way to entice diffusive imagination in memory. And yet, in their various forms of play, they consistently affirm the current time. Their interaction with memory is one of critique, as a critique of compassion, and one of affirmation, as an affirmation of life.

## Conclusion

### Creating Unlikeness

In the previous chapters I have examined the theme of otherness in the short stories by Vladimir Nabokov and Mu Xin. First I examined the play of space and time in their writing, two important concepts in the definition the self. Space provides an idea of “where I am,” and time convinces an individual that “I exist” despite the changes in the passage of time. The synthesis of space-time assures the impression of a unified and coherent self. In their play of time and space, Nabokov and Mu Xin create a fictional world where a fictional “I” dwells. As diasporic writers, both have an intense interest in writing about exile and memory. Exile brings out a porous interface of life experience, transcending the spatial, temporal and cultural boundaries, while memory, itself fluid and inventive, also induces spatial and temporal play.

In so playing, these two writers present the self not as a singular subject configured by a static space-time, but as a plural one, enriched and liquefied by othering in time and space. The writers’ desire to play with the self is further rendered apparent by their use of role-playing. In the prologue to *The Windsor Cemetery Diary*, Mu Xin comments on the initiative of writing, and he makes similar comments in interviews and prose. He mentions that he first felt the impulse for literary creation when he was attending the local theatre in his hometown. This was no aristocratic entertainment, as the actors and actresses were members of a "migrant theatre." They lived on boats, traveled along the river; from time to time they would make a stop for

and stage performances for random audience. And yet, the child Mu Xin was deeply attracted by the fictional world created on stage (*Windsor* 1-5). The art of play triumphantly engulfed the filthy environment, the shabby stage, the plainness of the actors and actresses, and the child was lost in the pleasure of the play. Since then Mu Xin had always thought “it is tedious for human beings to have just one life” (“Dialogue,” *Art* 140). The river of time keeps flowing; the migrant theatre floats away and fades out. Now it is Mu Xin as an artist that flows with the river of time and makes stops for artistic creation in a life of mishaps.

Mu Xin summarizes his intention of artistic creation as the attempt to “conceal” and to “disperse the self.” Nabokov makes a bolder statement about his own artistic impulse. He, too, traces the impulse to childhood experience:

I used to be a little conjuror when I was a boy, I loved doing simple tricks—turning water into wine, that kind of thing; but I think I’m in good company because all art is deception and so is nature; all is deception in that good cheat, from the insect that mimics a leaf to the popular enticements of procreation. Do you know how poetry started? I always thinks that it started when a cave boy came running back to the cave, through the tall grass, shouting as he ran, “Wolf, wolf” and there was no wolf. His baboon-like parents, great sticklers for the truth, gave him a hiding, no doubt, but poetry had been born—the tall story had been born in the tall grass. (*Strong* 11)

Mu Xin’s understated literary desire is sonorously pronounced here by Nabokov as the only legitimate theme of artistic creation: to be an artist is to be someone else, in another time, in another space. The creation of art is not to create something in the likeness of the author, or in the likeness of actuality, but to incorporate and take delight in their unlikeness, the Other.

Chapter I of this thesis has discussed the Orpheus motif shared by Nabokov's and Mu Xin's short fiction. Their characters are frequently represented as Orpheus in quest of a lost object of desire – and those who recognize the power of art can reclaim the loss. Nevertheless, the significance of the Orpheus myth reaches beyond the discussion of loss and gain. The creative artists see the process of artistic creation in the image of Orpheus. Maurice Blanchot, in his interpretation of the myth, argues that Orpheus turns around and looks at Eurydice not once, but an infinite amount of times. Orpheus, the beloved musician of Apollo, belongs to the light of the day, and his work is meant to give form and shape to the desired object. However, in his pursuit of Eurydice in the other world, he forgets his original purpose “to give form,” and loses his lucidity:

From day's perspective, the descent into the Underworld, the movement down into vain depths, is in itself excessive. It is inevitable that Orpheus transgress the law which forbids him to "turn back," for he already violated it with his first steps toward the shades. This remark implies that Orpheus has in fact never ceased to be turned toward Eurydice: he saw her invisible, he touched her intact, in her shadowy absence, in that veiled presence which did not hide her absence, which was the presence of her infinite absence. (Blanchot, *Space* 171)

The artist, like Orpheus, moves between the real and the form. Artistic creation is the constant movements toward the real, redoubled at each attempt and repeated with the desire to approach the real. However, “the essential night,” where the real or the origin lies, is “richer” and “more august than the empty futility which it becomes after he looks.” To gaze into the real is to leave the artistic work in oblivion. Blanchot calls this “sudden eclipse” “the distant memory of Orpheus’s gaze,” “the nostalgic return to

the uncertainty of the origin” (*Space* 173).

Hence there is a temporal implication in art. Art has nostalgia as its initial motivation, and ends in a divorce with the present. The repetition of the artistic desire toward the real makes endless movements toward the real. The evasive movements form a constant act of concealment. Nietzsche would call are the “appearance” instead of what is hidden. The concealment of the real is in itself art. As it is stated by Deleuze:

It is art which invents the lies raise falsehood to its highest affirmative power, that turns the will to deceive into something which is affirmed in the power of falsehood. For the artist, *appearance* no longer means the negation of the real in this world but this kind of selection, correction, redoubling and affirmation. The truth perhaps takes on a new sense. Truth is appearance. (*Nietzsche* 103)

A Nietzschean artist seeks freedom in the lies and illusions of life, rather than taking comfort in the Platonic mimesis of life. Therefore, art provides comfort in the absence of the real, meanwhile, pushing the real further away. In the myth, Orpheus turns around to see Eurydice, and loses her as a result. However, in the artistic creation Orpheus turns around to lose her on purpose: to let go off the real, and to dwell on concealment.

It is based on such creative principles that Mu Xin and Nabokov create fictional worlds with biographical traces. The more biographical traces are involved, the more challenges their writings pose for the reader. Among all of Mu Xin’s thirteen stories in *An Empty Room*, “Notes from Underground” poses the greatest risks. The main body of the story is drawn from Mu Xin’s actual notes while he was imprisoned in a

dungeon. This raises the question of how a writer like Mu Xin, who has ardently attempted to “conceal the self,” would release the historical notes and use it for fiction. At first, Mu Xin opposed “the resurrection” of the notes. He was concerned that critics and audience would read these notes as an object of cultural studies, and he wanted his work free from any ideology (Wu, “Reading” 44). And yet, he finally detached himself from his work:

The symbolic significance of this event now transcends my own person. So I stand aside like any other viewer, watching the first level of significance fade away. The notes originated in a damp and filthy dungeon and they now end up in a clean and well-lighted museum. The English have a saying: “What happens to others can also happen to you.” I no longer insist a further delay. (Liu “Dialogue,” *Art* 140)

There he accepted the proposal of juxtaposing the notes with the paintings at the exhibition. What has made his mind change is the artistic desire to view the self as the Other, in this case, not as the creator of the notes, but as a viewer of the notes. To approach the notes as part of the traumatic personal history, with a sense of etching pain in memory, is to search for “the first level of significance.” “The second level of significance,” however, allows the viewer to see things from the aesthetic perspective. For example, the Parthenon in ancient Greece and the stone sculpture in Dunhuang were created for religious purpose; that was their first level of significance. But for today’s viewers, they no longer have the religious significance; they are appreciated for the second level of significance: they are viewed as art works now (*Ibid.*). And this is what Mu Xin was doing while looking at his own notes. He views the time (the Cultural Revolution), the space (the dungeon cell) and the self (the artist/prisoner) as



the Other. In order to mediate the tension between biography and fiction, Mu Xin puts the sketches in a narrative frame outlining an I-narrator visiting a Chinese diasporic artist in New York. Upon visiting the artist's study, the I-narrator finds some interesting manuscripts, faded and forgotten by the owner. So "I" picks up five sketches and starts reading. This narrative frame distances Mu Xin the author from the writer of the manuscripts. Mu Xin suggested that this manuscript should not be classified as "what it is" but by "what it is not" (*Ibid.*). In the case of "Notes from Underground," the artist's life is the concealed in the notes, the hidden, and the "what it is" underneath the appearance. However, for the Nietzschean artist there is no truth hidden, for "truth is appearance" (Deleuze, *Nietzsche* 103). Therefore, the hiding or the concealment is art itself. "What it is not" becomes "truth" in art.

Nabokov ponders this tension between truth and appearance in the form of history and memory. A revisit to the opening paragraph of "Mademoiselle O" is helpful: "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" (*Stories* 480). The foreignness he feels about memory is, in fact, the product of othering during the process of artistic creation. To write about things past is to let them adopt a life of their own.

Both Nabokov and Mu Xin are faced with a classical dilemma of the Nietzschean artists: the intuitive act to see self as a real human being and the aesthetic efforts to represent existence as aesthetic falsehood, and the self as the Other. As summarized by Stephen Barker, the artist moves toward absence by becoming, and the artist clings

to being, s/he will abolish the artistic values of the creation. Thereby, s/he ceases to be an artist (*Autoaesthetics* 71).

Mu Xin has named his 2001 Yale exhibition “The Tower within a Tower.” He explains that the external tower is the Tower of London, while the internal tower is an ivory tower; he thinks of himself as a maker of an ivory tower while being a prisoner of the Tower of London. This image truly summarizes Mu Xin’s career of artistic creation, from the dungeon prisoner secretly writing notes based on his imagination in utter solitude, to the artist under house-arrest secretly painting landscape from recollection. But it is a universal situation for every artist. All artists are prisoners of reality. One has to create an ivory tower, isolate time and space from actuality, and watch the self as an active player in the imagined vision. Nabokov has called himself a prisoner of time (*Speak* 19). Exile could be his Tower of London. Like Mu Xin, he creates an ivory tower of a perfect Russian childhood in literature. Also in Nabokov’s ivory tower are the many faces of the Other he creates from the self. And yet, Nabokov probably would not use the same image of a tower, but use the image of a cocoon, which is pregnant with the othering possibility at every moment, and anticipates a product of othering, a stunning butterfly, as beautiful as the art of composition/writing. In so doing, both of them transform a loss in personal life into a literary asset. The only truth of the self lies not in the artist’s experience of the self, framed in time or space, but lies in the artist’s play of it in the presence of these elements.

Much remains to be done in this academic arena to further develop this research

project. This thesis focuses on the influences of the Western literary heritage upon Mu Xin. A comparative study of the Eastern heritage and its Western counterpart, using Mu Xin, Nabokov, and probably other diasporic writers in North America for example, may yield significant insights into the understanding of self and the Other in two major cultural contexts, whose boundaries are becoming blurred, and would be likely to contribute to the discussion of the significance of art in human existence. Nietzsche has made the claim for art as such: “Art and nothing but art! It is the great means of making life possible, the great seduction to life, the great stimulant of life” (*Will* 853). It will be an intriguing study to examine the Nietzschean artistic view with its Eastern counterpart.

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## A Glossary of Chinese Names, Titles and Terms<sup>3</sup>

Chen Danqing 陈丹青: a contemporary artist, writer and critic.

“Chichi gaobai” 《迟迟告白》: “A Belated Confession,” an essay by Mu Xin.

*Gelunbiya de daoying* 《哥伦比亚的倒影》: *Reflections of Columbia*, a collection of essays by Mu Xin.

Houji 后记: Afterword.

Li Shangyin 李商隐: 813-858, a poet.

Mu Xin 木心: 1927-2011, a writer and artist.

*Qiongmeika suixiang lu* 《琼美卡随想录》: *Thoughts of Jamaica*, a collection of essays by Mu Xin.

Tao Qian 陶潜: 372?-427, a poet.

Wang Wei 王维: 701-761, a poet, painter and Zen Buddhist.

Wangchuan bieye 辋川别业: the Wangchuan Villa, Wang Wei’s private garden estate.

“Wensha muyuan riji” 《温莎墓园日记》: “The Windsor Cemetery Diary,” a short story written by Mu Xin; also the name of Mu Xin’s short story collection in Chinese.

Xu 序: Preface.

“Yikuang pian” 《遗狂篇》: “Remains of the Wild,” a prose fiction by Mu Xin.

Yin 隐: reclusion.

Yin 瘾: addiction.

*Yuli zhi yan* 《鱼丽之宴》: *A Banquet of Feast*, a collection of Mu Xin’s essays and

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<sup>3</sup> My translation.

interviews.

“Zhongxia kai xuan” 《仲夏开轩》: “A Midsummer Conversation,” an interview between Toming Jun Liu and Mu Xin in 1993, collected in *Yuli zhi yan*.

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