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From Biography to Autobiography and Back: The
Fictionalization of The Narrated Self in *The Real Life*
of *Sebastian Knight*

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Readers of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* - the story of a man's research into the life of his half-brother — face a complex pattern of interwoven identities and fictions. The intricate interrelationship between the experiences of the narrating figure known as “V” and the fictions of the subject of his narration, the author known as “Sebastian Knight”, has generally occasioned three broad interpretations. According to one group of readers, Sebastian Knight himself is the author of the text: he creates V, V's quest, and V's encounter with characters from his (Sebastian's) own fiction (see Field 27 and Stuart 37).

According to the second view, it is V who is the unitary author, not only of the narrative about his research on Sebastian Knight, but perhaps even of the passages he cites as models of Sebastian's writing (see, e.g., Brufee 181). In a variant of this reading, Sebastian may be a figure distinct from V, but V's supposed biography of Sebastian becomes instead an autobiography, as V himself either takes center stage or actually becomes Sebastian (see, e.g., Nicol 93 and Grabes 16). Finally, the third interpretation regards Sebastian and V as separate entities, but it considers Sebastian to be exerting a covert influence on V and his narrative from beyond the grave (see Fromberg 438-39, Rowe 21-25, Boyd, *The Russian Years* 498-99, and Alexandrov 146-59).

Although each of these interpretations can be argued with some justification, none can be definitively proven to be the sole “correct” one. A different perspective emerges, however, when one analyzes the novel in light of a central concern of Nabokov's work in the mid-1930's — the problem of verisimilitude and narrative accuracy which arises during the process of biographical and autobiographical writing. This problem surfaces both when individuals are writing about others and when individuals are writing about themselves. Let us focus on the latter process now.

During the years leading up to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* Nabokov wrote a series of works in which first-person narrators attempt to record something of their personal experiences. These works include *The Eye* and *Despair*, and the series culminates in “Recruiting” and *The Gift*. Although considerations of space rule out a full discussion of the topic here, one can summarize Nabokov's discoveries as follows. These works demonstrate Nabokov's recognition that any attempt to tell one's own story introduces an element of fictionalization into the story. The self that is portrayed in a verbal autobiography becomes, inevitably, a fictional construct.¹ Narratives which reflect this recognition may reveal a bifurcation of authorial representation. The first-person speaker who is distinguishable on the extradiegetic level through the first-person pronoun “I” may also be represented on the diegetic level in a figure who is denoted with a third-person pronoun “he”. This binary structure is particularly evident both in “Recruiting”, where the first-person narrator speaks of a figure in the text as “my representative” (*Tyrants Destroyed* 110), and in *The Gift*, where one can observe a distinctive oscillation between the first and third-person modes of narration: the implied author represents himself in the text both through the pronoun “I” and through the figure of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev (“he”).²

¹ See my monograph, *Nabokov's Early Fiction* (particularly Chapter Seven), for a full discussion of this subject.

² Nabokov exploits the ambiguities inherent in the shifter “I.” While the pronoun often represents the thoughts of the character Fyodor at a given moment, it sometimes seems to represent a slightly different consciousness—that of the narrating voice describing Fyodor's life (note, e.g., the proleptic passage referring to the square “where we dined,” p. 52).

I believe that Nabokov's design in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* receives special illumination if one considers the relationship between Sebastian as the subject of the narration and V as the narrator of the tale in terms of the relationship between the binary representations of authorial consciousness discussed above. Such a reading combines elements of all three of the interpretations mentioned at the outset.

Nearly every reading of the novel points to the intricate connections between V and Sebastian that emerge by the end of the text. These connections are so tight that a virtual fusion of identity seems to occur ("I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I ..." [RLSK 205]). It may be fruitful to evaluate this connection as a new variant of the essential bifurcation of authorial identity seen earlier. If such a bifurcation is at work in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, then V may be a representative of the authorial consciousness on the extradiegetic level — as the narrating voice, and Sebastian may represent the authorial consciousness on the diegetic level — as the narrated subject.³

What does such a structure imply? I think it suggests that standing behind both V and Sebastian is an authorial consciousness which I believe can be closely identified with Sebastian, though it is not precisely congruent with him. According to this view, the authorial consciousness represented in the text by both Sebastian and V is a Sebastian-like figure who wishes to tell his own autobiographical tale, but realizes, as any good author in Nabokov would, that to do so means inevitably to fictionalize oneself. Thus, the authorial consciousness creates the character "Sebastian Knight" to be the subject of the text, and autobiography turns into fictional biography. Moreover, since this authorial consciousness is also cognizant of Hermann Karlovich's observation in *Despair* that "the first person is as fictitious as all the rest" (*Despair* 53), it therefore creates out of the narrating voice a fictitious character as well — the narrator V.⁴

Critics have made much of the fact that V's quest for information about Sebastian Knight leads him to encounter characters who seem to have stepped from the pages of Sebastian's fiction. However, if V himself is a fictitious representative of that same authorial consciousness which has created Sebastian Knight's characters, then his encounter with other fictional beings is no surprise. What one finds here is not the intermingling of ostensibly human reality and fiction, but rather of different levels of fictional existence.⁵

Before going any further with this chain of thought, let us consider the reasons why Nabokov may have structured his novel in such a way that V serves as a mask for an authorial consciousness who is also represented in the text by the figure of Sebastian Knight. I believe that there are several compelling reasons for this design.

In the first place, this structure allows Nabokov to explore a fundamental concern of his work — the inevitability of death and the possibilities for transcendence in art. According to V's account, Sebastian was preoccupied with thoughts of death, and one can cite many examples of this (see, e.g. RLSK 99, 104, 175). Yet as readers have pointed out, the evidence of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* suggests that Sebastian's own death does not lead to oblivion.⁶

This perception of the survival of Sebastian's spirit may be akin to that secret — "the absolute solution" — that V seems to detect hidden in *The Doubtful Asphodel* (RLSK 180). From the reader's perspective, this secret has two variants: either Sebastian has actually "died," yet

³ Of course, the actual situation is more complex, for V is not only a narrator on the extradiegetic level, he is a participant in the story on the diegetic level, and Sebastian is the subject of the story on a metadiegetic level (see Rimmon's article for a discussion of this).

⁴ The strategy of making Sebastian's biographer his "half-brother" is itself suggestive. As two halves make a whole, V and Sebastian represent two aspects of one authorial consciousness (cf. Stegner's perception that V and Sebastian are "divided halves of a single identity" [72]).

⁵ Of course, it is also possible that V's encounter with Sebastian's characters is entirely V's own invention, but space considerations prohibit a discussion of this possibility here.

⁶ See, in particular, Rowe 21-25, Fromberg 438-39, and Alexandrov 146-59.

retains some power to influence the living after his death, or he has not really died, but has simply invented his death to achieve several purposes: in addition to suggesting that the spirit of the dead can influence the living, he can give new life to himself in the figure of V, thereby intimating the power of one soul to inhabit other souls.⁷

The antecedents for having a character seem to die, only to live on in a new or changed identity, are several in Nabokov's works. The best example occurs in *The Eye*. The narrator of *The Eye* shoots himself, and then claims that his consciousness lives on after his death; indeed, it is after the supposed suicide that the persona of "Smurov" arises, ultimately to merge with the narrator (as V merges with Sebastian?).

In addition to suggesting the power of the soul to transcend death, the Sebastian-V relationship also permits Nabokov to explore issues concerned with the writing of biography and autobiography. Nabokov had undertaken a preliminary investigation of this subject in *The Gift*, where Fyodor wrestled with the problem of how to animate a portrait of another without overwhelming the original with projections from his own imagination. The author had further addressed the problem in his essay on Pushkin, "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible." There he asked: "Is it possible to imagine the full reality of another's life, to relive it in one's mind and set it down intact on paper? I doubt it: one even finds oneself seduced by the idea that thought itself, as it shines its beam on the story of a man's life, cannot avoid deforming it" (P 40). This is precisely the territory that he explores in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. The creation of V as a kind of alter ego for Sebastian allows Nabokov to touch upon three facets of the general problem.

First, V's narrative about Sebastian's life illustrates the potential for personal fictionalization that occurs when a biographer shines the beam of his thought on the subject of the biography. Although V chides his rival Goodman for making hypothetical assumptions based on a reading of Sebastian's fiction, he himself applies the same procedure (see RLSK 25-27). More importantly, the story of V's own quest gradually encroaches upon and overwhelms the story of Sebastian's life, and in his quest to identify Sebastian's last love, V himself seems almost to step into Sebastian's shoes.

Secondly, since Sebastian was himself a writer of fiction, then the very manner in which his story is presented to the reader conveys something of the inner truth or "colour" of the man's spirit. Clare Bishop had said that the title of a book should convey its "colour" (RLSK 72). Several critics have observed that the design of V's narrative has affinities with patterns found in Sebastian's fiction (see, e. g., Nicol 88-93, Bader 16-25, and Rimmon 492-501.)

Finally, if V has been created by the authorial consciousness to serve as Sebastian's alter ego, then his experiences as he follows the contours of Sebastian's life serve to provide a new angle of perception on those very contours. This is particularly true of his attempt to learn the identity of Sebastian's last love. Although his encounter with Madame Lecerf emits a faint odor of the absurd or farcical, the reader can still gain through this farce some inkling of the kind of attraction Sebastian felt for Nina Rechnoi. We glimpse through V's comic beam of light an experience that was much more serious and troubling for Sebastian himself.

This, of course, illustrates the methods of Sebastian's own fiction. V writes, for example, that Sebastian often "used parody as a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion" (RLSK 91). V's flirtation with Madame Lecerf may be a parodic echo of the serious affair which Sebastian had with his lover, an affair that eventually blighted his life.

If indeed, Sebastian (or the authorial consciousness behind him) has created V to provide another perspective on the events of Sebastian's own life, then the relationship between the two figures illustrates V's observation: "Two modes of life question each other and the answer is life itself, and that is the nearest one ever can approach a human truth" (RLSK 137). In V

⁷ Brian Boyd proposes a similar design for understanding the relationship between John Shade and Kinbote in *Pale Fire* (see *The American Years* 443 and 447).

and Sebastian, the authorial consciousness provides two figures whose stories can be conflated to arrive at a third, and one might say, core truth.

The concepts of parody, and of masking the authentic in the fictitious — which V identifies as a salient feature of Sebastian's work — serve as pointers to the disclosure of deeper concerns buried within V's narrative. Critics have noted a series of masks in the novel. For example, V perceives that behind the figure of Madame Lecerf stands Nina Rechnoi, who he believes is Sebastian's last lover. Behind both of these, of course, one may speculate about the specter of Irina Guadanini (see Boyd, *The Russian Years* 501-2). However, I think that some readers may have overlooked the serious weight Nabokov has given to this emotional tangle through the character of Clare Bishop, the woman Sebastian spurned to pursue his torturous infatuation. We should thus turn our attention to Clare Bishop and the mask she may wear.

Not only is Clare (in V's estimation) the implied addressee of some of the most heartfelt words in the novel — the "love letter" quoted at length by V from Sebastian's novel *Lost Property* (see RLSK 112-14), she also stands as a second focal point of one of the central themes of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* — a concern with death and loss. Both elements surface in the letter from *Lost Property*, a letter that deserves close scrutiny.

The author of the letter tries to convey his sense of sorrow over the fact that he is ending his relationship with his former love. At one point he writes: "when I think of the little things which will die, now that we cannot share them, I feel as if we were dead too. And perhaps we are" (RLSK 112). Not only does this letter connect the loss of a relationship with physical death, but according to V, both Sebastian and Clare are in fact "dead" when V writes his account of Sebastian's life.

The letter writer continues with the theme of death, and then introduces a new motif: "I have not stopped loving you; but something is dead in me, and I cannot see you in the mist..." (RLSK 112). What is significant here is the image of the "mist". This is one of the most charged images in the novel, and its appearance now resonates with an earlier comment made by V about Sebastian's struggle to find the appropriate form of verbal expression: Sebastian experienced "the maddening feeling that the right words, the only words are awaiting you on the opposite bank in the misty distance. . ." (RLSK 84). This formulation in turn resonates with the discussion of the theme of death in the novel *The Doubtful Asphodel*, where the dying man questions concepts of death and feels frustrated by knowing that only "one half of the notion of death can be said really to exist: this side of the question — the wrench, the parting . . . ah! he was already on *the other side*, if he could see the beach receding; no, not quite — if he was still thinking" (RLSK 177; the first and third emphases are mine).

What I would like to suggest in linking these passages is that the evident frustration which Sebastian feels with fissures, breaches, and inadequacies in this life (culminating in the ultimate breach of death) is counterbalanced by his desire to transcend or overcome these fissures, if not in this world, then on "the other side" — that is, beyond the abyss of death. Emotionally or spiritually "dead" in this life (due to his blighted affair with Nina), he cannot see Clare "in the mist." But the thrust of the novel which purports to show his "real" life indicates that the possibility exists for transcendence and reunion in the realm that lies beyond death. If the breach between himself and Clare is irreparable in the here and now, perhaps they can be reconciled in the hereafter.

The letter in *Lost Property* goes on to speak in images of union or unity that also resonate with fundamental themes probed elsewhere in the novel. The writer expresses his conviction that a person can only have one "love-mate", and he concludes this thought by asserting: "There is only one real number: One. And love, apparently, is the best exponent of this singularity" (RLSK 113). I believe that the numerical imagery introduced here can be associated with the numerical relationship encoded in the kinship between V and Sebastian:

they are *half*-brothers, and to attain that special number which Sebastian would say is “the only real number”, one must bring the two together.

This desired conjunction of the two halves is, of course, what implicity occurs at the end of the novel when V recites the formula: “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows” (RLSK 205). Significantly, the image of separated halves also appears at the conclusion of the essential letter in *Lost Property*. There one reads: “Every small thing which will remind me of you ... every small thing which we have descried together — will always seem to me *one half* of a shell, *one half* of a penny, with the *other half* kept by you” (RLSK 114). If indeed the rift between the two half-brothers is bridged at the end of the novel, perhaps this can be taken as a sign that the rift between Sebastian and Clare can be bridged as well.⁸

When V is listening to the breathing of the man he mistakenly believes is Sebastian, all thoughts of the “momentous truth” he had expected to learn from Sebastian are swept away, to be replaced by something else. As he puts it: “The strange dream I had had ... now seemed vague, abstract, as if it had been drowned in some warm flow of *simpler, more human emotion*, in the wave of love I felt for the man who was sleeping beyond that half-opened door. *How had we managed to drift apart?*” (RLSK 202-3, emphasis added). The love V feels for Sebastian here may be analogous to the love Sebastian had felt for Clare, and V’s bewilderment over the cause of his estrangement from his brother may be similar to emotions Sebastian experienced in regard to Clare.

It is noteworthy that on the final page of the novel, after V has declared “I am Sebastian Knight” (RLSK 205), the only person he names more than once (other than Sebastian) is Clare Bishop. He mentions first “the pale radiance of Clare’s inclined head, as she is led away weeping by a friendly maiden” (RLSK 205); this may evoke her sorrow over the rift which had arisen between herself and Sebastian. He then notes that all the characters he has conjured up “go back to their everyday life.” All, that is, except Clare, who, he adds parenthetically “goes back to her grave” (RLSK 205). Clearly, the injury inflicted upon Clare Bishop and her ultimate death weigh heavily on V, and on the mind of the authorial consciousness standing behind V.

Even so, I believe that we can go further beneath the surface to uncover additional meaning in the text. To do so, we may enlist the assistance of the novel’s manipulation of alphabetic motifs. As every reader of the novel will note, Nabokov plays freely with letters of the alphabet. One finds anagrams, as in the “Nosebag” — “G. Abeson” pair (RLSK 94); one finds names based on sequences of letters in the alphabet, as in the series — “May, Judy, Juliette, Augusta” (RLSK 100); and one finds passages where code-switching, from English to Russian or Russian to English, plays a major role (the narrator’s trick of exposing Madame Lecerf’s true identity by speaking Russian to another character is one example [see RLSK 173]).⁹

If we look at Clare Bishop’s initials — C, B — as letters in the Cyrillic alphabet, the results are suggestive. The Cyrillic letter C is the approximate equivalent of the English letter S, and the Cyrillic letter B is the equivalent of the English letter V. Thus Clare Bishop’s initials, in Cyrillic, form the initials of the central pair of characters, Sebastian and V.¹⁰ However, if one inverts the order of these two letters — B (V), C (S), one arrives at a very different sequence. V and S happen to be the initials of Véra Slonim, Nabokov’s wife. The connection of these letters to Véra may seem speculative, but even if the letters do not refer to Véra directly, the emotions expressed in the novel may have some relevance to the author’s personal life. The

⁸ Compare the phrase--“one-half of the notion of death”--quoted above (RLSK 177).

⁹ See Barabtarlo’s article (“See Under Sebastian”) for other examples of code-switching and anagrammatic play.

¹⁰ Rimmon observes that V and S are the first initials of the name Vladimir (Nabokov) and Sirin (511), and Maddox notes that V and S are the initials of the Nabokov brothers, Vladimir and Sergei (164, note 3).

heartache that V and Sebastian jointly feel about Sebastian's abandonment of Clare for a flighty and fickle mistress may resonate with anguish their creator could have felt over his own conduct in regard to his wife. The novel, then, with its coded references to pain and separation which one fervently wishes to heal, may carry some weight of personal atonement and regret. One need not, of course, read the novel in this way. But to do so, I think, only adds to the depth of the work, and does not diminish it.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is a remarkable work, and its pattern of masks laid over masks is deeply provocative. V's "fictitious biography" of Sebastian Knight may seem to some to be a "fictitious autobiography" of V himself. Even more, however, the text itself suggests that it harbors a kind of fictitious autobiography of yet a third figure--someone whom neither of the central pair can truly know.

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