Nabokov’s Palace

Nabokov's Palace:
The American Novels

By

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To

András, Dorka, Ádám, Matyi and Milán

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ABBREVIATIONS

The following editions of Nabokov's works are cited in-text throughout the book, most of them in abbreviated form.

Ada	*Ada* (New York, Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1969).
BS	*Bend Sinister* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986).
EO	*Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse* by Aleksandr Pushkin, translated from the Russian, with a Commentary by Vladimir Nabokov, 4 vols. (New York: Bollingen, 1964).
LATH	*Look at the Harlequins!* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974).
LL	*Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Bruccoli Clark, 1980).
Lolita	*Lolita* (New York: Vintage International, 1997).
LRL	*Lectures on Russian Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).
ND	*Nabokov's Dozen* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984).
NG	*Nikolay Gogol* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973).
OL	*The Original of Laura (Dying is Fun)*, edited by Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009).
PF	*Pale Fire* (New York: A Perigree Book, a reprint of the 1962 edition by Putnam's, 1980).
Pnin	*Pnin* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1983).
PP	*Poems and Problems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970).
SIC	*The Song of Igor's Campaign: An Epic of the Twelfth Century*, trans. by Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Vintage Books, 1960).
SM	*Speak Memory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986).
SO	*Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).
TRLSK	*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982).
TT	*Transparent Things* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972).

INTRODUCTION

Full of great rooms and small the palace stood,
All various, each a perfect whole
From living Nature, fit for every mood
And change of my still soul.
—Alfred Lord Tennyson

This book focuses on the Anglo-American literary tradition in the American novels of Vladimir Nabokov written after the author emigrated to the USA from France in 1940. The chapters dedicated to the discussion of individual novels aim to discover the Anglo-American sub-texts and inter-textual patterns in order to show that Nabokov's novels continue and become a part of this literary tradition.

Nabokov's distinguished and unique position in American literature has always been indisputable, but paradoxical. There has always been an element of foreignness in his writings, since he also incorporated elements from Russian and French literature into the sub-texts of his novels and with the exception of *Lolita*, dealt less with American "reality." In the preface to *Nabokov at Cornell*, a compilation of studies published for the centenary celebrations of Nabokov's birthday, Gavriel Shapiro claims that Nabokov "occupies a towering position in Russian and world literature," but omits to stress the author's status in American literature.[1] Another critic a few years before, Alexei Zverov, also expressed his reservations:

> Nabokov, who lived in America for more than a quarter of a century and created there a reputation that is now acknowledged by more than a narrow circle of connoisseurs, was more like a foreigner in relation to American culture than its own permanent property. . . .[2]

Nevertheless, this book suggests that Nabokov, as an Anglo-Russian writer, consciously, playfully, but in all seriousness, continues the Anglo-

[1] Gavriel Shapiro, Preface to *Nabokov at Cornell*, ed. Gavriel Shapiro (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), xi.
[2] Aleksei Zverov, "Nabokov, Updike and American Literature," trans. Anna K. Primrose, in *The Garland Companion to Nabokov*, ed. V.E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 547.

American literary tradition. Although he once said that the "writer's art is his real passport," through the recurrence of historical and literary situations, the shared themes and motifs, and his complicated structural labyrinths of allusions, he shows that he is aware of this tradition and is able to employ it and contribute to it (*SO* 63). In other words, he succeeds in making his American novels an integral part of the Anglo-American literary heritage. He also transcends and "globalizes" this tradition by discovering and making constant parallels with Russian and French literature. Therefore, it is worthwhile to approach Nabokov's English texts from a comparative literary viewpoint. In doing so, what is perhaps most intriguing about Nabokov's fiction becomes clear: the themes may be recurring and eternal, but the "combination" of elements that brings them to the surface offers "delightful possibilities, illusions, vistas of thought" including false ones (*SO* 12). Discovering the Russian and French parallels and correspondences alongside the English and American ones usually helps in finding an interpretation or the illusion of an interpretation. As Nabokov once pointed out:

> I am trilingual, in the proper sense of writing, and not only speaking, three languages (in that sense practically all the writers I personally know or knew in America, including a babel of paraphrasts, are strictly monolinguists). (*SO* 111)

But it was more than just Nabokov's trilingualism and multicultural background which contributed to this richness. Being acquainted with the difficulties of translation as a process, and with the mistranslated texts that abound in the three languages he was familiar with, Nabokov dedicated a great deal of time to translating passages or whole texts from Russian or French for his students at Cornell University. His more ambitious and meticulous translations of *The Song of Igor's Campaign* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, which aimed at precision and provided extensive literary historical commentaries, contributed towards shaping Nabokov's American fiction. This may be at the root of the discrepancy that some readers may find between his Russian and English prose. It is mainly owing to the art and study of translation that the structure of Nabokov's English novels came to embed more and more Anglo-American inter-textual patterns and sub-texts. Even when we compare Nabokov's first novels in English to the ones he wrote in the fifties, while he was working on these translations, we can see a distinctive change taking place. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Bend Sinister* may be devious constructions, but *Lolita*, *Pnin*, *Pale Fire* and *Ada* cannot be compared in structural complexity to the earlier American novels. In his four volume

prose translation of Pushkin's verse poem Nabokov includes his own poem, "On Translating *Eugene Onegin*," which reconstructs the meter and rhyme scheme of the *Eugene Onegin* stanza. The following lines from the poem, however, do not just refer to the "stratagem" and the attitude that a translator should take, but could be applied to those readers and scholars who wish to study and interpret and arrive at a closer understanding of Nabokov's own texts:

> What is translation? On a platter
> A poet's pale and glaring head,
> A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,
> And profanation of the dead.
> The parasites you were so hard on
> Are pardoned, if I have your pardon,
> O, Pushkin, for my stratagem:
> I traveled down your secret stem,
> And reached the root, and fed upon it; . . . (*PP* 175)

We cannot, of course, as parasitic scholars, be sure of having the author's "pardon," nor to have "reached the root," and therefore our attitude should be humble in this respect. For it is always possible that the "root" we think we have reached may have secondary ones, as well as radicals, which complete or offer parallel, alternately valid interpretations. But the approach that Nabokov shows in his Commentary, that one should "travel[. . .] down" a "secret stem," can be followed. The tracking down of the origin of an image, motif or allusion, realizing "the similarity between metaphors accumulated" in French, Russian or English poetry, the discovery of "parallelisms" either deliberate or simply "explained by the logic of literary evolution working on the same fund of immemorial formulas," the method that Nabokov himself followed, can also be the technique for those who wish to investigate Nabokov's novels more closely (*EO* 3:53). Nabokov believed that "there is no delight without the detail," so it is no wonder that the author's texts are a wide and inexhaustible fund of linguistic and literary discoveries and interpretations.[3]

Realizing that this was the approach that Nabokov's texts demanded, early Nabokov criticism focused on Nabokov's Russian and English prose from mainly an aesthetic, structural point of view. Although several scholars have studied the Anglo-American tradition in Nabokov's American fiction, providing valuable comparative analyses in this area,

[3] Quoted in Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 340.

there has been no extensive study of all the American novels from this perspective.[4] The first to engage in a longer comparative analysis between an English poet and Nabokov was Michael Long in the early eighties. In his comparative study of Marvell and Nabokov, Long also included Russian novels and attempted to find common "themes, tones and images" in the writings of the English poet and the Anglo-Russian novelist, but warned that the aim was not to "bind them up together in some fixed relation."[5] In the case of this book as well my aim is not to "bind" Nabokov to various English poets and American writers, but to open possibilities for future analyses and interpretations.

A number of distinguished Nabokov critics have since then opened up perspectives in the unraveling of the structural and inter-textual intricacies, exploring the Russian, and/or the French and English literary associations in both Nabokov's English and Russian novels. D. Barton Johnson and Brian Boyd have been leading these groups of scholars. Priscilla Meyer's main critical work illustrates the bridge Nabokov constructed between Anglo-American and Russian literary texts. Others, beginning with Ellen Pifer, (Boyd also deserves a place in this long list) have concentrated on not simply the "cerebral" delights in these novels, as Leona Toker argues, but the "deeply touching human reality" they offer, the "humanistic value of Nabokov's work."[6] Beginning with the publication of V. E. Alexandrov's seminal critical work on *Nabokov's Otherworld* there has been a shift in interpretation, to see Nabokov's English and Russian fiction as an investigation into Nabokov's convictions about the metaphysical realms of the afterlife. Numerous dedicated scholars, with different linguistic backgrounds, have contributed valuable studies to Nabokov scholarship, focusing on the linguistic, aesthetic, structural, humanistic, and metaphysical features of his work. Interpretations, new associations concerning the same, repeatedly analyzed texts, have been numerous and will abound in the future. And each work of scholarship has its special

[4] The names of Leona Toker, Suellen Stringer-Hye, D. B. Johnson, Brian Boyd, Herbert Grabes, John Burt Foster, however, deserve to be mentioned here, as they have been leading the group of scholars who have examined the role of some English and American texts in Nabokov's fiction, a task which this work also undertakes. Some of these names also indicate a shift in critical attitudes to see Nabokov's American novels as being more a part of the American literary tradition.

[5] Michael Long, *Marvell, Nabokov: Childhood and Arcadia* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), vii.

[6] Leona Toker, *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989) 2, 3.

function in helping to unravel the mysteries of Nabokov's texts.[7] This book also wishes to contribute to existing interpretations to show that there are further discoveries awaiting those who study Nabokov's writings, specifically in their relationship with American literature. When asked about the great American writers he happened to admire Nabokov replied:

> When I was young I liked Poe, and I still love Melville, whom I did not read as a boy. My feelings towards [Henry] James are rather complicated. . . . Hawthorne is a splendid writer. Emerson's poetry is delightful. (*SO* 64)

Although it seems that in his mature years Nabokov turned away from Poe, in his later years he returned to his childhood favorite. He also admitted that in his youth he had a "veritable passion for poetry, English, Russian, and French" (*SO* 150). Then, by switching from Russian to English as a writer, and by becoming an American novelist, he was consciously adopting and transforming the themes of fellow English and American artists from the past in order to embed them in the deep structure of his prose. In doing so he also provides a literary historical perspective which emphasizes a poetic continuity with a variety of eternal subjects that surface in a new combination of details each time an artist addresses them.

The discussion of the novels in the seven chapters of the book follows the chronological order of publication. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, composed in France in 1938, shows Nabokov's first attempt to become an English writer. Because speaking and writing a language which is not one's native tongue is similar to donning a mask and shedding one's original self, Nabokov used Shakespeare's play, *Twelfth Night*, to illustrate that Sebastian Knight's identity—the subject of V's biography—is just as elusive as the identity of Shakespeare. Characters are resurrected not only from Sebastian Knight's fiction, but from the play itself. References to Shakespeare's other plays can be found in the other English novels as well, since, as Nabokov explains in *Strong Opinions*: "Pushkin's blood runs through the veins of modern Russian literature as inevitably as Shakespeare's through those of English literature" (*SO* 63). Thus the constant presence of Shakespeare's plays, as for instance, the repeated

[7] Websites have been dedicated to Nabokov studies: see "Zembla,"
http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/zembla.htm
or the Archives of NabokVL@LISTSERV.UCSB.EDU
http://listserv.ucsb.edu/archives/nabokv-l.html and *The Nabokov Online Journal*
www.nabokovonline.com

allusions in later novels to *Hamlet*, or *Timon of Athens*, as well as other plays, are also signs of Nabokov's conscious artistic intention to incorporate the Anglo-American tradition into his writings, making sure that Shakespeare's "blood runs through" his American novels.

In *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov's second novel in English, the author merges a nightmare fantasy of a dictatorship with philosophy. Most of the philosophical ideas, which are also political ones in practice, are shared by and may even have originated with William James, whose writings Nabokov had read as a boy in St. Petersburg. James's pragmatic principles on individualism and free will were in turn influenced by Emerson. The main principles of American individualism and freedom, but also James's fascination with the irrational and the possibilities of immortality, left an imprint on Nabokov's own intellectual development and philosophical convictions, as we will see in the novel.

In the chapter on *Lolita*, I have attempted to conduct a comparative analysis between Nabokov's most famous novel and Hawthorne's last romance. Art, the main theme of Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* is shared by *Lolita*. Humbert's desired transformation from a symbolist mythical faun-satyr into a human being does not take place, he remains throughout the novel a faun who cannot distinguish between what is possible in art, or must not be attempted in life. The figures of the faun and the nymph are present in Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* as well, but there the transformation of Donatello into a human being seems to be complete. He will succeed in understanding how sorrow and sin and also repentance are connected to the human condition. Humbert, however, placed into the American world of the forties, revived from symbolist-decadent, late nineteenth century English texts, and professing views that representatives of English and French Aestheticism also diffused, is always confusing Arcadia with America. It is in *Lolita* that Nabokov first offers a literary historical overview of the essence of aestheticism as it is described in the poetry and writings of English and French representatives of the movement, as well as in the writings of its symbolist predecessors.

Pnin seems to stand apart from the rest of the American novels. Nabokov's academic novel, published in 1957, parodies American academic life. The book relies heavily on the Russian literary tradition rather than an American one because, as a Russian exile, and despite the pressure, Pnin finds it difficult to conform to his American surroundings. The time structure of the text is constructed on Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*.[8]

[8] Nabokov repeatedly emphasized that her last name in English should be "Karenin," not "Karenina."

The inter-textual associations are, however, partly Biblical, and much of the imagery is Christian. We find that saintly Pnin, like the apostles two thousand years ago, has a mission to carry out wherever fate may take him. In this case he is an American citizen, although history has made an exile of him. America is the terrain of his mission where he fights as an educator and scholar against ignorance and *poshlost*, the Russian word for philistinism, the trite, the mediocre, which is, however, a common phenomenon all over the world.[9] Pnin's colleagues may not appreciate him as a teacher, but he is an ideal scholar. Through Pnin the character, and the novel's theme and location, Nabokov pays tribute to his adopted country, but also to the culture of the pre-Soviet world of his native one.

Pale Fire was inspired by the theme of literary friendship, as the literary friendships of poets in English literary history are evoked through the relationship of Shade and Kinbote. These friendships, although in many ways different from one another, were characterized by one partner (or both) being melancholic in nature, and trying to fight madness. Melancholy has been a major theme in English poetry since the seventeenth century. Thus Nabokov, in the sub-text of *Pale Fire*, offers a literary historical tour of this subject and creates a society of dead English poets with whom communion is possible through their poetry.

The literary combinations in *Ada* are more eclectic than in any of his other American novels. The main concern of the novel is Time, and the investigation of its dual nature, which is an incestuous one (between duration and spatial Time). In *Ada*, specific references to the writings of Melville offer a good example of how Nabokov adopts a metaphor from an American nineteenth century text for use in a contemporary work: thus the incestuous relationships in Melville's *Pierre* and Nabokov's *Ada* are both metaphorical. In Melville's case the "celestial" and the "terrestrial" (the chronometric and horologic) ideals are incompatible; in Van's case, however, it is the two aspects of Time which cannot be reconciled. [10]

Nabokov's last three novels, *Transparent Things*, *Look at the Harlequins!* and the fragmentary *The Original of Laura* (published recently, in the Fall of 2009), are compared to some tales and poems by Edgar Allan Poe in which the themes of trance, dreams and nightmares dominate. Trance, as did melancholy, became a literary trend undergoing its own

[9] There are long descriptions of *poshlost* by Nabokov in *Strong Opinions*, *Lectures on Russian Literature* and *Nikolay Gogol* as well (*SO* 100-101, *LRL* 309-314; *NG* 63-74).

[10] See Suellen-Stringer-Hye's article which provides the basis for the ideas in the chapter on *Ada* and *Pierre*: "The Weed Exiles the Flower, Melville and Nabokov," http://libstaff.library.vanderbilt.edu/LIBTECH/Stringer/nabokov.html

evolution throughout the nineteenth century. With the help of Poe's texts, Nabokov continues and revivifies the Romantic tradition which associated trance with the source of the power of the creative imagination. The Anglo-American tradition in Nabokov's American novels thus deserves a whole floor in Nabokov's palace and perhaps these studies offer a view into these exquisite chambers.

In demonstrating Nabokov's own pattern of continuity, the idea for *Nabokov's Palace*: *The American Novels* comes from a character in *Pnin*, Joan Clements. At Pnin's housewarming party (which will also prove to be his farewell party at Waindell College) she refers to a particular feature of the books of the diabolical narrator, Vladimir Vladimirovich: "But don't you think—haw—that what he is trying to do—haw—practically in all his novels—is—to express the fantastic recurrence of certain situations?" (*Pnin* 134). This is true of Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov's books as well. In all of Nabokov's American novels the main characters find themselves in situations that have had precedents and which have been documented by the pens of English and American poets and writers. Kinbote finds his state of mind being similar to Swift's, Boswell's, Coleridge's, Tennyson's, Housman's; Sebastian Knight is a literary incarnation of Shakespeare's Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*, Timofey Pnin finds himself in a similar position as St. Timothy; Humbert is a resurrected faun from a Mallarmé poem and a romance by Hawthorne. The traces of Melville's Isabel and Lucy in *Pierre* can be found in the characters of Ada and Lucette and Van finds himself battling against the same, powerful forces which Pierre also found unconquerable. Nabokov's prose (as any good prose) is thus built upon poetic metaphors. Nabokov began his literary career as a poet and continued throughout his life to compose poetry (mainly in Russian). In comparing poetry to prose, Nabokov found many similarities:

> Well, poetry, of course, includes all creative writing; I have never been able to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose. As a matter of fact, I would be inclined to define a good poem of any length as a concentrate of good prose, with or without the addition of recurrent rhythm and rhyme. The magic of prosody may improve upon what we call prose by bringing out the full flavor of meaning, but in plain prose there are also certain rhythmic patterns, the music of precise phrasing, the beat of thought rendered by recurrent peculiarities of idiom and intonation. As in today's scientific classifications, there is a lot of overlapping in our concept of poetry and prose today. The bamboo bridge between them is the metaphor. (*SO* 44)

The main metaphors, therefore, which are elaborated in the novels and are described in deceptive combinations, include the mask, circles, faun, the saint, friends, incest, fire (of trance), nightmare (of trance) and suicide (in trance). Most of the metaphors listed link Nabokov to the Romantic tradition of English and American writing. For the early and late Romantics the dichotomy of Art and Life was a major issue. Nabokov consistently returns to this aesthetic theme, offering different interpretations of "other states of being" in relation to reality. Some of his characters, however, cannot tell the difference between the two realms of Life and Art. As Lucy Maddox suggested: "the most tortured of Nabokov's characters are those who fail to distinguish between the ideal images of imaginative art and the actual people and processes of ordinary life."[11] Thus Kinbote, Humbert, Hugh Person and Vadim continue to be absorbed by the nineteenth century Romantic dilemma of "reality" as opposed to the world of art. The problem with reality, Nabokov suggests, is that

> [y]ou can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. (*SO* 11)

This description, however, might also apply to the opposite of "reality," the deceptive quality of bottomless dreams within dreams, and their Romantic interpretation, which are linked to the creative imagination. Therefore, when Nabokov defines the term "aesthetic bliss," and connects it to "a sense of being somehow, somewhere, connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, kindness, ecstasy) is the norm," he is referring to the "otherworld" of art.[12] Thus all of Nabokov's American novels express—through different elaborate literary structures, themes, motifs and metaphors—these "other states of being" where the "fantastic recurrence of certain situations" becomes possible. Recreating these situations also makes the resurrection of characters from other literary texts and a "parleying" with dead poets possible. So when the question is raised: "Is it really possible to speak of Nabokov as an American writer if one has in mind not the fact of his citizenship but the peculiarities of his writing?" there can be no doubt about the answer.[13] The American "reality" that some readers miss in his writings (with the exception of *Lolita*), and the "absence" of which questions whether

[11] Lucy Maddox, *Nabokov's Novels in English* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgetown Press, 2009), 6.
[12] Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," in *Lolita*, 315.
[13] Aleksei Zverov, "Nabokov, Updike and American Literature," 538.

Nabokov truly belongs to the Anglo-American tradition, is clearly to be found in the "wayside murmur" of the allusive sub-texts (*BS* 11). Hopefully this book will add to the discoveries made by readers in the distinct "otherworld" of Art in Nabokov's American novels.

CHAPTER ONE

"A MANNER OF BEING:" SHAKESPEARE'S *TWELFTH NIGHT* AND NABOKOV'S *THE REAL LIFE OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT*

> It is too hard a knot for me to untie.
> —Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

> He (the dying man) was that knot, and he would be untied at once, if he could manage to see and follow the thread.
> —Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

Nabokov's admiration for Shakespeare, the open tribute he pays to the great English playwright and poet, can be particularly seen through the references in his novels to various plays such as *Hamlet* in *Bend Sinister* and *Timon of Athens* in *Pale Fire*. There are, however, more covert ones as well, such as the allusions to *Twelfth Night* in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. But Nabokov also expressed in interviews his high appreciation of Shakespeare's "verbal poetical texture," which "is the greatest the world has known," adding that "[w]ith Shakespeare it is the metaphor that is the thing, not the play" (*SO* 89-90).[1] As early as 1924 he composed a poem in Russian entitled "Shakespeare" in which the mystery surrounding the identity of the poet is stressed. The speaker calls upon the great poet: "Reveal yourself, god of iambic thunder, / you hundred-mouthed,

[1] For Nabokov's use of Shakespeare in his English novels, see Herbert Grabes, "Nabokov and Shakespeare: The English Works," *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. V. E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland Publishing, 1995), 496-512. For the presence of Shakespeare in the Russian novels, see Samuel Schuman, "Nabokov and Shakespeare: The Russian Works," *The Garland Companion*, 512-517. All references in this book to Shakespeare's plays are to the Oxford Standard Authors edition.

unthinkably great bard!"[2] When Nabokov decided to undertake the painful switch from Russian to English, after he completed his last Russian novel, *The Gift*, the result of his first efforts to compose a novel in English, in 1938, was *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Some themes from the "great bard's" comedy *Twelfth Night* are embedded in Nabokov's first English novel, as we shall see; the importance of language and verbal play in creating an illusion; the consequences of deception, role-playing and mistaken identities; the importance of good reading as opposed to misinterpretation and distortion, and the elusive identity of the authority behind the whole text.

In discussing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov criticism has focused especially on the identity of the narrator of Sebastian's life and the limitations of biography. One of Nabokov's earliest critics, Andrew Field, raised the following question: "Is it possible that *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is not a biography at all, but a fictional autobiography, another of Knight's own novels?"[3] According to V. E. Alexandrov, "Sebastian may be behind what V. sets down."[4] Brian Boyd offers a similar solution: "Sebastian seems to have invented V and his entire quest for Sebastian Knight."[5] According to this interpretation, Sebastian is providing us with a fictitious autobiography in guise of a biography which is supposed to have been written by his own half-brother, V. This standpoint, however, can also be supported by comparing some characters and lines from Shakespeare's play with those that can be found in Nabokov's novel. According to another critic, Page Stegner, for instance, Sebastian's first name may be a reference to Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*, while V's initial evokes Sebastian's twin sister Viola:

> Twin brother and sister are close enough to half-brothers, and one eyes the initial consonant in Viola's name with a certain glee. The screw turns once again as we recall V's parting shot, 'or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows.'[6]

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[2] Vladimir Nabokov, "Shakespeare," trans. by Dmitri Nabokov, in *NOJ/НОЖ Nabokov Online Journal* 3 (2009). http://etc.dal.ca/noj/articles/volume3//11b_Dmitri%20Nabokov_Transl_SHAKESPEARE.pdf

[3] Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 27.

[4] V. E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, 159.

[5] *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 499.

[6] Page Stegner, *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: The Dial Press, 1966), 70.

David Shields also argues: "In a book about half-brothers, 'Sebastian' must be taken as a reference to Viola's twin brother in *Twelfth Night* and 'Knight' is a triple pun on 'night,' 'chess knight,' and 'dubbed knight.' "[7] Thus one reason why some references in the novel point to *Twelfth Night* can be found in the elusive identity of Shakespeare, which, in Nabokov's work, is countered by the ambiguity of the author of Sebastian Knight's biography. As the young Nabokov expressed it in his poem on Shakespeare: "You are among us, you're alive; your name, though, / your image, too—deceiving, thus, the world— / you have submerged in your beloved Lethe."[8] In a similar manner, Sebastian is deceiving us by presenting a fictitious biography of himself to readers, and we cannot be sure of the "real" name of the author, (Sebastian or V?), nor of his "real" image or "real life." Thus the limitations and deceptive quality of biography as a genre, the impossibility of capturing the "real" in another person's life, the subjectivity of the biographer interferes with the quest for "truth." The use of language as a tool for deception and disguise is the first step towards enhancing the illusion that the fictitious author Sebastian Knight wishes to create concerning his own image and identity.

Language and illusion

Although Nabokov continued to write poetry in his native language and later even undertook the tedious work on the Russian *Lolita*, switching from one language to another must have been the consequence of his having given up all hopes of ever returning to his homeland. Nabokov could no longer believe that he could become a distinguished Russian writer who could finally drop the label "émigré" which qualified and narrowed the scope of his art. He had been a well-known Russian novelist only in émigré circles, and had not even dared to hope in the late thirties that any of his books would ever get published under the Soviet regime. Reaching a broader native audience, and receiving some sort of

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[7] David Shields, "Autobiographic Rapture and Fictive Irony in *Speak, Memory* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*," *The Iowa Review*, 17 (1987):44. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20156348http://www.jstor.org/stable/20156348
See also an earlier article on inter-textuality and characterization in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* based on Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*: Márta Pellérdi, "*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, or, What You Will," in *Studies on the 20th Century Novel*, ed. Zoltán Kiszely (Székesfehérvár: Kodolányi János, University College, 1999), 17-27.

[8] Vladimir Nabokov, "Shakespeare," *NOJ/HOЖ Nabokov Online Journal* 3 (2009).

"reverberation, if not response" from Russian readers had become an irrational wish (*SO* 37). The first of Nabokov's eight English novels, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, marks the end of the author's Russian output, leaving behind more than forty short stories and numerous poems written in Russian, not to mention the series of nine novels which end with *The Gift*. Although Nabokov asserted that he was "bilingual as a baby," changing the language of his artistic medium from Russian to English must have been more like acting on his part, donning a mask with which he also had to become familiar (*SO* 5). A year after the appearance, in 1941, of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* on the American literary market, the writer still had misgivings about abandoning his native language. He felt keenly the urge to write in Russian as he described in a letter to his wife:

> On the way a lightning bolt of undefined inspiration ran right through me, a terrible desire to write, and write in Russian—but it's impossible. I don't think anyone who hasn't experienced these feelings can properly appreciate them, the torment, the tragedy.[9]

Fourteen years later, in the author's afterword to *Lolita*, he expressed the same feeling:

> 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. [10]

There is an evident similarity between Nabokov's situation at the time and that of his hero, Sebastian, who undertakes writing in English from the start, exchanging his Russian identity for an English one. Sebastian's mother, Virginia, however, had been an Englishwoman. As a result, Sebastian had grown up worshipping a distant and errant English mother and her remote land of birth. While his half-brother and biographer V, whose mother was Russian, stayed in Paris, which was at the time, in addition to Berlin and Prague, one of the major centers for Russian émigrés in the twenties and thirties, Sebastian, who resolved to forget his Russian past, turned enthusiastically to his mother's country and was trying to:

> out-England England . . . until finally he realized that it was not these outward things that betrayed him, not the mannerisms of fashionable slang,

[9] Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov*: *The American Years*, 52.
[10] "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," in *Lolita*, 317.

> but the very fact of his striving to be and act like other people when he was blissfully condemned to the solitary confinement of his own self. (*TRLSK* 38)

Sebastian Knight is only half Russian and uses his English mother's maiden name as an English author. But he was born and raised in Russia, just like V, the author of Sebastian's biography. Sebastian, however, tries to make a complete break with his past. It is not easy for him, however, to become an English writer. Although he cannot really pass judgment over Sebastian's English, V asserts that Sebastian's English was not natural. "I know, I know as definitely as I know we had the same father, I know Sebastian's Russian was better and more natural to him than his English" (*TRLSK* 71). Clare Bishop, his English mistress, corrects Sebastian's phrases and grammar: she tells him that "You can't say it so in English" (*TRLSK* 71). For the betrayal of his "father" tongue, Sebastian is punished through his relationship with the Russian lady Nina Lecerf, the *femme fatale* in the novel. The irony of abandoning his native language will reach Sebastian in the second half of the book when he arrives at the conclusion that he had been mistaken in trying to give up his past; being Russian is just as much an integral part of his being as his English heritage, perhaps even more so. By then, however, it is too late for the English author to become reconciled to his past, too late for him to retrieve the "shed snake-skins" of his Russian self; he will never write in Russian any more. At the end of the novel, Sebastian who "spoke Russian gingerly, lapsing into English as soon as the conversation drew out to anything longer than a couple of sentences" sends his last letter to V, and "[s]trangely enough, it was written in Russian" (*TRLSK* 27, 156). In this letter, which is "couched in a Russian purer and richer than his English ever was, no matter what beauty of expression he attained in his books," Sebastian urges V to visit him, but he registers in the hospital where he is to die under his father's Russian name (*TRLSK* 71). V thus visits the wrong bedside and will never find out what the dying Sebastian had wished to impart to him. But in trying to write a biography of his half-brother and capturing the truth about his life and past, V is also using English. Language thus becomes a tool for deception: V's identity is just as elusive as his half-brother's. Language does not just conceal the structural tricks of the text but also the identity of the author responsible for these deceptions. It simultaneously destroys and transforms "reality" to suit the illusion the author wishes to create, according to what he wills, enhancing the fictitious, fiction-within-fiction quality of text. V's rather rigid English creates the illusion that V is the author of the text.

Language is used to deceive in a similar way in *Twelfth Night.* Terry Eagleton in his analysis of the play draws attention to the power of language in creating an illusion, its arbitrary relation to reality. In the case of Orsino for instance, his love for Olivia is "parasitic" and it is expressed in language which

> has the destructively creative quality of the language of Richard II and the *Macbeth* witches, and the illusions of Puck: it absorbs and transforms reality into its own image, leveling its values to its own standard and thus rendering all experience arbitrary and interchangeable. . . . The complex relations of language and reality is a common theme in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night.*[11]

Orsino is not so much infatuated with Olivia as he is with the notion of love itself when he sends Cesario (Viola in disguise) to her repeatedly to express his love for her instead of going himself to "unfold the passion of [his] love" (1.4.24). His love destroys and transforms reality and becomes detached from the person of Olivia. But Olivia is also directed by her obsession to mourn for her brother and gives up the pleasures of life until she meets Cesario (Viola). When Viola appears in the guise of a man and begins to "speak" in a "masterly" fashion, she wins Orsino's affection and Olivia's love at the same time (2.4.23). When Sir Toby, Maria and Sir Andrew Aguecheek (the knight in the play) forge a love letter in the name of Olivia to her steward Malvolio, and he is duped into believing that Olivia is in love with him, reality is again transformed by the power of written language. Thus we can conclude that what Eagleton calls "[t]he complex relations of language and reality" is a theme that runs through Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in a similar way as in Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.*

Disguises and mistaken identities

The first half of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (corresponding to the first ten chapters) is dedicated to describing how Sebastian tries to free himself from his Russian roots. In the next ten chapters, however, there is a singular reversal of his feelings which happens six years before his death. Sebastian's return to his native language parallels a change in personal relationships as well. With his renewed interest in and acceptance

[11] Terrence Eagleton, "Language and Reality in *Twelfth Night,*" in *Shakespeare's Wide and Universal Stage*, ed. C. B. Cox and D. J. Palmer (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 86.

of his Russian heritage there is a final separation between him and his English mistress, Clare Bishop. His abandoning his trustworthy English mistress is partly due to Sebastian's realization that he had contracted a fatal heart disease, and mainly to his first encounter with the young Russian woman, Madame Lecerf, at Blauberg in 1929. As soon as he meets her, he will also remember and attempt to renew his relationship with his forgotten Russian brother, V. In other words, Sebastian will return to his father's native language, as his letter to V, written in Russian before his death, implies:

> I am fed up [*osskomina*] with a number of tortuous things and especially with the patterns of my shed snake-skins [*vypolziny*] so that now I find a poetic solace in the obvious and the ordinary which for some reason or other I had over-looked in the course of my life. (*TRLSK* 156)

In choosing Nina over Clare, returning to Russian culture, taking an interest in "the obvious and the ordinary," he is also placing himself under the influence of a *femme fatale*, in the literal sense of the phrase, whom he cannot bend according to his will. As a writer, he had betrayed the Russian language when switching to English; Nina represents the heritage from which he tried to free himself. She exhales the poison that will eventually take revenge on Sebastian, breaking his heart. The emotional heart problem, the fatal attraction of the Russian mistress over the English one will develop into a rare heart disease in a physical sense, which will lead to Sebastian's death. This return to a lost language and the past indicates the painful, futile and tragic quality of the attempt.

Nina misleads V by pretending to be the friend of Sebastian's former lover. As a character she is seen by V as cruel, totally unaffected by Sebastian's death, the type of woman that makes men miserable. She shamelessly tells V that she would have liked "to see that kind of refined, distant—brainy fellow [Sebastian] go on all fours and wag his tail" (*TRLSK* 132). Although V almost falls for the charms of Mme Lecerf as well, he cannot understand how Sebastian could have been attracted by a woman with whom he had nothing in common intellectually. He could not even discuss his work with her:

> Books mean nothing to a woman of her kind; her own life seems to her to contain the thrills of a hundred novels. Had she been condemned to spend a whole day shut up in the library, she would have been found dead about noon. I am quite sure that Sebastian never alluded to his work in her presence: it would have been like discussing sundials with a bat. (*TRLSK* 146)

Nina is an incarnation of another Nina, from the Russian short story "Spring in Fialta," written by Nabokov in the same year as *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.* The comparison between the two characters starts off a series of associations that lead to Shakespeare in a curious way across a series of literary digressions. "Fialka" is the Russian word for violet, a color echoed in the title of "Spring in Fialta" and a flower that "dance[s] through the story from the first page to the last," besides being an obvious rhyme with the Crimean town of Yalta.[12] Fialta contains "violaceous" syllables and at their last meeting Victor sees Nina holding "a firm bouquet of small dark, unselfishly smelling violets" (*ND* 7; 27). Virginia Knight (Sebastian's mother) and Nina Lecerf are both associated with violets and the color blue. Madame Lecerf has a bluish sheen to her hair, violet-dark eyelids, a blue vein on her neck, sapphire ring, she sits on a blue sofa the first time V sees her, and it is at Blauberg that Sebastian first meets her. Although Virginia Knight and Madame Lecerf resemble each other, the "mother" association, which first occurs to the reader, is correct only in so far as the two characters represent "mother tongues", the native languages of the two females, one of them being English, the other Russian. Sebastian's mother had been an uncertain, careless woman who had abandoned husband and child and whose life ends in a pension called "Les Violettes" (*TRLSK* 16). She visits her son only once and "thrusts into Sebastian's hand a small parcel of sugar-coated violets" (*TRLSK* 9). When out of sheer curiosity the young V searches Sebastian's drawers back in St. Petersburg, he finds among various items "a small muslin bag of violet sweets" (*TRLSK* 15). Nina, on the other hand, succeeds in luring Sebastian back to the language and culture of his father, although she is in many ways similar to Virginia. The letters she writes to him are written in Russian on "notepaper . . . egg-shell blue with a dark-blue rim," which V, out of respect for his brother's last request, destroys (*TRLSK* 32).

Nina Lecerf's literary predecessor in the Nina of "Spring in Fialta" is supplemented with the physical attributes of a female literary figure taken from an American story by Nathanial Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Daughter."[13] The function of the Anglo-Persian dictionary on Sebastian's

[12] L. L. Lee, *Vladimir Nabokov*, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1976), 33.

[13] M. Pellérdi, "*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, or, What you Will," 23. See also the chapter entitled "Aesthetics and Sin: The Nymph and the Faun in Nabokov's *Lolita* and Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun*" for more comparison between Hawthorne's and Nabokov's texts. Recently Priscilla Meyer also discussed the relationship between Hawthorne's Beatrice Rappaccini and Nina Lecerf. "Life as Annotation: Sebastian Knight, Nathaniel Hawthorne," *Cycnos* 24 (2008). http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1072