Aspects of Nabokov's Transition to English Prose in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight

Quinn Brian T.

https://doi.org/10.15017/1355918

出版情報：英語英文学論叢. 40, pp.81-101, 1990-02. 九州大学英語英文学研究会
バージョン：
権利関係：

Aspects of Nabokov's Transition to English Prose in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

Brian T. Quinn

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight was the first of Vladimir Nabokov's novels to be written in English and was published in New York in 1941. The original manuscript was written, however, in Paris in 1938-39, while Nabokov was planning his move to America. During his time in Paris, Nabokov took his first steps towards using English as an artistic medium with self-translations from his native Russian into English of two of his previous novels *Despair* and *Laughter in the Dark.*

Sebastian Knight was Nabokov's first full-fledged attempt to make English his new mode of artistic expression. After having previously completed nine novels and numerous short stories and poems in Russian, this work reflects his significant and sometimes painful shift from his masterfully prosaic Russian to a still somewhat rigid and cumbersome medium of English. One is immediately impressed by Nabokov's crisp and lucid English and at the same time it appears as if his love of obscure and archaic terms gives his prose a hazy foreign flavor.

One of the first reviews of the novel immediately alludes to this very same impression:

> Mr. Nabokov's English style is interesting in a Walt Disney sort of way. He describes a divan as 'sprawling', a writing desk as 'sullen and distant', a table lamp as having a 'pulse', bookshelves as 'densely peopled', letters that 'swoon' under the 'torturing flame' of a fire. All of this might sound nice in another language. It sounds

surrealist and rather silly in plain English.[1]

It is interesting to note that English was not all that foreign a language for Nabokov who had learned it thoroughly from governesses and tutors while still a small child. He then later proceeded to study at Cambridge University from 1919-22 after escaping from his native Russia during the civil war. Yet, he had used Russian exclusively from 1922 onward an an émigré writer in Berlin. Throughout the 1920's and 1930's, writing in Russian under the pen name Vladimir Sirin, Nabokov produced a brilliant collection of poems, stories and novels, which had by 1937 already established him as one of the most gifted Russian writers-in-exile of his generation. The reason for his switch to English at the peak of his career is a simple one. The once large Russian émigré communities were quickly disintegrating and Hitler's troops were preparing to overrun Europe. Nabokov went first to Paris in 1937 and decided to change over to English in wary anticipation of an impending move to either England or America.

In *Sebastian Knight* Nabokov shows that he is already a mature writer who is in full control of his art even though the dramatic switchover to another language must have been indeed a traumatic one. Yet, more important than just writing in a new language, Nabokov was now writing for an entirely new audience. Whereas the Russian émigré world had consisted of a rather miniscule number of readers located in a few obscure pockets in Europe, Nabokov quickly realized that through English he would be able to touch one of the largest reading publics in the world.

The novel itself is about a man named V. who throughout the course of the book gathers information about his recently deceased half brother, Sebastian, who had been a famous author, for the ostensible purpose of writing his "real" life story in a biography. Ironically, as is often the case in Nabokov's works, the deceased author has numerous biographical similarities to Nabokov himself. In

addition, all of Sebastian's novels bear a strong resemblance in both theme and structure to Nabokov's own works. Therefore, Nabokov is creating not only a biography of Sebastian Knight but, at the same time, he is bestowing upon his new English audience a kind of autobiography in which he himself comes to grips with his own twenty year period of European exile. It appears that Nabokov, in writing his first English novel, was, to a great extent, summarizing his own career as a Russian writer and laying the groundwork for his new career in America. With this in mind, the novel becomes indispensible to understanding Nabokov's art and sense of tragic loss at forsaking his powerful native form of expression for his new endeavor to become an outstanding English author.

It is also interesting that while the basic themes of Nabokov's previous Russian works remained intact, with some striking similarities to his earlier stories, several new aspects of his prose soon became noticeable in his adopted tongue. For example, the element of parody and the use of puns increased considerably after switching over to English. As stated earlier, Nabokov has an excellent command of the English language yet, writing creatively in it for the first time, he demonstrated a unique tendency to perceive the language with the fresh eyes of a childlike outside observer displaying an uncanny ability to turn words or phrases playfully inside out or change them ever so slightly to create a confused but amusing mixture of sound and meaning. Therefore, he always appears to be looking at the language from the outside. This is especially noticeable in the novel itself when the narrator, V., talks about Sebastian and his lover Clare:

> Naturally, I cannot touch upon the intimate side of their relationship, firstly because it would be ridiculous to discuss what no one can definitely assert and secondly because the very sound of the word "sex" with its hissing vulgarity and the "ks, ks" catcall at the end, seems so inane to me that I cannot help doubting whether

there is any real idea behind the word.[2]

Such an analysis of the word "sex" seems only possible from someone who can be linguistically objective about the language. V. selfconsciously informs the reader that his mastery of English is unsure since unlike Sebastian, who went to Cambridge and lived in London, V. went to the Sorbonne and lived in Paris. V. is writing the book in English as a tribute to the memory of his lost brother and confesses:

> The dreary tussle with a foreign idiom and a complete lack of literary experience do not predispose one to feeling overconfident.[3]

However, the famous writer Sebastian's English also has a peculiar air about it. As a result, Nabokov is able to provide the reader with some unique insights into his own feelings of limitations regarding the English language through V.'s comment on his brother's occasional awkwardness:

> It appears that Sebastian's English, though fluent and idiomatic, was decidedly that of a foreigner. His "r's", when beginning a word, rolled and rasped, he made queer mistakes, saying for instance, "I have seized a cold" or "that fellow is "sympathetic" —— merely meaning that he was a nice chap. He misplaced the accent in such words as "interesting" or "laboratory". He mispronounced names like "Socrates" or "Desdemona." Once corrected, he would never repeat the mistake, but the very fact of his not being quite sure about certain words distressed him enormously and he used to blush a bright pink when, owing to a chance verbal flaw, some utterance of his would not be quite understood by an obtuse listener. In those days he wrote far better than he spoke, but still there was something vaguely un-English about his poems.[4]

This passage could well be a description of Nabokov's own shortcomings in English, at least when he was a student at Cambridge.

V. also makes various statements regarding Sebastian's English prose which allude to the fact that his Russian was superior:

> 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.[5]

Sebastian's occasional awkwardness is best depicted in a scene where his British lover, Clare Bishop, is rewriting his manuscript and stops to say:

> "No, my dear. You can't say it so in English."
> He would stare at her for an instant or two and then resume his prowl, reluctantly pondering on her observation, while she sat with her hands softly folded in her lap quietly waiting. "There is no other way of expressing it," he would mutter at last. "And if for instance," she would say——and then an exact suggestion would follow. "Oh, well, if you like," he would reply. "I'm not insisting, my dear, just as you wish, if you think bad grammar won't hurt . . ."
> "Oh, go on," he would cry, "you are perfectly right, go on . . ."[6]

After reading such passages the reader can better appreciate some of the difficulties and tribulations that Nabokov himself must have no doubt experienced in utilizing his new language. It is also necessary to keep in mind that the work was entirely created in France without any English millieu for the author to rely on. His family and friends spoke only Russian and he was surrounded by French speakers. This makes the difficulties of composition all the more comprehensible.

In the preceeding passages it appears as if Nabokov is trying to make some defensive excuses for his own language, which might, in

some places, not ring true for his new reading public. Yet, in comparison with his later novels, which are loaded with many obscure English phrases and numerous foreign expressions, *Sebastian Knight* is ironically one of the clearest and most accessible of all Nabokov's works. He was not trying to be especially cute or fancy, only trying to get his intended meaning across clearly and artfully.

Nabokov was later to specifically expound on this trying time in his book *Strong Opinions:*

> My private tragedy, which cannot, indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second rate brand of English.[7]

We mere mortals, of course must find such a statement hard to believe for it is a rare native English speaker who has even close to the mastery of the language that Nabokov does. His sadness must have been great, but even more powerful was his resiliency as a true artist continuing to excel in literature and not only surviving but thriving in a new environment.

In another memorable statement, Nabokov even more graphically described his change from Russian to English prose as something:

> exceedingly painful——like learning anew to handle things after losing seven or eight fingers in an explosion.[8]

Nabokov knew by 1936, when he began to translate *Despair,* that he would soon have to give up his language and eventually go to America. Therefore, *Sebastian Knight* becomes a farewell tribute to his past and at the same time marks the beginning of a new and fruitful literary career.

There are many similarities between Nabokov and the protagonist Sebastian, such as they were both born in 1899, both went to Cam-

bridge and eventually became Russian-English authors. However, the reader must be very careful not to fall into the trap of equating the two! Sebastian is not Nabokov. Nabokov likes to give several of his main characters a varied assortment of his own personal traits. Not surprisingly, Sebastian has the same habit and V. mentions that:

> He had a queer habit of endowing even his most grotesque characters with this or that idea, or impression, or desire which he himself might have toyed with ...
> But I fail to name any other author who made use of his art in such a baffling manner——baffling to me who might desire to see the real man behind the author.[9]

Therefore, the reader can plainly see that no matter how many of Nabokov's own traits might appear, the reader must be able to clearly distinguish between artistic expression and reality. The reader has also been thus warned that discovering the "real" Nabokov will be a decidely difficult, if not impossible task.

As mentioned earlier, Nabokov was already a mature writer when he undertook this novel and in no other work, either fore or after, did he ever try to give such a precise and exact explanation to the reader of how his art is both created and conceived. Nabokov took almost a didactic approach to revealing the essence of his art to his new reading public. There are numerous details on his methods, objectives and beliefs. Time and again we observe his comments on the meaning of art, the fallacies of Freudian thought and the supremacy of consciousness over mundane banality. Thus, filled with so many indirect statements on his artistic and thematic credo, *Sebastian Knight* truly becomes a guiding light in coming to better understand Nabokov's later masterpieces such as *Lolita, Pale Fire* and *Ada,* all of which become steadily more cryptic for the average reader.

Nabokov's first English novel clearly reflects the significance of his shift from Russian to English prose. However, for the reader to

comprehend this significance, it is necessary to take a closer look at his long European exile. Nabokov resided for fifteen years in Berlin and wrote nine novels among other works. Throughout the novel *Sebastian Knight,* V. comments on Sebastian's past writings which are quite similar to what Nabokov was doing in Berlin. So as we slowly come to a better understanding of Sebastian's art, so too do we come to understand the general thematic trends of Nabokov's past oeuvre. Therefore this so-called biography,in many ways, becomes a kind of autobiography of Nabokov's art during his Berlin phase.

V. makes several comments on Sebastian's methods of writing which bear a striking resemblance to Nabokov's:

> he had always liked juggling themes, making them clash or blending them cunningly, making them express the hidden meaning, which could only be expressed in a succession of waves, as the music of a Chinese buoy can be made to sound only by undulations.[10]

With this in mind, it becomes necessary for the reader to absorb Nabokov's texts very carefully. In fact the demands on Nabokov's readers are incredibly high. Certainly delving into one of his tales is not for the weak at heart. One must constantly be able to make various connections and establish associations regarding the small segments of memory, action, flashbacks and different events which appear in the text.

In this first English book Nabokov also signals his clear and final break with his Russian homeland. Sebastian, as is Nabokov, is never fully able to overcome the feeling of loss and in his works the themes of the motherland continually reccur. Yet, in Sebastian Knight's last novel, *Doubtful Asphodel,* he harshly attacks totalitarian regimes in general and Soviet Bolshevism in particular as he calls Russia:

> ... A dark country, a hellish place, gentlemen, and if there is anything of which I am certain in life it is that I shall never exchange the liberty of my exile for the vile parody of home ...[11]

This is, no doubt, the exact same emotion that Nabokov feels toward his raped and ravaged homeland. Nabokov was also careful in this first work to clearly show that he was no Communist sympathizer.

By summarizing his own career as a Russian writer, in an indirect fashion with the help of his narrator V., Nabokov is, as a result, able to present the reader with some very profound autocriticism. Nabokov well realized that his new audience would have no access to his previous works and thus, in some manner, wanted to transmit what he had been attempting to artistically accomplish over the previous fifteen years of his career. Nabokov never in his wildest dreams imagined in 1937 that someday all of his Russian novels would be translated and later published in English.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, just as his last Russian novel, *The Gift* (1936), deals with the art of biography. The story is almost completely about the search and composition of the life of Sebastian Knight after his death. The narrator, V., has had almost no contact whatsoever with his half-brother since their early childhood, yet he undertakes the biography in order to demonstrate his deep affection for Sebastian and his wonderful writing which he had never been able to express during his lifetime.

In this first English effort, the reader is somewhat frustratingly introduced to a diabolical world of mirrors, false bottoms, mirage-like leads and illusions. On the surface, V.'s search for information about his late brother seems innocent enough at first, however, as the story progresses we never seem to be able to get any closer to the "real" Sebastian. The reader keeps meeting numerous people who in some way or another had touched Sebastian throughout his life, but by the end of the story his character remains some sort of an enigma. Ultimately, by the end of the story we have come no closer to the

elusive Sebastian, if anything the "real" Sebastian has become less real, more distant, hazy and difficult to define.

This story is strangely reminiscent of Gogol's *Dead Souls,* in which Chichikov travels all over Russia in search of dead serfs' names and meets a whole host of strange and absurd characters. V., too, is traveling all over Europe in search of Sebastian's "dead soul". His final effort also seems unobtainable just as with Chichikov's hopeless mission. Therefore, what starts out as a typical mystery novel of trying to trace the tracks of a dead man's past in order to establish the meaning of his life, turns out to be an illusion, a parody, an inverted tale. The superficial reader, who is looking for standard plots and stock figures, will seem to find them and then suddenly become lost as the characters become twisted and turned around, always going left when the poor reader expects them to go right. The condition is much the same as that created in Sebastian's artistic world where he was always:

> hunting out the things which had once been fresh and bright but which now were worn to a thread, dead things among living ones; dead things shamming life, painted and repainted, continuing to be accepted by lazy minds serenely unaware of the fraud.[12]

So the author is turning all typical story lines of the love story, mystery novel, etc., topsy turvy. As a result, the reader may have the tendency to want to throw such a book down in disgust, which would all be to the immense merriment of Nabokov himself. The fact of the matter is that in all of Nabokov's books the real action or essence of the text is happening completely below the surface of the story. The story is often of little consequence at all in regard to the author's greater quest of artistic beauty. Nabokov especially loathes the standard plots and formulas which make up most popular best-sellers. It is much like one who despises movies such as "Rocky III, V, VII", etc.. Therefore, Nabokov is trying to destroy these mun-

dane and overused ploys by turning them inside out. It becomes the difficult task of the reader to see through the superficial structure down into the rich imaginary world that lays behind it.

By using parody to attack so many standard literary forms, Nabokov is provided with a constant source of humor. This humor is no more apparent than at the end of chapter five when V. suddenly hears a strange voice in the misty darkness:

> "Sebastian Knight" said a sudden voice in the mist, "Who is speaking of Sebastian Knight"[13]

At this point the reader, who imagines himself to be in the middle of a mystery tale, expects a strange "Mr. X" to come out and conveniently fill in the missing gaps of Sebastian's life which would happily allow V. to continue on his merry way of writing his biography. Yet, this turns out to be a classic example of the author, Nabokov, just teasing the reader and then scolding us for having been so "naive" as to expect such absolutely predictable trash to spring up in his novel. There was, in fact, no one in the mist——just darkness. It is up to the reader to get out of the dark and find the sparks of bright light which lay deeply hidden in a completely different way among the novel's many disjointed bits and pieces of information.

The reader, as stated earlier, never seems to get any closer to the "real" Sebastian but he does get many glimpses into Sebastian's novels and artistic credo. The purpose of Sebastian's art is also parodic. He, too, uses art in a way to reach the rarest of levels of true artistic consciousness and awareness:

> he used parody as a kind of springboard for leaping to the highest regions of serious emotion.[14]

This description of Sebastian's art fits perfectly with that of Nabokov as well.

What Nabokov is trying to show then is the many fantastic possibilities of mixing and re-combining different parts and pieces of the narrative to finally create his own totally unique artistic image. In describing Sebastian's first English novel *The Prismatic Bezel* (which can be taken as a mirror image of Nabokov's own first English novel) V. noted that it:

> is not only a rollicking parody of a detective tale: it is a wicked imitation of many other things.[15]

So parody abounds and the reader must constantly beware when entering into Nabokov's prose that all is not what it appears to be. More often than not, all one finds are imitations, inversions and false reflections. As touched upon earlier, the parodic element in Nabokov's writing tended to increase after switching over to English. He had, of course, used parody and other forms in his Russian works, but in his first English work he began to use the language of parody and puns in a way he had never done in Russian. He got great enjoyment of word play such as turning such words as "merry-go-round" into the Nabokovian term "sorry-go-round". This tendency rather annoyed many literary critics who suggested that he refrain from such games.

This punning aspect began to develop right in his first English book where Nabokov constantly shows an inate ability to see how words can be inverted or altered slightly to change their effect. For example, in *Sebastian Knight* sexual drives are supposed to come from a "sexaphone" point in nature. This shows that even though Nabokov was fluent in the English language, he never lost the ability to see English with the fresh eyes of a clever and naughty child. Such linguistic games later played an almost overpowering role in subsequent works and on occasion, when overused, tended to detract from the tone and effectiveness of his writing.

In *Sebastian Knight* Nabokov already began to play with the game

of having Russians and Germans speak English badly for comic effect. The author always seemed to delight in this and his taunting descriptions of the poor émigrés are indeed quite comical. For example, his rendition of the German Herr Silbermann's English:

"You can't see de odder side of de moon"[16]

This aspect of the author's English prose is more good fun than anything else and does not need to be deeply analyzed.

Throughout the novel the reader encounters numerous queer and awkward words such as condemnable, teluvian, mnemogenic, etc. Such words give us a feeling of distance and provides a sense of strangeness and perhaps unreality of language. We feel as if Nabokov has perhaps leafed through his Oxford dictionary once too often in order to obtain his "le mot juste." Yet, ironically, *Sebastian Knight* uses one of the most accessible and least estranged languages of all Nabokov's English novels. Again I think it important to understand that Nabokov was looking for clarity of expression to introduce his art to the English world. In later works, especially after his world acclaim with *Lolita,* he much more confidently and ambitiously used English in even more cryptic and obscure ways.

As an English writer with a Slavic native language Nabokov himself was the first to anticipate that he might be compared to the Polish-English author Joseph Conrad. Such a comparison greatly annoyed Nabokov because he saw Conrad as a teller of stock tales incessantly using old worn out clichés. In this novel, one critic even picked up on this point when giving advice to Sebastian:

> One gentle writer, the author of a single famous book, rebuked Sebastian (April 4, 1928) for being "Conradish" and suggested his leaving out the "con" and cultivating the "radish" in future works —a singularly silly idea—I thought.[17]

Thus, in typical Nabokov fashion, the author renounces such absurd comparisons while merrily continuing to play his own word games.

The theme of unity and oneness in Nabokov's works is clearly brought out in this novel. Nabokov has often been accused by his critics of always writing the same novel over again and again. Ironically, oneness is a major them in Sebastian's art:

> All things belong to the same order of things, for such is the oneness of human perception, the oneness of matter, whatever matter may be. The only real number is one, the rest are mere repetition.[18]

Just as in Nabokov's own works, Sebastian tends to repeat similar plots and story lines in following his methods to reach his own aesthetic plane of pleasure. This is a unique foreshadowing of Nabokov who throughout his career often repeated very similar themes in his works, both before and after journeying to America.

Page Stegner refers to the thematic repetition of Nabokov and agrees that repetition is everywhere in his works:

> because each part of that literary structure is, in many ways, a mirror image of its predecessor: when you have read one book you have encountered the "patterns of the game" that you will find in them all. Perhaps the greatest evidence of Nabokov's genius is that he can make each work unique in the very act of echoing the others; that he can transform through language the same characters and subjects into something always fresh and original.[19]

In this way *Sebastian Knight* affords the reader an excellent opportunity to grasp the "patterns of the game" which will enable one to go on and undertake Nabokov's even more challenging works.

There is another interesting occurence that takes place when V. is visiting Sebastian's apartment for the first time and carefully inves-

tigates his bookshelves:

> But one shelf was a little neater than the rest and here I noted the following sequence which for a moment seemed to form a vague musical phase, oddly familiar: *Hamlet, Le Mort d'Arthur, The Bridge of San Luis Rey, Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, South Wind, The Lady with the Dog, Madame Bovary, The Invisible Man, Le Temps Retrouvé,* Anglo-Persian Dictionary, *The Author of Trixie, Alice in Wonderland, Ulysses, About Buying a Horse, King Lear . .*[20]

These books make up many of Nabokov's favorite and most cherished works. Thus, in just this brief passage we can see the kinds of works which he considers to be supreme literature. It also gives us a hint to his connections with such writers as Flaubert, Joyce and Proust. Such information can greatly help in coming to better grasp the influences which have molded Nabokov as an author.

Another theme which is well presented to his new reading public is that of lonely homeless exiles, wandering aimlessly. Almost without exception the heroes of Nabokov's novels are much like him, a homeless European who frequently changed lodgings. They are people who are always moving either across Europe, America or in some imaginary land. In addition almost all the leading characters are possessed by an obsession of one kind or another, be it chess, nymphets or in Sebastian's case the art of fiction and in V.'s case the art of biography. Both Sebastian and V. are homeless exiles wandering about Europe and being forced to use a different language in order to organize their thoughts. Exile life and homelessness are not, however, the main causes of suffering for his characters. It is, however, the one main theme which ties almost all of his characters together in his works.

The continual use of themes and backgrounds which so nearly mirror his own images are not to be taken for Nabokov himself. The images of his past which are cleverly interspersed among his

stories are simply mirror images of his past or reflections of images in his past. Thus, the reader must make sure to separate the main characters from that of Nabokov himself.

Practically all the major themes of Nabokov's later works can be easily found in *Sebastian Knight*. One of the most easily recognizable is that of yearning for one's past to which one never can return to again. Sebastian and V. both suffer from this feeling in quite an acute manner. Sebastian attempts to regain his losses by artistically re-creating some of the images and ghosts that still exist in his own memory. In the same way V. is trying to bring life back into Sebastian's ghost in order to come to a better realization of who he himself really is. V. is also an excellent example of Nabokov's strange and rather unreliable narrators. He is a man without friends, without country and he does not even have a name! In order to write the biography, V. must travel into the past but he can only find illusory reflections which leave him, and as a result, the reader, as confused at the end of his search as he was at the start. The reader gradually comes to perceive that V. is so obsessed that he begins to confuse art with life and illusion with reality itself. By the end of the story all we really know about Sebastian is what we have gleaned from the few passages from his literary works——i.e., his art. Therefore, in the end the "real" Sebastian Knight consists only of his art. All that remains after his death is his legacy of five books which are still:

> Laughingly alive in five volumes.[21]

Sebastian's life continues and he is still alive because his art is alive. By stressing this supremacy of art over life, Nabokov implies that art is life. For Nabokov the only way to escape the mundane, vulgar and harsh realities of the world is through the pursuit of art, through irony, parody and the beauty of artistic composition. By cultivating the beauty of art and literature Sebastian is able to overcome the

pain of this world to a great extent, and he is able to eventually reach the highest realms of human existence which Nabokov calls aesthetic bliss.

In all of Nabokov's novels psychotherapy is consistently under attack and *Sebastian Knight* is no exception. This time his attack is aimed at Sebastian's former secretary who hastily wrote a biography about Sebastian basing his life on his tragedy of having lived in the era of World War I and after, i.e. he was a hopeless victim of his environment. Nabokov clearly shows the falsehood of this and continually stresses man's independance from the functional Freudians who would place a rational excuse for all of man's actions. For Sebastian time did not exist. V. notes that the secretary:

> misunderstands Sebastian's inner attitude in regard to the outer world. Time for Sebastian was never 1914 or 1920 or 1936——it was always year 1.[22]

Nabokov leaves no doubt as to the deep contempt he feels for such mechanistic individuals who would classify all people as victims of social circumstance.

Since Nabokov so hated using old clichés he felt it was the writer's obligation to express his imagery with just the right words. Not surprisingly Sebastian held the exact same belief:

> He had no use for ready made phrases because the things he wanted to say were of an exceptional build and he knew moreover that no real idea can be said to exist without the words made to measure.[23]

From the above statement the reader is well warned that he will have frequent occasion to reach for the dictionary to find one of Nabokov's locutions or "precise" expressions.

Chess imagery abounds in Nabokov's works and there are also

abundant references in this work as well. To begin with, Sebastian always drew the figure of a black knight chess piece as his trademark in his youth. Later he has his most stable relationship with a woman named Bishop, another name of a chess piece. Finally, he dies in a little town named St. Damier, and damier just happens to be the name of chessboard in French. Such examples could continue, but what is important is that the reader understand the kinds of symbols he should be constantly on the lookout for in these works.

With so many loose bits of information and allusions scattered throughout the story, the real action of the novel takes place between the author and the reader. Nabokov is often leading the reader in circles on a wild goose chase and always takes as devious a route as possible and throughout all this he teasingly invites the reader to try and follow him. Therefore, it has been said that you can never read a Nabokov novel but only re-read it. In *Sebastian Knight* the game is a very frustrating one indeed, primarily because the reader is expecting a different outcome. The levels of perception are also too numerous to mention. I have already touched on one chess allusion regarding the name Knight but the name Sebastian alone has several possible origins including the Bible and Shakespeare.

The ultimate irony of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is that it is not a book about "real" life at all. It is about deceptive reality and the difference between art and life. We are left with a vague idea of Sebastian's literary genius but we know nothing of the man behind the books. However, this image of deceptive reality is absolutely central to Nabokov's artistic vision of aesthetic consciousness being *the* only reality worth living for.

We have seen Nabokov create his own artistic world in his novels and this is reinforced when Sebastian lies spread-eagled on his apartment floor after just finishing his second novel. His girlfriend, upon seeing him, fears that he has suffered a heart attack while Sebastian calmly replies:

> "I'm not dead. I have just finished building a world, and this is my Sabbath rest."[24]

Thus, it is clear to see that in order for the reader to enter into an understanding of Nabokov's prose he must give up much of his mental baggage and enter into Nabokov's special literary world.

We are time and again reminded in Nabokov's works that his novels are, more than anything else, a literary act and the only "reality" that we ever encounter is the reality of the author's creative mind at work expressing himself in his own unique and articulate way.

Finally, in this first English novel, Nabokov was able to transmit, more than in any work fore or since, a lucid description of his inimitable style when V. says of Sebastian:

> Told to write like Mr. Everyman he would have written like none. I cannot even copy his manner because the manner of his prose was the manner of his thinking and that was a dazzling succession of gaps; and you cannot ape a gap because you are bound to fill it in somehow or other——and blot it out in the process.[25]

We are continually shown Sebastian as a model of poetic style——a perfectionist whose solitary existence has led him to cultivate an intensely enlightened state of awareness. Thus, the essence of a man's biography, for Nabokov, does not consist primarily of just getting the facts straight. A man's biography depends on the depth of his artistic soul:

> The best part of a writer's biography is not the record of his adventures but the story of his style.[26]

From this point of view then it is fair to say that V.'s search has been a successful one for he has helped to preserve and transmit the

essence of Sebastian's artistic style and art. Therefore, the joy to be found in Nabokov's world is in the poetic search itself, not necessarily in the ultimate reaching of any particular goal or the attainment of any objective. If during the search the Nabokovian hero can rise above the crowds of lesser men and approach his own kind of artistic and stylistic perfection then such a character can succeed in arriving at the highest state of human endeavor for Nabokov, i.e, the state of hightened consciousness or aesthetic bliss. Sebastian Knight does succeed in doing so and thus can never be a "tragic" figure in the author's eyes. Nor is he really dead because the story of his style and art shall live on in his books.

With his first English novel Nabokov has set the stage for his new reading public to try and come to terms with his challenge. Nabokov's novels can be either very enjoyable or extremely distasteful to the reader depending on one's aesthetic preferences. With the publication of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* Nabokov has, without a doubt, made his first great step toward expanding the boundaries of English fiction by recombining forms and techniques across different cultures, languages and literatures, and by using the medium of English he has created something uniquely and unquestionably his own.

Notes

1. PMJ in New York Times Book Review, 11 January 1942, p.7.
2. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York : New Directions, 1941), p.105.
3. *RLSK,* p.101.
4. *RLSK,* p.48.
5. *RLSK,* p.84.
6. *RLSK,* p.85.

7. Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw Hill: 1973), p.15.
8. *Strong Opinions,* p.54.
9. *RLSK,* p.114.
10. *RLSK,* p.176.
11. *RLSK,* p.84.
12. *RLSK,* p.91.
13. *RLSK,* p.51.
14. *RLSK,* p.91.
15. *RLSK,* p.92.
16. *RLSK,* p.132.
17. *RLSK,* p.42.
18. *RLSK,* p.105.
19. Page Stegner, editor; *The Portable Nabokov* (New York : Penguin, 1971), p.xix.
20. *RLSK,* p.41.
21. *RLSK,* p.52.
22. *RLSK,* p.65.
23. *RLSK,* p.84.
24. *RLSK,* p.90.
25. *RLSK,* p.35.
26. *Strong Opinions,* p.45.