

## Desire and Writing in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

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### Abstract

This paper examines, from a psychoanalytic standpoint, the intersection between identity and writing in the novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) by Vladimir Nabokov. In particular, in the wake of Freud and Lacan, the following contribution will take the notions of desire, signifier, and the process of sublimation involved in artistic creation as interpretative devices. The main focus of the analysis will be the relationship between the two half-brothers of the novel, V (the narrator) and Sebastian. First, I will show that Sebastian Knight holds the role of the object of desire for the characters who have established a close relationship with him and, in particular, for V. Secondly, the paper will be devoted to the analysis of the trauma experienced by the characters because of Sebastian's death, with a particular focus on the narrator's mourning through writing (the fictional biography we read in the novel); in the end, I will give evidence of the so-called signifier's fallacy, crucial episodes in which the narrator can experience an insight into the truth of desire. Because of the not negligible question of the fictional paternity of *The Real Life* and the equally essential matter of V's 'stylistic touch', metaliterary aspects of the novel will also be part of the following reading of the text.

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### Keywords

Desire, Sebastian Knight, signifier, sublimation, V

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### 1. «More daring interpretive realms». A psychoanalytic reading of the novel

*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) was judged rather negatively by Vladimir Nabokov, who in an interview hints at its unbearable imperfections. Perhaps as a consequence, his first book written in English has received less critical attention than his other prose works. However, this low appreciation seems somehow unfair when it comes to the novel's hermeneutical complexity: the structure of the textual knots is particularly challenging, beginning from the issue of fictional paternity, which has been the object of much significant debate.<sup>1</sup>

Who is the 'author' of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*? Irina Marchesini, in her article "A Conjuror's Smile", recalls what Carla Benedetti in *L'ombra lunga dell'autore* has defined as «effetto d'apocrifo» («apocryphal effect»): an author creates a fictional character who progressively becomes the author of the book (Benedetti 188). In Nabokov's novel, the candidates are two: V or Sebastian, who perhaps wrote the book before dying. In my opinion, the metadiegetical question of the fictional authorship cannot be answered once

<sup>1</sup> See Andrew Field, Anthony Olcott, Susan Fromberg Schaeffer and Charles Nicol, whose positions are summarised by Julian W. Connolly in his article "From Biography to Autobiography and Back: the Fictionalization of the Narrated Self in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*".

and for all; as Julian W. Connolly points out, «[...] the problem is, there are *too many* clues. The novel is ‘overdetermined’, and the evidence Nabokov supplies leads to contradictory explanations» (*The Challenge of Interpreting and Decoding Nabokov* 9). Moreover, even taking for granted V’s fictional authorship, how can we fully assess his reliability as a storyteller? What is the boundary between testimony and writing?

Setting aside these considerations, it must be noted that V’s passionate quest has been investigated only rather generically. Some studies are devoted to linguistic and number repetitions, or motifs,<sup>2</sup> while others try to pinpoint Nabokov’s literary sources<sup>3</sup> and autobiographical influences.<sup>4</sup> Critics have rapidly commented on the testimonies presented by the narrator, without examining in depth the question of voice and the ambiguous perspectivism related to them.

What is most noticeable is probably the lack of interest in the personality of the characters, an issue that could have benefited from other disciplines than literature, such as psychoanalysis. But, as Maurice Couturier observed a few years ago in *A Forty-Year Journey in Nabokovland*:

Nabokov’s opinions on literature are so strong that many of his exegetes have felt the need to stick to a kind of criticism he himself practiced or would have sanctioned; and they have refrained from venturing into more daring interpretive realms, psychoanalysis for instance.  
(6)

Couturier’s words can be hardly contradicted. Despite Nabokov’s extraordinary insight when characterizing his literary creatures, which remain in the readers’ memory not only because of the sophisticated narrative structures, it is true that few critics have dared challenge the writer’s double ban: «Freudians, Keep Out» and «Let us skip sex» (Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*).<sup>5</sup>

This essay, however, carries out a psychanalytical reading of the main characters’ identity in the novel, applying a Freudian and Lacanian theoretical framework. Freud’s theory of identification and Lacan’s theory of «lack of being» may throw light on issues that have been neglected so far, for instance the ambivalent relationship between the two half-brothers, or Sebastian’s unhappy love affair with a Russian *femme fatale*. The Freudian concepts of work of mourning and sublimation may clarify V’s attitude towards Sebastian’s memory and Sebastian’s attitude towards his parents’ memory. In this respect, since emptiness assumes so many shades in the novel, Lacan’s teaching on the role of emptiness in the work of art, namely the so-called «aesthetic of emptiness», «estetica del vuoto» as Massimo Recalcati defines it,<sup>6</sup> seems relevant. Yona Dureau, in chapter VII of *Nabokov ou le sourire du*

<sup>2</sup> Jane Zwart, “Nabokov’s Primer: Letters and Numbers in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*” and Priscilla Meyer, “Black and Violet Words: *Despair* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as Doubles”.

<sup>3</sup> Priscilla Meyer, “Anglophonia and Optimysticism: Sebastian Knight’s Bookshelves” and “Life as Annotation: Sebastian Knight, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Vladimir Nabokov”.

<sup>4</sup> Gerard de Vries comments on the analogies with *Speak Memory. An Autobiography revisited* (1967), in which Nabokov mentions his relationship with his younger brother Sergeij, who died in a German Nazi concentration camp. See “The True Life of Sebastian Knight.” Also David Shields, “Autobiographic Rapture and Fictive Irony in *Speak Memory* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.”

<sup>5</sup> The cool reception of Couturier’s book *Nabokov ou la cruauté du désir: lecture psychanalytique* (2004), in which he sheds light on the theme of cruelty applying a Lacanian theoretical framework, shows a general lack of interest in this type of analysis.

<sup>6</sup> Massimo Recalcati, *Il miracolo della forma. Per un’estetica psicanalitica* (2007).

*chat*, also stresses the importance of the absence and the unsaid in *The Real Life*, exploiting Lacan's concept of the Real to discuss V and Mr Goodman's interpretations of Sebastian Knight's prose fiction.

Critics have always dedicated more attention to Sebastian Knight since he is the object of his half-brother's research; however, the latter should be taken into equal consideration, in view of the fact that he is the unifying *medium* through which we know about Sebastian's life and conjecture on his personality. Lara Delage-Toriel, in her article *Disclosures under Seal: Nabokov, Secrecy and the Reader* underlines the role of the secret in the novel, attributing it primarily to the narrator: «Whereas the narrator had most often been exposed as the one who was excluded from a secret circle, we are made aware of the fact that he himself is a cryptic character, not to the other characters, who share in the secret, but to ourselves» (7). Very little is known about V's life.<sup>7</sup> What can we infer of his mindset? At the end of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* we probably know the narrator better than Sebastian, at least the meaning that Sebastian's existence had for him.

## 2. «A manner of being». Desire and modes of being

«But what actually did I know about Sebastian?» (28) V wonders, while devising the fictional novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

Sebastian was born from their Russian father's first marriage to an English woman, Virginia Knight, who soon left husband and toddler for a new lover, dying in solitude some years later. The half-brothers, who have an age gap of six years, spent their childhood and adolescence together; however, recalling that life period, the younger observes:

Sebastian's image does not appear as part of my boyhood, thus subject to endless selection and development, nor does it appear as a succession of familiar visions, but it comes to me in a few bright patches, as if he were not a constant member of our family, but some erratic visitor passing across a lighted room and then for a long interval fading into the night. (15)

The narrator does not explain this feeling in terms of age difference. He rather underlies «Sebastian's constant aloofness, which, although I loved him dearly, never allowed my affection either recognition or food» (*ibid.*); every episode of their boyhood is marked by Sebastian's disinterest in establishing a closer contact. This emotional detachment is perceived by his stepmother as well, who tells V about her inability to understand him:

'I've always felt' said my mother, 'that I never really knew Sebastian, I knew he obtained good marks at school, read an astonishing number of books, was clean in his habits, insisted on taking a cold bath every morning although his lungs were none too strong – I knew all this and more, but he himself escaped me. And now that he lives in a strange country and writes to us in English I cannot help thinking that he will always remain an enigma – though the Lord knows how hard I have tried to be kind to the boy.' (26)

Although one can list Sebastian's habits and tastes, something in his personality remains inexplicable, to such an extent that he may be defined as an «enigma». The youth's detachment becomes stronger after the escape from revolutionary Russia, when he decides to live in England, absorbing its language and customs, and signing his literary works with

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<sup>7</sup> «As the reader may have noticed, I have tried to put into this book as little of my own self as possible» (117); V's domicile and job are essentially all the information he decides to reveal to the reader.

his maternal surname. From then on, the half-brothers hardly see each other, living their own lives as though there was no blood relation between them. Grown-up V cannot hide a certain ambivalence in his affection: «Why had I never visited Sebastian in London? He had invited me once or twice» (164). In his last letter sent to V a few days before dying, Sebastian does not reveal the hopelessness of his health condition.<sup>8</sup> When the gifted but unknown novelist dies, V is stricken with remorse: «I regretted desperately never having told Sebastian how much I delighted in his books. As it is I find myself helplessly wondering whether he had been aware I had ever read them» (28).

During his adventurous pursuit of the bereaved's 'real' life, the narrator seems in search of something not very clear to himself, besides the facts he comes to know. What escapes him exactly about Sebastian's personality? Incidentally, V writes that, when his half-brother was alive, «the 'whys' of his behaviour were as many Xs» (29): Sebastian's enigma concerns origin, something which eludes any definition.<sup>9</sup> While sketching a plausible portrait of his half-brother, what clearly emerges is the inadequacy of what Giovanni Bottioli defines as «property conception» of identity, «concezione proprietaria» dell'identità (*Che cos'è la teoria della letteratura* 14).<sup>10</sup> This is all the more so because Sebastian embodies the «enigma of desire», l'«enigma del desiderio», as we guess from his stepmother and the narrator's complaints.

This rather vague expression refers to Jacques Lacan's concept of desire, developed on the basis of Freud's work. Lacan maintains that human desire is founded on a constitutive lack, as psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati recapitulates: «Unlike need (which holds a specific object) and *jouissance* (which consists in an experience of stasis and annulment), human desire evolves around an empty spot», «A differenza del bisogno (che possiede un oggetto specifico) e del godimento (che consiste in un'esperienza di stasi e di azzeramento), il desiderio umano si costituisce intorno a un punto vuoto» (*Introduzione alla psicoanalisi* 64).<sup>11</sup>

Sebastian Knight may be defined as an enigma of desire, primarily to the narrator since he represents this emptiness, in two senses. First, he is able to cause desire through his novels, which are also a source of *jouissance* («delight» 21), thanks to the lack inherent in language. Secondly, Sebastian's elusiveness is due to frustration caused by the absence of «recognition» (15) of V and his mother's desire, indicating at the same time a difficulty in

<sup>8</sup> Michael Wood points out: «Sebastian's diffidence, his desperate attempt at the offhand, means that not even in misery and the shadow of death can he become less remote. The language of feeling is so alien to this subtle novelist that we can't tell from his tone whether he is talking to his mistress or his relative» (41).

<sup>9</sup> Interpreting the sentence algebraically, Jane Zwart states that if  $X=X$  the resultant Cartesian graph has a straight line crossing the origin, so «Sebastian's motives average to what is a gap – the aporia of the origin – [...]» (216).

<sup>10</sup> «Per le più consolidate abitudini di pensiero (in cui confluiscono mentalità quotidiana e stereotipi filosofici) attribuire un'identità significa *classificare*, cioè incasellare. [...] Una zolletta di zucchero può venire definita in maniera soddisfacente mediante le sue proprietà. Per molti studiosi, la *concezione proprietaria* (potremmo chiamarla così) è applicabile con successo anche alla descrizione degli esseri umani – ma molti filosofi e scrittori non condividono quest'idea» (14). «Out of deep-rooted habits (in which everyday ways of thinking and philosophical commonplaces converge), to attribute an identity means to *classify*, that is to pigeonhole. [...] A lump of sugar can be satisfactorily defined by its properties. According to many scholars, the *conception of property* (if we may call it this) can be successfully applied to human beings as well – although many philosophers and writers would not agree».

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Lacan maintains that human desire is always desire of the Other, desire for recognition. Desire comes from the «lack of being», «*manque à être*» of the Other (also called Symbolic field), and is caused by a cut in the Real.

understanding what causes his desire. Indeed, it seems that Sebastian had very few desires or at least not ordinary ones (like writing): neither power, nor knowledge, nor money; he conducted a sober love life and his literary ambition is far from many of his colleagues' arrogance. The narrator describes his half-brother's radical solitude as «inability to fit into any kind of picture»:

The keynote of Sebastian's life was solitude and the kindlier fate tried to make him feel at home by counterfeiting admirably the things he thought he wanted, the more he was aware of his inability to fit into the picture – into any kind of picture. (36-37)

V claims that Sebastian Knight's real life, his inner life, consists in a turmoil of fantasies and languages to express them, not accessible to common people (42).<sup>12</sup> I would venture that Sebastian's main desire is for the word, not only a literary one (which might also explain his attraction to sharp and chatty Lecerf-Rechnoy), for a word that can soothe his anguish at being an orphan.

Since he is an object of desire depicted in an endless displacement, Sebastian Knight recalls Edgar Allan Poe's purloined letter, following Jacques Lacan's reading in the «Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*» (*Écrits* 6-48).<sup>13</sup> As well as in Poe's tale, in *The Real life* we see the mode scissions that Sebastian provoked in the other characters (V first; Clare Bishop and the Russian woman; Mr Goodman), being for them a «signifier» (21).<sup>14</sup> Each one has crossed Sebastian's enigma on the basis of their own desire, and it is the testimony of these manners of being that the narrator collects during his research.

Freud's theory of desire as identification may clarify his point better. In chapter VII in *Group Psychology and Analysis of the 'I'*, he makes a distinction between desire to have («object-choice»), and desire to be («identification»): «Identification is known to psychoanalysis as the earliest expression of an emotional attachment to another person», inevitably connoted by ambivalence (57). The subject's identity is conceived as the series of identifications involving someone during their life, usually starting from their parents; one can identify oneself with a loved object (in which the desire to be participates), or with a model, at the level of the 'I' or of the 'I'-ideal (57-63).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> V comments: «When at last he thoroughly understood this and grimly started to cultivate self-consciousness as if it had been some rare talent or passion, only then Sebastian derived satisfaction from its rich and monstrous growth, ceasing to worry about his awkward uncongeniality [...] (37). Because of his condition of 'happy' estrangement, Julia Kristeva includes the character of Sebastian Knight among the so-called cosmopolitan strangers: «One who is happy being a cosmopolitan shelters a shattered origin in the night of his wandering. It irradiates his memories that are made up of ambivalences and divided values. That whirlwind translates into shrill laughter. It dries up at once the tears of exile and, exile following exile, without any stability, transmutes into games what for some is a misfortune and for others an untouchable void» (38). The French psychoanalyst names this condition «mnestic polymorphism».

<sup>13</sup> Gennady Barabtarlo noticed that the hero's name can be anagrammed into 'A Knight is absent' (8).

<sup>14</sup> In Lacan's teaching, «signifier» does not refer to one side of the sign, matched up with the «signified»; it is a linguistic unity whose value is «nullibiety» (*Écrits* 16), that is to say it signifies nothing but in relation to the scissions in *manners of thought* it causes in people. Every object of desire is also a signifier (Bottiroli, 178). Yona Dureau considers Sebastian Knight a signifier for V in relation to his novels, whose inner meaning is endlessly displaced.

<sup>15</sup> As Giovanni Bottiroli points out, identification goes beyond simple «imitation», or «empathy»: «When I imitate someone else, I remain myself; and also when I put myself in someone's shoes, in order to

So, who was Sebastian Knight? For V, surely a model; for Clare Bishop, clever orphan like him, a loved object, for whom she was maybe more a friend than a lover; for the Russian woman the stereotypical gloomy and refined intellectual on whom to exert her hysterical seduction («it would be rather good fun to have him make love to her», 132);<sup>16</sup> for Mr Goodman, the object of an envious hate. As in a cubist picture,<sup>17</sup> we may say that the narrator's research journey shows every modal and temporal perspective of the characters who had entered the Knightian orbit, revealing something that concerns not only Sebastian Knight:

that the soul is but a manner of being – not a constant state – that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden. (173)

Let us now try to go into the details of the relationship between V and Sebastian, which is significantly marked by affective ambivalence. Sebastian's aloofness probably indicates some jealousy towards his younger half-brother, who diverted his father's exclusive attention from him and is the son of a woman who replaced his mother; as regards V, we have an open confession about his own feelings:

And as I sat there alone in the lugubriously comfortable hall, and read the publisher's advertisement and Sebastian's handsome black name in block letters, I envied his lot more acutely than I had ever envied it before. I did not know where he was at the time, I had not seen him for at least six years, nor did I know of his being so ill and so miserable. On the contrary, that announcement of his book seemed to me a token of happiness – and I imagined him standing in a warm cheerful room at some club, with his hands in his pockets, his ears glowing, his eyes moist and bright, a smile fluttering on his lips – and all the other people in the room standing round him, holding glasses of port, and laughing at his jokes. (151-152)

Envy is not devoid of admiration, as we come to know while he is on his way to say farewell to Sebastian: «Why had I kept away from him so stubbornly, when he was the man I admired most of all men? Those bloody asses who sneered at his genius...» (164).

understand their point of view, the boundaries between myself and the other are sufficiently clear. Identification abolishes these boundaries, determining a deep and enduring modification of personality: identifying myself with someone else, I assimilate at least partially their traits, I become them» (282-83).

<sup>16</sup> Hysterical desire aims at digging a lack in the Other in many ways, among which to play hard to get with the Other (here impersonated by Sebastian and V), also exploiting language (Mme Lecerf's skills in this field are indisputable). On hysterical desire see Recalcati, *Lezioni su Lacan*. It must be observed that even though V will never 'find' the last woman loved by Sebastian (at least since there is no frank confession from her part), Mme Lecerf's seductive strategy will suffice for him as proof; he now realizes how a *cocotte* behaves, so how his half-brother had been seduced...and how he was going to be seduced as well.

<sup>17</sup> David Lodge maintains that Nabokov's novels «are fundamentally metonymic in Jakobson's terms» (4), in particular *The Defence*, *Glory*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *The Gift*, *Ada*: «Fiction modelled on biography is an essentially metonymic form because it reconstructs the chronological sequence of events that make up a life – with inevitable gaps and ellipses, which may be foregrounded (as in *The Defence*) but seldom with the continual shuttling backwards and forwards in time that is characteristic of the modernist, symbolist novel of consciousness (e.g. *Ulysses*, *To the Lighthouse*)» (5).

For V, Sebastian is in the place of the desire to be. After death, he will become for the narrator a model in the 'I'-ideal. V's choice of writing, moreover in English, suggests an identification.<sup>18</sup> The following passage throws light on the link between identity and writing which unites them:<sup>19</sup>

Once I happened to see two brothers, tennis champions, matched against one other; their strokes were totally different, and one of the two was far, far better than the other; but the general rhythm of their motions as they swept all over the court was exactly the same, so that had it been possible to draft both systems two identical designs would have appeared. (28-29)

This process of identification with his half-brother unravels at the end of the novel, which may also be interpreted in a metaliterary sense:<sup>20</sup>

try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows. (173)

V has not simply grasped his half-brother's manner of being, the «undulations» of his soul; something of Sebastian has left a mark in him. And thanks to writing, the narrator may give a new meaning to his life and Sebastian's, finding out a truth about him and his own relationship to him.

### 3. «The essential drama». Work of mourning and artistic sublimation

There is no doubt that death and loss are among the major themes of *The Real Life*. The novel is a sort of inquiry into the past through the answers of the present, permeated with sorrow and nostalgia, as well as with that ironic and playful touch so typically Nabokovian. Michael Wood says about the overall atmosphere of the novel:

This novel's deepest mood is what Nabokov elsewhere calls that of the preterist: a longing for lost treasures, tastes, languages, countries, loved ones, a hope that they may be magically stored somewhere because they cannot have vanished, simply gone like smoke. (52)

How can a lost past be evoked, lost because of exile, death, and no communication? V faces Sebastian Knight's demise bestowing a new dignity and meaning to his past; for this reason, we may claim that he is deeply engaged in the work of mourning. In one of his most famous essays, entitled *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud coined the expression *Trauerarbeit* «work of mourning» (205) to define that process of libidinal disinvestment which indicates a positive reaction to the loss of a loved one, of an abstraction or an ideal, in another words to the object of a narcissistic investment. This transient response to the object-loss implies pain, energy, time and memory:

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<sup>18</sup> The detail «my miserable English» (29) is also part of the metaliterary play in the novel.

<sup>19</sup> V explicitly puts himself in an inferior position: «the difference between his power of expression and mine is comparable to that which exists between a Bechstein piano and a baby's rattle» (29). Metaliterary irony as well, since they are both using Vladimir Nabokov's pen.

<sup>20</sup> The mysterious third person whom neither of the half-brothers knows could be an allusion to the Creator of the novel (Vladimir Nabokov) or to the reader who will interpret it.

Serious mourning, the reaction to the loss of a loved one, contains [a] painful mood, the loss of interest in the outside world – except as it recalls the deceased – the loss of ability to choose any new love-object – which would mean replacing the mourned one – turning away from any task that is not related to the memory of the deceased. (204)

Grief accompanies the absence of the object, since it is unforgettable, ever-present with the individual, whose energies are all in motion to recall – even involuntary – every episode linked to it, which diminish the involvement in external activities. Memory is essential to work through bereavement, because at its utmost the subject reaches a healthy state of oblivion and is able to accept the loss by giving it a meaning. This reality-testing leads to libidinal investment in other objects.

Lacan goes beyond his colleague's definition of mourning, claiming that at the core of this experience there is not only identification with the loss-object:

Nous ne sommes en deuil que de quelqu'un dont nous pouvons nous dire «j'étais son manque». Nous sommes en deuil de personnes que nous avons ou bien ou mal traitées, et vis-à-vis de qui nous ne savions pas que nous remplissions la fonction d'être à la place de leur manque. (X 166)

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* V's half-brother sudden death arouses in him an affection previously soothed by time and distance, and prompts him to write a biography of the dead, an enterprise in which he sets aside his current life:

Two months had elapsed after Sebastian's death when this book was started. Well do I know how much he would have hated my waxing sentimental, but still I cannot help saying that my life-long affection for him, which somehow or other had always been crushed and thwarted, now leapt into new being with such a blaze of emotional strength – that all my other affairs were turned into flickering silhouettes. (28)

The narrator undertakes a journey across Europe in the hope of assembling the jigsaw puzzle pattern that is Sebastian, questioning the latter's possessions and the people who have known him, along with his own memories. His half-brother's life must be recomposed, so that it may find a meaning for him: 'Who was Sebastian Knight to me?' is the question the narrator tries to answer.

From the beginning, this psychological detective journey into Sebastian Knight's past goes together with the writing of it; the research is due to the book project: «As I planned my book it became evident that I would have to undertake an immense amount of research» (28). However, V does not openly express his will to commemorate his half-brother (which the reader can easily guess); the reasons for his writing remain somehow unknown.<sup>21</sup> In Nabokov's novel we do not only follow the history of a research, but we

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<sup>21</sup> Michael H. Begnal claims that «V. tells us that the main reason he is writing this novel is to refute a previous biography, *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight* (which incidentally does not mention V), composed by a Mr Goodman» (1). Actually, V does not say anything of the kind in the novel, except telling us his irritation towards Mr Goodman's work: «The reader already knows how thoroughly I disapprove of that gentleman's book. However, at the time of our first (and last) interview I knew nothing about his work (insofar as a rapid compilation may be called work)» (47). As soon as Mr Goodman comes to know V's intention to write a biography on Sebastian, he tries to dissuade him from the purpose, probably fearing competition.



are also challenged to interpret the book as the outcome of that research, assuming V's fictional authorship.

The work of mourning is here fruitfully linked to another activity, the artistic sublimation. As Massimo Recalcati recalls in *Il miracolo della forma*, «sublimation is for psychoanalysis a highly problematic concept», «per la psicoanalisi quello di sublimazione è un concetto altamente problematico» (3), starting from Freud, who developed his idea of *Sublimierung* in several papers without coming to any conclusive theory, which gave rise to a series of readings (Jung, Bernfeld, Klein, Lacan).<sup>22</sup> We shall discuss here only Lacan's stance, in order to put forward a hypothesis on the theme of literary creation in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

In *Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, Freud argues that in this process the sexual aim is exchanged «for another one which is comparatively remote and socially valuable» (86): in other words, the sexual drive may get a non-sexual satisfaction, a cultural one, through activities like a play or a job, or through socially valued works.<sup>23</sup> In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* Lacan describes sublimation as the relation between the subject and the Thing<sup>24</sup> (*Das Ding*) in which the authentic nature of the drive is displayed:

The sublimation that provides the *Trieb* with a satisfaction different from its aim – an aim that is still defined as its natural aim – is precisely that which reveals the true nature of the *Trieb* insofar as it is not simply instinct, but has a relationship to *das Ding* as such, to the Thing insofar as it is distinct from the object. (111)

Lacan's formula is that through sublimation «The object is elevated to the dignity of the Thing» (*ibid.*, 112), namely a symbolic-imaginary object becomes a representation of the Real:

At the level of sublimation the object is inseparable from imaginary and especially cultural elaborations. It is not just that the collectivity recognizes in them useful objects; it finds rather a space of relaxation where it may in a way delude itself on the subject of *das Ding*, colonize the field of *das Ding* with imaginary schemes. That is how collective, socially accepted sublimation operate. (*ibid.*, 99)

As for artistic sublimation, the French psychoanalyst claims that «All art is characterized by a certain mode of organization around this emptiness» (130): a work of art implies a veil on the Real, and we may add that the more refined is this organization, the better for

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<sup>22</sup> Recalcati thus summarizes the theoretical obstacle encountered by the father of psychoanalysis: «La possibilità che la pulsione si soddisfi per altre vie rispetto a quelle sessuali comporta inevitabilmente che si ridefinisca il concetto stesso di soddisfazione pulsionale» (3) The possibility that the drive gets a satisfaction in other ways than the sexual ones inevitably implies a redefinition of . Recalcati's first two chapters illustrates the theory of sublimation from Freud to Lacan.

<sup>23</sup> Sublimation is the destiny of civilization (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*). In his essay *On Narcissism*, Freud makes a distinction between sublimation and idealization, since the former does not consist in a (narcissistic) identification with an object, which implies repression, but is an alternative aim of the object-libido; moreover, being no repression, it differs from symptoms, dreams or lapsus (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*). Despite the plasticity of the drives, the individual cannot achieve a full sublimation; there is always a libidinal amount which resists it (*Introduction to Psychoanalysis*).

<sup>24</sup> This concept indicates the order of the Real (Reality minus the Symbolic and Imaginary). The Thing is represented by a fundamental emptiness since it is outside language and unattainable, and at the same time by a lethal plenitude. The place of a mythic and lost *jouissance*, it acts as a cause of desire for the individual when it takes shape in the object little-a (*objet petit a*).

its aesthetic value. According to Lacan, art represents the ultimate threshold to the horrific vortex of the Thing:

The true barrier that holds the subject back in front of the unspeakable field of radical desire that is the field of absolute destruction, of destruction beyond putrefaction, is properly speaking the aesthetic phenomenon where it is identified with the experience of beauty – beauty in all its shining radiance, beauty that has been called the splendour of truth. (*ibid.*, 216-217)

I would venture that through that symbolic object which is *The Real Life*, V has raised Sebastian's enigma to the dignity of *das Ding*. The emptiness left by his half-brother's loss suscitates in him an unprecedented and burning desire of knowing the mystery of Sebastian's personality and talent. The latter's inaccessibility leads V to a creative enterprise, which enables him, a figure of the «obvious and ordinary» (156), being an anonymous salesman, to enter the (fictional) history of literature.

We have spoken of *The Real Life* as a fictional work of art and this novel seems to make fun of any pretension to objectiveness in the biographical genre. The narrator does not hesitate to exploit Sebastian's literary production, also quoting some passages, in order to prove his ideas about the man's personality. Literature leaves a trace of the loss-object, to such an extent that:

L'objet ultime de la quête devienne, par glissements successifs, non plus Sebastian Knight, non plus la vie de Sebastian Knight, mais l'écriture de Sebastian Knight [...]. Sans les écrits de cet homme [...] il n'y aurait véritablement plus de trace. Seul le livre, dans la perfection de l'objet fini, demeure après lui. (Dureau 432) The real life of Sebastian Knight is at times the straightforward object of the narrator's hope, his desire to see the real man behind the author; at other times it is Sebastian's books (he is laughingly alive in five volumes), at others still it is the act of writing, the tussle with language. (30)

The body of the text becomes Sebastian's body; the former is necessary to understand the latter. Michael Wood comments on the shades of the word «real» in the novel:

The real life of Sebastian Knight is at times the straightforward object of the narrator's hope, his desire to see the real man behind the author; at other times it is Sebastian's books (he is laughingly alive in five volumes), at others still it is the act of writing, the tussle with language. (30)

The quest for his half-brother's real life seems to turn into the search for the Lacanian Real, for an emptiness that V finds in Sebastian Knight's literary works, which are «a successful combination of pure signifiers», «una riuscita combinazione di puri significanti», as Recalcati synthesizes Lacan's definition of poetry (*Miracolo* 194). As a consequence, the narrator can be misled by the power of his half-brother's style, being both presence and absence of the author; Susan E. Sweeney rightly speaks of «V's purloined readings of Sebastian's novels» (226), though we may say he is essentially a good reader.

A biographical approach to Sebastian's writing is an unauthentic way to grasp his enigma, whereas a stylistic one provides better tools. Intuitively, V does not dwell on the

author's psychology too long; in chapter X and XVIII he attempts a different interpretation of his works.<sup>25</sup>

Thus V has access to the mystery of the signifier and the manner of being of Sebastian himself. Sebastian's body cannot be evoked but by his writing, whose inner understanding nobody will ever fully possess, not even the narrator. Sebastian's loss makes the inevitable and original loss of *Das Ding* present as the constitutive emptiness pertaining to the Symbolic.

Sebastian Knight's novels are moments of epiphany and encounter with beauty, giving the narrator that satisfaction always frustrated with his half-brother; paradoxically, we may say that the only successful meetings with Sebastian are not with the man but with his novels (see the St Damier episode). V decides to follow in his half-brother's footsteps, without sticking to a «separative» and factual reconstruction of his life but opting for a «distinguishing logic», «logica distintiva», namely for the flexibility of rhetorical language (Bottiroli, *Che cos'è la teoria* 257). Sebastian Knight's real life belonged to art and to art it will belong again thanks to V, who commemorates him through his own style, taking some poetic license as regards the facts:<sup>26</sup>

A more systematic mind than mine would have placed them [the pages on Sebastian's first love] in the beginning of this book, but my quest had developed its own magic and logic and though I sometimes cannot help believing that it had gradually grown into a dream, that quest, using the pattern of reality for the weaving of its own fancies, I am forced to recognize that I was being led right, and that in striving to render Sebastian's life I must now follow the same rhythmical interlacements. (113)

Would the biographee have found that special 'Knightian twist' about it [the enigma of the Russian woman] which would have fully compensated the blundering biographer? (131)

Conscious of the artifice of imagination, V comes into contact with Sebastian Knight's truth, the truth of the poet, who finds what Lacan calls *la parole pleine*, «full speech» (*The Function and Field* 212), namely a polysemous, dense word based on the lack of the Other:

Il godimento poetico e la sua arte consistono proprio nel realizzare questa possibilità: trarre dalla mancanza dell'Altro l'opportunità di una creazione significativa inedita, che sappia trasformare creativamente tale mancanza in una significantizzazione singolare di questa stessa mancanza.<sup>27</sup> (Recalcati, *Miracolo* 206)

Thus *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is both a *mise en abyme* and a veiled manifestation of the Real. As Yona Dureau writes, «la vraie vie de Sebastian Knight est celle de ce roman» (437), which means that he will live through the readers' interpretations. I would

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that Mr Goodman displays a «separative logic», «razionalità separativa» (Bottiroli 253), taking literally what Sebastian said and wrote; quoting Dureau, «de livres de Sebastian, selon M. Goodman, sont un rapport biographique d'événements historiques» (413). The literary agent reduces any work of art to commercial goods, whose value depends on the capacity to reflect its epoch.

<sup>26</sup> Mr Silbermann is a character without whom V's research of the Russian woman could not continue. Begnal defines him as «a narrational necessity», thanks to which «V will create the totally fictional second half of the novel. V is indeed now writing his own fiction» (1). Who is Mr Silbermann? The meek man at Sebastian's or a development of Mr Siller (the character in Knight's short story) or neither of them?

<sup>27</sup> «The poetic delight and its art consist in fulfilling this possibility: draw from the lack of the Other the opportunity of an unprecedented signifier creation, turn the lack into a signifier of this lack creatively».

add that the novel's characters are «real» in terms of «necessary possibilities – possible destinies not at a factual but at an identity level», «*possibilità necessarie* – destini possibili non sul piano dei fatti, ma su quello dell'identità» (Bottiroli, *Che cos'è la teoria* 280).<sup>28</sup>

We commented on the pivotal role of Sebastian's death in V's decision to become a writer. Sebastian himself had experienced loss deeply in his youth:

Sebastian could never forget his mother, nor could he forget that his father had died for her. That her name was never mentioned in our home added morbid glamour to the remembered charm which suffused his impressionable soul. (15-16)

As the narrator informs us, his half-brother starts writing at a very precocious age – a few years after their father's death. The poetic word is the way chosen by Sebastian to treat symbolically the trauma of his parents' death. This seems particularly true for the loss of Virginia Knight, since Sebastian adopts her language: «The poems were written in English. [...] the signature under each poem was a little black chess-knight drawn in ink» (15). Michael Wood also claims that «Sebastian's English is not only his mother's tongue but implicitly represents an engagement with his mother's absence, an act of mourning» (37). Sebastian's choice of English is perhaps an extreme attempt to establish a contact with her beyond death.<sup>29</sup>

During his university years at Cambridge, where he graduates in English literature, he uses the maternal surname and tries «to out-England England» (38): for instance in fashion, or speaking that language even to his Russian stepmother and half-brother. In *Lost Property*, his so-called autobiographical book, the young émigré retrospectively sees this anglophilia as an endeavor to adjust to the English way of life. But there is obviously much more than that at the origin of his behavior.

Recalling Freud's theory of identification, we may argue that Virginia Knight, Sebastian's loved object, is in his 'I'-ideal as regards writing, while the English identity in its most prosaic aspects involves his 'I'. It is in action a «confusive metaphor» (Bottiroli, *Che cos'è la teoria* 255), which has rather comical and stereotypical effects on his attire and manners («hyperliteral confusive metaphor»), while full immersion in the language has deeper consequences («hyperfigurative confusive metaphor»).<sup>30</sup> Having enhanced his language skills and thanks to his inner genius, Sebastian will create art in English («distinguishing metaphor»), producing four novels (*The Prismatic Bezel*, *Success*, *Lost Property*, *The Doubtful Asphodel*)

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<sup>28</sup> The reference is to Kant's categories of modality: existence, possibility and necessity. The truth of a fictional character falls under neither the criteria of existence nor possibility but lies in the combination of necessity and possibility.

<sup>29</sup> Julia Kristeva claims: «In contrast to what happened to Camus' Stranger, the casual cosmopolitan Sebastian Knight lost his mother early, did not attend her funeral, links her tomb to no specific place. But, Russian through his father, he assumed her name, that of the English woman. He gave himself a new tongue in choosing English, which, although it was not his maternal language for he did not speak it as a child, was nevertheless that of his nearly unknown mother, the dead language of a dead mother to be brought back to life» (37).

<sup>30</sup> «In confusive identification we also have to recognize two effects: a hyperliteral one, which regards imitation, and a hyperfigurative one, which is similar to osmosis», «Nell'identificazione confusiva bisogna ancora distinguere due effetti: un effetto *iperletterale*, che si colloca sul versante della mimesi, e un effetto *iperfigurale*, che si colloca su versante dell'osmosi» (Bottiroli, *Identità/identificazione* 42).

and three short stories (*The Funny Mountain*, *Albinos in Black*, *The Back of the Moon*). As Sebastian himself tells the reader, he gives up on imitating the British, though not so soon and maybe not entirely.<sup>31</sup>

Critics have often mentioned Virginia Knight's influence on her son's identity and literary career, failing to discuss the character of Sebastian's father. What did Sebastian feel for him? Here is the narrator's opinion on the subject:

In *Lost Property* Sebastian hints at a vaguely bitter feeling towards his happily remarried father, a feeling which changed into one of ecstatic worship when he learnt the reason of his father's fatal duel [apparently Virginia's honor]. (16)

Sebastian's admiration towards his father suggests that the latter is taken as a model in the 'P'-ideal.<sup>32</sup> In his works, Sebastian adopts the language of the mother but his style seems somehow to display his father's features:

Every time I open one of his books, I seem to see my father dashing into the room – that special way he had of flinging open the door and immediately pouncing upon a thing he wanted or a creature he loved. My first impression of him is always a breathless one of suddenly soaring up from the floor, one half of my toy train still dangling from my hand and the crystal pendants of the chandelier dangerously near my head. He would bump me down as suddenly as he snatched me up, as suddenly as Sebastian's prose sweeps the reader off his feet, to let him drop with a shock into the gleeful bathos of the next wild paragraph. (7)

The «terrific vigour» of Sebastian's literary style recalls their father's lifestyle, as V says: «he had in him that rich strain of adventurous restlessness which Sebastian inherited as a writer» (6). The narrator's considerations on his half-brother and on their father, who loved hunting and was focused on his targets, indicates a permeability between art and life.<sup>33</sup>

It does not pass unnoticed that V's reticence to speak of himself includes the silence on his mother and father's names. As we know, the half-brothers are related – both biologically and symbolically – through their father, and a metaliterary interpretation of this

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<sup>31</sup> Recalling his meeting with Sebastian in 1924, V notices that «he tried to pronounce French as a real healthy Britisher would» (61)

<sup>32</sup> Unlike Sebastian, V is simply shocked by his father's fatal decision: «But just because Palchin [Virginia Knight's lover] was a fool and a cad, it is hard for me to understand why a man of my father's worth should have risked his life to satisfy - what? Virginia's honour? His own desire of revenge? But just as Virginia's honour had been irredeemably forfeited by the very fact of her flight, so all ideas of vengeance ought to have long lost their bitter lust in the happy few years of my father's second marriage. Or was it merely the naming of a name, the seeing of a face, the sudden grotesque sight of an individual stamp upon what had been a tame faceless ghost? And taken all in all was it, this echo of a distant past (and echoes are seldom more than a bark, no matter how pure-voiced the caller) was it worth the ruin of our home and the grief of my mother?» (11). V's encounter with his father's lack or *manque* deeply disappoints and anguishes him.

<sup>33</sup> The half-brothers' parents do not relate to their object of desire in the same way: «His was a constant quest which changed its object only after having attained it. Hers was a half-hearted pursuit, capricious and rambling, now swerving off the mark, now forgetting it midway, as one forgets one's umbrella in a taxicab» (8).

particular silence seems intriguing.<sup>34</sup> We may also hazard a psychoanalytic one: the father's name never being mentioned calls to mind the constitutive emptiness in the Symbolic, the unique, individual stylistic cut, which also reminds of the mystery of art:

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.<sup>35</sup> (30)

#### 4. «Methods of fate». Sebastian Knight's two souls and the signifier's fallacy

The reflections on Sebastian's writing are intertwined in the novel with the narration of his life, the second part of which he spent mostly in England. While Sebastian is still alive, V considers him chiefly as a rather cool relative, who lives abroad and does everything to hide his national origin. Their mutual uneasiness in childhood and youth later becomes a sort of foreignness. Apart from a dinner in a Russian restaurant, the half-brothers' meetings take place when the elder is still connected to England: his fiancée is an English girl and he lives in London (the narrator ignores Sebastian's affair with a Russian woman).

After his half-brother's death, V understands he had given too much importance to Sebastian's attempt to «out-England England». Close to dying, once his mortal destiny as a writer in English has been fulfilled, Sebastian reveals his other soul, the Russian one.<sup>36</sup> Here it may be important to comment on this metaphorical journey back to Russia.

As with Sebastian Knight's previous works, his last one, entitled *The Doubtful Asphodel*, arouses V's curiosity and it is immediately purchased.<sup>37</sup> Chapter XVIII of *The Real Life* contains V's comment on the book and some quoted passages:

A man is dying, and he is the hero of the tale; but whereas the lives of other people in the book seem perfectly realistic (or at least realistic in a Knightian sense), the reader is kept ignorant as to who the dying man is, and where his deathbed stands or floats, or whether it is a bed at all. The man is the book, and the book itself is heaving and dying, and drawing up a ghostly knee. (147)

The reader follows the thoughts of this mysterious character, when at the moment of his death:

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<sup>34</sup> The reader cannot help completing the narrator's name as V(ladimir Nabokov), who is the author of the novel and father, or common origin, of his characters.

<sup>35</sup> V's description calls to mind Heidegger's metaphor of the work of art as *aletheia*, and Lacan's so-called «aesthetic of emptiness» as Recalcati defines it in *Il miracolo della forma*.

<sup>36</sup> Kristeva comments on this return to «the language of his Russian childhood, that of the second mother» (38): «And he became lost in the kaleidoscope of his multiple identities and untenable memories, leaving of his accumulated exiles merely a track of words».

<sup>37</sup> *The Doubtful Asphodel* seems to be a parody of the events narrated in the last chapters of *The Real Life*, especially Sebastian's worsening health condition and his off-stage death. Some characters like the «gentle chess player Schwartz» and the «fat Bohemian woman» (117) call to mind others, whom the narrator actually met; Gérard Genette has defined this device, in which the boundary between metadiegesis and diegesis is abolished, as «narrative metalepsis» (*Narrative Discourse* 235).

We feel that we are on the brink of some absolute truth, dazzling in its splendour and at the same time almost homely in its perfect simplicity. By an incredible feat of suggestive wording, the author makes us believe that he knows the truth about death and that he is going to tell it. In a moment or two, at the end of this sentence, in the middle of the next, or perhaps a little further still, we shall learn something that will change all our concepts, as if we discovered that by moving our arms in some simple, but never yet attempted manner, we could fly. 'The hardest knot is but a meandering string; tough to the finger nails, but really a matter of lazy and graceful loopings. The eye undoes it, while clumsy fingers bleed. He (the dying man) was that knot, and he would be untied at once, if he could manage to see and follow the thread.' (149)

The human being is a dense entity, a «knot», which only insight/intuition can unravel. The reader is about to grasp a fundamental truth, actually the «absolute truth»:

The answer to all question of life and death, 'the absolute solution' was written all over the world he had known: it was like a traveller realizing that the wild country he surveys is not an accidental assembly of natural phenomena, but the page in a *book* where these mountains and forests, and fields, and rivers are disposed in such a way as to form a coherent sentence; [...] Thus the traveller spells the landscape and its sense is disclosed, and likewise, the intricate pattern of human life turns out to be *monogrammatic*, now quite clear to the inner eye disentangling the interwoven letters. And the word, the meaning which appears is astounding in its simplicity: the greatest surprise being perhaps that in the course of one's earthly existence, with one's brain encompassed by an iron ring, by the close-fitting dream of one's own personality – one had not made *by chance* that simple mental jerk, which would have set free imprisoned thought and granted it the great understanding. (150; the italics are mine)

The narrator argues that it would suffice a «simple jerk» to escape from one's own mind and to have access to the greatest revelation. But the man dies, and the reader is not told the fatidic word.<sup>38</sup>

A few months after the publication of the novel, V receives a letter (in Russian) from Sebastian, who is hospitalized and expresses the wish to see him, in a tone that does not reveal his desperate state. V is not excessively worried and decides not to leave at once, as he is in the dark regarding his half-brother's heart disease and last unhappy love affair. That very night, he has a «singularly unpleasant dream» (157), in which private events as his mother's death are intertwined with allusions to Sebastian's works, who wants to tell him something:

I moved, and then his voice came in one last loud insistent appeal, and a phrase which made no sense when I brought it out of my dream, then, in the dream itself, rang out laden with such absolute moment, with such an unflinching intent to solve for me a monstrous riddle, that I would have run to Sebastian after all, had I not been half out of my dream already. [...] I felt that the nonsensical sentence which sang in my head as I awoke was really the garbled translation of a striking disclosure [...]. (159-160)

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<sup>38</sup> V's considerations and the quoted passages seem to make a parody of the Romantic concept of Nature, and I suggest a comparison between these pages and those in Novalis' *Henry of Ofterdingen*. Nature as a moral subject and an arabesque which disclose the meaning of all things to the wanderer, thanks to a self escape.

As in *The Doubtful Asphodel*, a word is deferred, but in the dream logic it is accessible to V.<sup>39</sup> When a medical telegram definitely alerts him, he has no doubts: «His last book, my recent dream, the mysteriousness of his letter – all made me firmly believe that some extraordinary revelation would come from his lips» (164). However, nothing suggests that Sebastian has indeed anything special to tell him apart from saying goodbye before dying. V puts his dream and Sebastian's novel and letter together, sure that his half-brother is in possession of some truth – the reason for their rather cold relationship? Or perhaps the mystery of his genius? The «monstrous riddle» becomes Sebastian's enigma.

We may argue that V is expecting some «full speech» (*la parole pleine*, see p. 10), which Recalcati, according to Lacan's theory, describes as follows:

La parola che invoca il luogo dell'Altro come luogo della sua destinazione è la parola che si sostiene sul desiderio come desiderio dell'Altro, la parola che manifesta il soggetto dell'inconscio come soggetto del desiderio. Questa parola ricerca nell'Altro il luogo della propria verità.<sup>40</sup> (*Jacques Lacan. Desiderio* 87)

V's expectation suggests that he turns to Sebastian in order to know a possible truth about desire, his own and his half-brother's, since the latter speaks the language of desire, eminently in his literary works: fiction and desire rest on an emptiness, on the lack of the Other. As we mentioned in the previous paragraph, full speech is similar to the poetic one:

La parola piena è una parola che Lacan accosta indirettamente a quella poetica poichè si costituisce come una parola – com'è appunto quella poetica – che è «identica a ciò di cui essa parla». Nell'esperienza analitica, infatti, la parola piena è la parola vera, la parola che realizza l'evento [l'esegesi] del soggetto.<sup>41</sup> (*Recalcati, Miracolo* 196)

The meaningful landscape in *The Doubtful Asphodel* may be interpreted as this realization of the event of the subject, which assumes a «monogrammatic» shape. Although the reader of Sebastian's last book is not directly told the fatidic word, V says:

I sometimes feel when I turn the pages of Sebastian's masterpiece that the 'absolute solution' is there, somewhere, concealed in some passage I have read too hastily, or that it is intertwined with other words whose familiar guise deceived me. I don't know any other book that gives one this special sensation, and perhaps this was the author's special intention. (151)

The reader of *The Real Life* cannot help wondering whether these considerations apply to the novel as well.

V spends an endless night on a train to Paris, trying to remember the place of Sebastian's clinic (St Damier). Once he arrives there, he asks a janitor about his half-brother: «'Knight' I said. 'It begins with a K. It is an English name ... K,n,i,g ...'» (169). A nurse

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<sup>39</sup> Kristeva remarks that «The brother's psychology tends toward romanticizing, and he is just a little bit Freudian. Does he not dream, in premonitory fashion, the night before the writer's death, of waiting for Sebastian in a large dim room, "and the whole atmosphere of his arrival seemed so uncanny?"» (36).

<sup>40</sup> «The word which appeals to the Other's place as the place of its destination is the word which rests on desire as the desire of the Other, the word which the unconscious subject as the subject of the desire. It is in the Other that this word searches for the place of its truth».

<sup>41</sup> «Full speech is a speech which Lacan indirectly puts next to the poetic one, because it as a speech – as it is the poetic one – 'identical to that which it speaks about'. The psychoanalytical practice shows that full speech is the true speech, the speech which brings about the event [exegesis] of the subject».



takes him to the antechamber adjacent to Sebastian's bedroom, advising him to stay just a few minutes in order not to disturb the patient. The narrator is overwhelmed by affection and forgets his expectations:

The strange dream I had had, the belief in some momentous truth he would impart to me before dying – 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 little I knew of his life! But now I was learning something every instant. That door standing slightly ajar was the best link imaginable. That gentle breathing was telling me more of Sebastian than I had ever known before. (170-171)

Some minutes later, while talking to the nurse, the awful surprise:

'Right', I said. 'I haven't explained. We are half-brothers, really. My name is [I mentioned my name].'

'Oh-la-la!' she exclaimed getting very red in the face, 'Mon Dieu! The Russian gentleman died yesterday, and you've been visiting Monsieur Kegan...' (172)

Sebastian Knight has died as he was born, with Russian name and surname. V's grotesque misunderstanding shows to what extent he had been deceived by the signifier «Sebastian Knight».

Firstly, V has been deceived by his half-brother's anglophilia, which was just a means, not an end.<sup>42</sup> The hero's English soul only mattered in relation to his destiny as a writer, and his literary pseudonym misled even more profoundly the narrator, who was so fascinated with his novels to identify the man with them. In Sartre's terms we could speak of a Sebastian \*\*\* for facticity, and of a Sebastian Knight for transcendence.

The St Damier episode illustrates the «function of the *tuché*, of the real as encounter – the encounter in so far it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter» (Lacan, *Book XI* 55). Although V has come too late for Sebastian, at St Damier he encounters the Real, in the sense that he finds out the truth of his desire and also a greater truth: desire is anchored in a form of absence. His emotions rest on the illusion of a presence, as in Sebastian's novels.

The constitutive emptiness in the Symbolic is exemplified by the misunderstanding of the name, which metaphorically shows that it will be the dead man's English soul (Mr Kegan) to survive, thanks to literature. In other words, Sebastian will survive in his novels: «Laughingly alive in five volumes» (44), the narrator says.<sup>43</sup> This paradoxical encounter with life and death, called oxymoron in rhetoric, is illustrated at Sebastian's mistaken deathbed. And from a metaliterary perspective, *The Real Life* is for the reader what Sebastian's mistaken deathbed is for V.

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<sup>42</sup> Sebastian's English is the result of hard work on the language, doubly artificial since he is not a native speaker; nonetheless, he is capable of making it alive through his genius. His Russian linguistic identity, though his original one, has no artistic results for Sebastian's own choice; it becomes the language of the «obvious and ordinary», namely his native land, his half-brother and stepmother, and the Russian woman.

<sup>43</sup> Gennady Barabtarlo has noticed that V's spelling of Sebastian's surname and Kegan are the imperfect anagrams of the Russian noun «КНИГА», which means «book» (10).

The final episode calls to mind another, narrated by Sebastian in *Lost Property*, whose factual truth we are free to doubt but that perfectly illustrates the signifier fallacy.<sup>44</sup> During a holiday in Provence, Sebastian decides to visit his mother's place of death in Roquebrune, namely a pension called Les Violettes. Nobody among the locals he meets seem to have ever heard of it, except a grocer who takes him to a villa with violets painted on the entrance:

I sat down on a blue bench under a great eucalyptus, its bark half stripped away, as seems to be always the case with this sort of tree. Then I tried to see the pink house and the tree and the whole complexion of the place as my mother had seen it. I regretted not knowing the exact window of her room. Judging by the villa's name, I felt sure that there had been before her eyes that same bed of purple pansies. Gradually I worked myself into such a state that for a moment the pink and green seemed to shimmer and float as if seen through a veil of mist. My mother, a dim slight figure in a large hat, went slowly up the steps which seemed to dissolve into water. A terrific thump made me regain consciousness. An orange had rolled down out of the paper bag of my lap. I picked it up and left the garden. Some months later in London I happened to meet a cousin of hers. A turn of the conversation led me to mention that I had visited the place where she died. 'Oh' he said 'but it was the other Roquebrune, the one in the Var.' (16-17)

The Romantics considered blue as the color of desire; the detail of the blue bench (as the blue lamp at St Damier) indicates that the character is in the empty place of desire, and is being deluded. As V finds out that he has been visiting the wrong man, Sebastian goes to the wrong Roquebrune; the mistake was due to the painted violets, image equivalent to the name of the pension.<sup>45</sup> We may argue that both half-brothers have been unconsciously driven by signifiers that have characterized their manner to find the loss-object.

There were no doubts for the narrator (and for the reader I may add) about Sebastian's rejection of his Russian origins until the St Damier episode.<sup>46</sup> However, doctor Starov's telegram had provided a clue:

'Sebastian's state hopeless come immediately Starov'. It was worded in French; the 'v' in Sebastian's name was a transcription of its Russian spelling; for some reason unknown, I went to the bathroom and stood there for a moment in front of the looking-glass. (160)

The final revelation that Sebastian had died as he was born throws light on the narrator's act; V understands he is a part (a synecdoche) of his half-brother, since they share

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<sup>44</sup> Is the resemblance between the episodes due to the narrator's artistic touch? One may even speculate that the misunderstanding at St Damier has been invented by V and he simply came too late.

<sup>45</sup> Priscilla Meyer observes that «For Sebastian violets are emblematic of his mother [...] Sebastian keeps the "small parcel of sugar-coated violets" from her visit when he is nine years old at least until he is sixteen when V. finds them in his locked drawer. [...] Sebastian in pursuit of his mother's shade is doubled by V. in pursuit of Sebastian's. The infinite regress of this pursuit is emblemized by the talcum powder tin "with violets figured between its shoulders, standing there alone, reflected in the mirror" that V. finds in Sebastian's London flat after his brother's death». The critic also mentions the «black and violet words» of Sebastian's manuscripts and «Mme Lecerf's "violet dark eyelids"» (41-42).

<sup>46</sup> This is also due to the novel's cunning plot: the first part narrates the shaping of Sebastian's English soul, whereas the second one shows his 'return to Russia'.

the Russian soul.<sup>47</sup> And paradoxically, Sebastian's Russian soul was inscribed in his mother's English name – V(irginia Knight).

The letter V, found in Sebastian's name, constitutes the narrator's identity – by synecdoche since he decides not to reveal his full name. Bearing in mind the latter's considerations on *The Doubtful Asphodel*, I would venture that, metaphorically speaking, V is the monogramme which discloses the inner meaning of *The Real Life*; nothing else than the initial of its narrator and fictional author. The biography of Sebastian Knight cannot be but the autobiography of its author's manner to find – its fictional author V, and its non-fictional one, Vladimir Nabokov. What we see here is the encounter with the truth inscribed in one's own name, «la singolarità della lettera innanzitutto come destino, ovvero come unione radicale di contingenza e necessità» (Recalcati, *Miracolo* 65).<sup>48</sup> Thanks to Sebastian the narrator has found himself,<sup>49</sup> in other words a possible destiny as a writer, finding out the asemantic Real of the letter: «Il significante, per come Lacan lo estrae dalla clinica psicoanalitica e nella sua radice ultima, non ha in realtà senso alcuno. La radice del significante, piuttosto, è asemantica» (*ibid.* 199).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Jane Zwart claims that «The effect of the b/v is much the same as the effect that Barthes describes with regard to Balzac's Sarrasine in S/Z. In much the same way, the V that Sebastian had expunged from his name registers his Russian origin. His origin is not a secret on the level of Sarrasine's, but Sebastian does try to "out-England England"» (222). When referring to his half-brother, V always uses his English literary pseudonym; applying Barthes' reading of *Sarrasine* to *The Real Life*, we may also add that V ignored Sebastian's Russian origins because what really mattered to him was his English ones – the signifier Sebastian Knight, the author of extraordinary novels. But behind the English writer there was the Russian man, as in Balzac's *Sarrasine* there was a *castrato* behind the woman.

<sup>48</sup> «The singularity of the letter first of all as a destiny, that is to say as radical union of contingency and necessity».

<sup>49</sup> One last remark on the main characters' identity: from a rhetorical perspective, we can affirm again that oxymoron is the key rhetorical device. Sebastian's surname constitutes a *coincidentia oppositorum*: metaphorically speaking, a knight is a person who fights against the 'dark side' of the world, a person who brings order to chaos. Furthermore, knight is a chessman whose move (L) resembles a V.

<sup>50</sup> «The signifier, as Lacan extrapolates it from psychoanalytic clinical practice and in its ultimate root, has in reality no sense at all. Rather, the root of the signifier is asemantic».

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