

OANA FOTACHE

**THE WRITER'S INVENTION.
FAKE BIOGRAPHIES AND REALISTIC EFFECTS
IN NABOKOV'S *SEBASTIAN KNIGHT***

"I am Sebastian Knight."

Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941)

At the time he was writing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* – a novel he would complete in 1938 in Paris and publish in 1941 in the United States – Vladimir Nabokov was no longer a Russian writer and not yet an American one. This first English work comes at the end of a series of nine novels written in Russian between 1926-1938, and opens his "second" career that would include novels, short stories, translations, poetry, and drama. An exile since 1919, living in Cambridge, Berlin and Paris until he embarked for the U.S.A. in 1940, Nabokov preserved his native tongue as a fiction writer for almost two decades. His switch to English looks easy and painless, and his trilingual upbringing must have played an important part in the process; anyway, much easier than Nabokov makes it for his character Sebastian Knight ("Poor Knight! he really had two periods, the first – a dull man writing broken English, the second – a broken man writing dull English"¹, caustically writes "a celebrated old critic" in the novel).

This novel had its enthusiastic fans and sceptic critics, much like the fictional Sebastian Knight's career. Edmund Wilson, close friend and admirer of Nabokov's work, wrote to him in a letter before the novel's publication: "it's absolutely enchanting [...] You and Conrad must be the only examples of foreigners succeeding in English in this field"². Wilson mostly insisted on its poetic quality. Later, the novel has been read in many ways: as a fictional autobiography, as a game of chess (keeping in mind the writer's almost professional interest in this field), a detective story, a puzzle, etc. In her groundbreaking *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), Julia Kristeva discusses it as an instance of the polymorphism of writing and a representation of the wandering hero³. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, New York, New Directions, 2008, p. 7.

² *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*. Correspondence between Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, 1940-1971, edited, annotated and with an introductory essay by Simon Karlinsky, New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London, Harper & Row, 1979, p. 49.

³ Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1991, pp. 33-38.

her book *A Glance beyond doubt: narration, representation, subjectivity* (1996)⁴, to which I will return, interprets *Sebastian Knight* as a novel concerning representation and its troubles, an uncanny forerunner of the postmodernist play with ontological barriers (remember Brian McHale's theory). Neil Cornwell traces the Nabokovian thematic inspiration for Pamuk in "Secrets, Memories and Lives: Nabokov and Pamuk" (in *Transitional Nabokov*, 2009, ed. by W. Norman & D. White⁵). And the examples are many. Critical interest seemed to increase over the years, since K.A. Bruffee's remark on its "never been a popular novel, perhaps of its formal complexity"⁶. Yet, despite the amount of critical attention it has rejoiced, still looms the opinion that *The Real Life...* is somehow "a perplexing failure"⁷.

I am not going to propose another close reading of the novel in this article, nor asking (again!) who is this novel really about and what is "the secret" of Sebastian Knight. What I am interested in is the function of this novel for Nabokov's construction of himself as an English prose writer. This process is obliquely represented through Sebastian Knight's similar endeavor as seen by his half-brother/ biographer V.

Nabokovian postures

Apparently the theme of this intricate novel is the reconstruction of a Russian/ English writer's life. Nabokov resorts here to a technique he used before and would use again: the invention of writers and book titles, together with a whole set of paraphernalia in support of their verisimilitude. This technique is similar to the one employed by Jorge Luis Borges in *Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote* (1939)⁸; the two works are contemporaneous, yet Nabokov got familiar with Borges's writing much later, in the 1960s. Besides their common postmodernist flair *avant-la-lettre*, the context and tone are quite different and allow for divergent interpretations of the two works. Borges's short story provides a sketch of the writer's figure and a list of his works in the good old historiographical fashion; the narrator's (and presumably the author's) interest lies with the significance of rewriting a canonical novel in exactly the same words but within a wholly different historical setting. In Nabokov's first English novel, Sebastian

⁴ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *A Glance beyond Doubt: Narration, Representation, Subjectivity*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 1996, pp. 55-74 (chapter 3).

⁵ Neil Cornwell, "Secrets, Memories and Lives: Nabokov and Pamuk", in Will Norman and Duncan White (eds.), *Transitional Nabokov*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2009, pp. 115-134.

⁶ K.A. Bruffee, "Form and Meaning in Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: An Example of Elegiac Romance", *Modern Language Quarterly* 34, 1973, pp. 180-190.

⁷ Lucy Maddox, *Nabokov's Novels in English*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2010, p. 47.

⁸ Jorge Luis Borges, "Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote", in *Ficciones*. Edited by Anthony Kerrigan, New York, Grove Press, 1962, pp. 45-56.

Knight's figure is constructed by means of many details, descriptions of his writings, encounters, love affairs, travels, etc. The critics have pointed out to the numerous similarities in biographical data between Nabokov and this fictional character (and also between the author and the novel's narrator, V., who "accidentally" bears the same first initial). For both, the university years spent in Cambridge were "the story of my trying to become a Russian writer"⁹. Later on, Sebastian's literary career – as well as Nabokov's – unfolds as an effort of translating his Russianness into English. Nina Rechnoy/ Madame Lecerf, a character in the novel, has been identified with Irina Guadanini, with whom Nabokov had been romantically involved in 1937. Besides these details that strengthen the link between the writer's life and his imaginative universe, the reader finds out how Sebastian used to write, in an experimental/ modernist manner that reminds one of Gertrude Stein or Samuel Beckett:

Between some legal documents I found a slip of paper on which he had begun to write a story – there was only one sentence, stopping short but it gave me the opportunity of observing the queer way Sebastian had – in the process of writing – of not striking out the words which he had replaced by others, so that, for instance, the phrase I encountered ran thus: 'As he a heavy A heavy sleeper, Roger Rogerson, old Rogerson bought old Rogers bought, so afraid Being a heavy sleeper, old Rogers was so afraid of missing tomorrows. He was a heavy sleeper. He was mortally afraid of missing tomorrow's event glory early train glory so what he did was to buy and bring home in a to buy that evening and bring home not one but eight alarm clocks of different sizes and vigour of ticking nine eight eleven alarm clocks of different sizes ticking which alarm clocks nine alarm clocks as a cat has nine which he placed which made his bedroom look rather like a'¹⁰

There are several modern writers that are acknowledged as references for Sebastian's art; among them, the afore-mentioned Joseph Conrad, who makes the pretext for a much quoted Nabokovian pun: "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"¹¹. Another is Gogol, author of *Dead Souls* (on whose work Nabokov would later write a critical study). But the most prominent figure is Marcel Proust, a writer who redefined the relationship between biography and work. At a general level, the theme of memory and the art of life writing provide a connection between the two major modernist writers¹². For Dabney Stuart¹³, the construction of the self

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited* (1967), Vintage International, 1989, p. 261.

¹⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life...*, p. 39.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 42.

¹² Cf. Bruffee, *Form*.

¹³ Dabney Stuart, "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Angles of Perception", *Modern Language Quarterly* 29 (3), 1968, pp. 312-328.

from scattered fragments and the vision of knowledge as partial and imperfect are reminiscent here of Proust. Apart from critical opinions, there are several references to Proust in the novel. For instance, the sense of a subtle corresponding link between a toponym, an event, and a character as epitomized in V.'s search for his brother's dying place, which he finally remembers: the hospital of St Damier. Another (this time explicit) reference is attributed to Sebastian himself:

“You seem to wonder”, – he wrote in one letter, “what on earth could make me, a budding author (as you say – but that is a misapplied term, for your authentic budding author remains budding all his life; others, like me, spring into blossom in one bound), you seem to wonder, let me repeat (which does not mean I am apologizing for that Proustian parenthesis)...”¹⁴

Here, by the same move, Sebastian Knight pays homage to and distances his prose from the already famous French writer.

And there is also the remark of Knight's official biographer, Mr. Goodman, whom V. regards as an unreliable source for his brother's life story: “I am told that the French author M. Proust, whom Knight consciously or subconsciously copied, also had a great inclination towards a certain listless ‘interesting’ pose...”¹⁵ The Proustian “pose” seems to confirm Gerard de Vries's hypothesis¹⁶ of Sebastian's unacknowledged homosexuality. De Vries reads the novel as a tribute to Nabokov's brother Sergey. Not only because Goodman is an unreliable narrator (isn't V., as well?), but also because the pose is qualified as “listless” and “interesting”, one can read here an indirect affirmation of Nabokov's difference and writerly status. At the time, Proust was widely recognized by modernist writers and critics alike: Virginia Woolf had enthusiastically welcomed the novel, Samuel Beckett had published his essay on *Proust* in 1930, Walter Benjamin had translated parts of *La Recherche...* into German. To place Sebastian Knight in Proust's literary descendance, to endow a fictional *alter ego* with a well-deserved success, despite his dazzling originality and lack of social skills, obliquely manifests Nabokov's trust in his own chances in the literary field. This illustrates the self-creation – at the rhetorical/ textual, not social level, in this case – that J. Meizoz theorizes in his book *Postures littéraires* (2007). Let's listen to Meizoz: “l'auteur livre dans l'œuvre une image de soi diffusée dans le public, qui constitue en retour sa *posture*”¹⁷ (45). The choice of a penname reflects the same marked concern for the construction of a literary identity – and the writer used to sign his Russian works with the name V. Sirin, and switched to Nabokov starting with

¹⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life...*, p. 54.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 116.

¹⁶ Gerard de Vries, “The True Life of Sebastian Knight”, *Zembla. The International Vladimir Nabokov Society*, 2010, accessed March 20, 2014, <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/forians.htm>

¹⁷ Jérôme Meizoz, *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l'auteur*, Genève, Slatkine Érudition, 2007, p. 45.

Sebastian Knight (much later, Vivian Darkbloom, an anagram of his name, would provide another mask). Yet as Meizoz cautions, “la posture n’est signifiante qu’en relation avec la position réellement occupée par un auteur dans l’espace des positions littéraires du moment”¹⁸. For Nabokov, a prominent status in the Russian émigré circles would no longer match his literary ambitions. In his 1967 autobiography, the writer would describe the atmosphere of the Russian exile intellectual circles in a sad tone:

[...] the main contingent of the intellectuals had escaped abroad or had been destroyed. The lucky group of expatriates could now follow their pursuits with such utter impunity that, in fact, they sometimes asked themselves if the sense of enjoying absolute mental freedom was not due to their working in an absolute void. True, there was among émigrés a sufficient number of good readers to warrant the publication, in Berlin, Paris, and other towns, of Russian books and periodicals on a comparatively large scale; but since none of these writings could circulate within the Soviet Union, the whole thing acquired a certain air of fragile unreality¹⁹.

For Timo Müller, a German critic of Modernism who adopts Meizoz’s theoretical apparatus, “the analytical value of the concept of posture [...] lies in its diachronic, serial perspective. It allows us to identify the trajectory of a writer’s (inter)action in the field, or in other words the strategies behind his different position-takings”²⁰. Essential in this process is the linguistic change undergone by Nabokov, a change largely commented upon in *Sebastian Knight*:

His struggle with words was unusually painful and this for two reasons. One was the common one with writers of his type: the bridging of the abyss lying between expression and thought; the maddening feeling that the right words, the only words are awaiting you on the opposite bank in the misty distance, and the shudderings of the still unclothed thought clamouring for them on this side of the abyss. 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 [...] Sebastian’s Russian was better and more natural to him than his English. I quite believe that by not speaking Russian for five years he may have forced himself into thinking he had forgotten it. But a language is a live physical thing which cannot be so easily dismissed²¹.

The obsession of ideally matching idea and form, thought and expression, pervades Nabokov’s searches in his autobiography as well; and has a lot to do with his passion for synesthetic captures of “the real”. Giving up one’s mother tongue is a decisive choice for a writer, and it calls for critical attention. “Peut-être parce

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

¹⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 280.

²⁰ Timo Müller, *The Self as Object in Modernist Fiction: James, Joyce, Hemingway*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2010, p. 53.

²¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life...*, pp. 83-85.

qu'il fut à plusieurs reprises confronté à la nécessité de reconquérir un public en fuite (appartenant à une autre sphère linguistique et/ou culturelle), Vladimir Nabokov a beaucoup joué avec la fiction de l'auteur", writes Isabelle Poulin²².

Nabokov emerged victorious out of this metamorphosis not least because of his self-confidence. At the beginning of the novel, when V. attempts to evoke Sebastian's years as a Cambridge student, he anticipates this trustfulness in the guise of his "object": "his mind was a turmoil of words and fancies, incomplete fancies and insufficient words, but already he knew that this and only this was the reality of his life, and that his destiny lay beyond that ghostly battlefield which he would cross in due time"²³. The military metaphor adequately pins down a Russian aristocratic imaginary forged during childhood and adolescence, which Nabokov would insist upon in *Speak, Memory*.

The novels authored by Sebastian are described and commented upon at length; several passages from *Lost Property*, *The Prismatic Bezel*, *The Doubtful Asphodel* serve to clarify aspects of Sebastian's life choices, in a reversal of Sainte-Beuve's method. By means of a baroque twist, Sebastian presents himself as an author of fictive biographies, a genre he would never exercise. (But Nabokov would write and rewrite his autobiography, and publish a final version in 1967.) Even the titles of Sebastian Knight's invented works somehow echo some of Nabokov's earlier or later novels (*Lost Property* vs *Transparent Things*, *Success* vs *Glory*, *The Back of the Moon* vs *Bend Sinister*, *Albinos in Black* vs *Pale Fire*). These symmetries could be interpreted through Nabokov's ironic use of symbolism. And they also express the opposite of V.'s "attempt to reconstruct the past and its inevitable discontents"²⁴, in Rimmon-Kenan's phrase – that is, a future construction, a projected biography. Indirectly represented through both the characters of Sebastian and V. (who becomes a writer himself²⁵), Nabokov's posture is that of an innovative though still misinterpreted exile writer, who further explored and extended the modernist aesthetic stakes. A novel centered on Sebastian's figure would have been another, "listless" *Recherche...* Nabokov needed to counterbalance a Quixotic hero (Sebastian Knight) with a more realistic and mundane character. Through Sebastian and V. as well, the writer performs a successful act of translating his Russian style into English, he imagines a different career, and makes it possible for himself.

²² Isabelle Poulin, "« La vraie vie » : du bon usage de l'auteur selon Vladimir Nabokov", in Brigitte Louichon, Jérôme Roger (eds.), *L'auteur entre biographie et mythographie*, Bordeaux, Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2002, p. 286.

²³ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life...*, p. 50.

²⁴ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *A Glimpse beyond Doubt*, p. 55.

²⁵ Cf. Bruffee, *Form*, p. 187.

Nabokov as theorist of biography

Reading Nabokov's previous Russian novel *The Gift* in the light of his autobiographies (*Conclusive Evidence*, 1951, and the revised version, *Speak, Memory*), Galya Diment opposes the understanding of life story as a mimetic process, reflecting with strenuous accuracy what "really happened", to its Nabokovian reworking by means of "distortion" and "refraction"²⁶. The writer holds to the idea that "a deliberate 'distortion of a remembered image may not only enhance its beauty with an added refraction, but provide informative links with earlier or later patches of the past'"²⁷. This is precisely what takes place in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as well. Since V. strongly despises the genre of *biographie romancée*, he refuses to lend coherence and linearity to the depiction of a real life story: "For reasons already mentioned I shall not attempt to describe Sebastian's boyhood with anything like the methodical continuity which I would have normally achieved had Sebastian been a character of fiction"²⁸. If a character does possess the marks of a literary type, then she should be avoided, as is the case of Nina, the *femme fatale*; "you may find her in any cheap novel, she's a type, a type"²⁹, warns her ex-husband. Nabokov's narrator V. keenly distinguishes between the artificiality of a literary plot, with all its rhetorical qualities, and the accidental, chaotic course of events in real life: "not that I might have expected from the flame of chance the slick intent of a novelist's plot"³⁰, he confesses. On the other hand, and on a more profound level of experience, one could notice the presence of invisible but effective "methods of human fate", as Sebastian strives to represent them in his book *Success*.

V. contests Mr. Goodman's biographical method because of its traditional schematism, that is, the highly simplistic views on time, generation, cause and effect, etc. that it shares with positivist literary historiography. V.'s ideal biography attempts to give the reader a sense of the sensitive complexity that was so characteristic of Sebastian:

Time for Sebastian was never 1914 or 1920 or 1936 – it was always year 1. Newspaper headlines, political theories, fashionable ideas meant to him no more than the loquacious printed notice (in three languages, with mistakes in at least two) on the wrapper of some soap or toothpaste³¹.

²⁶ Galya Diment, "Nabokov's Biographical Impulse: Art of Writing Lives", in Julian W. Connolly (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 170-184.

²⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, quoted by Diment, p. 175.

²⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life...*, p. 20.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 146.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 38.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

The clash of the everyday with the abstract categories that are supposed to facilitate understanding takes place at the core of Sebastian's perceptions and experiences. The same hypersensitive reaction to facts is to be found in passages from *Speak, Memory*. Vladimir recalls how his mother went to buy him the customary daily present while he was lying in bed, recovering from an illness. (This particular memory had also been used in the novel *Gift*.) In a half-delirious, half-lucid state of mind, the child follows his mother on her way:

I vividly visualized her driving away down Morskaya Street toward Nevski Avenue. I distinguished the light sleigh drawn by a chestnut courser. [...] Still watching the sleigh, I saw it stop at Treumann's (writing implements, bronze baubles, playing cards). Presently, my mother came out of this shop followed by the footman. He carried her purchase, which looked to me like a pencil. I was astonished that she did not carry so small an object herself, and this disagreeable question of dimensions caused a faint renewal, fortunately very brief, of the "mind dilation effect" which I hoped had gone with the fever. As she was being tucked up again in the sleigh, I watched the vapour exhaled by all, horse included. [...] A few minutes later, she entered my room. In her arms she held a big parcel. It had been, in my vision, greatly reduced in size – perhaps, because I subliminally corrected what logic warned me might still be the dreaded remnants of delirium's dilating world. Now the object proved to be a giant polygonal Faber pencil, four feet long and correspondingly thick³².

Thus, for Nabokov fictionality occurs not only in writing – be it in the framework of the novel or the autobiography – but in "real" life as well, as a device meant to give consistency and significance to facts. Nabokov's writing displays a certain sensory realism that is characterized by a reinterpretation of the relationship between verisimilitude and truth. To represent a complex of sensations, however diffuse and ambiguous (as in the quotation above) might result in a more convincing, truthful picture than when describing the typical, the "too plausible trail"³³, with its conventional appearance. The realistic effect is to a large extent a matter of perception and not a formal issue. For instance, V.'s quest for Sebastian's last love is described as having a "Knightian twist" about it that conveys more authenticity to the bare facts³⁴.

Ultimately, V.'s biography has to answer a sole, unusual criterion (actually in agreement with recent developments in the theory of "la fiction biographique"): to resemble the structure, the style, the overall ethos as discernable in Sebastian Knight's work. The troubled relationship between a writer's life and his work is indirectly exposed by the biographer V. in these terms:

³² Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, pp. 37-38.

³³ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life...*, p. 149.

³⁴ For a lengthy discussion on the Nabokovian concept of "the imagined facts" see Galya Diment, *Nabokov's*.

it must be admitted that in a certain sense, Sebastian's life, though far from being dull, lacked the terrific vigour of his literary style. 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 paragraph³⁵.

So it seems that a biographer's mission is to provide the reader with an understanding of the circuit that goes from the real to its literary representation and back to the real again, and Nabokov himself expressed it several times in his autobiography (see, for instance, the episode of his father's missed duel as an anticipation – and postponement – of his tragic death).

The first English novel written by Nabokov not only invents a writer – Sebastian Knight – in a verisimilar yet somehow oneiric fashion; it also invents his writer, Vladimir Nabokov, and anticipates his later work. This is perhaps its most outstanding realistic effect.

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³⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life...*, p. 7.

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THE WRITER'S INVENTION.
FAKE BIOGRAPHIES AND REALISTIC EFFECTS
(Abstract)

The paper analyzes Vladimir Nabokov's self-construction as an English prose writer in his novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941). Borrowing formal structures from other epic genres, Nabokov reflects upon the relationship between 'the real' and its fictional representation. The description of Sebastian Knight's novels plays an important part in this complex literary game, especially when read against Nabokov's autobiography and his later career. The main analytical concept is that of writerly posture, as theorized by J. Meizoz (2007). Indirectly represented through both the characters of Sebastian and V., his biographer (who becomes a writer himself), Nabokov's posture as displayed in the novel is that of an innovative though still misinterpreted exile writer, who further explores and extends the aesthetic stakes of modernism.

Keywords: Vladimir Nabokov, posture, biography, fictionality, realism.

INVENȚIA SCRITORULUI.
BIOGRAFII FICTIVE ȘI EFECTE REALISTE ÎN ADEVĂRATA VIAȚĂ A LUI
SEBASTIAN KNIGHT DE NABOKOV
(Rezumat)

Articolul analizează modul în care Vladimir Nabokov se construiește pe sine ca scriitor de limbă engleză în romanul său, *Adevărata viață a lui Sebastian Knight* (1941). Prin intermediul structurilor formale ale biografiei și povestirii polițiste, Nabokov reflectează asupra relației dintre „realitate” și reprezentarea ficțională a acesteia. Descrierea romanelor lui Sebastian Knight are, de asemenea, un rol important în acest joc literar complex, mai ales atunci când acestea sunt citite în legătură cu autobiografia lui Nabokov și cu parcursul viitor al scriitorului. Principalul concept analitic este cel de *postură literară*, preluat din teoria lui J. Meizoz (2007). Reprezentată indirect prin personajele lui Sebastian și ale lui V., biograficul acestuia (care devine el însuși scriitor), postura nabokoviană din roman este cea a scriitorului de avangardă exilat, încă neînțeles, care explorează și extinde mizele estetice ale modernismului.

Cuvinte-cheie: Vladimir Nabokov, postură, biografie, ficționalitate, realism.