



# The Challenge of Interpreting and Decoding Nabokov: Strategies and Suggestions

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# EPI-REVEL

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## The Challenge of Interpreting and Decoding Nabokov: Strategies and Suggestions

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Every writer's work poses certain challenges to the reader. When the writer speaks three languages fluently, has a vast knowledge of European literature, is an accomplished lepidopterist, and compares the relationship between the author and the reader to that between the composer of chess problems and the solver of those problems, this challenge takes on unusual dimensions. This paper will examine the kinds of challenges presented by Nabokov's work, and it will offer strategies and suggestions for surmounting them. While general observations on how to read Nabokov are well-known (beginning with Nabokov's own "one cannot read a book, one can only reread it"), specific guidelines are still lacking. To map out a workable blueprint for the interpretation for Nabokov's art, this paper will look at several individual components of his art, from the smallest building blocks to the largest questions of interpretation. In discussing these elements, we shall analyze ways to increase the likelihood of arriving at plausible interpretations and to minimize the chances of erroneous or overreaching speculation. Among the elements to be considered are Nabokov's use of anagrams and coded messages; the multiple roles played by literary allusion; the presence of traps set by the author for the unwary reader; the thorny issue of intentionality and authorial control; and finally, the issue of ultimate interpretation: are certain of Nabokov's texts genuinely open-ended, or do all the puzzles he sets have one, and only one, "correct" interpretation. If time permits, we will discuss how one might approach *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* using the principles outlined in this paper.

Every writer's work poses certain challenges to the reader. When the writer speaks three languages fluently, has a vast knowledge of European literature, is an accomplished lepidopterist, and compares the relationship between the author and the reader to that between the composer of chess problems and the solver of those problems, this challenge takes on special parameters. This paper will address the problems that arise when reading and interpreting Vladimir Nabokov's fiction, and then focus on the challenges posed by one particular novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

The problem of reading, decoding, and interpreting Nabokov's work becomes readily apparent when one peruses the postings in the online discussion group that is devoted to Nabokov–Nabokv-L: there are daily debates on matters ranging from the meaning of the verb “google” to describe a wobbly bicycle movement to the multiple sources for the name of the “Three Swans” [Trois Cygnes] hotel in *Ada*. If we begin with the smallest details in Nabokov—items such as character or place names—we must deal with the knowledge that the writer could draw upon several distinct lexicons when selecting words or creating names within his texts. In some cases the codes are relatively transparent: when Nabokov mentions characters such as “Blanche Schwarzmänn” and “Melanie Weiss” in *Lolita*, he is taking aim at what he perceived as simplistic “black-and-white” reductionism in the practice of psychoanalysis.<sup>1</sup> In other cases, the meaning of a name such as “Sig Leymanski” may remain a mystery until someone (in this case Nabokov) comes along and tells us that it is an anagram of “Kingsley Amis.” Of course, some words or names may carry multiple referents. For example, the name *Ada* points to the world of Byron and the aura of incest surrounding that writer, but it also carries within itself a reference to “hell” (*ad* in Russian), and we are reminded that Van Veen's pursuit of bliss with his sister Ada leads him into that peculiar kind of paradise defined neatly by Humbert Humbert in *Lolita* as “a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames” (*Lo* 166).

A similar problem arises when we encounter literary allusions. Sometimes the allusion appears to be relatively straightforward, but in other cases, Nabokov intends us to go beyond the apparent target text

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1 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 5, 32. All further quotations from this edition will be marked by a parenthetical reference with the abbreviation *Lo* and the page number.

to reach a second (or even a third) text lying behind it. In the early story “A Letter that Never Reached Russia” (“*Pis'mo v Rossiю*”), for example, Nabokov’s narrator describes a dance hall in Berlin, and he quotes a phrase from Pushkin: “pair after pair flick by” (“*cheta mel'kaet za chetoi*”).<sup>2</sup> This phrase is drawn from *Evgenii Onegin* (5:xli), and it is taken from the passage describing the dance at the Larin household during which Onegin decides to take vengeance on Lensky by dancing with Lensky’s beloved Olga. But as Nabokov himself points out in his commentary to *Onegin*, this stanza recalls another text, a poem by Evgeny Baratynsky (“*Opravdanie*”), which deals with infidelity and betrayal on the dance floor. It is *this* text, I think, that is perhaps most relevant in considering the meaning of the passage in the Nabokov story, which concerns a lonely émigré’s reflections on how he deals with his separation from his beloved who still lives in Russia.<sup>3</sup> Here is a clear case where an accurate *annotation* may help one arrive at a more accurate *interpretation*.

One can observe this process operating on a broader level in Nabokov’s work as well. As Alexander Dolinin has pointed out, the ultimate target of Nabokov’s literary satire in the novel *Despair* (*Otchaianie*), particularly in the Russian, version, is not so much the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky as the phenomenon of “Dostoevskyism” (*dostoevshchina*) that was flourishing in Russian literature in the first part of the twentieth century, as for example, in Leonid Andreev’s novel *Thought* or Ilya Ehrenburg’s *Summer of 1925*.<sup>4</sup> But here we come up against a significant problem. In attempting to decode these

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2 The English text is from Vladimir Nabokov, *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Vintage, 1987), 139. All further quotations from this edition will be marked by a parenthetical reference with the abbreviation *Stories* and the page number. The Russian text is from Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v piati tomakh*, 5 vols. (St. Petersburg: Symposium, 1999–2000), 1: 160. All further quotations from this edition will be marked by a parenthetical reference with the abbreviation *Ssoch* and the volume and page numbers.

3 For a more detailed discussion of this set of allusions, see my article, “Nabokov and Narrative Point of View: The Case of ‘A Letter that Never Reached Russia,’” *Nabokov Studies* 1 (1994): 14–15. The best analysis of this type of multiple allusiveness in Nabokov’s work is Pekka Tammi’s essay, “Reading in Three Dimensions. Remarks on *Poligenetichnost*’ in Nabokov’s Prose,” in his *Russian Subtexts in Nabokov’s Fiction: Four Essays* (Tampere: Tampere University Press, 1999).

4 See Dolinin, “Caning of Modernist Profaners: Parody in *Despair*,” *Cycnos* 12.2 (1995): 43-54.

multi-leveled allusions, how do we know when we've gone far enough? Or, how do we know that we haven't gone too far?<sup>5</sup>

This general problem becomes acute when we turn our attention to the interpretation of a work as a whole. A good example of this is the meaning of the third phone call in the short story "Signs and Symbols". Some readers point to the many suggestive clues planted in the text and conclude that the call must be a notification from the hospital that the young man finally succeeded in killing himself. Others argue that the fact that Nabokov leaves the phone call *unanswered* should be read as an indication that Nabokov wishes to spare the child (and the parents, and the reader) such an unequivocal and potentially disturbing "solution." These readers point to the mental affliction that torments the institutionalized child—"referential mania"—and conclude that Nabokov wants to warn us against over-interpretation, or strict, deterministic conclusions. By assuming that the third phone call carries dire news from the hospital, this interpretation goes, the reader would in essence serve as the boy's executioner. On the other hand, Brian Boyd has written that Nabokov did indeed intend the reader to complete the pattern and interpret the phone call as coming from the hospital, but he argues that to do so brings not only anguish, but "all-suffusing compassion" as well as "tenderness and love."<sup>6</sup> Going even farther in this direction, Alexander Dolinin re-investigated the entire concept of "signs" and "symbols" and applied it to the numbers and letters on the telephone dial, thereby arriving at the conclusion that the unanswered phone call is from the son himself, signaling to his parents that he has succeeded

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5 An analogous problem arises when one looks at word and phrases for possible anagrams. Gene Barabtarlo ingeniously decoded the the spurious operatic phrase from *Invitation to a Beheading*—"Mali è trano t'amesti"—to reveal the following saying in Russian: "death is sweet, [but] it's a secret"; see his *Aerial View: Essays on Nabokov's Art and Metaphysics* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 193-97. Once one begins looking for anagrams, however, the search can be endless. Barabtarlo himself who cautions us that "Virtually *any* reasonably long stretch of letters yields any number of meaningful and more or less compatible lexical units" (*Aerial View* 239). Nabokov also uttered a relevant warning: "Ask yourself if the symbol you have detected is not your own footprint"; see *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 66.

6 Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 85.

in his suicide attempt and passed over to a more beneficent realm beyond the confines of our world.<sup>7</sup>

Discussion of this story leads me to what I see as the fundamental question in the project of interpreting Nabokov's fiction. Are his works "closed" systems, with the puzzles posed in them leading inevitably to one and only one "correct" solution, or are they open-ended, encouraging the reader to arrive at more than one plausible resolution? I am thinking now primarily of the *author's design*, rather than the *reader's creativity*. It is of course possible, and highly likely, that new readers with new expectations will arrive at interpretations of a work that the writer never considered. But the fact that Nabokov was so careful in planting clues as well as false leads indicates that he might have wished his readers to arrive at what he would regard as a "correct" interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

In considering this question, we may perhaps gain some insight by weighing his comments about the composition of chess problems. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov declared that "competition in chess problems is not really between Black and White but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction, the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world), so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of 'tries'—delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray" (290). When we apply this to Nabokov's writing, we can see how cunningly he provides misleading clues to his readers, leading them down a number of false paths, but hoping that they will eventually reject the erroneous solutions and arrive at the most satisfying and elegant one. Indeed, Nabokov wrote in the same passage how often he struggled to bind White's queen "so as to avoid a dual solution!"

This might seem to answer the question. Since Nabokov disliked dual solutions, then each Nabokov work should carry one and only one

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7 See Dolinin, "The Signs and Symbols in Nabokov's 'Signs and Symbols,'" <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/dolinin.htm> (28 September 2006).

8 Ellen Pifer has commented on Nabokov's attitude toward the creation of a novel: "Nabokov approached the writing of novels as an act of continual discovery, *as a problem to which there is no fixed solution*"; see *Nabokov and the Novel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 130 (emphasis added). However, this comment, which applies to Nabokov's approach to *writing* a novel may not be true of how he wanted his readers to *interpret* his novels.

correct solution. However, I am not sure that we can take a comment about the composition of *chess* problems and apply it rigorously to all of Nabokov's *fiction*. What if the correct solution to a work is the lack of a single solution? For example, in the concluding scene of *Invitation to a Beheading*, the protagonist Cincinnatus is led to the chopping block, and at the moment when the ax is brought down upon his neck, it appears both that he is beheaded, and that he arises from the chopping block, whole and unharmed. As he strides away from the scene of his execution, the tawdry world in which he has been imprisoned collapses around him. The "solution" here seems to be that one part of Cincinnatus, timid and credulous, has died, while another other, more significant part emerges intact to join the ranks of beings with imagination and creativity.<sup>9</sup>The ending of *Invitation to a Beheading* is just one reminder of how generous Nabokov could be with his open-ended conclusions. Another such example is the final line of "Details of a Sunset" ("*Katastrofa*"). A young man has been run over by a streetcar, but his sensation of pain is countered by visions of union with his girlfriend. The work concludes: "Mark no longer breathed, Mark had departed—whither, into what other dreams, none can tell" (*Stories* 85). There are many other examples of this in Nabokov's fiction.

So now we return to our original question: how can we tell if a given interpretation has a reasonable chance of being correct? What guidelines or measures can we use? In my opinion, there are two specific points of reference that we should keep in mind. First is the context or contexts in which the work was written. I am primarily thinking here of the chronological context. What else was Nabokov writing at the time when he composed the text under investigation? In this regard, it is crucial to acknowledge that Nabokov's work underwent a significant *evolution* over the course of his career. His fiction became increasingly complicated in metaliterary and metalinguistic terms, culminating with the work he wrote in Switzerland, when his prose fiction reveals something akin to a unique, transnational lexicon and an idiosyncratic narrative syntax in which time planes are entirely liberated from conventional tendencies toward linearity or unidirectionality. When interpreting works from

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9 For a discussion of the open ending in Nabokov's short fiction, see Maxim Shrayer's monograph *The World of Nabokov's Stories* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

each stage of Nabokov's career, one might want to look for principles or techniques that are operative at that particular stage, and not to mix and match them indiscriminately.

The second point of reference is the text under investigation itself. It is quite possible that each of Nabokov's texts may offer its own internal guide as to how we should interpret what we are reading. In other words, one should look first and foremost *at the text itself* to provide clues about which interpretive strategies are most likely to yield productive results for a given item. Perhaps the best example of this is found in *The Vane Sisters* (1951). As you all know, the first letter in each word in the story's final paragraph forms a message from the dead Vane sisters, Cynthia and Sybil ("Icicles by Cynthia, meter from me Sybil"). But not every reader might notice this on her own, and Nabokov himself had to point it out to Katherine White, the editor at the *New Yorker* magazine who rejected the story. Anticipating Ms. White's reaction, Nabokov continued: "You may argue that reading downwards, or upwards, or diagonally is not what an editor can be expected to do; but by means of various allusions to trick-reading I have arranged matters so that the reader almost automatically slips into this discovery, especially because of the abrupt change in style."<sup>10</sup> As this declaration indicates, not only does Nabokov's "abrupt change in style" spur the reader to begin the necessary decoding process, but he has planted certain clues in the text to encourage this kind of interpretive process. His narrator writes about an "eccentric librarian" who pores through old books for "miraculous misprints" (*Stories* 627), and on the night he learns of Cynthia's death, the narrator himself begins "idiotically checking the first letters of the lines to see what sacramental words they might form" (*Stories* 629). Most telling, however, is the narrator's frustrated admission that he could not recall "that novel or short story (by some contemporary writer, I believe), in which, unknown to its author, the first letters of the words in its last paragraph formed, as deciphered by Cynthia, a message from his dead mother" (*Stories* 626). Here Nabokov sends a direct, if somewhat camouflaged, signal to the reader about the reading strategy to be employed in the last paragraph of this specific text.

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10 Vladimir Nabokov, *Selected Letters 1940–1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich / Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1989), 116-17.



Now, keeping all this in mind, let us turn to a discussion of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and the interpretive challenges it presents to the reader. Although it will not be possible to do a comprehensive analysis in the space of this essay, I would like to offer some suggestions for possible approaches to the novel.

Nabokov's distinctive treatment of the narrator V's quest to find out and record the details of his half-brother Sebastian Knight's life has led readers to arrive at a variety of interpretations. Some argue that it is Sebastian Knight who is the author of the text we read. He has not died, as V proclaims, but rather has invented V and the entire tale of his quest. According to this reading, the text we read is just the latest in a series of cunning narratives written by Sebastian.<sup>11</sup> A second group of readers take a different point of view. They accept the claim that Sebastian has died, but they believe that Sebastian is somehow aiding or influencing V's quest from beyond the grave.<sup>12</sup> A third group downplays the role of Sebastian, and promotes V as the unitary author, viewing him as the creator not only of his narrative about his quest for information on Sebastian, but perhaps even of the passages he cites as models of Sebastian's writing.<sup>13</sup> A final alternative takes up

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11 Andrew Field asks: "Is it possible that *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is not a biography at all, but a fictional autobiography, another of Knight's own novels? It is more than possible"; see *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967), 27. Dabney Stuart states: "the narrator... is Sebastian himself"; see *Nabokov: The Dimensions of Parody* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1978), 37.

12 See Susan Fromberg, "The Unwritten Chapters in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 13 (1967): 426-42, where she writes: "Sebastian has taken V's web of reality and used it to finish weaving his own final and profound vision" (438), and "Sebastian has chosen to live in V's soul" (441). Vladimir Alexandrov writes: "This remark...points to the possibility that V's writing, and by extension his entire biographical enterprise, was begun patterned or directed by his dead brother"; see *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 146.

13 K. A. Brufee reports: "Field is correct in saying that the novel is a fictional autobiography. Its subject is V, the narrator. And Stuart is correct in saying that Sebastian has no life apart from the person who composes him; the narrator V. Whether Sebastian 'really existed' or not has little importance" see "Form and Meaning in Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: An Example of Elegiac Romance," *Modern Language Quarterly* 34 (1973): 181. In one variant of this reading, Sebastian may be a figure distinct from V, but V's supposed biography of Sebastian becomes instead an autobiography, as V himself either takes center stage or actually becomes Sebastian. See, for example, Charles Nicol: "through his attention to Knight's novels... V becomes Sebastian Knight" ("The Mirrors of

V's own suggestion in the last lines of the novel: "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows,"<sup>14</sup> with the presumptive third entity being Nabokov himself.<sup>15</sup> Gene Barabtarlo has recently argued that these disparate interpretations may be compatible if one views them as different levels of a multi-storied edifice.<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that such an approach appears to be endorsed in the text of the novel in a reference to a "mental jerk" that enhances understanding: "One had not made by chance that simple mental jerk, which would have set free imprisoned thought and granted it great understanding. Now the puzzle is solved" (SK 179).

Yet how does the novel itself guide us to such an interpretation? Does it provide clear clues as to how it should be read and decoded? I think the novel *does* provide such clues, but the problem is, there are *too many* clues. The novel is "overdetermined," and the evidence Nabokov supplies leads to contradictory explanations. Let us briefly review some of the more significant clues.

First, as evidence that Sebastian might be the author of the text we read, we can cite V's references to a "fictitious biography" that Sebastian "never wrote," but was possibly contemplating during the last year of his life (SK 40). Is this that biography? And we might consider the clever plot twist in Sebastian's first novel, *The Prismatic Bezel*, in which "G. Abeson," a dealer of art, who is believed to have been murdered, turns out *not* to be dead, but rather disguised as another character, anagrammatically named "Nosebag" (SK 94–95).

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Sebastian Knight," in *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*, ed. L. S. Dembo [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967], 93); and H. Grabes: "the biographer... acts quite consistently when he attempts to enhance his resemblance to Sebastian to the point of complete identity, thus turning his biography into an *autobiography*" (*Fictitious Biographies: Vladimir Nabokov's English Novels* [The Hague: Mouton, 1977], 16).

14 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 205. All further quotations from this edition will be marked by a parenthetical reference with the abbreviation SK and the page number.

15 Shlomith Rimmon writes: "'V' is both the beginning and the end of 'Vladimir Nabokov,' and 'S' is the beginning of 'Sirin'; thus both of them are indeed 'someone whom neither of them knows,' the real author of this novel"; see "Problems of Voice in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*," *PTL: A Journal for Descriptive Poetics and the Theory of Literature* 1 (1976): 511.

16 Paper presented at the Third International Conference on Nabokov in Nice, June 22, 2006.

On the other hand, the idea that Sebastian is exercising a covert influence on V from beyond the grave is indicated several times in V's narrative, when V makes such remarks as: "Sebastian's spirit seemed to hover about us" (*SK* 45–46), or "I am sustained by the secret knowledge that in some unobtrusive way Sebastian's shade is trying to be helpful" (*SK* 101; see also pages 35, 52, 168). The notion that V is the primary author of the text (both his own and Sebastian's) may be supported by the fact that he encounters several people who seem to be characters in Sebastian's fiction. Is he so immersed in the world of Sebastian's fiction that he projects those identities onto people he meets, or, on the contrary, is he imposing his own experiences onto "Sebastian's" fiction, inventing fiction by Sebastian that he populates with people he himself has met?

Even the final paragraph of the novel provides contradictory indications. V tells us that while he was listening to the breathing of a man he thought was his brother he learned a secret: "that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations" (*SK* 204). This might seem to lend support to the notion that V is the dominant force in the creation of the Sebastian we see in the novel. V has in effect taken possession of Sebastian's soul: he has become Sebastian, or, as he puts it: "I am Sebastian." On the other hand, the very next sentence begins: "The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul" (*SK* 204). This would support the reading that Sebastian's ghost has not only guided V's quest, but has taken up residence in V's soul. Seen in this light, Sebastian has become V! Or, as he puts it: "Sebastian is I." The dual way in which this information can be read can also be applied to other utterances in the novel. When V remarks upon a "fictitious biography," one can rightly ask whether this fictitious biography is meant to apply to V (a fictitious biography written by Sebastian), or to Sebastian (a fictitious biography written by V). Or is it simply a remark about a work that was never written? Similarly, when V writes confidently about his "secret knowledge" that Sebastian's shade is helping him in his quest, one might wonder whether this is a true indication of supernatural aid, or rather a sign of braggadocio indicating V's unreliability as an observer and narrator (as was the case in *Despair*, when Hermann Karlovich kept insisting on a resemblance between himself and his victim Felix).<sup>17</sup>

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17 For a detailed discussion of the relationship between *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Despair*, see Priscilla Meyer's essay "Black and Violet Worlds: *Despair*

From my perspective, the most striking phenomenon we have to deal with in the novel is the appearance of Mr. Silbermann in chapter 13. As nearly every commentator on the novel has pointed out, Mr. Silbermann has an unmistakable resemblance to a character named Mr. Siller in one of Sebastian Knight's short stories. What are we to make of this similarity? These are some of the options we might consider:

- 1. The similarity is sheer coincidence. There is no relationship between the two characters at all. (That seems rather unlikely.)
- 2. Sebastian and V. have both met the same man, and Sebastian used him as the model for Mr. Siller in his short story. This would be another coincidence, perhaps even more fantastic than the first.<sup>18</sup>
- 3. Sebastian is dead, but his spirit is trying to aid V in his quest. This spirit somehow provides Siller/Silbermann to facilitate V's progress.<sup>19</sup> If this is the case, then Nabokov seems to be endowing Sebastian's ghost with powers not given to spirits in his other works.<sup>20</sup>
- 4. V is a devoted reader of Sebastian's work. Having run into a dead end in his attempt to learn the names of the women staying at the Blauberg resort with Sebastian, he either projects elements from the description of Mr. Siller onto a person he met on a train, or he has

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and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight as Doubles*," *Nabokov Studies* 4 (1997): 37-60.

<sup>18</sup> In considering this option we might wish to take into account an observation made (presumably by P. G. Sheldon) of a "meek little man" waiting for Sebastian in one scene in the novel (*SK* 103).

<sup>19</sup> Alexandrov, for one, sees Silbermann as Sebastian's "emissary" (*Nabokov's Otherworld*, 157).

<sup>20</sup> Sebastian's shade is not merely sending V inspiring or consoling visions as might be found in *Pale Fire* or *Ada* (as Brian Boyd as argued in his work on those two novels). Rather, his spirit would have far greater abilities, including the power to create a character who can operate freely and skillfully in the so-called "real" world of the novel. We can contrast this apparent power with the remarks made by the ghostly narrator of *Transparent Things*: "The most we can do when steering a favorite in the best direction, in circumstances not involving injury to others, is to act as a breath of wind and to apply the lightest, the most indirect pressure such as *trying* to induce a dream that we *hope* our favorite will regard as prophetic"; Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 92.

somehow created the figure entirely in his imagination in his desperate attempt to solve the mystery of Sebastian's last love.<sup>21</sup> Earlier in the novel V had warned the reader about giving too much credence to a "voice in the mist" (SK 52). Just before Silbermann appears, V writes in forlorn tones about the fact that the "stream" of his biography was "enshrouded in pale mist." Does Silbermann represent just such a "voice in the mist"?<sup>22</sup>

There are other possibilities as well, but we may leave them aside for the moment.<sup>23</sup>

What is problematic for most of these explanations is the fact that V himself does not seem to recognize Silbermann as Siller, or at least he does not comment on the similarity, even though he gave quite an extended description of the character when he was discussing Sebastian's work earlier, and had called him the "most alive of Sebastian's creatures" (SK 104). Indeed, V began his description of Sebastian's Siller by stating: "You remember that delightful character..." (SK 103). This may be the only time in his narrative that V addresses the reader in quite this way.<sup>24</sup> We may assume that V is

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21 Discussing V's creation of Silbermann, Michael Begnal writes: "To keep the plot, and his biography, going, V begins to plunder his characters out of Sebastian's fiction"; see "The Fledgling Fictionalist," <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/begnal.htm>, 1 (28 September 2006).

22 When one considers the name of V's friendly agent Silbermann, one can decode the meaning of the German words which make up the name to arrive at a "silver man" or "silver retainer." Has V appropriated Sebastian's character Siller from "The Other Side of the Moon" and transformed him into his own "silver retainer"? All of V's subsequent encounters with figures like those described in *Lost Property* emerge from the names this mysterious agent Silbermann provides for him. Is it possible that V's quest to locate the woman who drew Sebastian away from Clare Bishop may be a fantastic invention, much like Charles Kinbote's account of Zemblan intrigue? Could V have woven the events of this episode out of the fabric of Sebastian's novels, drawing the characters from *Lost Property* and the settings from works such as *The Prismatic Bezel*?

23 Another possibility, for example, is that Sebastian has created both V and Siller/Silbermann as part of his fictitious biography. Here, then, we are dealing with two fictional characters meeting with each other.

24 And, we wonder, who actually is the intended addressee? We are surely meant to assume that V is addressing readers who are familiar with Sebastian's work, but one wonders whether he might not have a different addressee in mind, and that therefore we should consider this address in the same way as we do Fyodor's address to a

addressing a reader who is supposedly familiar with Sebastian's work, but it is also possible to think of the utterance as a form of imperative: "You, reader, should remember this character...."

In any case, V's lack of commentary on the Siller/Silbermann resemblance is noteworthy. *Something* is going on here, but what? What is the best way for us to understand it?<sup>25</sup> Returning to the notion that Nabokov's novels may provide clues to their own decoding, I have already indicated that *this* novel provides too many clues. To which set of clues should we give priority? One place that we might logically look is at passages that make reference to *strategies of reading and interpretation*. In this novel, such passages are primarily found in reference to Sebastian Knight's fiction. Many commentators have discussed the way that statements and themes in Sebastian's fiction are echoed in V's description of his quest,<sup>26</sup> but those very statements and themes can profitably be applied to Nabokov's novel itself.<sup>27</sup> We could easily go through each of Sebastian's novels and

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"you" in *The Gift* or Nabokov's use of the pronoun in *Speak, Memory*. If Sebastian's ghost is writing this text, perhaps he is addressing his remarks to the ghost of Clare!

25 Anthony Olcott points out (112) that it is "strange" that V would not recognize Silbermann or Lydia Bohemsky as avatars of Sebastian's characters, since he supposedly knows his works so well. Indeed, V makes a remark about "all these books that I know as well as if I had written them myself" (*SK* 203). V's silence on this point is itself suggestive. Or is it possible that his claim of knowing Sebastian's work well is false, a case of bravado somewhat like Hermann Karlovich's assertion: "speaking of literature, there is not a thing about it that I do not know" (*Despair* 45). One critic who theorizes about V's lack of commentary on the Siller/Silbermann resemblance is J. B. Sisson. Discussing the idea that Sebastian's spirit may be trying to help V in his quest, Sisson states that it "seems implausible that V. should fail to recognize this evidence of Sebastian's rather heavy immaterial hand, and the reader may deduce that V. has slyly inserted Sebastian's characters into his narrative, perhaps to suggest greater credence for his claims of ghostly guidance"; see Sisson, "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight," in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 636.

26 See, for example, Katherine O'Connor, "Nabokov's *Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: In Pursuit of a Biography," in *Mnemozina: Studia Litteraria Russica in Honorem Vsevolod Setchkarev* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1974), 289–91; and Rimmon, who writes "the quest is actually made to duplicate Sebastian's novel" ("Problems of Voice," 496).

27 Grabes comments: "There can be no doubt that Nabokov uses the discussion of fictitious works written by a fictitious author to comment upon his own literary technique" (*Fictitious Biographies*, 14). I would go even further and point out that Sebastian Knight's fictions individually combine to form *Nabokov's* fiction, thereby

draw out parallels between V's observations on those novels and the way Nabokov's novel itself works. Here are just a few examples:

- 1. "*The Prismatic Bezel* can be thoroughly enjoyed once it is understood that the heroes of the book are what can loosely be called 'methods of composition'" (SK 95).
- 2. On Sebastian's novel *Success*: "if his first novel is based on methods of literary composition,—the second one deals mainly with the methods of human fate" (SK 95).
- 3. Apropos of *Lost Property*: "He had a queer habit of endowing even his most grotesque characters with this or that idea, or impression, or desire which he himself might have toyed with" (SK, 114).
- 4. On *The Doubtful Asphodel*, V writes: "The man is the book" (SK 175), and "It is not the parts that matter, it is their combinations" (SK 176).

One of the most distinctive passages in which V's impressions of Sebastian's writing seem particularly relevant to the reader's impressions of Nabokov's text is V's description of the sensation he has when he finishes reading Sebastian's last novel: "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 has deceived me" (SK 180). The effect of this declaration is to spur the reader of Nabokov's novel to return to the text and look for the "absolute solution...concealed in some passage or intertwined with other words."<sup>28</sup>

There are numerous places where one might look for hidden messages. One might investigate the "vague musical phrase, oddly

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confirming V's observation on *The Doubtful Asphodel*: "It is not the parts that matter, it is their combinations" (SK 176).

<sup>28</sup> We can find an analogous situation in the cryptic passages about "the poetry of a wildflower" or "foreign currency" that one finds in "Ultima Thule." The narrator of "Ultima Thule" tells the reader that his dying wife wrote that the things she liked most in life were "verse, wildflowers, and foreign currency" (*Stories* 510). References to these items crop up in the narrator's conversation with the mysterious Falter, who claims to have solved "the riddle of the universe" (*Stories* 509), and Falter's reference to these items may indicate the survival of the woman's spirit after death.

familiar” formed by the books on one shelf in Sebastian’s last apartment (*SK* 41); or one might consider the extensive chess imagery laced throughout the novel. In an earlier essay on this topic, I explored some of the alphabetic codes in the novel, including the results one gets when one investigates the overlap between certain letters in the Roman and Cyrillic alphabets.<sup>29</sup> This line of inquiry is stimulated by another of V’s comments about the design of *The Doubtful Asphodel*. According to V, the book gives the impression that the dying man discovers that the “answer to all questions of life and death, the ‘absolute solution’ was written all over the world he had known.” Once deciphered, “the intricate pattern of human life turns out to be monogrammatic” (*SK* 179). At least one critic, John Demoss, has gone to great lengths to argue that the relevant monogram in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is the letter V.<sup>30</sup>

I might suggest that a more suitable monogram could be revealed if we follow up V’s description of the way that Sebastian’s novel *Success* depicts the workings of fate: “The two lines which have finally tapered to the point of meeting are really not the straight lines of a triangle which diverge steadily towards an unknown base, but wavy lines, now running wide apart, now almost touching” (*SK* 97). I think we can form a monogram that fits this description by combining the letter *S* (running from top right to lower left) with its mirror opposite (running from top left to lower right). If these two images are joined at the bottom, they would form a unique monogram, a stylized form of the letter *V*.

But my main interest today is not in the letters of the novel, but in different code set, that of *numbers*. The novel is full of numbers, some of which recur with insistent frequency, and some to which V himself draws attention. One such passage is at the beginning of chapter 19, when V writes:

“I have managed to reconstruct more or less the last year of Sebastian’s life: 1935. He died in the very beginning of 1936, and as I look at this figure I cannot

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29 See Julian Connolly, “From Biography to Autobiography and Back: The Fictionalization of the Narrated Self in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*,” *Cynos* 10.1 (1993): 39–46.

30 To try to bolster his case, Demoss suggests seeing other letters as versions of V. Thus, as he sees it, the letter *L* may be seen as a bent version of *V*, and the lower case “l” can stand for the numeral one; see “The ‘Real’ *Real Life: Sebastian Knight* and the Critics,” <http://www.geocities.com/jdemoss69/> (28 September 2006).



help thinking that there is an occult resemblance between the man and the date of his death. Sebastian Knight d. 1936... This date seems to me the reflection of that name in a pool of rippling water. There is something about the curves of the last three numerals that recalls the sinuous outlines of Sebastian's personality." (SK 183)

We should also note that the numerals making up the year of Sebastian's death recur in other contexts. The address of his last apartment is 36 Oak Park Gardens (SK 36, 131); the room in which he believes Sebastian lies dying is number 36 (SK 201); Sebastian's physician, Dr. Starov, has the phone number "Jasmin 61-93" (SK 196).

On the other hand, there is also a great emphasis placed on the number one. Sebastian writes in *Lost Property*: "The only real number is one, the rest are mere repetition" (SK 105). (Curiously, this proclamation is itself repeated just a few pages later as V again quotes from *Lost Property*: "There is only one real number: One" [SK 113].) This number is also invoked in the recurring image of two halves having the potential to make up one whole (see, for example, this excerpt from the long letter quoted from *Lost Property*: "Every small thing which will remind me of you...will always seem to me one half of a shell, one half of a penny, with the other half kept by you" [SK 113–14]). The most important of these half/whole images is of course the fact that V and Sebastian are half-brothers.

How are we to correlate this fact with the statement that "the only real number is one"? Are we supposed to interpret this as meaning that there is only one "real" author in the novel? And if so, would that be Sebastian or V, or does it point us beyond the world of the novel to a third figure to whom V may be referring in the last line of the novel ("perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows" [SK 105]). In that case, we would truly be dealing with a situation in which "It is not the parts that matter, it is their combinations" (SK 176).<sup>31</sup>

Before going too far afield, let me return to V's earlier focus on the date 1936, which not only contains the number one, but three other numbers that he finds so suggestive of Sebastian's personality. Can

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31. Compare V's statement about his discovery of Sebastian's first love while searching for Sebastian's last love: "Two modes of his life question each other and the answer is his life itself, and that is the nearest one ever can approach a human truth" (SK 137).

we find a way to connect this information with some of the other material that I have already touched upon in this essay? Perhaps so.

Let us recall precisely where in Sebastian's work the figure of Mr. Siller appears. It is in the short story "The Other Side of the Moon," which happens to be the *third* story in the *third* book Sebastian published. In his first sentence describing this story, V introduces Siller as someone who helps "three miserable travellers in three different ways" (SK 103–104). This emphasis on the number three is significant. Three has traditionally been considered a "magic" number,<sup>32</sup> and its appearance here may be a signal that when Siller steps out of Sebastian's story into V's "life," Nabokov means for the reader to understand this as a moment of authentic magic. As Brian Boyd has put it, "we see that he [Silbermann] is not a real person nudged into V's path by some spectral influence but a purely magical creature."<sup>33</sup> Supporting the "magic" hypothesis is Silbermann's strange method of accounting: instead of collecting money from V for services rendered, he ends up giving money *to* V, which seems to confirm the fact that V has for the time being at least stepped through the looking glass.<sup>34</sup>

What are we to make of this? Considering that we are dealing with a character who seems to have stepped out of the pages of a fictional work into the realm of "real life" (the life of the novel), I think we are meant to interpret this as Nabokov's affirmation of the power of imaginative literature itself. Characters who are vividly depicted by their creators can come alive in the minds of imaginative and engaged readers. One of the functions of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is

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32 See Lauren Leighton, "Numbers and Numerology in 'The Queen of Spades,'" *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 19.4 (1977): 433.

33 Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 499.

34 For a discussion of the links with *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, see G. M. Hyde, *Vladimir Nabokov: America's Russian Novelist* (London: Marion Boyars, 1977), 87–89. Among other images pointing to the theme of magic one can cite the request of Sebastian's governess that V write a book and "make it a fairy-tale with Sebastian for prince. The enchanted prince..." (SK 23). The name "Rechnoi" attached to Sebastian's last love suggests "river" (*rechnoi* is the adjectival form of the Russian word for "river"), and there is something *rusalka*-like in her personality (the *rusalka*, or water sprite, was a supernatural being that was often believed to lure men to their deaths).

to celebrate the power of art to animate “dead souls.”<sup>35</sup> Indeed, in his foreword to *The Gift*, which he had written just before *Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov speculated about the enduring life he had given to his characters. As he put it: “I wonder how far the imagination of the reader will follow the young lovers after they have been dismissed.”<sup>36</sup> Thus the number three points to the magical dimension of art in this novel. What about the other numbers? Here we arrive at a second dimension of the work’s field of significance. In traditional numerology (dating back to Pythagoras), one can reduce all numbers larger than nine into a single digit by adding the digits together. Thus the number fourteen, for example, can be reduced to the number five ( $1 + 4 = 5$ ). What is more, each of the numbers one through nine have specific meanings or associations. One is the number associated with beginnings. Three is associated with creativity and generation (and it may be no accident that Silbermann, who is associated with the number three, generates the list of names that leads to such important discoveries for V later in the novel). Nine is associated with completion.<sup>37</sup>

When we look back at the key recurring numbers and dates from this perspective, we get a strong and consistent message. The number 36 (which is the address of Sebastian’s last apartment, and the number of the room where V thought Sebastian was dying) reduces to nine.<sup>38</sup> The last year of Sebastian’s life was 1935, which also reduces to nine. The year in which he actually died, however, is 1936, which reduces to one, the number associated with new beginnings.

What can we glean from this? Through his use of numbers, Nabokov may be pointing to a crucial concept developed by the novel: the concept of eternal renewal and transformation. Sebastian’s death

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35 V refers to Nikolai Gogol’s novel *Dead Souls* when commenting on the visits he makes in his effort to find Sebastian’s last love (SK 143).

36 Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage, 1990). See also a comment Nabokov made in an interview just a few years later: “I think what I would welcome at the close of a book of mine is a sensation of its world receding in the distance and stopping somewhere there, suspended afar like a picture in a picture: *The Artist’s Studio* by Van Bock” (*Strong Opinions*, 72–73).

37 For a discussion of other numbers appearing in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, especially five, see John Demoss’s essay.

38 The number 1899, the year of Sebastian’s birth, reduces to nine, though he was born on the last day of the year, perhaps suggesting the completion of one cycle and the beginning of another.

merely marks the completion of one cycle and the beginning of another. Although he may have died, his spirit lives on in V, and in the books he left behind. This concept, of course, would have had tremendous relevance to Nabokov himself as he wrote this novel. In moving from Russian to English, Nabokov was completing one cycle and beginning another. Sirin may be reaching the end of his career, but his spirit would live on in his work, and in the new writer Vladimir Nabokov. V wrote that time, for Sebastian was “never 1914 or 1920 or 1936—it was always year 1” (*SK* 65).<sup>39</sup> For Nabokov too, each new year held out the promise of new discoveries and new creations. This spirit of adventure holds true for the reader of Nabokov’s work as well.

Like most of Nabokov’s novels, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* contains multiple levels of meaning and sets numerous puzzles for the reader to ponder. Some puzzles might have been intended for the so-called “general” reader to solve, and some might have been intended for a more select audience, including even an audience of just one or two (Vladimir and Véra). What is more, even when one has arrived at the solution that Nabokov himself may have been steering the reader to find, one may continue to uncover new perspectives and new discoveries. In this regard, we can refer to Dmitri Nabokov’s comment about how his father might have reacted to some of the conflicting theories about *Pale Fire*: “It is possible, of course, that Father might have perused the more brilliant *dovody* [Russ: “arguments”—DBJ], rubbed his chin between thumb and index, then pursed his lips as he sometimes did in mock chagrin, and said ‘Maybe I didn’t realize it and they’re right.’”<sup>40</sup> And Nabokov himself wrote in a letter to Carl Proffer about Proffer’s *Keys to Lolita*: “Many of the delightful combinations and clues, though quite acceptable, never entered my head or are the result of an author’s intuition and

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39 Incidentally, if one add up all the digits in these dates one arrives back at the number one again! One might ask who is responsible for all these fatidic dates: is it V, or Sebastian, or should we turn to Nabokov as the ultimate source? Of course it is Nabokov, but in weaving this web of numbers around his characters he may have been following the example of a predecessor he much admired: Alexander Pushkin’s “Queen of Spades” makes extensive use of recurring numbers, especially three, seven, and one (see Lauren Leighton, “Numbers and Numerology”).

40 Dmitri Nabokov, “A Word about PALE FIRE,” posted on NABOKV-L on Thursday, January 8, 1998. The initials “DBJ” belong to the moderator of NABOKV-L, D. Barton Johnson.

inspiration, not calculation and craft. Otherwise why bother at all—in your case as well as mine.”<sup>41</sup> Thus, if Nabokov’s readers continue to apply an attentive and engaged mind to his texts, and follow the clues he planted with such care, I am confident that they will be dazzled and delighted by the new finds they shall surely make.<sup>42</sup>

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41 Nabokov, *Selected Letters*, 391.

42 There is surely more work to be done even on the numerology theme in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Noting the emphasis on numbers such as nine and three, one may reevaluate statement such as V’s comment on a part of the plot of Sebastian’s second novel *Invitation to a Beheading*: “a certain politician’s life-long predilection for the number nine is found to be at the root of the business” (SK 96). The square “root” of nine is, of course, three.