Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

"The painting of different ways of painting"

As in *Absalom, Absalom!*, the exploration of the possibilities and limitations of representation in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* takes the form of an attempt to reconstruct the past and its inevitable discontents. In both novels, the past emerges from, or is created by, a kaleidoscope of stories told by different narrators and gleaned from various characters. This situation, with its unsettling implications for the status of narration, is foregrounded by the use of *mise en abyme*. Judith's loom image from *Absalom, Absalom!* is comparable in this respect to V's characterization of Sebastian's *The Prismatic Bezel*. Judith visualizes "five or six people all trying to make a rug on the same loom only each one wants to weave his own pattern into the rug" (127). And the image V borrows from painting similarly emphasizes the collage principle that, according to him, informs Sebastian's novel: "It is as if a painter said: Look, here I'm going to show you not the painting of a landscape, but the painting of
different ways of painting a certain landscape, and I trust their harmonious fusion will disclose the landscape as I intend you to see it” (79).

In both cases, the idea of a stable reality is replaced by a multiplicity of subjective perceptions. Whether these perceptions ultimately represent reality remains an open question in both *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, corresponding (at least in part) to whether the subjective versions are grasped as unreliable or are invested with the truth of imaginative creation.

The past reconstructed or constructed in these novels is, to a large extent, the life history of an individual or group of individuals, and the attempt to represent reality is related (more in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* than in *Absalom, Absalom!* to the project of representing a “real life” of a certain individual. But the relation between narration and subjectivity is no less problematic than that between narration and representation. To begin with, does narration render a preexisting, autonomous self, or does it constitute a subject in the very act of telling? Moreover, does narration convey or constitute the subject it tells about (Sutpen, Henry, Bon, Sebastian Knight) or the subjectivity of the teller (Quentin, Shreve, V), or both? These less than simple questions are further complicated by the performative character of narration in both novels. In talking about Henry and Bon, Quentin and Shreve actually live what they narrate/create, repeating the absent past in the present of their own lives. Similarly, in searching for the real life of his half brother, V’s narration causes him to reenact that life. Quentin and Shreve “become” Henry and Bon just as V “becomes” Sebastian Knight.

Since *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* pursues and interrogates the problematic quest of reality mainly through the search for the “real life” of its title character, I shall start with the problem of subjectivity, and only later broaden the exploration to the issue of representation. Characters at different narrative levels of
The Real Life of Sebastian Knight explicitly state opposed views of subjectivity. Lost Property, Sebastian's autobiographical novel, presents a traditional image of the self as a unique, inalienable inner essence: "I seem to pass with intangible steps across ghostly lawns and through dancing halls full of the whine of Hawaiian music and down dear drab little streets with pretty names, until I come to a certain warm hollow where something very like the selfest of my own self sits huddled up in the darkness" (58).

Nothing sounds more alien to "the selfest of [one's] own self" than V's discovery of the possibility of freedom from the straitjacket of personality: "Whatever his [Sebastian's] secret was, I have learnt one secret too, and namely: 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 consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden" (172). However, these seemingly contradictory views have more in common than meets the eye. The self discovered in Lost Property is actually a double who sits huddled up in the darkness while the "I" walks the streets. This self is thus alienated or displaced through the other; from this perspective it is another. Conversely, the freedom V envisions is a series of transitory identifications by which one gains access to subjectivity through the other.

The problem of subjectivity, as well as its relation to otherness, is enacted through the troubled identities of the narrator and the object of his narration. Both V and Sebastian may be conceived of as narrators; both may also be considered objects of narration. The novel gives rise to these two possibilities, together with several subcategories, and renders choice impossible. The coexistence of opposed hypotheses dramatizes a complex attitude to subjectivity via narration.

Let me begin with the sharper incompatibility. Until almost the end of the novel, V seems the ostensible narrator. However, the climactic identification at the end—"Thus I am Sebastian
Knight" (172)—in retrospective conjunction with the casually imparted information that Sebastian’s intention to write a fictional biography had never materialized (“That was a book Sebastian never wrote” [34]) suggest that the “unwritten” text may be the novel we read. In other words, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* may be Sebastian’s autobiography, and V merely a persona. Such a twist is perfectly congruent with Sebastian’s playful cast of mind, and the use of V as a mask for the “real” author tallies with Sheldon’s statement that Sebastian’s novels are “but bright masks” (87). Various critics have discussed the possibility of a switch from V as narrator of Sebastian’s biography to Sebastian as author of an autobiography using V as narrator. Dabney Stuart says: “For the narrator, the person whose perspective we are left with at the end of the novel is, as we discover, Sebastian himself” (1968, 313). And 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 novels?” (quoted in Bruffee 1973, 181).

The clash between V and Sebastian as potential candidates for the role of narrator is also a clash between seeing the novel as biography or as autobiography. The biography/autobiography dichotomy, however, is not limited to the ambiguity of the narrator. Even if we take V as an uncontested narrator (a decision the novel does not authorize), the object of his narration remains an open question. The title arouses expectations of a biography, either fictional or real. In accordance with traditional generic conventions, we expect the narrator to describe a third person’s development. The first paragraph, however, already frustrates these expectations by containing seven first-person and only two third-person pronouns, an imbalance that gets aggravated as the text progresses. As Charles Nicol puts it, “The more V talks about his half brother the less we seem to know about him” (1967, 88). At the same time, the more V talks about his half brother, the more
we seem to know about V. Is the novel, then, about Sebastian’s life or about V’s quest for Sebastian’s life? Is it Sebastian’s biography or V’s autobiography?

The polarity in this case is less clear-cut than the ambiguity of the narrator’s identity. Here the two possibilities are not mutually exclusive, and the contrast between them may be complicated by a discrepancy between intention and execution. V may have intended to write a biography but ended up unwittingly composing an autobiography—in which case the execution might be judged by the reader as a failure in relation to the intention and/or as the triumph of unconscious motivations. V says: “As the reader may have noticed, I have tried to put into this book as little of my own self as possible” (117). The reader, however, has noticed no such thing and is therefore likely to adopt an ironic attitude toward V’s statements. Beyond the irony, though, s/he may try to understand the unconscious reasons underlying the discrepancy between declared intention and execution. Could it be V’s narcissism, his need to make room for himself in Sebastian’s biography, or his desire to become a part of Sebastian’s life? Support for the second hypothesis comes from V’s reaction to Goodman’s biography of Sebastian: “Oddly enough, this second marriage [of Sebastian’s father] is not mentioned at all in Mr. Goodman’s Tragedy of Sebastian Knight... so that to readers of Goodman’s book I am bound to appear non-existent” (6). Consequently, when V assures us that “if I continue to harp on the subject [of Goodman], I do so for Sebastian Knight’s sake” (52), we may conjecture that it is precisely for his own sake that he attacks Goodman; in order to rectify his nonexistence in Goodman’s biography, he writes an account easily transformable into autobiography. In a way that recalls the various narrators of Absalom, Absalom!, V’s struggle for control over the narration may also be a struggle for self-assertion. Moreover, V’s unconscious motivation may extend beyond the biography to the life itself. Various details in the novel suggest
that during Sebastian's lifetime, contact between the two half brothers was minimal (cf. 14, 15, 26–27, 164), so it is plausible that V would unconsciously try to insert himself into Sebastian's life in retrospect by writing (or rewriting) the story. More sinister is the possibility that V is unconsciously taking revenge on Sebastian for his "constant aloofness" (15) by manipulating his biography, now that Sebastian is dead and V controls the narrative.

So far I have elaborated on the hypothesis that V is the narrator, Sebastian the intended object of narration, but V himself the actual, unwitting, object of narration. But the autobiography may also have been intended by V, as some critics suggest, in which case there is no discrepancy between intention and execution. "Certainly," says K. A. Bruffee, "this novel is not the fictional biography it claims to be. The title is a ruse. Sebastian Knight is not the center of attention at all, although he is, or was, the narrator's center of attention... the novel is a fictional autobiography. Its subject is V, the narrator" (1973, 181). Various conscious reasons may have led V to write his own story through Sebastian's, for example, the knowledge (expressed on several occasions) that Sebastian is the more famous of the two and the book may therefore gain in interest by purporting to be about him, or even an experimental play—on the part of a self-conscious narrator—with the borders between biography and autobiography.

Having discussed the alternative narrators and their intended or unintended objects of narration, an explicit expansion on the contribution of these phenomena to the problematics of subjectivity and narration is now in order. On the face of it, the biography hypothesis sees narration as the (re)construction of the subjectivity of an other, whereas the autobiography hypothesis views it as a (re)construction of one's own subjectivity. The coexistence of both hypotheses, however, seems to be a performative articulation of both the alienation of the subject through the other and the constitution of the other through the narrating subject.
Indeed, “the merging of twin images” is explicitly formulated by the narrator in the final sentence of the novel: “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows” (172). To relate this insight back to the foregoing hypotheses, if V purports to write Sebastian’s biography and ends up (unwittingly?) writing his own, narrating the other’s life makes him discover his own subjectivity. But the quest and the telling make him discover that he is another—Sebastian. If the novel is Sebastian’s autobiography, using V as a persona, then the narration explores subjectivity through the other, but also otherness through subjectivity, since V as Sebastian’s narrating persona is in quest of the real life of Sebastian Knight. . . . In both cases, there emerges an identification of the subject with the other, coupled with an alienation or displacement of the subject through the other. This is a structure reminiscent of Lacan’s description of the mirror stage, in which the reflection is recognized as both identical to and different from the face looking at it, and mirror images abound in this novel.

The novel’s title, with which I started the discussion of the relations between narration and subjectivity, also opens up the question of representation. For, in addition to arousing expectations of a biography, the novel’s title implies the possibility of reaching reality and telling about it. Readers familiar with Nabokov’s work may detect an ironic overtone in this title, which has the ring of a cliché characteristic of certain popular genres. V’s later thoughts give an indirect ironic twist to the title: “Oh, how I sometimes yearn for the easy swing of a well-oiled novel! . . . A handy character, a welcome passer-by who had also known my hero, but from a different angle. ‘And now,’ he would say, ‘I am going to tell you the real story of Sebastian Knight’s college years’” (44). Doesn’t this suggest that The Real Life . . . is possible only in well-oiled, facile novels and that reality is much more evanescent than such titles would lead one to believe?

This double movement, whereby a glimpse of reality is—as
Barthes would say—*posé et déçu*, goes beyond the title to characterize the entire novel. The possibility of an "extraordinary revelation" about reality (164), about "the real life," although emerging at various narrative levels, is also suspect or unattainable. A sense that "now the puzzle was solved" (150) permeates the final scene of Sebastian's *The Doubtful Asphodel*, leading both characters and readers to expect "some absolute truth," "the absolute solution" (149, 150) from the lips of the dying man. But a moment's hesitation on the part of the author proves fatal: "The man is dead and we do not know" (151). Similarly, V dreams that Sebastian "was calling me and saying something very important—and promising to tell me something more important still, if only I came to the corner where he sat or lay, trapped by the heavy sacks that had fallen across his legs" (159). But the "striking disclosure" takes the form of a "garbled sentence" (160), which V cannot understand. Under the shock of this dream, V travels to the St. Damier hospital, which he reaches only after Sebastian's death. Like Sebastian's novel, like V's dream, Sebastian's life ends without disclosing the ultimate secret. This gap, this absence, motivates V's quest for the real life of his half brother and his need to narrate it.

The impulse to pin down reality, to represent the absence, is questioned in the novel in a variety of ways. First, is it desirable to represent reality? Sebastian's "real life," like his prose, "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" (30). Second, is it possible to represent reality? Like the narrators in *Absalom, Absalom!* V has very limited contact with the "real life" he is trying to narrate, so he necessarily resorts to assembling information from the stories other characters tell him (Sebastian's governess, Sheldon, Miss Pratt, Nina Rechnoy-Lecerf, etc.). As in *Absalom, Absalom!,* here too the informants suffer from limited knowledge, difficulties in remembering the
past, distorting emotional involvement, and even downright insincerity. This creates a problem of reliability, which V formulates on behalf of a mysterious Voice in the Mist, the voice of conscience asking, "Who is speaking of Sebastian Knight?": "It was but the echo of some possible truth, a timely reminder: don't be too certain of learning the past from the lips of the present. Beware of the most honest broker. Remember that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale" (44). Third, if the "real life" is a piecing together of various stories, is it anything more than a narrative, a fiction? And if the various unintended fictions fail to represent reality, what is the status of Sebastian's self-declared fictions, his novels? The conflict between narration as representation and narration as creation, so noticeable in *Absalom, Absalom!*, is enriched in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* by the tension between reality and fictionality. This tension emerges from analogies between Sebastian's novels and Sebastian's life, as well as from those between Sebastian's novels and V's quest. The first set of analogies seems to reinforce the view of narration as representation (Sebastian's novels are molded on his own life), while the second seems to suggest that narration creates—rather than re-creates—reality (Sebastian's novels determine the form and development of V's quest).

Let me begin with the first set. A certain passage in *Success* is said to be "strangely connected with Sebastian's inner life at the time of the completing of the last chapter" (82), but no details are given about the nature of the connection. In the same novel, though, William, the protagonist, suffers from his heart and consults a doctor named Coates (ibid.). Sebastian also has a heart disease; his doctor is called Oates (88). The unrealized meetings in *Success* (81) and the near confrontation between Sebastian and Clare by the Charing Cross bookstall (154) are analogous as well. In Sebastian's short story *The Back of the Moon*, the "meek little
man” is reminiscent of another “meek little man” who provoked a tremendous scene of rage and fury by unwittingly interrupting Sebastian in his work (85).

Lost Property, supposedly an autobiographical novel, is generally similar to Sebastian’s life. Particularly analogous is the situation in which a man breaks up a happy love affair for the sake of a fatal and miserable one, “the damned formula of ‘another woman’” (93). V considers that the letter written by a character in Lost Property on this occasion resembles what Sebastian felt about Clare or perhaps even wrote to her, although the twin character is a faintly absurd one.

Doubtful Asphodel, composed when Sebastian is mortally ill, reenacts the anxiety of a man who fears he will die before revealing the great truth he has glimpsed. Small details in this novel, for example Clare’s silver shoes (86, 147) and the feeling of regret for not giving a penny to an old beggar (90, 148), also parallel Sebastian’s life.

Sebastian’s novels thus seem to render his life in a representational mode. But the Voice in the Mist explicitly warns against such a simplistic view: “Who is speaking of Sebastian Knight? . . . Who indeed? His best friend and his half brother. A gentle scholar, remote from life, and an embarrassed traveller visiting a distant land. And where is the third party? Rotting peacefully in the cemetery of St. Damier. Laughingly alive in five volumes” (44). Sebastian may be more alive in his novels than in his life, and the hierarchy implied by the traditional representational view is questioned.

The analogies between Sebastian’s novels and V’s quest place the traditional representational view much more heavily under fire, for beyond a suggestion of the supremacy of fiction over the writer’s own life, they signal the capacity of fiction to mold the reality of another. Sebastian’s first novel, The Prismatic Bezel, is, among other things, “a rollicking parody of the setting of a detec-
tive tale” (76) and hence full of “false scents” and delays: “Owing to a combination of mishaps (his car runs over an old woman and then he takes the wrong train) the detective is very long in arriving” (77). V’s quest is similarly a process of detection (minus the parody) with its own false scents, like Mr. Goodman, and its own delays, like Mme Lecerf and the various obstacles put in V’s path to the dying Sebastian: a slow car, a wrong turning, and all the rest of the conventional retardatory apparatus. In any self-respecting detective novel, the murderer turns out to be the one least suspected by the police and the reader. The Prismatic Bezel takes this device to a ridiculous extreme. The corpse is that of an art dealer called G. Abeson. In the crowd there is a passerby, the harmless old Nosebag, who has a passion for collecting snuff-boxes. When the detective finally arrives and starts cross-questioning everybody, a policeman suddenly informs him that the corpse is gone. Old Nosebag now steps forward, taking off his beard, wig, and spectacles, to reveal the face of G. Abeson. The most harmless looking among the crowd turns out to be not the murderer, as in the conventional detective story, but the murdered. The newly resurrected corpse then goes on to explain: “You see... one dislikes being murdered” (79). Abeson’s death is transcended by his identification with the living Nosebag. A similar situation, in a serious vein, occurs at the beginning of V’s quest. Sebastian is no more; yet disliking being dead, he is continued by a death-transcending duplicate in the person of his half brother, V: “I am Sebastian Knight.” In both cases the identification is connected with the names of the two parties. “Nosebag” is the exact reversal of “G. Abeson,” and V’s identification with Sebastian is implicitly and indirectly hinted at in the doctor’s telegram, which spells Sebastian’s name in the Russian way—“Sebastian’s state hopeless come immediately Starov”—and “for some reason unknown” makes V stand for a moment in front of the looking glass (160, emphasis mine). In addition, The
Prismatic Bezel abounds in situations where strangers discover that they are related to each other, just as V’s quest leads him to discover that Nina Rechnoy and Mme Lecerf are one and the same person.

Success is a novel of quest, with an obvious Percival Q. as the researcher and is analogous to V’s quest both in its subject and in its use of false scents and delays. Success also contains a series of near meetings between its protagonists, paralleling V’s near meeting with the unwitting Clare in the street (65).

The Back of the Moon contains one of Sebastian’s liveliest characters, “a meek little man” called Siller, who helps three miserable travelers while waiting for a train (86). He has a bald head, a big strong nose, bushy eyebrows, and a constantly moving Adam’s apple (ibid.). The meek and helpful Mr. Siller becomes Mr. Silbermann at the level of V’s quest. Like Siller, Silbermann helps a miserable traveler (V) on a train, and like Siller, Silbermann has “a pink bald head” (104), “a big shiny nose” (ibid.), “bushy eyebrows” (103), and an Adam’s apple that keeps “rolling up and down” (105). As if to clinch the analogy, Silbermann advises V to stop searching for his brother’s fatal woman because one cannot see “de odder side of de moon” (ibid.), reminding us of the story in which his counterpart “makes his bow, with every detail of habit and manner” (86).

In Lost Property, Sebastian’s most nearly autobiographical novel, the narrator tells the story of a profound experience he had while visiting the small hotel at Roquebrune, where his mother had died. Later, he adds, he mentioned this experience to a relative in London only to learn that he had made a dreadful mistake: “but it was the other Roquebrune, the one in the Var” (17). The experience, nevertheless, was real. V has an analogous “wrong/right” experience when he sits by the bed of a dying man, believing that it is Sebastian (who is already dead) and feeling, as he had never done before, intense affinity with his half brother. This ex-
experience gradually leads V to the climactic recognition of interchangeability and identification.

So I did not see him after all, or at least I did not see him alive. But those few minutes I spent listening to what I thought was his breathing changed my life as completely as it would have been changed, had Sebastian spoken to me before dying. Whatever his secret was, I have learnt one secret too, and namely: 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 consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden. Thus—I am Sebastian Knight. (172)

Sebastian’s last novel, The Doubtful Asphodel, yields even more analogies with V’s quest. The subject of the novel (as we have already seen) is a dying man who has a secret, an absolute truth, to divulge, and who dies before uttering the word that would have changed the lives of all those who could have benefited from the disclosure. In a similar fashion, V tries desperately to reach the dying Sebastian in the belief that “he had something to tell me, something of boundless importance” (162), but Sebastian dies, and it is too late for the extraordinary revelation to come from his lips. There is one crucial difference, however, in V’s experience: He does discover a secret—not from Sebastian’s mouth but from the silent breathing of the “wrong Sebastian” in the wrong room.

Around the central character in The Doubtful Asphodel there are other lives that constitute “but commentaries to the main subject”:

We follow the gentle old chess player Schwarz, who sits down on a chair in a room in a house, to teach an orphan boy the
moves of the knight; we meet the fat Bohemian woman with that grey streak showing in the fast colour of her cheaply dyed hair; we listen to a pale wretch noisily denouncing the policy of oppression to an attentive plainclothes man in an ill-famed public house. The lovely tall prima donna steps in her haste into a puddle, and her silver shoes are ruined. An old man sobs and is soothed by a soft-lipped girl in mourning. Professor Nussbaum, a Swiss scientist, shoots his young mistress and himself dead in a hotel room at half past three in the morning. (147)

Most of these people are analogous, to the point of identity, with minor characters in V's search. Schwarz, the chess player, is—with a simple translation of the name—Uncle Black at the Rechnoy house, and Rechnoy himself opens the door to V, holding "a chess-man—a black knight—in his hand" (118). This is analogous not only to V's quest but also to Sebastian's life: Sebastian's name is Knight, and he signed his English poems with "a little black chess knight drawn in ink" (15). Later in V's quest, it is again chess that helps him remember the name of Sebastian's hospital. In the telephone booth "some anonymous artist had begun blacking squares—a chess board, ein Schachbrett, un damier (166), hence St. Damier.

The orphan boy in The Doubtful Asphodel parallels the one who opens the door at Helene Grinstein's, and the "soft-lipped girl in mourning" (147) is Helene herself (111–12). The "fat Bohemian woman" is Lydia Bohemsky of V's quest, and the "plain-clothes man" may again be Silbermann (105). There is no obvious parallel in V's quest to the man who denounces the policy of oppression. The "lovely prima donna" is analogous to Helene von Graun, who has "a splendid contralto" (109) and who, like the prima donna of the novel, steps into a puddle when she arrives at Mme Lecerf's country house. Finally, the episode of Professor
Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight

Nussbaum and his young mistress is similar to the story the hotel manager at Blauberg tells V: “In the hotel round the corner a Swiss couple committed suicide in 1929” (102).  

The similarities between The Doubtful Asphodel and V’s quest are so close to being identical that the distinctions between the levels seem in imminent danger of disappearing. Sebastian’s novel almost dictates the development of V’s quest. It is not only that the quest has “that special ‘Knightian twist’ about it,” as V puts the idea during his visit to Mme Lecerf (131). The quest is actually made to duplicate Sebastian’s novel, manifesting the supremacy of fiction over reality, except, of course, that the reality is also fiction, and the fiction is supposed to yield the “real” life of its protagonist.  

Further insight may be gained by locating all these analogies within the intricate layering of narrative levels in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. The layering itself tells us something about the fictionality of reality and the reality of fiction. The extradiegetic level is concerned with V’s narration and his thoughts about methods of composition and difficulties involved in writing a biography. The diegetic level consists of V’s quest for Sebastian’s real life, while Sebastian’s biography—emerging as it does from conversations between V and key figures in his half brother’s life, as well as from V’s own memories—becomes a metadiegetic level, a story within a story. That the “real life” should be a doubly fictional narrative (the novel we read and, to boot, a metadiegetic level in it) may be an initial suggestion of the fictional nature of reality.  

There are other metadiegetic levels in addition to Sebastian’s life, some taking the form of written documents, some essentially nonverbal but translated into writing. To begin with, there is V’s report of Goodman’s book, The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight, which V demolishes and finally labels The Farce of Mr. Goodman. Then there are notes, like Sebastian’s last letter to his half
brother or Dr. Starov’s telegram to V. Among the nonverbal metadiegeses are V’s prophetic dream about his half brother and Roy Carswell’s portrait of Sebastian.

But this is not all. If Sebastian’s life is a metadiegetic level, his novels—often narrated in detail and “quoted from”—constitute a meta-metadiegetic level. And if Sebastian’s life is a fiction not to be trusted, Sebastian’s fictional works seem closer to his “real life” than his day-to-day reality, as reconstructed through V’s conversations with the various informants. But even Sebastian’s novels do not really yield the truth for, as Sheldon suggests, “His novels and stories were but bright masks, sly tempters under the pretence of artistic adventure leading him unerringly toward a certain imminent goal” (87). All the authors in Nabokov’s novel wear masks. Goodman wears a black one (48, 49, 50), which the narrator pockets in the hope that “it might come in usefully on some other occasion” (50). Sebastian’s novels are bright masks, and at the end V realizes that “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” (173). As in deconstruction, the real face cannot be seen, behind every mask there is another mask, and there is no way of stopping the interchangeability between reality and fiction.

Within Sebastian’s novels there is a further meta-level consisting of letters written by his metadiegetic characters (the love letter and the business letter in Lost Property). These are analogous both to Sebastian’s life and to V’s quest.

The perplexing effect of what Nabokov himself described as a “hell of mirrors” (Nabokov 1967, x) is enhanced by the interpenetration of the various narrative levels. The diegetic V is not only analogous to various elements of the metadiegetic level of Sebastian’s life, but is also infused into one of them. The description of Sebastian’s last meeting with his first love, as rendered by Natasha Rosanov, unwittingly uses the narrator’s name as part of the scenery: “A last change: a V-shaped flight of migrating cranes;
their tender moan melting in a turquoise-blue sky high above a
tawny birch-grove” (114–15). A similar use of the name is made
in the letter written by the fictional character in Sebastian’s Lost
Property: “Life with you was lovely—and when I say lovely, I
mean doves and lilies, and velvet and that soft pink ‘v’ in the
middle” (93). Not only V’s initial but also other features of his
personality are evoked in this letter by association and analogy.
The brokenhearted lover, for example, knows that he will never­
theless “joke with the chaps in the office” (94), and we know that
V works in an office. The character in the letter has not been able
to bring some business to a satisfactory end (ibid.), and V too is
unsuccesful in clinching some bureaucratic matter (151–52).

Lost Property also contains another interpenetration of ele­
ments, though these are both at the same level. Of the letters
found in the air crash, one is addressed to a woman but begins
“Dear Mr. Mortimer,” while another is addressed to a firm of
traders—and contains a love letter. Not only did the actual letters
get confused, but the one contains details from the other, for we
read in the love letter: “I have not been able to clinch the business
I was supposed to bring ‘to a satisfactory close,’ as that ass
Mortimer says” (94).

V’s description of The Doubtful Asphodel treats the book and
the events narrated in it as if they belonged to the same level: “A
man is dying, and he is the hero of the tale; . . . The man is the
book; the book itself is heaving and dying, and drawing up a
ghostly knee” (147). The intermingleing of the book and its nar­
rative reaches a metaphoric climax when the landscape (itself used
as a comparison) is described in terms of vowels, consonants, and
sentences:

The answer to all questions of life and death, ‘the absolute
solution’ was written all over the world he [the dying man]
had known: it was like a traveller realizing that the wild
country he surveys is not an accidental assembly of natural
phenomena, but a 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; the vowel of a lake fusing with the consonant of a sibilant slope; the windings of a road writing its message in a round hand, as clear as that of one's father; trees conversing in dumb-show, making sense to one who has learnt the gestures of their language. . . . (150)

Knight's act of narration is also treated as if it were at the same level as the events it narrates, so that the author, his narrator, and his hero are almost fused:

And now we shall know what exactly it is; the word will be uttered—and you, and I, and everyone in the world will slap himself on the forehead: What fools we have been! At this last bend of his book the author seems to pause for a minute, as if he were pondering whether it were wise to let the truth out. He seems to lift his head and to leave the dying man, whose thoughts he was following, and to turn away and to think: Shall we follow him to the end? Shall we whisper the word which will shatter the snug silence of our brains? We shall. We have gone too far as it is, and the word is being already formed, and will come out. And we turn and bend again over a hazy bed, over a grey, floating form—lower and lower. . . . But that minute of doubt was fatal: the man is dead. (151)

The author's lifting his head seems to be at the same fictional level as the visions of the dying man. It is as if a pause at the level of writing actually causes the death at the level of the events.12

A similar collision occurs in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight when its characters are treated as real people who can read the novel in which they appear. Thus V says about the Russian lady whose diary he studied: "That she will ever read this book seems wildly improbable" (5). He wishes that the Blauberg hotel manager would "never read these lines" (101), wonders whether he
Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

should “send [Silbermann] this work when it is finished” (110), and definitely decides to give Nina a copy (145). From one point of view, these references do not transgress the boundaries between levels, since the book is presented as a biography and the characters as real people. But for the real reader, who stands outside the “game” of narrative levels (to the extent that such an “entity” is still conceivable by this point), the characters—including Sebastian and V—are fictional, and therefore cannot really read the book they hold in their hands.

Behind all these levels, Vladimir Nabokov, the author who invented the novel’s other authors, is visibly pulling the strings, suggesting, among other things, that both V and Sebastian may be manifestations of himself. V’s epiphany, the identification that opens the quest and closes the novel, is not only “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, “ but also “or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows” (172). That this someone is probably the real author is further intimated by a game of letters: v is both the beginning and the end of Vladimir Nabokov, and the s of Sebastian is also the first letter of Sirin, the name by which Nabokov signed his Russian novels. Moreover, Nabokov playfully made Sebastian’s life analogous to his own. Both were born in 1899 in St. Petersburg, left Russia in 1919, moved to England, and studied at Cambridge. Like Sebastian’s mother, Nabokov’s mother used to tie her own wedding ring to her husband’s with a black ribbon, and, like Sebastian, Nabokov’s first love ended with the bitterness of betrayal. “Sebastian’s Russian was better and more natural to him than his English” (71), and Nabokov repeatedly said the same thing about himself. Sebastian wrote his novels under his mother’s maiden name (Knight); Nabokov did the same with his Russian novels (Sirin). Many more similarities can be discerned by perusing Nabokov’s autobiographical *Speak, Memory*, but these will suffice as indications of the identification of both fictional narrators and objects of narration with the real author.

Narrative levels in the novel collide, intersect, and mirror each
other, shattering the illusion of their separateness and, with it, the possibility of distinguishing between fiction and reality. What is consequently destabilized is not only the concept of representation but, more radically, that of reality. “Reality,” says Nabokov, “is an infinite succession of levels, levels of perception, of false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable” (Smith and Nabokov 1962). Compared to *Absalom, Absalom!* Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* comes closer to the ontological doubt that characterizes postmodernism (see the introduction). Nevertheless, a yearning for reality, for representation, sometimes even for an autonomous self also permeates the novel, and access to the “real” of the title is both ironically subverted and nostalgically sought in this borderline text.