

Absent yet Present: On the Paradoxical Nature of Characters in Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

Irina Marchesini

The fake move in a chess problem, the illusion of a solution or the conjuror's magic...

Vladimir Nabokov (Nabokov 1973, 11)

Introduction

The artistic space of Vladimir Nabokov's first novel written in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941),¹ is characterized by an element that works on every level of the text: the theme of absence. Even from the superficial level of the plot it is possible to observe several elements connected to this theme. V., a minor businessman, is trying to write a faithful biography of his half-brother, Sebastian Knight, an artist who died prematurely just before completing his last novel, the fictitious biography of Mr H.. One of V.'s aims is to discredit Sebastian's secretary, Mr Goodman, who prior to Sebastian's death, had started writing Sebastian's biography. Hence, Sebastian Knight's absence, caused by death, generates the main plotline. A kaleidoscopic, multi-coloured gallery of characters hovers about V.'s hopeless search,² whirling round a pale fire: absence. V.'s quest is full of silences, allegedly wrong or useless information, meetings with characters who openly lie or are untraceable.

Previous scholarship, mostly interested in searching for the self-reflective elements in Nabokov's works, has explored the theme of absence in connection to this novel.³ In

* I am grateful for the insightful comments and recommendations from the anonymous reviewers of an earlier version of this article.

¹ Nabokov, 2001. Here and henceforth, all quotations from this work are taken from this source.

² Eventually he does not manage to either meet his brother, or to write anything truthful about him.

³ The metafictional dimension is dominant in this kind of study. For further reference see, for instance, John Lanchester (2001), who claims that the novel is "full of absence" (Lanchester 2001, 175). Yona Dureau too refers to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as an allegory of emptiness, basing her study *Nabokov ou Le Sourire du chat* (2001) on the writer's systematic use of empty spaces, *les blancs*. A couple of years later, Jane Zwart wrote: "we cannot deny the zero as an emblem of the novel" (Zwart 2003, 218). The last, and probably most original



particular, Giorgio Manganelli has observed that

[t]his short and “light” book — it seems to have the cork’s deceitful consistency — is in fact a truly ambitious book; to me it seems that its aim is to create a texture of words — it disgusts me to call it “a novel” — around an empty point, an absence, an indefinable mental place. Moreover, this absence contains another pun-like game, a verbal artifice. Sebastian Knight’s life, the real one, is lost, because no clue brings to the centre; the writer is a phantom, an image similar to those one can see near the sleep’s precipice.⁴ (Manganelli 2005, 228–29)

Nonetheless, as Charles Nicol maintained, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a novel that must be reread.⁵ Therefore, while absence can be considered one of the main areas of inquiry in the field of Nabokov Studies, it can still be revived with the analysis of certain aspects that deserve further clarification. The present research tries to shed light on some of these elements, focusing in particular on the key figures of this *roman à clef*, the narrator V. and the poet Sebastian Knight. Arguably, the construction of characters in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is paradoxical: absence constitutes their essence at a core level, as it often happens in the context of the self-conscious genre. Moreover, absence plays a key role in characters’ design, linking them to all Nabokovian novels. However, despite their innermost ‘flatness’, to use Edward M. Forster’s categorization,⁶ they still appear to be ‘round’, i.e. plausible, mimetic figures. To support this thesis, the analysis will focus on three major aspects: name, body, ‘soul’.

Onomastics and Absence

‘Roundness’ is a feature connected to the very first character appearing in the novel, although not in its most obvious meaning. The first person interviewed by the narrator is “an old Russian lady who has for some obscure reason begged [him] not to divulge her name” (5). Notwithstanding this, V. decides to disclose the secret,⁷ because in his opinion Olga Olegovna Orlova is “an [...] alliteration which it would have been a pity to withhold” (5). He was right: the “egg-like” (5), round shape recalled by the woman’s initials evoke, too, the number zero, a cipher that can be regarded as the numerical equivalent of absence. On a textual level, this element performs the function of a point in a map, figuratively and graphically representing both the start of V.’s quest and the origin of the book.

Even though the number zero and the egg-like shape recall in the mind of the reader the embryonic, initial phase of physical development, there are other subtle elements that

book that highlights the theme of absence is *Le sette vite di Sebastian Nabokov* [*The Seven Lives of Sebastian Nabokov*] by Franco Mimmi (2016). In the course of nineteen lessons, the author uses Nabokov’s first English novel to teach the concept of literary inventiveness in a class of creative writing.

⁴ All the translations from Italian, Russian and French are mine.

⁵ “While rereading, one begins to acquire the same method as reader that Nabokov employs as writer: seeing the entire novel simultaneously, as numerous structures, interlocking syllogisms which may proceed in reverse as well as forward order” (Nicol 1967, 86).

⁶ ‘Flat characters,’ “[...] constructed round a single idea or quality” (Forster 1985, 67) versus ‘round,’ “more highly organized” characters (Forster 1985, 75).

⁷ V.’s behaviour already suggests his unreliability, a constant that emerges throughout the whole novel.

destabilize the apparent, generative value attached to those aspects. In fact, Sebastian was born on the last day of the twelfth and last month of the last century's year (31.12.1899).⁸ This peculiar circumstance represents a sort of dead end, which anticipates the delusion experienced by the reader after finishing the book, having gained no trustworthy information about Sebastian Knight. She will know nothing more than Sebastian's birthdate, thus circularly returning to the starting point, which fatally, hinted at this failure. For these reasons, the number zero can be interpreted as a void, a gap, instead of an origin.

This fact is clear already from the beginning. Indeed, Orlova is unable to provide the narrator with precise hints for his search. Her contribution amounts to the diary she wrote at the time, in which the woman recorded trivial facts concerning her life. Unluckily for V., the entry corresponding to the day of Sebastian's birth reported scant weather information: it was a fine windless winter day, with twelve degrees Reaumur below zero.

All this considered, Olga Olegovna Orlova does not seem to have any explicit function in the plot. In fact, she does not help V. in his quest for knowledge. Moreover, she does not perform any meaningful action, nor is there any description of her physical appearance or temper. Thus, in the economy of the story, she counts as 'zero.' Was not this what she wanted, with her initial request for anonymity? The only interest seems to be in her name and in its primary function, which is to introduce the main theme of the book: absence.

Still, Nabokov manages to give this cameo the appearance of a realistic, human-like figure, depicting it with few brisk strokes: an old woman, with a plausible name, whose present is crystallized in her memories.⁹

Sebastian Knight's name too seems perfectly plausible. Nonetheless, as Gennadii Barabtarlo contends, it has an enigmatic flavour.

[w]e've got the impression to perceive that there is something particularly devised in his name (...) As gradually unwinding the shrouds, in which the 'real life' [of Sebastian] is wrapped, his essence and personality become vaporous, and when the last layer is removed, the main dramatis and desired persona comes completely to naught, evaporating. (Barabtarlo 2003)

⁸ It might be interesting to push this reasoning even further. Reaumur is a thermometer scale in which the freezing and boiling points of water are set to 0 and 80 degrees respectively; it was widespread in Europe, particularly in Russia. Twelve °r corresponds to fifteen °C; in order to fully appreciate Nabokov's game, it is better to visualize the written formula: $15\text{ °C} = 12\text{ °r} \times 1.25$. The repetition of numbers 1, 2, 5, if added to the other information given above, creates a hell of resonances and repetitions, miming the *mise en abyme* nested inside the heart of the novel. Moreover, a question rises: why did the author decide to mention this particular temperature scale? A possible answer could be that Reaumur was a skilled entomologist, as Nabokov was.

⁹ Throughout the novel a similar fate unites Olga with other characters, for instance Clare Bishop, Sebastian's fiancée, who seems to have disappeared after the end of her relationship with the poet. She is even characterized by a marked trait, myopia, which is absence of sight. Sebastian's last mistress is also absent. V. is looking for her, and at a certain point in the novel his investigation of Sebastian is replaced with his search for this missing woman. Finally, he manages to find her, discovering that she has been playing with him all the time by camouflaging her real identity: she has always been pretending to be another person, Madame Lecerf. Madame Lecerf is thus absent simply because she doesn't exist: her name is just a mask.

Following his intuition, Barabtarlo decided to rearrange Sebastian's complete name and surname, discovering that "Sebastian Knight = Knight is absent." This imperfect anagram, so typical of Nabokov's style, leaves out only one meaningful letter, "a", which, according to Barabtarlo, is a "lonely, indefinite article" that can be used too, forming the more general sentence "a knight is absent" (Barabtarlo 2003).¹⁰ It seems rather obvious that Nabokov, by means of this linguistic expedient, wanted to emphasize his character's main trait: absence.

If the reader is constantly reminded of the protagonist's name, V.'s complete name is actually absent, as it is never openly told. From the text one only learns that it starts with the letter 'V.' Another aspect worth noting is that this letter appears, in its *sole* occurrence, in V.'s recollection of an accidental meeting with his half-brother in Paris, 1924. It is the artist who calls him by this surrogate in one of the most important parts of the book (60). If it weren't for Sebastian, the reader would have no clue about the narrator's name. V. never says his name, even when he is directly asked: " 'I am,' I answered, 'Sebastian Knight's half-brother.'" (48). His attitude persists throughout the whole book: " 'But what is your real name,' she asked peering at me with her dim soft eyes which somehow reminded me of Clare. 'I think you mentioned it, but today my brain seems to be in a daze. ... Ach', she said when I had told her" (112). Sometimes his behaviour gets irritating: " 'My name is so-and-so,' I said" (118), "[m]y name is [I mentioned my name]" (172).

The repeated and deliberate omission of the narrator's name, expressed in such a clear way, performs two functions. First, it stresses the key role of absence in the novel, as its constitutive element. Second, it underlines an ambiguous similarity between his and the name of the real writer of the novel: there is, indeed, a strong temptation to associate V. with Vladimir Nabokov. However, this should be regarded as one of the author's tricks. In fact, in his letter dated 3rd February, 1967, Nabokov explains to Andrew Field: "V stands for Victor" (Nabokov 1997, 677). This is what he says. Is it possible to trust him fully?

This question is probably destined to remain unanswered. Nevertheless, the reader can accept with no particular hesitation the use of a letter, instead of a full name, to identify the narrator. Indeed, this specific choice is consistent with V.'s apparent reluctance to write his half-brother's biography, being a non-professional writer.

Sebastian's Body

Sebastian's non-existence constitutes the real core of the book: more obviously, his death is the reason why *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* exists. Death is the physical absence of a person's body; many elements in the text continuously point to this, mainly by means of diverse appealing images. Sebastian is often compared to a partially drawn figure: "he will remain as incomplete as your picture" (99), "[a] book with a blind spot. An unfinished picture — uncoloured limbs of the martyr with the arrows in his side" (103). Occasionally, his pictorial representation is substituted by even more evanescent images: "[d]ust was swarming in a slanting sunbeam; volutes of tobacco smoke joined it and rotated softly, insinuatingly, as if they might form a live picture at any moment" (140).

The poet's invisibility is compared to a phantom-like figure: he is often likened to a ghost, as V. writes, "Sebastian's spirit seemed to hover about us with the flicker of the fire

¹⁰ Originally in English in Barabtarlo's study.

reflected in the brass knobs of the hearth” (38). In certain occurrences, Sebastian’s immateriality becomes somehow visible to V.’s eyes: “[f]or a moment I seemed to see a transparent Sebastian at his desk” (32). Additionally, V. perceives the poet’s presence, feeling his will to help him, both in his quest and in his literary activity: “I am sustained by the secret knowledge that in some unobtrusive way Sebastian’s shade is trying to be helpful” (84); “[r]otting peacefully in the cemetery of St Damier. Laughingly alive in five volumes. Peering unseen over my shoulder as I write this (although I dare say he mistrusted too strongly the commonplace of eternity to believe even now in his own ghost)” (44). Such supernatural imagery is found throughout the book and stresses the protagonist’s absence: exactly what is its profound meaning? The answer is not simple, and yet there is disagreement among critics. Dabney Stuart (1978, 37), Andrew Field (1967, 27) and Brian Boyd (1990, 499), argue that all the ghostly images in the novel portraying Sebastian in the act of writing at his desk or trying to help V. in his search signal Sebastian as the “real” author of the book. Sebastian, a phantom, a vague figure standing behind the curtain, paradoxically seems to embody the implied author. As Wood maintains, “[t]he dead man is an early instance of Roland Barthes’s author, displaced and resurrected by Nabokov’s phrasing. The corpse is both absent and active”¹¹ (Wood 1994, 32).

By exploiting his paper artist, and posing one simple question, “*who is talking about Sebastian Knight?*” (instead of: “*who was Sebastian Knight?*”) Nabokov casts light upon the matter of the novel’s creation. This is a typical feature of the postmodern self-conscious genre, as Brian McHale points out:

[i]n an effort to stabilize this dizzying upward spiral of fictions, meta-fictions, meta-meta-fictions, and so on to infinite regress, various postmodernist writers have tried introducing into their texts what appears to be one of the irreducibly real reality in their performance as writers — namely, the act of writing itself. Thus arises the postmodernist *topos* of the writer at his desk, or what Ronald Sukenick has called “the truth of the page.” (McHale 1987, 198)

Sebastian’s lack of body and (simulated?) absence is firmly anchored to the book’s materiality: he is indeed traceable by some signs purposely left in the text, such as his style and technique. Knight’s voice is heard only through the lengthy quotations from his books: his physical absence is therefore balanced by his creations, which function as substitutes for his body.

The theme of the book is simple: a man is dying: you feel him sinking throughout the book; this thought and his memories pervade the whole with greater or lesser distinction (like the swell and fall of uneven breathing), now rolling up this image, now that, letting it ride in the wind, or even tossing it out on the shore, where it seems to move and live for a minute on its own and presently is drawn back again by

¹¹ This image vividly recalls the thought experiment of the “Schrödinger’s cat.” The question of the body’s invisibility, and especially its ghostly appearance, inevitably leads the discussion to the problem of the implied author in the context of the postmodern self-conscious genre. However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this study.

grey seas where it sinks or is strangely transfigured. A man is dying, and he is the hero of the tale; but whereas the lives of other people in the book seem perfectly realistic (or at least realistic in a Knightian sense), the reader is kept ignorant as to who the dying man is, and where his deathbed stands or floats or whether it is a bed at all. The man is the book; the book itself is heaving and dying, and drawing up a ghostly knee (146–47).

In these lines, written by Sebastian in his novel *The Doubtful Asphodel*, there is a complete identification of the author with his work. Notably, the supremacy of the final, edited and printed text, which functions as the poet's substance, body and voice, is strengthened by the drafts absence. Indeed, like Nabokov, Sebastian too thought that nothing, except the final version of a work of art, should ever survive. As V. recalls,

I had a letter from him instructing me to burn certain of his papers. It was so obscurely worded that at first I thought it might refer to rough drafts or discarded manuscripts, but I soon found out that, except for a few odd pages dispersed among other papers, he himself had destroyed them long ago, for he belonged to the rare type of writer who knows that nothing ought to remain except the perfect achievement: the printed book; that its actual existence is inconsistent with that of its spectre, the uncouth manuscript flaunting its imperfections like a revengeful ghost carrying its own head under its arm; and that for this reason the litter of the workshop, no matter its sentimental or commercial value, must never subsist. (30)

The concreteness of the text as a substitute for the poet's body is repeatedly hinted at in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Remarkably, while commenting *Invitation to a Beheading* (1936) and *The Gift* (1938), Brian Stonehill argues that “[n]arrative modulations are employed further as reminders of the physicality of the text itself [...]. Similarly, our attention is frequently drawn to the physical disposition of ink on the page [...].” (Stonehill 1998, 82). Instances of this concept expressed by Stonehill can be frequently found also in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. For example, the episode in which V. describes Clare's typewriting of Sebastian's novels is focussed chiefly on details of calligraphy and the act of writing itself: “[s]he had learnt to type and the summer evenings of 1924 had been to her as many pages slipped into the slit and rolled out again alive with black and violet words” (70).

In spite of these constructions, Nabokov manages to create “astonishingly vivid” characters, as John Lanchester (Lanchester 2001, 175) has observed. Indeed, all the works attributed to the fictitious artist are so well written that, as Nabokov reports in the preface of *Invitation to a Beheading*, Knight has been criticized by scholars as if he were a real writer: “[d]uring the last three decades they have hurled at me (to list but a few of these harmless missiles) Gogol, Dostoevski, Joyce, Voltaire, Sade, Stendhal, Balzac, Byron, Bierbohm, Proust, Kleist, Makar Marinski, Mary McCarthy, Meredith (!), Cervantes, Charlie Chaplin, Baroness Murasaki, Pushkin, Ruskin, and even *Sebastian Knight*.” (Nabokov 1959, 6, italics mine).

V.'s Body

A thick halo of vagueness and uncertainty surrounds not only Knight, but also V.. Apart from his considerations about his searches and his poor childhood memories,¹² little more is told about him. Therefore, V. is characterized not only by the absence of his name, but also by what he is missing:¹³ Sebastian. Besides declaring his disgust with the so-called “biographies romancées” (17), V. decides to write Knight’s biography to restore the truth about his life. In fact, according to V., his reputation had been ruined by the publication of *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight*, a book composed by Mr Goodman (Sebastian’s secretary) while the poet was still alive, defined as “slapdash and very misleading” (13). This task proves to be hard for a minor businessman who has never trod the path of literature: he often feels bewildered, “lost [...] [with] nowhere to go” (103), and makes no secret about his perceived shortcomings, openly taking his frustrations out on the reader. His initial (pretended?) modesty, expressed through frequent declarations of inadequacy, soon leaves more and more space to thorough reports of his searches.

Indeed, after the first couple of chapters, the reader begins to realize that *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* will not be about the poet’s biography, but rather, it will deal with V.’s attempt to write it. The narrator’s incapability (or lack of will?) to write about the deceased poet falls short of the audience’s expectations, breaking the title’s¹⁴ inferred promise and distancing Sebastian even more. Thus the object of desire, already distant from the very beginning (since he is dead), is pushed further away, nearly disappearing. This happens mainly when the narration (and the narrator, too) becomes unreliable, *i.e.*, when the interviews carried out prove to be useless, or when V. reports his ideas, thoughts and searches. As in Sebastian’s case, the concreteness of the text, which is the book we are actually reading, functions as a substitute for V.’s body.

Ultimately, the only certainties in V.’s story seem to be Sebastian’s occupation and his novels;¹⁵ one can draw some conclusions about his style by comparing it to his half-brother’s,¹⁶ but the lack of information about him still remains a fact. This fundamental inaccessibility to Sebastian’s life suggests the effective absence of his biography, despite V.’s attempts to convince the reader that his work is the only one faithfully portraying his half-brother’s existence. The substantial absence of Knight’s biography is even more striking when compared to the multi-coloured mass of fictional, bogus biographies, auto-biographies, trustful or false information about the poet that cram the novel. Hence, the dichotomy of absence *versus* presence is obtained in this case by exploiting the concept of overabundance.

To take one example, at the time of his death, Sebastian was working on a biography of a non-existent person, a certain Mr H..¹⁷ A newspaper clipping provides an insight into

¹² In which he constantly recalls being ignored by Sebastian.

¹³ Marco Focchi argues that the same technique of characterization is employed both by Ariosto and Pessoa. For further details, see Focchi (1991; 2005).

¹⁴ For further reference on Nabokovian paratexts, see Edelstein (2008).

¹⁵ What if they are invented too?

¹⁶ As Vladimir Nabokov said, “[t]he best part of a writer’s biography is not the record of his adventures but the story of his style” (Nabokov 1973, 154–55).

¹⁷ The symbol ‘H’ has got a meaning not only in Latin letters, but also in the Cyrillic alphabet, where it denotes the Latin sound ‘N.’ This distinction makes clear the structural *mise en abyme* that lies at the basis of the novel:

Sebastian's method of constructing his invented character: "[a]uthor writing fictitious biography requires *photos* of gentleman, efficient appearance, plain, steady, teetotaler, bachelors preferred. Will pay for photos childhood, youth, manhood to appear in said work" (34, italics mine). The reader is also informed that during his life Sebastian composed a novel, *Lost Property*, which was "his most autobiographical work" (6) in his half-brother's opinion.

The pendulum swing between V.'s and Sebastian's voice causes the oscillation of literary genre and the problem of resolving it within the novel. By noting all his own feelings and thoughts,¹⁸ the narrator writes a sort of autobiography. Yet the book approaches the field of biography when V. quotes passages from Sebastian's works or fragments of their conversations. The question of genre gets even more entangled when one notes that certain elements in the novel vividly recall Nabokov's life.

Infusing Paper Characters with Life

Nabokov's fiction seems to be steeped in his own autobiographical details. In the writer's novels, real life and imagination are always blended. Different critics, such as Herbert Grabes (1972), David Shields (1987), and Madeleine Descargues (1995), and more recently Andrea Pitzer (2013) and Gerard de Vries (2016),¹⁹ have examined the presence of autobiographical elements in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. However, a rapid foray into the autobiographical aspect of the novel will provide more detailed insight into some aspects of the present discussion.

It has been suggested that the inspiration for a biography springs from absence, in its meaning of loss and death. In Dureau's words, "[o]n one hand, there are forms of absence which are presented as irreducible, thus as causes of suffering; on the other hand, there are forms of absence which constitute a source of inspiration and creation" (Dureau 2001, 406). Under the black sun²⁰ of literary modernism, the empty space left by the bereavement provokes the birth of a particular kind of writing, as Monica Farnetti (2005, 41–47) argues with reference to Anna Maria Ortese and Virginia Woolf. Filippo Secchieri, too, highlights the use of literary production to soothe the pain caused by sorrow: "I can't see, I can't feel, I am no-one and I have got nothing, so I dream, I imagine, I write" (Secchieri 2005, 68).

Through the act of writing Sebastian's biography, V. shows his determination not only to establish the truth about his half-brother's life, but also to fill the void that the poet's absence has left after his death as well as the newly recognized void that existed during his lifetime. V. remembers that in their childhood Sebastian treated him coldly: "with a shove of his shoulder he pushes me away, still not turning, still as silent and distant, as always in regard to me" (14). Their relationship was so weak that "Sebastian's image does not appear as a part of [his] boyhood" (15). This last sentence is particularly interesting if compared to Brian Boyd's comment concerning the bond between Nabokov and his brother Sergei:

N. could well be the initial of Nabokov. The impression of Sebastian Knight at work on Vladimir Nabokov's biography is highly suggestive.

¹⁸ He even writes about his own affair with Madame Lecerf, Sebastian's last mistress.

¹⁹ In particular, de Vries (2016) devotes his attention to the secluded love affair Sebastian had with a man, linking it to an episode of crucial importance that occurred in the life of Nabokov's brother Sergei.

²⁰ This expression has been used by Julia Kristeva (1989).

“Vladimir racked himself with thoughts of insufficient fraternal affection: ‘there was not even any friendship between us, and . . . it is with a strange feeling that I realize I could describe my whole youth in detail without recalling him once.’” (Boyd 1990, 70).

Nabokov’s younger brother Sergei died in a Nazi concentration camp on January 9th, 1945. Despite having repeatedly denied putting explicit autobiographical elements in his works, it is nonetheless possible to find some faded cameos of their brotherhood inside the novel, such as Sergei’s left-handed gestures, their meetings in Paris and the episode of the discovery of his brother’s homosexuality. Moreover, there is a very significant image that parallels both Vladimir and Sergei, Sebastian and V.:

when I imagined actions of his which I heard of only after his death, I knew for certain that in such or such a case I should have acted just as he had. Once I happened to see two brothers, tennis champions, matched against one another; their strokes were totally different, and one of the two was far, far better than the other; but the general rhythm of their motions as they swept all over the court was exactly the same, so that had it been possible to draft both systems two identical signs would have appeared. (28–29)

In this image, which probably bears resemblance to Nabokov’s relationship with Sergei, V. and Sebastian are so closely bound that they seem two faces of one coin. Such metaphor echoes the one Plato explored in his *Symposium*:

the primeval man was *round*, his back and sides forming a *circle*. [Zeus said] ‘[...] men shall continue to exist, but I will cut them in two and then they will be diminished in strength and increased in numbers; this will have the advantage of making them more profitable to us. [...] He spoke and cut men in two, like a sorb-apple which is halved for pickling, or as you might divide an *egg* with a hair [...]. After the division the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and throwing their arms about one another, entwined in mutual embraces, longing to grow into one, they were on the point of dying from hunger and self-neglect, because they did not like to do anything apart [...]. So ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of man. (Plato 2008, 28, italics mine)

As in Plato’s narration, Nabokov seems to purposely use V. and Sebastian to fill one another’s deficiency. On one side is V. who is not as skilled a writer as Sebastian; his lack of talent is a foil to Knight’s genius. On the other side, the large, overwhelming presence of the narrator balances Sebastian’s physical absence. Hence, the true nature of V. and Sebastian is that they are two halves of one single thing. This condition, which reminds the attentive reader of Nabokov’s real situation, allows the construction of a bridge between life and fiction, through which characters inherit some ‘humanity.’

Conclusion: On the Negative (-) and Positive (+) Sides of Zero

The analysis ultimately leads to authentically Nabokovian questions. What truthful elements can be found in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*? What, on the contrary, is false? It

is undoubtedly true, as previous scholarship has indicated,²¹ that absence constitutes the structural core of novel, not only in its macroscopic aspects (such as the plot-line, narration, genre, meta-fictional dimensions), but also in its microscopic features (onomastics, letters, symbols, wordplay). Generally though, the aforementioned criticism that views absence as its constitutive trait focuses mostly on the negative meanings associated with the term, such as death, loss and nothingness.

Nonetheless, it also is possible to draw different conclusions based on a positive interpretation of absence and its numerical counterpart, zero. For example, the most blatant lack concerns the faithful biography promised by the title. The *real* life of the paratext is not real at all in the text. This is, however, an affirmation of a general truth: as a genre, biography is always, to some extent, mendacious. 'Real life' is something different and separated from its (fictional) account. Yet, the only valid portrait of an artist can be depicted using her works, instead of biographical details. Therefore, through denial — in this case, of a genre — there emerges a positive value.

Furthermore, this reasoning can be applied to the characters' construction. Everything in the novel concerning Sebastian Knight is potentially false. All characters, including Sebastian, might be invented by V., assuming that V. is the author of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Or, V. might be Sebastian's invention. V.'s unreliability allows both interpretations. Or, they are one person they do both not know:

I am Sebastian Knight. I feel as if I were impersonating him on a lighted stage, with the people he knew coming and going [...] but the hero remains, for, try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows. (172–173)

Such a reading finds its confirmation if considering the central importance of chess in the novel.²² In the end, Knight vanishes, making the same move of the alike-named figure in the game. He seems to be approaching through a direct line but at the very last minute he abruptly changes his direction. Moreover, as Aleksandr Vladimirovich Ledenev (Ledenev 1998) has claimed, the three 'Os' (or zeros) in Orlova's name form the scheme of a chess move, the so-called 'castling', in its long variant. What is interesting here is that 'castling' is a defensive move to protect the King. Who is the King in the novel? Perhaps he is the nameless person whose identity is so persistently concealed. Namely through the use of masks,²³ these attitudes of protection and defence continuously emerge, allowing a better understanding of the 'equality' of characters in the novel. As if they were all, Sebastian included, evenly at the mercy of an invisible tyrant. This equality conforms to a Shklovskyan understanding of characters, seen as *functions* of the fictional world they inhabit. Indeed, they all co-operate within the limits of their metafictional status.

Paradoxically, however, this uniformity gives another value to all that is written on Sebastian's account. Everything could be true, or better — partially true. Then why would V.

²¹ See footnote 3.

²² This theme has already been extensively discussed (see Gezari and Wimsatt 1979).

²³ In Mr Goodman's first meeting with V., he mysteriously wears a black mask (p. 48).

want to report apparently useless information, as that given by Olga Olegovna Orlova, or even contrasting opinions of the much hated Mr Goodman? All the points of view presented by the characters, for better or worse, generate an image of Sebastian. Sometimes, these images are even completely juxtaposed. Still, as pieces of a mosaic, they compose the whole picture. In this respect, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* could be regarded as a more sophisticated experiment in the taxonomy of characters, which Nabokov had already explored in his povest' *Sogliadatai* (1930, self-translated into English as *The Eye*, 1965). As in *Sogliadatai*, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* a compact, definite image of the protagonist never emerges. Hence, as far as the character is concerned, the reader is left suspended in the feelings of uncertainty and incompleteness.

Such incompleteness, however, can be explained if considering *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as part of a hypertext, where the hypertext corresponds to Nabokov's whole *oeuvre*. Sebastian can be found again, for instance, in *Look at the Harlequins!*,²⁴ with his typical 'violet attributes': "[h]e hoped, furthermore, that Sebastian — whoever that was — might still be coming for the grape season or lavender gala" (Nabokov 1990, 5). Had Nabokov provided his characters with abundant descriptions, there would have been very little gain in playing this game. Therefore, absence becomes fundamental to the characters' internal structure. Jane Zwart once suggested that in Olga Olegovna Orlova's empty monogram "each [...] letter is a circle around [Sebastian's] non-existence" (Zwart 2003, 220). I would rather argue that her monogram represents the circle uniting related characters in all Nabokov's works, thus construing a hyper-character.

This, in a nutshell, seems to be the artifice in the conjuror's magic.

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²⁴ Priscilla Meyer (1997) has studied the relationship between *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Despair*.

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author: Irina Marchesini
 affiliation: University of Bologna
 email: irina.marchesini2@unibo.it