

## *The “Doubles” in Nabokov’s The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** The ambiguous identities of the two heroes, V. and Sebastian, in Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, is of great interest to Nabokovian criticism and scholarship. This paper, in light of theories on the “double”, intends to figure out the problem and reveal Nabokov’s design of Sebastian and V. as “doubles”. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov structures delicate mappings for the doubling relationship between the two heroes. His intricate design of doubles aims to show the dynamic process of Sebastian and V.’s self-development by erasing the psychic distance between them.

**Keywords:** Vladimir Nabokov; *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; double; relationship

### Introduction

*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is Vladimir Nabokov’s (1899–1977), the Russian-American writer’s first English-language novel. Obviously, this novel occupies a key position in the exiled writer’s art, it has its own special status in Nabokov’s oeuvre and shows Nabokov’s enduring interest in the identity problem.

The novel offers the reader a character simply named as V., with the double identity of a minor businessman in Marseilles in France and Russian émigré, and another hero, Sebastian Knight, V.’s recently deceased half-brother, who is a famous Anglo-Russian writer with four novels and three short stories published. Though they grew up together, Sebastian and V. are not very close. Due to the Russian Revolution, Sebastian and V. flee to Western Europe with

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V.'s mother after their father's death. They go their separate ways. Sebastian goes to Cambridge, while V. attends Sorbonne. They meet each other just four times in Paris before Sebastian's sudden and unexpected death caused by heart disease. Then V., on the one hand, moved by Sebastian's death and obsessed by his half-brother's life, on the other hand, to protect his half-brother's reputation threatened by a newly published biography, *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight*, written by Mr. Goodman, Sebastian's previous secretary, decides to write a book on Sebastian and his books. In order to perceive Sebastian on a much deeper and more accurate level, V. makes strenuous efforts to collect information about him from those who knew Sebastian. In the process of his assiduous quest, V. is discovered to have had more and more similarities with Sebastian. At the end of the novel V. claims that he is Sebastian Knight. Finally, V.'s book is titled *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

The ambiguous identities of the two heroes, V. and Sebastian, are of great interest for Nabokovian criticism and scholarship. This is occasioned by three controversial points in the novel. Firstly, the title, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, provides a special conceit for the work itself. However, "most readers of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* are likely to finish the book feeling that the promise made by the title has not been kept by the novel" (Fromberg 1967: 427). The more one reads the book, the more one is frustrated by V.'s recurrent complaint about his hard quest, and the less the reader knows Sebastian. Secondly, the very first paragraph mentions Sebastian just twice, with seven pronouns pointing to V.. In other words, the presumed hero of this book, Sebastian Knight, does not get his pre-eminence. Finally, the ending sentence, "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows" (Nabokov 1959: 205), reinforces the readers' accumulating uncomfortable suspicion: Is the book about the "real life" of Sebastian Knight or about V.'s quest of it? Or is V. the actual Sebastian? Obviously, V., as the narrator and biographer, is enmeshed in the "I," while Sebastian should be the hero, as the title indicates. These obstacles frustrate many scholars who attempt to unravel the plot accurately and convincingly. The interwoven identities of V. and Sebastian have generally generated a number of interpretations. Whether V. is Sebastian becomes a paradox, which seems to be Nabokov's intricate mystery (Zhang & Zhang 2016: 687–693). Gennady Barabtarlo summarizes all the reading possibilities of this novel and proposes five reading levels:

1. V. has written the life of his half-brother.
2. Sebastian's ghost guides V. through Knight's fiction as Virgil does Dante's narrator.
3. V. has invented his half-brother.
4. V. and his story are Sebastian's fabrication.

5. Both are figments of "someone's" imagination, as stated in the last sentence of the novel. (Barabtarlo 2008: 61)

Moreover, Barabtarlo provides textual proofs for every level in order to deconstruct the problem. He thinks that "the solution to the narrative riddle of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is to be found in its title: Sebastian is an anagram of 'Knight is absent' with an 'a' to spare" (69). In other words, the title of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* implies that this novel is a book recording the real life of an "absent Knight".

Through centring on the ambiguous identities of Sebastian and V., this paper, in the light of theories on the "double", intends to figure out the identity puzzle and reveal Nabokov's design of Sebastian and V. as "doubles".

## The Motif of the Double

The motif of the double originates from the "doppelgänger", Jean Paul Richter's footnote to his novel *Siebenkäs* (1796) (Miller 2009: 49). Doppelgänger, meaning the "double goer", refers to people who see themselves. The term "double" at the outset attained its denotational meanings in the guise of the second self, the alter ego, the other, the other half or the doppelgänger which implies the images of split- or double-personalities (Dieguez 2013: 77). Usually this kind of "double" image can be evoked by some material objects such as mirrors, portraits, photographs, shadows, statues, and dolls which can serve to implement the doubling mechanism. Later, the term "double" was also endowed with a spiritual dimension by being associated with the identity of the orphan which manifests the double's nature of wandering and roaming (Miller 2009: 48).

The resonance between the doubles usually consists of two aspects, the outer appearance and the inner knowledge, or the physical aspect and the psychic one. Concerning the similarities between the doubles, "manifest doubles" are the most common kind in literary works (Rogers 1970: 1)<sup>2</sup>. Manifest doubles have similar appearances and family likenesses. Among them, "the theme of the brothers" is the classic (Rank 1971: 84). The dualistic relationship between the doubles can be complementary or oppositional. As for the complementary doubles, they "may present two characters who complement each other both physically and psychologically" (Rosenfield 1963: 328), which highlight their psychic affinities and a strong shared psychological bond. Concerning the

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<sup>2</sup> There are two kinds of doubles. Another kind is called "latent doubles" (Rogers 1970: 1). The latent double appears as a distinct and separate being apprehensible by the physical senses, but it carries a dependent relation to the original.

contrary doubles, “the double is often a symbolic representation of a tug-of-war between conflicting elements present in the original self, the inner fight being externalized and embodied in a separate individual” (Dieguez 2013: 83). The second self can be the embodiment of the double’s emotional and psychological weakness, his inner anxiety and fear. In other words, the other self becomes the projection of the double’s fear and anxiety. Usually, in literature, the function of the doubles lies first of all in mirroring the corresponding part’s situation. Secondly, the emergence of the double can be seen as “the operative presence of the doppelgänger” (Vardoulakis 2010: 3), which highlights the fusion of the doubles. The operative presence of the double functions as “the element of formal relationality that structures the subject’s ontology” (Vardoulakis 2010: 3), while the absent presence of the double denies the differentiation and “questioning the limits of identity and the self” (Dieguez 2013: 83).

In the light of the “double” theories, “the identity puzzle” of the two heroes in Nabokov’s *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* may be interpreted differently. In this novel, Nabokov structures delicate mappings for the doubling relationship between the two heroes<sup>3</sup>. There are three suggestive symptoms implying the doubling design of the half-brothers, V. and Sebastian, in the novel. Firstly, in the first sentence – “Sebastian was born on the thirty-first of December, 1899, in the former capital of my country” (Nabokov 1959: 5), the juxtaposition of the first person and the third person suggests the coexistence of the narrator and the subject of his biography, which implies their close bond. They are both “manifest doubles” because of their blood relationship, and “complementary doubles” because of their psychic affinities. Secondly, the last sentence – “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I” (Nabokov 1959: 205), directly defines the fusing and merging of their identities. The third symptom is implied by the name of Sebastian Knight. After anagrammatizing “Sebastian Knight”, the phrase “Knight is absent” (Barabtarlo 2008: 72), with an “a” left over, expresses the absent presence of the double with the omnipresent spirit of Sebastian. The above-mentioned three symptoms correspond to the dynamic process of one double meeting

<sup>3</sup> Actually, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov structures delicate mappings for the doubling relationship between five main figures besides the mirror-image relationship between Sebastian and V.. Firstly, Mr. Goodman, as the counterpart of V., is the perfect psychological mapping for V.. The doubling design of Mr. Goodman and the conflicting conversation between V.’s biographical text and Mr. Goodman’s biographical text reflect that V. is striving to achieve his own self-development through writing. Secondly, Sebastian’s doubling relationship of his British mother Clare Bishop and Nina Rechnoy shows that Sebastian spares no effort to achieve a spiritual flight from mortal life in order to meet his ideal model. However, this article will only focus on the doubling relationship between the two heroes.

his counterpart. The last sentence – “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I,” which reflects the mirror-image relationship between V. and Sebastian, signifies the state of “the other in I.” In the novel, V. and Sebastian are each other’s ideal models. The distance between the double and his ideal model motivates the double to complete himself. The final merging and fusion of V. and Sebastian results from the absent presence of the double through the mutual gaze between the doubles.

Sebastian and V., based on their blood relationship, build a mirror-image relationship which guarantees the fusion of their spirits through a dynamic process of self-improvement. Nabokov’s intricate design of doubles aims to show the dynamic process of Sebastian and V.’s self-development by eliminating the distance between them.

### Sebastian and V.: “The bonds between us”

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the two protagonists, the half-brothers Sebastian and V. are each other’s doubles. Their doubling connection is first of all explained by the bonds between them. Because of their common father, Sebastian and V. are apparent “manifest doubles”, joined together by ties of blood and family likeness. Besides their similar physical characteristics, they share the spiritual identity of the wandering orphan and they have a close psychological bond.

First, because of their blood relationship, Sebastian and V. are similar to each other in looks, which denotes that they are “manifest doubles”. V., as the narrator of the novel, repeatedly tells the readers that their similar looks result in other people’s mistaking one for the other, resulting in mistaken identity. For example, V. mentions Sebastian’s last letter to V. describing a scene where old Dr. Starov’s mistook him for V.. Sebastian lives in Paris for the sake of his heart-disease and meets old Dr. Starov by chance one night in the street. Sebastian realizes Dr. Starov’s mistake when old Dr. Starov implies that Sebastian has been “vegetating in Paris since maman’s death” (Nabokov 1959: 186). The truth is that it is V. who is exiled in Paris. But Sebastian accepts his doctor’s mistake and agrees to his version of his émigré existence without any further explanation. Sebastian’s quiet reaction implies that others’ mixing up the two half-brothers is common to him. Thus, it is certain that Sebastian and V. have similar looks so that they are always mistaken for each other by other people.

The physical doubling of Sebastian and V. is further manifested through the myth of Narcissus<sup>4</sup> implied in the novel. In Sebastian’s portrait painted by Roy

<sup>4</sup> The myth of Narcissus is repeatedly adopted in Nabokov’s fictional writing (see Boyd 1998/1999).

Carswell, the painter wants to convey the impression that Sebastian is pouring upon his reflection in a pool like Narcissus. In Sebastian's portrait there is Sebastian's actual reflection in the water. Later the portrait is passed on to V., and when V. looks at Sebastian's reflection in the painting, he feels that he is peering "into a pool at himself" (Nabokov 1959: 119). Thus in V.'s hands the painting in some degree functions as a mirror reflecting V.'s inner infatuation with his half-brother, his second self. In other words, the painting is transformed into a mirror for V.. Therefore, the allusion to the myth of Narcissus connects the doubles.

Apart from their similar physical characteristics, both Sebastian and V. are orphans on the real and spiritual levels. Sebastian lost his English mother, Virginia Knight, when he was nine; he lost his Russian father at the age of thirteen. Whereas V. lost his father when he was eight; he lost his mother during his exile at the age of seventeen. Their identities as orphans embody the inner side of their characters and their loss of identity. For Sebastian, the orphan's loss originates from the absence of his English mother. He "could never forget his mother, nor could he forget that his father had died for her" (Nabokov 1959: 18). In his eyes, his restless mother's abandonment does not affect his pursuit and love. On the contrary, "that her name was never mentioned in our home added morbid glamour to the remembered charm which suffused his impressionable soul" (Nabokov 1959: 18). His only and incomplete meeting with his biological mother becomes his source of inspiration for all his later descriptions and memories. And V. is more like an orphan without any family member living, especially after Sebastian's death. His feeling of loss is expressed by his soliloquy after Sebastian leaves his stepmother's funeral: "Suddenly for no earthly reason I felt immensely sorry for him and longed to say something real, something with wings and a heart, but the birds I wanted settled on my shoulders and head only later when I was alone and not in need of words" (Nabokov 1959: 32). Because Sebastian and V. are orphaned writers, they find in the form of literary creation an everlasting way to make up for their common feeling of loss. Only in their literary worlds is nothing absent, for "everything is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (Nabokov 1999: 56).

What's more, Sebastian and V.'s psychic resonances also signify the bonds between this pair of doubles. Firstly, V.'s possession of inner knowledge of his dead half-brother lets him build a mysterious connection with Sebastian. V. says, "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" (Nabokov 1959: 33–34). Obviously, V. can perceive the existence of his Russian father in Sebastian's works. For every time he opens one of Sebastian's works, he seems to see their father dashing into the room. Secondly, benefiting from their blood relationship, their doubling takes advantage of the general rhythm of their motions which can

be explained as the curious "it-has-happened-before-feeling" (Nabokov 1959: 34). In Sebastian's books V. can easily find some detail of mood or impression that makes him "remember at once, say, a certain effect of lighting in a definite place which two had noticed, unknown to one another" (Nabokov 1959: 35). In a word, Sebastian and V., as doubles, do possess certain psychological affinities.

### Sebastian and V.: "The other in I"

The physical and psychological bonds between Sebastian and V. mark them as doubles. Each of them has the feeling of "the other in I", which means that they are doubles who "complement each other both physically and psychologically" (Rosenfield 1963: 328).

"The other in I" accurately reflects the paradoxical relationship between a man and his mirror image when he is staring at his reflection in the mirror (Yan 2009: 19). There are three points pertaining to the relationship between the doubles. Firstly, "the other in I" is "the man in the looking-glass." More accurately, when a man gazes at himself in the mirror, he is not looking at himself but appreciating his ideal model instead. Thus, "the man in the looking-glass" reflects that the double is continuously striving for an ideal model nobler than himself. Meanwhile, the longing for an ideal model reveals the double's incompleteness. Secondly, the mirror-image relationship between the doubles implies the distance between the double and his ideal model. However, the invisible and immeasurable distance between the doubles provides the double with enough space to make progress in self-development. Thirdly, "the other in I" is the other in one's gaze. The double's gaze expresses his strong desire for a mystical and spiritual union with his ideal model. At the same time, the mutual gaze between the doubles functions as "the operative presence of the doppelgänger" (Vardoulakis 2010: 3). Taken in this sense, V.'s quest for Sebastian's real life in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* can be seen as a record of how a double meets his mirror image in the looking-glass.

Firstly, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, V. and Sebastian are each other's ideal models, therefore they are "complementary doubles". From the perspective of V., Sebastian is his ideal model because of Sebastian's literary achievements, which inspires V.'s ambition to be a successful English writer like his dead half-brother. V., as an unpromising businessman, envies Sebastian's occupation as an acclaimed writer. In V.'s eyes, the announcement of Sebastian's new book is "a token of happiness" (Nabokov 1959: 181). He cannot help picturing in his mind Sebastian's world in which Sebastian is standing "in a warm cheerful room at some club... and all the other people in the room standing round him, holding glasses of port, and laughing at his jokes" (Nabokov 1959: 181). In order to escape from his

meaningless life in which V. has to wheedle clients into settling deals, V. desires to access a higher spiritual level by writing like Sebastian. Similarly, for Sebastian V. is the ideal model. V. stays loyal to his spiritual identity of a White Russian émigré while Sebastian, because of his maternal identity of English, makes every effort to erase his paternal identity of the exiled Russian. However, his blending into English culture makes Sebastian lose the sense of belonging on the spiritual level. He envies V.'s persistent efforts to protect his own singular identity as an émigré. V. lives in Paris with other Russian émigrés and interacts with other émigrés like Dr. Starov. And V. accepts this kind of homeless state but he lives through his spiritual identity. V.'s loyalty to his émigré identity and his unchanging love for his Russian heritage finally leads Sebastian back to his Russian identity before his death.

Secondly, the motivation of pursuing one self's ideal model stems from the distance between his self and his ideal model. V.'s distance from Sebastian is demonstrated by three aspects: their age gap, emotional distance and the gap of literary creation. First of all, the six years' gap of age precludes Sebastian from cultivating any close conscious relations with V., for he is "not young enough to be my companion and not old enough to be my guide" (Nabokov 1959: 18). Secondly, it is "Sebastian's constant aloofness" (Nabokov 1959: 18) that keeps V. away from his half-brother. Even V. "could perhaps describe the way he walked, or laughed or sneezed, but all this would be no more than sundry bits of cinema-film cut away by scissors and having nothing in common with the essential drama" (Nabokov 1959: 18). Last but not least, there is literary distance between V. and Sebastian. V. adores his half-brother's literary capacity sincerely. And he thinks that "the difference between his power of expression and mine is comparable to that which exists between a Bechstein piano and a baby's rattle" (Nabokov 1959: 34) because V.'s capacity of mastering English is worse than that of Sebastian. Thus, V. holds that it is impossible for him to share with Sebastian "any riches of the mind, any facets of talent" (Nabokov 1959: 34).

Compared to V.'s externalized differences, Sebastian's distance to V. lies in his incomplete sense of belonging resulting from Sebastian's escape from his spiritual identity of an exile. Sebastian's binational citizenship is the origin of his spiritual vacillation between his English and Russian identities. The immature Sebastian has a great urge to follow his English mother's extraordinary life path. The imagery in his poems exposes his eagerness to visit his mother's hometown. When he goes to Cambridge, he makes a great attempt to fit in. He refuses to speak Russian, and he even forces himself to forget Russian by writing in English. When, at a class, one Slavacist enthusiastically talks to Sebastian in Russian, he rejects his Russian identity by telling a lie that he was born in Sofia instead of Russia. His exterior transformations include a preference for foreign clothing and adopting an artificial

accent. When Sebastian visits V. and his step-mother in Paris at the close of his first university year, they are "struck by his foreign appearance" (Nabokov 1959: 28). And when Sebastian has dinner with V. in 1924, "he tried to pronounce French as a real healthy Britisher would" (Nabokov 1959: 73). However, the distance between Sebastian's fake English identity and his ideal model's Russian identity provides enough space for his return.

Thirdly, gazing at the ideal model means that the double "desires to search for an object to identify with for constructing an integrated subjectivity" (Yan 2009: 2). The mutual gaze of V. and Sebastian achieves the absent presence of the double in each other's lives. In the novel, V. does not intend to hide his strong affection for Sebastian, which is manifest in his concentration on every aspect of Sebastian's life. When V. is six, he tries his best to "get a better glimpse of the paint-box beyond my half-brother's moving elbow" (Nabokov 1959: 16). When V. is in a moral conundrum, he reads every published book of Sebastian. In order to complete the picture of Sebastian in his mind, he tries any means he can to find the fatal woman in Sebastian's life, for she is "the missing link in his evolution" (Nabokov 1959: 120). Clearly, V.'s lasting preoccupation with Sebastian's mirror image results in Sebastian's absent presence in V.'s mind. "The Voice in the Mist" (Nabokov 1959: 52) reveals this kind of operative presence of his double. That Voice of "Who is speaking of Sebastian Knight?" (Nabokov 1959: 52) reminds V. of Sebastian's advice: "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" (Nabokov 1959: 52). Meanwhile, the operative presence of Sebastian functions as the haunting spirit of Sebastian. In V.'s mind, he is "sustained by the secret knowledge that in some unobtrusive way Sebastian's shade is trying to be helpful" (Nabokov 1959: 101). Sebastian becomes the guide of V.'s own will during his research on the truth of his half-brother Sebastian's life. For Sebastian, V. never escapes from his literary world where he goes on living the life of a businessman. In Sebastian's novel *Lost Property* (1930), he mentions a businessman with whom he has lunched a few weeks previously. Furthermore, one leading role in Sebastian's fictional world is being a member of office staff who reads novels, writes verse, and keeps an eye on the stocks. Sebastian keeps gazing at his absent presence for the sake of constructing an integrated subjectivity. In short, the mutual gaze of V. and Sebastian provides the motivation for them to complete their respective subjectivity.

Thus, "the other in I" is more than a reflection of the doubling relationship between V. and Sebastian. It can be seen as a dynamic process of self-development. "The other in I" not only refers to the ideal model in the double's eyes but also implies the distance between the doubles. Furthermore, the existence of this distance provides the doubles with a springboard onto a higher spiritual level.

Therefore, the final merging and fusion of the identities of V. and Sebastian not only denies a difference between the doubles but also undoes their individuality.

## Conclusion

Based on the above discussions, it can be concluded that the ambiguous identities of V. and Sebastian represent a doubling relationship between the two half-brothers. Nabokov's intricate design of doubles intends to show the fluid nature of an individual's spiritual identity and the dynamic process of Sebastian and V.'s self-development by erasing their original identity through mutual identification and psychic affinities. V. and Sebastian are each other's doubles, and they desire to identify with each other for the sake of their born incompleteness. The affinities between V. and Sebastian shape this pair of doubles into an organic unit which stresses the continuous flowing of spiritual elements between different individuals based on their shared psychic perception and cognition of life.

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