

The Gnostic Hunters in Nabokov's The Real Life of Sebastian Knight

ZHANG JUNPING
ZHANG BIN

Abstract: Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* presents the ambiguous identities of the two heroes, V. and Sebastian, attracting great attention among Nabokovian scholarship. The present article intends to reveal that Nabokov's design of Sebastian and V. pertains to his own Gnostic faith and the ambiguous identities of V. and Sebastian, in light of certain Gnostic tenets and concepts, are the representation of their spiritual evolution and their merging spirits during their respective quest of "gnosis". The article will show how the heroes as "aliens" break the shackles of "this world," undo the chains of the heavy flesh, regain their spiritual identities of the inner selves, start the journey of spiritual evolution and self-revelation, and finally achieve the fusion of spirits in "the other world" by way of attaining "gnosis".

Keywords: Nabokov; *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; ambiguous identity; Gnostic belief

The Two Heroes' Ambiguous Identities in Nabokov's Novel and Some Interpretations

Vladimir Nabokov (1899–1977), the Russian American novelist, "as one of the finest and most influential writers of the twentieth century" (Roth 1984: 3), is endowed with double spiritual identities: one is an "alien" in exile; the other is a Gnostic hunter for knowledge. These double spiritual identities define not only Nabokov but also his oeuvre. And his unique double identities permeate every facet of his writing, his artistic devices, his themes, his fictional setting, his plot design, his heroes' psychology. His first English novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is no exception.

Though "the language in which Nabokov wrote this novel was a significant departure for him, many of the novel's themes, values, and writing devices were not" (Alexandrov 1991: 138). Obviously, this novel occupies a key position in the hidden mainspring of his art and gets its own special status in Nabokov's oeuvre. One of the heroes in the novel (also the narrator) is simply called V.,

who has double identities of a minor businessman in Marseilles of France and a Russian émigré. The other hero is V.'s recently deceased half-brother, a famous Anglo-Russian writer, Sebastian Knight, whose name appears in the title. The two brothers grow up together, but are not close. They flee to Western Europe with V.'s mother (their father died in a duel) as a result of the Russian Revolution, then go their separate ways. Before Sebastian's sudden and unexpected death caused by heart disease, they seldom meet. Even so, V., interested in his half-brother's life and overwhelmed by Sebastian's works, decides to write a book on Sebastian and Sebastian's books to protect his half-brother's reputation which is being destroyed by Mr. Goodman, Sebastian's previous secretary who published a biography of Sebastian. In order to collect accurate information about Sebastian, V. makes assiduous efforts to make acquaintances with those who lived around Sebastian, including his two lovers, Clare Bishop and Nina Rechnoy. In his strenuous quest, V. finds himself more and more similar to Sebastian. Finally, V. claims that "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows" (Nabokov 1959: 205). At the end of the novel, V. finishes his book on his half-brother which is "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight", the same title as Nabokov's novel.

The novel presents the ambiguous identities of the two protagonists, V. and Sebastian, attracting great attention among Nabokovian scholarship. As the title of the novel indicates, the novel must be about the real life of Sebastian. 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), for the more they read the book, the more they find V. complains about his frustrated quest, and the less the readers know about the supposed protagonist, Sebastian. Readers would easily consolidate their suspicion: Is V. the actual Sebastian? Are they the same one who divides himself into two characters for narrative fun? Is the book about the "real life" of Sebastian Knight or about that of V.'s? All of these show Nabokov's intricate literary mystery, challenging readers and frustrating scholars who try to figure out the "real life" of the real hero(s) accurately and convincingly. One scholar even summarizes five reading possibilities¹ as to the interwoven identities of V. and Sebastian and suggests "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" (Barabtarlo 2008: 69).

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 started in the last sentence of the novel (Barabtarlo 2008: 61).

Up to now, all the criticism has tried to separate the interwoven issues of identity, but has ignored the dynamic and fluid progress of Sebastian and V.'s mutual fusion as the result of each other's spiritual evolution. So, why not analyze the question concentrating on the fusion identities of Sebastian and V. instead of proving one character to be the center of the novel? Why not analyze the author's intention as designing their dynamic and fluid evolution of spirit, which is quite a manifestation of the Gnostic motif and Gnostic topoi and is also closely related to Nabokov's Gnostic belief?

Nabokov's Spiritual Identity of a Gnostic and Some Gnostic Concepts

Several pillars of Nabokovian scholarship have already explored Nabokov's Gnostic motif. First and foremost, D. Barton Johnson, the acknowledged Nabokovian expert, in his *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* exposes Nabokov's spiritual identity as a Gnostic seeker based on his thematic analysis of Nabokov's ten novels. Meanwhile, Johnson points out that Nabokov's two-world aesthetic cosmology, a problematic feature of Nabokov's fictions, pertains to his Gnostic quest running through his entire oeuvre. Then scholars began to adopt the related Gnostic tenets and symbols to explore Nabokov's metaphysics. Lena Toker also claims that Nabokov's "favorite brand of mysticism seems to have been the gnostical belief in a transcendent reality" (Toker 1989: 4). In other words, she believes that Nabokov's faith in "the other world" originates from his Gnostic faith. Sergey Davydov (1995a) directly analyzes Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* in the light of comprehensive Gnostic tenets. Alexandrov in his *Nabokov's Otherworld* totally embraces Davydov's adaptation of Gnosticism and merges the Gnostic topoi into his own exploration of Nabokov's faith in the existence of "the other world". Compared to the thematical studies, Bethea also points out that Nabokov's "positive characters often possess a secret knowledge ('gnosis')" (1995: 701).

Nabokov's spiritual identity of a Gnostic is also divulged by three conclusive proofs. Firstly, Nabokov's Gnostic faith pertains to his firm belief in the existence of "the other world". Nabokov inherited this belief from his mother, since "her intense and pure religiousness [takes] the form of her having equal faith in the existence of another world and in the impossibility of comprehending it in terms of earthly life" (Nabokov 1999: 29). In Nabokov's letters to his mother, he expresses his "fascination with the underweave of life, a realm of substantial shadows that lies beyond that illusory existence" (Schiff 1999: 41). And for Nabokov, "the other world" stands for the soul's immortality. What happens after death is like a bird springing from a branch, keeping flying

and never falling. After death, man's soul will meet "in an unexpected but completely natural heaven, in a realm where all is radiance and delight" (qtd. in Schiff 1999: 41). Secondly, Mrs. Nabokov, on behalf of her husband, endows "the other world" with the status of Nabokov's spiritual faith, when she wrote an introduction to Nabokov's Russian poems published posthumously in 1979. In her short but seminal remarks, Mrs. Nabokov claims that "the other world" is "a mystery that he (Nabokov) carries in his soul..." (qtd. in Alexandrov 1991: 4). Thirdly, "Vladimir Nabokov's novels have a mysterious Gnostic metaphysics" (Wang 2014: 76). His *Invitation to a Beheading* (1936) is regarded as a classic example with the highest density of Gnostic details. The novel's hero Cincinnatus is charged with the crime of "gnostical turpitude" (ibid. 72), which is apparently influenced by Nabokov's spiritual identity as a Gnostic.

Gnosticism is characterized by radical dualism that is suggested by the three main Gnostic symbols – "the alien," "this world" and "the other world," which also saturates the Gnostic cosmology, anthropology, and eschatology. The dual antithesis of "this world" and "the other world" deals with the Gnostic cosmology; the antagonistic relationship between "the alien" and "this world" concerns Gnosticism's anthropological problems; the ascending relationship between "the alien" and "the other world" pertains to the scheme of individual salvation.

Firstly, the antithesis of "this world" and "the other world" manifests the dual construction of the Gnostic cosmology, and these two isolated realms are cut off from each other by seven shells surrounding "this world." "This world" is like a prison with the feature of a labyrinth, whereas "the other world" is the habitation of Life and Light. The duality of "this world" and "the other world" coincides with the antithesis of darkness and light, the struggle between death and immortality. "This world" is a chaotic place, full of evil, full of falsehood and deceit, where the good things perish; while in "the other world", there is eternal life without death and decay.

Secondly, the antithetic relationship between "this world" and "the alien" underlines the alien's living conditions in "this world". This relationship reflects the tragic fate and the captive condition of "the alien" who has been cast into "this world." In this Gnostic context, the word "alien", on the one hand, connotes man's opposite disposition to "this world," for the reason that the alien "is that which stems from elsewhere and does not belong here" (Jonas 2001: 49). In the eyes of those who belong to here, "the alien" means the stranger and danger. On the other hand, considering that "this world" is a complex labyrinth, the alien, "as the primary symbol of Gnosticism" (ibid. 51), can be seen as the prisoner living in "this world" for the downward movement from "the other world." In a word, the word "alien" displays the living conditions of the alien in the strange

surroundings: “being alien to this world and under certain conditions alien within it” (ibid. 49). This experience includes not only their falling from “the other world” but also the sufferings from the danger of being contaminated by “this world”: once “the alien” is blinded by the “ignorance” of “this world,” he would forget his identity as a stranger stemming from the other land and lose his way in this chaotic labyrinth.

Thirdly, the relationship between “the alien” and “the other world” is closely related to the Gnostic salvation which is “the release of the inner man from the bonds of the world and his return to his native realm of life” (ibid. 44). The Gnostic redemption is a dynamic process of the alien with the pneuma (spirit) ascending to “the other world”, indicating that death is not the end of man but the rebirth. In the eschatological context, achieving self-revelation depends on attaining “gnosis”. Here, “gnosis”, namely knowledge, is tinged with a type of mystical cognition, “which per se brings healing and salvation” (Haardt 1971: 3). It “not only makes the individual sovereign in the sphere of knowledge but also determines the sphere of action” (Jonas 2001: 48), thus it is not only “the means for the attainment of salvation” but also “the form of salvation itself” (ibid. 32), having an eminently practical aspect, for it can be acquired by personal action and practical experiences bringing on the act of divine revelation. On the one hand, “gnosis” functions as the action and aim of achieving redemption. There are three approaches to attaining “gnosis”: the mortal death, the spiritual evolution of the inner self and rites of passage. The rite of passage is some secret rite with symbols passing through the seven shells between “this world” and “the other world” during the upward movement to the homeland. On the other hand, the confirmed existence of immortality endows “gnosis” with a new function as the criterion for evaluating the mortal. Accordingly, there are three classes of man in “this world” in terms of their souls: pneumatics, psychics, and fleshly men. The ways of salvation after their death depend on the three classifications. The pneumatics, the possessor of “gnosis” or the Elect, will return to their homeland when they attain “gnosis” by the act of self-revelation. The psychics, the assistants of the elect must return to the world and the terror often and as long as their spirits are freed and after a long wandering back and forth they will join the assembly of the Elect (ibid. 233). And the fleshly men or the sinners would end up in hell.

Previous research on Gnosticism and Nabokov’s Gnostic theme provided a strong motivation for this paper. Being indebted to our precursors’ exploration of Nabokov’s Gnostic faith and his Gnostic theme, we may conjecture that in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the dynamic process of V. and Sebastian’s spiritual evolution and their fused identities are consistent with the falling alien’s self-salvation process from “this world” up to “the other world” through the

accumulation of “gnosis”. This paper, in light of certain Gnostic concepts, intends to prove that the ambiguous identities of V. and Sebastian are the representation of their spiritual evolution and their merging spirits during their respective quest of “gnosis”.

“This World” as a Dark Labyrinth with Temporal Disorder for the Two Protagonists

In the Gnostic context, “this world” is the “world of darkness, utterly full of evil ... full of falsehood and deceit ... a world of death without eternal life, a world in which the good things perish and plans come to naught” (qtd. in Jonas 2001: 57). In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov ascribes to “this world” the nature of the dark labyrinth with the temporal disorder based on “this world-prison” metaphor.

For one thing, Nabokov constructs “this world” as the dark labyrinth and visualizes the suffering of the two heroes in “this world”. First, the two young émigrés’ life in exile is rendered as dim, the weather is terrible. Second, the alien places are put under the shadow of death, which is omnipresent with many people dying. The two heroes in exile visit Helsingfors in Finland, Lausanne in Sweden, London in England, Paris in France, Berlin in German, a German seaside resort, Blaubeurg and St. Damier near Paris. These foreign cities are full of dead images. The word “Helsingfors” can be anagrammatized as “for Hell’s thing”. In Lausanne, all the aged governesses are dying. London is the hometown of the dead Clare Bishop, Sebastian’s muse, and Virginia Knight, Sebastian’s mother. V.’s own mother died in Paris, and Sebastian attends her funeral there. At a Blaubeurg’s hotel, there is a Swiss couple committing suicide. In a word, the apparent exposures of death suggest that living in “this world” is threatened by death. To the two half-brothers wandering in the streets of foreign cities, “this world” is full of hellish scenes and every temporary lodging is haunted by the shadow of death.

Second, because the darkness of “this world” is “caused merely by the walls of time” (Nabokov 1999: 9), the labyrinthine aspect of “this world” is also featured by its chaotic temporal representation and temporal traps. Nabokov’s stylistic device of time’s prison elucidates the temporal dimension of Gnostic “this world-prison” metaphor. Man is imprisoned by this temporal labyrinth. The “broken watch” appearing in the hand of the silent blond person at the end of Chapter 17 accurately points out the utter temporal disorder theme throughout the whole text. The pattern of the chaotic time is mainly suggested by the intertwined chronology of the two half-brothers. There are some mathematical and inferential traps of time setting in the Sebastian’s chronology and V.’s schedule of his quest

of Sebastian's life. On the horizontal level, Sebastian's chronological time and V's individual time are like two lines starting from the same point and ending at the same point based on the arrangement of chapters. During the whole progression, the two lines are like wavy lines which are interdependent but different in rhythm and span, sometimes running wide apart, sometimes nearly touching, and sometimes really meeting. On the vertical level, this kind of intertwined temporal representation easily misleads the reader to lose his/her reading pace and be lost in the mingling and mixed temporal trap. In other words, the blurring of two lines of time makes the reader miss outlining the chronology of the protagonists' actions with the result of the broken watch in the reader's hands. The most ornate and most obvious temporal trap in the novel are Sebastian's dates of birth and death whose inerrability is threatened by the choice between the Julian calendar and the Gregorian calendar concerning Sebastian's dual identity: a son of an English mother and a Russian father. And "the time jumping is [not only] an emblem of the hero's dual White Russian and English nationalities, which require expression in the proper relations to the two nations' distinct pre-war calendars" (Williams 1985: 57). Therefore, the complicated associations between Sebastian's double nationalities and the uncertain choice of two different calendars "probe the limits of time by creating cultural contexts lifting the individual above the stream of time" (Lyaskovets 2009: 2). The simultaneous usage of the Julian and Gregorian calendars and the troublesome transition are liable to lead to "a series of remarkably consistent chronological blunders" (Nabokov 1999: 6). Another temporal trap, suggesting the disorder time of "this world", is presented by V's inconsistent and patchy schedule. Since V's timetable and his actual writing progress can only be inferred from the temporal distance between his events and Sebastian's date of death, his schedule, which has to depend on Sebastian's chaotic chronology, is likewise characterized by inconsistency and chaos.

The Two Heroes as "the Alien" in "This World"

The two brothers in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* are alien in "this world". "The alien", "as a primary symbol of Gnosticism" (Jonas 2001: 51), originates "in the divine realm, but had fallen into the world below" (King 2005: 120). The word "alien" displays the living conditions of the alien in the strange surroundings: "being alien to this world and under certain conditions alien within it" (Jonas 2001: 49). This experience includes not only their falling from "the other world" but also the sufferings from the danger of being contaminated by "this world".

In the novel, Sebastian and V's experience of fleeing from revolutionary Russia builds their basic identities of exiles and endows them with spiritual

identities of “the alien”. And the downward motion proves that they stem “from elsewhere and do not belong here” (Nabokov 1959: 49). Wandering around the foreign countries, the half-brothers face the danger of being contaminated by the alien surroundings, losing their way home, and forgetting their identities. In this novel, the bait leading the brothers to degeneration is nourished by their personal infatuations and impersonal submission.

Concerning Sebastian, his degeneration is suggested by his reversed homesickness of England and his morbid and mysterious love of Nina, his fatal woman. His decline originates in his enduring infatuation with his British mother, Virginia Knight, even if she betrayed his Russian father and abandoned Sebastian when he was only four. On the one hand, the absence of his mother makes Sebastian infatuated with everything about his mother, especially England. And this wrong form of homesickness makes him lose his cultural identity as a Russian émigré. For Sebastian, his flight from Bolshevik Russia offers him an opportunity to embrace his mother’s birthplace. This smug alien even believes that his exile seems to be a return. Obviously, he ignores his half Russian blood and “gets lost in a different sense by succumbing to the lure of the alien and becoming estranged from his own origin” (Jonas 2001: 49). As a freshman of Cambridge, Sebastian made all possible efforts to become an English gentleman. Firstly, he tried his best to speak like an Englishman by correcting his Russian English, and he resolutely gave up his native tongue. He even “tried to pronounce French as a real healthy Britisher would” (Nabokov 1959: 73). Furthermore, he was eager to dress up as a normal Britisher. He even learned to knock his pipe out in the street, and developed a new way of standing. However, these external illusions made him look like a clown. As a result, his strong elation was substituted with his personal tragedy brought by the alien’s fate. Sebastian’s intoxication of being an Englishman is the most detailed description corresponding to the lost alien who is the symbolic image in the Gnostic text.

On the other hand, Sebastian’s miserable and materialistic love affair with Nina Rechnoy is a kind of fleshly degeneration, which is suggested by the gradual deterioration of his health. For the sake of Nina he even abandons his Muse – Clare Bishop. To some degree, “there seemed to be a slight family likeness” (ibid. 163) between Nina Rechnoy and Virginia Knight in that they are both charming and attractive women in the eyes of men, and both experienced and excellent hunters of men in the “vanity fair”. They have the capacity of seducing silly men to be their captured prey. Girls of their type can smash a man’s life and make the man miserable. Nina seduces Sebastian to bite the apple of sin and then betrays him mercilessly, which to a certain degree speeds up his deadline. Certainly, this love affair is doomed to failure for its fragile basis is materialistic love.

When compared with Sebastian’s inner torture and torment, V. is consumed with material seductions from his surroundings. The mortal life “was just another

trap set by the wicked world rulers to tie Gnostics to the body and further entrap them in the material world” (King 2005: 124). V., as a wandering exile, bears the economic burden from the alien surroundings. Before he decides to be a writer, V. is an unsuccessful businessman working for a company in Paris. Unlike Sebastian who inherited a lot of money from his British mother, V. lives in an émigré district with his mother in Paris. V. is defeated by material need. The mortal living is the most difficult obstacle for this young Russian exile. Before he suddenly realizes the important connection with Sebastian and decides to make an assiduous quest for Sebastian, V. abandons himself to pursuing material enjoyment and forces himself to be a mean exile wandering without direction.

Besides, V. is suffering from the danger of being entrapped by Nina’s web of lies and her bait of physical beauty. For V., this kind of sexual seduction is a fatal threat of his pursuit of the truth. During his difficult research on his dead half-brother’s real life, V. gains some vague and obscure traces of Sebastian’s fatal woman. When he is on that woman’s trail, he meets Madame Lecerf whose real identity is that of Nina Rechnoy herself. Bewitched by her physical beauty, V. makes one clear explanation of his research intention and is led to Nina’s house. During his three meetings with Nina, V. is utterly bewitched by her sexual beauty and falls into her trap made of lies. In V.’s eyes, Nina is “after all quite a pretty young woman” (Nabokov 1959: 165). V. even confesses that “for a moment he thought of making love to that woman” (ibid. 168). In a word, V. becomes a new prey of Nina’s vulgar seduction like his half-brother.

In the Gnostic context, an alien’s degeneration is his unavoidable fate. He forgets his way home and becomes lost, which “is the culmination of the stranger’s tragedy” (Jonas 2001: 50). And this kind of tragedy originates in the half-brothers’ succumbing to the lure of the mortal world. Sebastian’s infatuation lies in his morbid pursuit of his dead mother’s shadow while V. to a certain degree is fettered by the mortal and material life caused by his submission to the impersonal power. Sebastian’s tragedy lies in his pursuit of his English mother’s secret life while V.’s threat comes from his enduring and eerie research on Sebastian’s real life. In short, various traps of “this world” intend to “tie Gnostics to the body and further entrap them in the material world” (King 2005: 124).

“The Other World” as Divine Paradise with Timeless Time for the Two Heroes

As the counterpart of “this world” – a chaotic place with death and decay, “the other world” can be seen as “a spiritual substance with some divine mystery” (Zheng 2013: 78), the habitation of Life and Light. In “the other world”, “every-

thing is as it should be, nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (Nabokov 1999: 56). In the antithesis of "this world" and "the other world" the dual construction of Nabokov's Gnostics' cosmology manifests itself.

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov uses a great amount of circumlocutions to plant his faith of "the other world" in his delicately embroidered text and shares his personal faith with his creatures, V. and Sebastian. For the sake of his faith's incommunicability, Nabokov constructs the vision of "the other world" on the basis of St. Petersburg in terms of space, and timelessness in terms of time. The imagery of St. Petersburg, as the spiritual habitation and asylum of a wandering soul, suggests that "the other world," as a transcendent realm, transcends the limits of Space, while the timeless time suggests that "the other world" has a different time which can be free from the bondage of mortal time.

First, St. Petersburg in this novel is not only an image of a city but also a spatial metaphor with its own spiritual connotation. St. Petersburg, as the lost paradise, alive in the regressing memories of two half-brothers, is a spatial metaphor associated with Nabokov's spiritual ideal. It transcends the boundary of space and becomes the mortal symbol of "the other world" with its own spiritual connotation. The description of St. Petersburg in the novel acts as the concrete mode of "the other world". Reconstructed in the vivid narratives of protagonists, the image of St. Petersburg, as the mundane symbol of "the other world," is a spiritual asylum with dazzling and glorious light, guiding the isolated dreamers, "thousands of whom roam the earth, [...] during the darkest and most dazzling hours of physical danger, pain, dust, death" (Nabokov 1980: 373). It reflects the wandering souls' strong yearning for the lost homeland as well. The image of St. Petersburg originates in the narrators' actual experiences and personal perceptions, and can be regarded as certain conclusive evidence of the actual existence of the narrators' amusing past for its physical property of a spatial cognition. Then the imagery of St. Petersburg reconstructed by memory and literary creation achieves its spiritual property as an asylum of the wandering heart where the narrator preserves all his invaluable treasure. For heroes in this novel roaming in alien countries, their bright and brilliant hometown, like a lamp with vague shades, directs exiled souls in the dark to their way back. Thus St. Petersburg in this novel, "being a miniature of Nabokov's belief of 'the other world'", crosses over the boundary of spatial definition and rises to a metaphysical level (Chen 2009: 7).

Meanwhile, from the temporal perspective, the completely free world of timelessness is the time symbol of "the other world". Sebastian and V's respective approaches of dealing with mortal time such as the fusion of the past, the present and the future and the juxtaposition of the past and the present suggest that they are endowed with the capacities of transcending the mortal time. Timelessness, as one outstanding aesthetic element relevant to Nabokov's metaphysical

insight of time, is installed in his vision of “the other world”. “The free world of timelessness” (Nabokov 1999: 10) is outside the walls of mortal time – “the prison of time”. And it is “spatialized as the fourth dimension, where the past, the present and the future coexist” (Grishakova 2006: 127). Timelessness implies a rather freer relation to time – a time beyond mortal time, and timelessness is the highest stage of mankind’s spiritual and mental evolution. Thus it is defined as “consciousness without time” by Nabokov himself (Nabokov 1973: 42), which means that consciousness is “not restricted to present time as human consciousness is: consciousness operating in a time that allows direct access to the past” (Boyd 2006: 475). The fusion of the past, the present and the future is one vital characteristic of timelessness, which is the most outstanding temporal characteristic of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Timelessness makes it possible for the man within a finite existence to have the capacity to obtain the infinity of sensation and to rebel against the control of mortal time. Timelessness also implies a freer relation to time. In the novel, the idea of mortal time “seems to curl up and fall asleep” (Nabokov 1959: 94). And for its heroes, “time was never 1914 or 1920 or 1936 – it was always year 1” (ibid. 65). Thus, the temporal distribution of each chapter appears to be seriously unbalanced. The first chapter’s temporal span covers Sebastian’s first thirteen years, while the last chapter covers just twelve hours. And the most special point of this chapter lies in the intensified appearances of temporal signs like “half past five”, “twenty minutes to five”, “twenty past five”, “nearing seven o’clock”, “a quarter past nine”. The high intensity of the appearance of the time unit of the hour is in great contrast to the other chapters’ vague temporal expression. Thus, the duration of each action in Chapter 20 is not in proportion with that of other chapters. In short, the changeable duration of time suggests that heroes in the text own a freer relationship with time and they are not restricted to the present time.

Nabokov’s theme of “the other world” demonstrates “his faith in the apparent existence of a transcendent, nonmaterial, timeless, and beneficent ordering and ordered realm of being that seems to provide for personal immortality” (Alexandrov 1991: 5). And this core theme implies that Nabokov undoubtedly embraces ideas about the key Gnostic tenet – “the other world” which represents a transcendent realm of being and a homeland for immortal souls.

The Seven Shells Between “This World” and “the Other World” for Sebastian

Owing to Nabokov’s Gnostic two-world cosmology, smashing the captivity of “this world” is a springboard for leaping into the highest region of spiritual evolution and finally to “the other world”. The two heroes imprisoned in “this

world” are confronted with the crisis of losing their spiritual identities because of the contamination of “this world”, the seduction of vulgarity and unavoidable infatuation. Only through waking their inner selves can the lost aliens break the captivity of “this world” and begin their long journey ascending to “the other world”. But between “this world” and “the other world” there are seven shells indicating the secret rite of passage which the two heroes must pass through during the upward movement to “the other world”, their homeland. The number “seven” in the Gnostic context pertains to the kind of secret rites (Zhang 2005), which is deliberately embedded in the novel. Let us first look at the seven shells between “this world” and “the other world” for Sebastian.

Sebastian in the novel is one classic Nabokovian artist and a pneumatic who possesses the faith in “the other world” and achieves his self-revelation through the diligent pursuit of knowledge. In the novel, Sebastian’s whole life is a metaphor for the process of his self-salvation. Sebastian’s spiritual evolution starts with the waking of his artistic consciousness, which makes him realize his unique solitude and his fate to achieve self-revelation through literary writing. Thus, his literary achievement is the concretized expression of the gnosis. His seven published works become containers of his secret “gnosis” and the ladder to his spiritual homeland. At the same time, Sebastian’s death in the earthly world is a divine rite through which he, finally, releases his inner self from the prison of the body and ascends to that transcendental realm.

For Sebastian, his ascent of spirit begins with his awakening of artistic consciousness which is regarded as the divine revelation of the inner knowledge. Sebastian’s waking of the inner knowledge pertains to his consciousness of time and the following individual loneliness. In his early works, he describes the mysterious experience of finding that his inner self is totally lonely in this world. Then, his total solitude makes him get rid of all the mortal fetters in order to achieve the complete freedom of literary creation. And this progress of isolating himself from all the mortal obstacles is suggested by his seven times of flight from his familiar surroundings. Sebastian’s emotional aloofness of his half-brother can be regarded as his first escape from this world. Meanwhile, he tries to write in his black notebook English poems which are full of certain mysterious imagery like dark roses, stars and the call of the sea. And there is a noticeable point that he begins to inscribe his English name, Knight, by use a symbol of a black chess-knight as his signature. The second flight from his family occurs after his father’s death when he was seventeen years old. This flight is, to a certain extent, a rehearsal of an eternal flight. And this flight implies an obscure relationship with his future literary career. The following eruption of the Russian Revolution provides him with a reasonable opportunity to flee from his family and his Russian identity. During his Cambridge time, he gets the freedom of writing in

English. And after his graduation from college, he decides to be an English writer and begins to write his first English novel. His fifth flight seems elusive for normal people for he abandons his Muse, Clare Bishop, and embraces his fatal love, Nina. But it is easy to understand when Sebastian is regarded as a Gnostic with born isolation. Clare proves the success of literary career and she wants him to take part in those literary circles like other writers. Clare's total immersion in fame begins to be an obstacle for Sebastian's literary creativity. Therefore, Sebastian has to leave her for the sake of keeping pure his pursuit of "gnosis". However, the material woman, Nina, is not a good reason for writing for her vulgar and ridiculous literary taste. Sebastian chooses to flee again. This is Sebastian's sixth flight, and he then completes his last masterpiece. When Sebastian dies, he finally achieves his eternal flight from the disgusting flesh and returns to his spiritual home. Obviously, Sebastian's seven flights are parallel to the Gnostic expression of the seven layers of bondages to the pneumatic, which is the externalization of Sebastian's spiritual evolution.

And equally important, Sebastian's seven books reflect his internal cultivation of "gnosis" as well. With the advance of Sebastian's creativity, the gradual refinement of the seven books coincides with his ascending level of knowledge. Sebastian's debut piece, *The Prismatic Bezel*, reflects Sebastian's unique understanding on the usage of parody, which he intends to use "as a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion" (Nabokov 1959: 91). *Success*, his second novel which brings him fame, implies that Sebastian takes full advantage of the creative method. It seems that he has passed "from one plane to another rising a step higher" (ibid. 95). In *Success*, Sebastian explores the working of human fate. His three stories including *The Funny Mountain*, *Albinos in Black*, and *The Back of the Moon*, indicate that "a certain idea steadily growing through two books has now burst into real physical existence" (ibid. 104). After he develops heart disease, he chooses to call a halt. In the next book *Lost Property*, which reflects the inner life of Sebastian when he is told that his death is near, Sebastian seems to sum up his past life and to count "the things and souls lost on the way" (ibid. 111). His last book, *The Doubtful Asphodel*, is his absolute masterpiece, for the dying author creates one dying book with his last breath. He pours his art into this book, and achieves "gnosis". His seven works provide Sebastian with a concrete manner by which his evolutionary and fluid soul is perfectly expressed.

In a word, Sebastian's spiritual evolution and inner cultivation is a fluid progress motivated by an upward power leading to "the other world." His painful and exhausting practices of self-revelation, his attainment and accumulation of "gnosis" shape his ladder to the transcendental realm. His whole evolution can be seen as a solitary man's autonomous departure from all the material matters, especially his flesh.

The Seven Shells Between "This World" and "the Other World" for V.

With regards to V., his research on Sebastian's life is the materialized representation of V.'s individual pursuit of "gnosis". There are two points about V.'s research: firstly, it is Sebastian's Russian letter and his earthly death that evoke V.'s waking of artistic consciousness; then Sebastian's ghost, the Messenger from the otherworld, directs V.'s whole process of the quest. Though V. does not experience death, he, as Sebastian's half-brother, still attains his "spectral dimension" (Davydov 1995b: 484) for his sharing faith in the existence of "the other world". The whole book becomes the spiritual container of "I" divulging his spiritual evolution and the final merging with Sebastian's soul. Similar to Sebastian, V. also passed through seven shells indicating seven secret rites of passage during the upward movement from "this world" to "the other world".

V.'s progress of self-revelation also begins with the awakening of his artistic consciousness, which is inspired by his half-brother's last Russian letter. This letter can be seen as an illuminating message with Sebastian's lurking spiritual secret and containing his fluid soul. It is in this letter that Sebastian pleads for V.'s presence, for the reason that he wants to talk to V. about their experiences. Thus, this Russian letter for V. is an actual invitation and a passport into Sebastian's inner world. For the sake of their double identities, this letter is also Sebastian's self-confession, implying the half-brothers' relationship of the confessant and the confessor. This letter also divulges Sebastian's intention of passing his lifelong ideal and his unique perception of "gnosis" to his brother. Therefore, this Russian letter inspires V. to practice his strenuous quest of Sebastian's life and to attain "gnosis".

Then, the seven places V. has visited during his quest are the concrete expression of V.'s internal cultivation. St. Petersburg is the half-brothers' common birthplace, and so V. visits it by the way of recollection. Lausanne is the place where Sebastian's old governess lives. London can be regarded as Sebastian's fixed habitation. Blauberg is the place where Sebastian meets Nina, his fatal love. In Berlin, V. meets Sebastian's adolescent lover. Paris is the place where the two half-brothers met each other four times since they parted in 1918. St. Damier is Sebastian's deathbed. For V., his visiting the seven places is a process of collecting those bright patches which contain Sebastian's spiritual sparks.

Moreover, V.'s spiritual evolution is suggested by his perspective, insightful and immaculate understanding and appreciation of Sebastian's seven published books and his crave and constant fight against information besmirching his brother's reputation, especially by Mr. Goodman, Sebastian's former secretary, and Nina, the two classic philistines. V. has the capacity of catching the hidden

artery throughout each of Sebastian's books, and he can feel Sebastian's advancing progress of the expression of literary themes and writing skills. For the reason that V. is Sebastian's double, his narration of Sebastian's life seems like talking in front of a mirror. Thus, his narration provides him with the opportunity of knowing his inner self and improving himself. Besides, his narration indicates that V. achieves the spiritual fusion with Sebastian's spiritual part. And V.'s understanding is so deep that he finds the "gnosis" hidden in Sebastian's books: "remodeled and recombined, the world yielded its sense to the soul as naturally as both breathed" (Nabokov 1959: 179).

In addition, V.'s struggle against Philistinism represented by the two classic philistines, Mr. Goodman and Nina, implies that "gnosis" functions as the moral criterion of the Gnostic. Contrary to gnosis which equals the perfection of human knowledge, philistinism coincides with the Gnostic ignorance, which is regarded as the origin of sin in the Gnostic text. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, V. discloses that the biography written by Mr. Goodman is a farce including Goodman's unreasonable conjectures about Sebastian's private life. And V. reveals Nina's nature of a female philistine, for the reason that she cruelly exaggerates Sebastian's sexual desire for her for the sake of her own smug vanity. In a word, Mr. Goodman and Nina both exaggerate their ignorance of the whole Sebastian, and they both regard Sebastian's one reflection as the whole man. Their nature as Philistines corresponds to their ignorance. In other words, V.'s struggle against Philistinism can be seen as a war between gnosis and ignorance. Finally, V. takes the upper hand in the war, completes his pilgrim to understanding his half-brother and attains his spiritual merging with his double's soul.

Conclusion

The aim of Gnostic salvation is "the release of the inner man from the bonds of the world and his return to his native realm of life" (Jonas 2001: 44). For a Gnostic, the real significance of his inner cultivation and spiritual evolution lies in "helping the pneuma get rid of the bondage of flesh and psyche for the intention of moving upward with refined and light soul and returning to his divine and delightful homeland – 'the other world'" (Wu 2006: 55). In other words, the progress of a Gnostic's self-revelation can be seen as an everlasting war in which the soul must beat the flesh. And the trophy of the war is "gnosis" (knowledge). The accumulation of "gnosis" is regarded as a progress of the annihilation of the evil self, which means the dissolution of the material flesh. The pneumatic's salvation is a process of moving up, which is the concrete expression of the individual's internal cultivation. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Sebastian and V.'s respective spiritual evolution is analogized as the whole process of the

two Nabokovian artists' growth. The half-brothers' self-redemption shares one starting point, that is, the waking of artistic consciousness which makes them realize the complete loneliness of their inner selves vis-à-vis the vast cosmos. Meanwhile, the waking of their artistic consciousness makes them perceive the freedom of timelessness. Benefiting from their identities as artists, Sebastian and V. both use writing for collecting "gnosis" and achieving self-redemption. "Gnosis" not only reflects their spiritual evolution but also provides a reasonable explanation for the final merging of their souls.

Therefore, it can be concluded that, to a large extent, the ambiguous identities of V. and Sebastian result from their merging spirits. V. and Sebastian's flight from revolutionary Russia makes them become aliens imprisoned in "this world." Their struggle against "this world" opens up their path of spiritual evolution. Meanwhile, their fight against the flesh is the necessary link of their spiritual evolution and spiritual unity in "the other world". "The other world" in which Sebastian and V. regain their lost paradise, the immortality of their souls and the freedom of timelessness, and achieve each other's spiritual evolution and fusion, can be regarded as the spiritual destination of their respective self-revelation.

As a result, the ambiguous identities of V. and Sebastian are related to Nabokov's spiritual identity of a Gnostic. In other words, it is Nabokov's Gnostic faith that influenced the delicate construction of the two Gnostic hunters' ambiguous identities and their spiritual fusion.

Zhang Junping

jndxzjp@163.com

Jiangnan University
CHINA

Zhang Bin

chuimengxizhou@163.com

References

- Alexandrov, V. E. 1991. *Nabokov's Otherworld*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Barabtarlo, G. 2008. Taina Naita. Narrative Stance in Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. – *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 6, 57–80. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.2008.0002>
- Bethea, D. M. 1995. Style. – V. E. Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 696–703.
- Boyd, B. 2006. Nabokov, Time, and Timelessness: A Reply to Martin Hägglund. – *New Literary History*, 37, 469–478. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2006.0032>

- Chen, J. 2009. [陈娟], 纳博科夫创作中的“彼岸世界.” 南京师范大学硕士学位论文. [Other World in Nabokov's Writing.] Nanjing Normal University.
- Davydov, S. 1995a. Invitation to a Beheading. – V. E. Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 188–203.
- Davydov, S. 1995b. Nabokov and Pushkin. – V. E. Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 482–496.
- Fromberg, S. 1967. The Unwritten Chapters in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. – *Modern Fiction Studies*, 13, 427–442.
- Grishakova, M. 2006. *The Models of Space, Time and Vision in V. Nabokov's Fiction: Narrative Strategies and Cultural Frames*. Tartu: University of Tartu.
- Haardt, R. 1971. *Gnosis: Character and Testimony*. Leiden: Brill.
- Johnson, D. B. 1985. *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis.
- Jonas, H. 2001. *The Gnostic Region: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- King, K. L. 2005. *What is Gnosticism?* 2nd ed. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lyaskovets, T. 2009. *Temporal and visual narrative structures in Bely, Nabokov, Robbe-Grillet, and Resnais*. Diss. Purdue University (West Lafayette, Indiana).
- Nabokov, V. 1959. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. New York: New Directions.
- Nabokov, V. 1973. *Strong Opinions*. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co.
- Nabokov, V. 1980. *Lectures on Literature*. New York: Brucoliclark.
- Nabokov, V. 1999. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Roth, P. A., ed. 1984. *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*. Boston: G.K. Hall.
- Schiff, S. 1999. *Véra: Mrs. Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Random House.
- Toker, L. 1989. *Nabokov: The Mystery of Literary Structures*. Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press.
- Wang, A. 2014. [王安], 纳博科夫小说中的诺斯替主义. 四川大学学报(哲学社会科学版). [Gnosticism in Nabokov's Fiction.] – *Journal of Sichuan University (Social Science Edition)*, 3, 70–76.
- Williams, R. J. A. 1985. *Maps, Chronologies, and Identities in Three Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*. Diss. York University (Canada).
- Wu, Z. 2006. [吴致莹], 从使命到天意—论哈姆雷特的转变. 台北艺术大学硕士学位论文. [From Calling to Providence – On Hamlet's Transformation.] Diss. Taipei National University of the Arts.
- Zhang, X. 2005. [张新樟]. 神话、秘仪和神秘主义——试论诺斯替精神的客观化与内在化. 世界宗教研究. [Myth, Mystical Rites and Mysticism: on the Objectification and Internalization of Gnostic Spirit.] – *Studies in World Religions*, 4, 95–100.
- Zheng, Y. 2013. [郑燕], 纳博科夫的“火车”:通往“另一世界”之旅. 外国文学. [Nabokov's 'Train': Journey Toward 'The Otherworld'.] – *Foreign Literature*, 5, 74–8, 158.