

## The Quest for a Mask: Metabiographical Life Writing in Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

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### Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov is one of the most gifted novelists and auto/biography writers bridging modernism and postmodernism periods. His first novel written in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, is so profoundly influenced by and suffused with life writing as to be read as a metabiographical fiction foregrounding the baring of its device and its pervasive self-consciousness, which aligns with many of the author's "strong opinions" as to autobiography, biography, fiction, and reality. This essay adopts "the quest for a mask" as a metaphor for biographical research, examining the metabiographical techniques employed in this novel and their significance in terms of biographical methodology and ontology. Firstly, it enlarges upon V.'s quests to reconstruct the "real life" of Sebastian Knight, respectively through the biographer's memory, the biographical source materials, and interviews with some of Sebastian's acquaintances. Secondly, it continues to analyze the elusive nature of the real subject and concludes that the "real life" is but a mask, behind which might hide Sebastian, V., and the authorial consciousness on varied planes. This essay concludes that Nabokov's novel challenges traditional methodological orthodoxies and ontological certainties, thereby ushering in postmodern metabiographical fictional experimentation.

**Key words:** Life writing; Metabiography; Nabokov; *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The great Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov (1899—1977) is universally acknowledged as one of the leading modern-postmodern novelists as well as sophisticated auto/biographers. Nabokov's oeuvre, encompassing a range of auto/biographies and biographical fictions in spectacular forms, fully exemplifies his sophisticated artistry in the genre of life writing and in fusing life writing and fiction to achieve his artistic vision. Therefore, interpreting his novels through the lens of life writing can shed a novel and insightful light on his unique world of life and art.

Nabokov's approach to life writing and his art of novelistic creation are intricately intertwined, mutually reinforcing each other to create a distinctive artistic style that is uniquely Nabokovian. *The Gift*, his Russian novel written in 1937, is an early yet sophisticate presentation of Nabokov's art of life writing. Besides an unfinished biography of the narrator's father in Chapter 1, it also includes in Chapter 4 a satirical "real" biography of Chernyshevski, a 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian writer and political activist. *Nikolai Gogol*, written in 1944, is another Nabokovian attempt at a biography of a famous Russian writer. In 1966, Nabokov published his "new kind of autobiography, or rather a new hybrid between that and a novel", *Speak, Memory*, originally titled *Conclusive Evidence*, which is, to quote itself, "a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic" (167). Nabokov's

own autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, originally titled *Conclusive Evidence*, is defined by himself as “the meeting point of an impersonal art form and a very personal life story”. Brian Boyd (1991), his biographer, considered it as “the most artistic of all autobiographies” (149). For its high level of artistry, it has been read and criticized even as a work of fiction for its “imagined facts” (Connolly, 1999). The 1957 novel, *Pnin*, is a pseudo-biographical novel depicting a Russian émigré professor teaching at an American university. *Pale Fire*, published in 1962, is a self-parody of his experience of translation and annotation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and takes the form of an autobiographical poem by a fictional poet and its accompanying commentary composed by Charles Kinbote, who appropriates the poem and turns it into the biography of a deposed king from a mythical Zembla.

*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (RLSK), written in 1938 and published in 1941 by James Laughlin's New Directions, is the first of Nabokov's novels composed in English that won him critical recognition in world literature. Though largely neglected or criticized unfavorably upon publication, RLSK won high acclaim from Edmund Wilson, his friend and patron within American literary circles: “It's absolutely enchanting. It's amazing that you should write such fine English prose and not sound like any other English writer, but be able to do your own kind of thing so subtly and completely” (Nabokov & Wilson, 2001, p.55). As an early formal experimentation in modernist and postmodernist fiction, RLSK purports to depicts the “real” life of the narrator's half-brother and English writer Sebastian Knight. As the very title makes clear, RLSK is a novel in the guise of a biography of its eponymous author-protagonist Sebastian Knight. This pseudo-biography is written by Sebastian's putative half-brother, V. after Sebastian dies prematurely at the age of 36 in 1936. V. is more a minor businessman in Marseilles than a writer whose command of English is sufficient in this endeavor. He asserts that the only qualification he possesses is his special knowledge about Sebastian's life. However, he and Sebastian were never close since their childhood in Russia. V. decides to write Sebastian's biography as an attempt to compensate for this estrangement between them. Quite contrary to readers' expectation as indicated in its title, the novel is actually less about “the real life” of Sebastian Knight and more about the narrator's attempts to quest after it. Rather, the novel thematizes the life writing process itself instead of the life of its subject, thus endowing it with the characteristics of a meta-biographical fiction. To a certain extent, the biographer's quests displace Sebastian's life story as the subject. Therefore, this essay adopts “the quest for a mask” as a metaphor for V's biographical research, examining the metabiographical techniques employed in this novel and their significance in terms of biographical methodology and ontology.

## 2. THE BIOGRAPHER'S QUEST

In RLSK, the biographer consciously lays bare the process of his quest after the “real life” of Sebastian knight, in so doing he foregrounds the process of his reconstruction of Sebastian's life. This attempt to increase the reader's awareness of the biographical fictionality is usually recognized as one feature of metabiographical life writing. Nabokov, through his narrator V., is well conscious of and draws readers' attention to this metabiographical “methods of composition”, the echo of which can be found in V.'s comment on “the workings” of Sebastian's novel, *The Prismatic Bezel*, that it “can be thoroughly enjoyed once it is understood that the heroes of the book are what can be loosely called ‘methods of composition’. It is as if a painter said: look, here I'm going to show you not the painting of a landscape, but the painting of different ways of painting a certain landscape, and I trust their harmonious fusion will disclose the landscape as I intend you to see it” (p.79). Therefore, if V. considers himself as a painter, then he is not showing readers “the painting of a landscape”, or, a biography, but the “different ways of painting a certain landscape”, a fitting metaphor of the life writing process. In so doing, the narrator increases the reader's awareness of his business of writing.

It should also be noted that Nabokov often manipulates sophisticatedly the technique of parody as a game to aesthetic effect, and in RLSK, the genre of the detective fiction is mockingly parodied not to help reconstruct the subject's life story. Instead, the narrator sets down the minute details of the quest process, resulting in the quest itself displacing the subject and taking center stage. Therefore, to fully capture and appreciate how life writing exerts its sway in the composition of RLSK, it is necessary to enlarge upon V.'s quests to reconstruct the “real life” of Sebastian Knight, respectively through his memory, subjective conjecture, the biographical source materials, and interviews with Sebastian's acquaintances.

V. manages to piece together Sebastian's “smooth development from infancy to youth” with recourse to his own fragmented memory, a practice fundamental to any biographer, particularly when he personally knows the subject. However, a careful reader might discern the pervasive unreliability of V.'s narrative concerning Sebastian's early life, as constructed from his recollection. V. admits that even when they lived together in the same house, he hardly knew his half-brother due to his aloofness. V. learns from his dying mother Sebastian's strange adventure in his youth with the futurist poet Alexis Pan and his wife Larissa to the east. It is unusual that V. addresses “the same father” of theirs as “my father” and “his father”, indicating that they might not be related at all. They meet only four times after their separation in Helsingfors. All these considered, the quest through his memory does not yield much about the real Sebastian and is probably not reliable either.

Traditional life writing methodology generally holds that the subject's "life" can be and is often traced and recovered by questing into his biographical source materials, including letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, writings, and etc. These documentary evidences concerned, in the case of Sebastian Knight, mainly consist of his letters and the writings by him and about him. Judging by his blatant ignorance and reckless handling of Sebastian's letters, V. proves himself to be an incompetent biographer even from the very start of his biography writing. V. receives a letter from Sebastian instructing him to "burn certain of his papers" (p.30), papers of immense value to any biographer. However, when V. arrived at Sebastian's flat in London, he "dislodged the two bundles of letters on which Sebastian had scribbled: to be destroyed", "struggled with the temptation to examine closer both bundles", and obediently set them on fire in the grate. The burning of the subject's correspondences is fundamentally implausible and incompatible with the nature of a biographer. An examination of these letters might have saved him much of his later quests. Only a minor fragment of the last letter is presented in his biography—"a few words appeared in full radiance, then swooned and all was over". These words in Russian trigger V. into wondering "who she might be, that Russian woman whose letters Sebastian had kept in close proximity to those of Clare Bishop" (p.32). The quest through Sebastian's letters has been practically and ironically disregarded by our biographer.

Aside from compensating for the distanced fraternal relationship with his half-brother, V.'s decision to write this biography was also driven by the intention of countering and discrediting Mr. Goodman's prior biography, *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight*, which is a "slapdash and very misleading book" and "paints in a few ill-chosen sentences a ridiculously wrong picture of Sebastian Knight's childhood" (p.13). V. relentlessly criticizes Goodman's simple method and philosophy with his sole object to "show 'poor Knight' as the product and victim of what he calls 'our time'" (p.52). V. also denounces his commercial motivation to "attract mediocre minds" (p.53). To refute and negate Mr. Goodman's inferior portrayal and to reconstruct the "real life" of Sebastian, V. embarks on further quests through his literary works given his status as an English writer. All Sebastian's literary output consists of a few poems, the four novels, namely *The Prismatic Bezel*, *Success*, *Lost Property*, and *The Doubtful Asphodel*, and an anthology of short stories, *The Funny Mountain*. For example, "his most autobiographical work", *Lost Property*, is frequently quoted to shape the image of Sebastian and to prove that Mr. Goodman's biography is written from a completely wrong angle. However, V. sometimes quotes from these works to support not only his selections of the biographical aspects but also his biographical writing.

For instance, some characters in Sebastian's books are suggestively helpful to V.'s biographical quest through their counterparts, of whom the most prominent is Mr. Silbermann, a private detective who assists V. in the acquisition of a list of guests staying at the Beaumont Hotel in Blauberger in June 1929. Mr. Silbermann resembles the detective, Mr. Siller, a fictional character in Sebastian's *The Back of the Moon*. These parallels might suggest that V. intentionally put the characters in Sebastian's books in his own narrative. The influence of Sebastian's works can also be found in the description of experiences during V. quests, some of which are strangely similar to those in his books. For example, V. has made a similar mistake in St. Damier hospital as Sebastian during his visit to Roquebrune, described in his "most autobiographical work", *The Lost Property*. These similarities may indicate the likelihood that V. has invented some events in his quests. These rather speculative and willful use of Sebastian's works might shake the reader's confidence in his own integrity as a biographer and accordingly the credibility of his biography.

Interviews have always been recognized as one principal means by which biographers secure biographical materials from diversified perspectives. V.'s biography of Sebastian relies heavily on his interviews with some of Sebastian's acquaintances, mainly including his college friend, his literary secretary, and his lover, to name just a few. The interviews have been originally planned by V. to "follow his life stage by stage" (p.45). After his recourse to memory for Sebastian's life before they departed in Helsingfors, V. visited Sebastian's best college friend in Cambridge and was told of the past of his college years, including his campus life, his subject, his English, his writing habit, and etc. It is strange that V. seems not satisfied with this interview. He implicitly blames it on the interviewee's "shallower and sillier" "reminiscences" and wishes that "a handy character" would come out of the mist and tell him "the real story of Sebastian Knight's college years" (p.44). V.'s next interview is with Mr. Goodman, Sebastian's secretary from 1930 to 1934. Curiously enough, the purpose is "merely to obtain a few suggestions as to what people I ought to see who might know something of Sebastian's post-Cambridge period" instead of "an account of Sebastian's last years" (p.45). This time the interview proves to be a frustration with Mr. Goodman advising against his writing that book of Sebastian Knight. Upon his departure, V. is called back by Helen Pratt, Mr. Goodman's typist and Clare's former bosom friend. The interview with Miss Pratt complemented by Sebastian's friends, the poet P. G. Sheldon and the painter Roy Carswell, indeed provides V. with almost what he knows about the adult Sebastian. It is also through Miss Pratt that V. seeks to arrange interviews with Clare Bishop and the other woman in Sebastian's life. However, the intended interview with Clare Bishop is

ultimately abandoned for unknown reasons. V. does have the opportunity to engage her in a conversation Sebastian when he encounters her in the street, but strangely gives it up, which is arguably unacceptable for a biographer. On his search for his last lover, V. accidentally meets with Natasha Rosanov, Sebastian's first love, and learns from her Sebastian's teenage experience. The suspected *femme fatale*, Nina Rechnoy, or Madame Lecerf, seems indifferent to Sebastian as a writer, and even averse to him as a lover.

The narrative resulted from these biographical quests proves to be either suspicious or unreliable, no different from the methods employed by his rival biographer. It should also be noted that the narrative of these quests takes on evident features of self-reflexiveness. The narrator keeps posing epistemologically oriented questions probably to remind readers of the fictionality of the quests rather than the authenticity valued in traditional biographies. V. is well conscious that there is only one sole subject and that this subject is absent. V. intentionally renders his life writing metabiographical characteristics by consistently foregrounding his quests via various mediums as illustrated in this section. However, these quests are not fully developed or properly undertaken, as usually expected of a faithful biographer, to unearth the "real life" of Sebastian Knight owing to V.'s own capriciousness, or perhaps more appropriately, his selfishness, as V. confesses, "my quest had developed its own magic and logic and though I sometimes cannot help believing that it had gradually grown into a dream, that quest, using the pattern of reality for the weaving of its own fancies, I am forced to recognise that I was being led right, and that in striving to render Sebastian's life I must now follow the same rhythmical interlacements" (p.113). Consequently, it is this dream-like quality of V.'s quests that renders his biography full of "fancies" rather than "realities". The questioning of the methodological validity is sure to entail the questioning of the corresponding ontological certainties.

### 3. MASK: AN ONTOLOGICAL METAPHOR

Another feature of metabiographical life writing in modernism and postmodernism contexts is its inability to truly capture its subject, i.e., the biographhee always remains elusive. This elusiveness in *RLSK* can be interpreted as a sort of interaction existing between the different biographical ontologies, including the narrator (V.), the alleged subject (Sebastian), and the author (Nabokov). Certain questions concerning these ontologies might arise: Is the narrator a reliable biographer? Whose life is he really writing? How does the authorial consciousness function in composing this pseudo-biographical fiction?

This essay adopts a mask as a metaphor to allude to the biographer's quarry, i.e., the biographer's subject, on hierarchical planes in an attempt to address these ontological uncertainties. The mask is chosen as analogy to the subject of the biography partially because this image, metaphorical or not, appears directly in *RLSK*. On his visit to Mr. Goodman, V. finds him wearing "a black mask", which he pockets when leaving because he "supposed it might come in usefully on some other occasion" (p.50). Also, near the end of the novel, V. claims that "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" (p.173). Symbolically speaking, the mask can be interpreted as a methodological and ontological strategy of life writing that allows the biographer to embody his subject, or even usurp the subject's identity on hierarchical planes. More precisely, on the diegetic plane, Sebastian Knight serves as a mask for V., the biographer, while on the extradiegetic plane, both Sebastian Knight and V. function as masks for Nabokov, the author.

To start with, the two protagonists' names are carefully chosen by Nabokov to possess a mask-like quality, intentionally distancing the characters from fixed and discernible identities. Firstly, the narrator's name is never revealed and is only labelled with the letter "V.", which might strongly tempt the reader into associating him with his creator's name, Vladimir. On several occasions when asked for his name, he either avoids mentioning it directly or keeps it from the reader. When visiting Sebastian's secretary, Mr. Goodman, V. introduces himself as "Sebastian Knight's half-brother" (p.48). When requested of his "real name" by Helene Grinstein, the narrator cunningly quotes Helene that "I think you mentioned it, but today my brain seems to be in a daze. ... Ach, she said when I had told her" (p.112). When talking with the nurse in St Damier hospital, the narrator reminds her that "We're half-brothers, really. My name is [I have mentioned my name]" (p.172). The evident absence of the narrator's name throughout *RLSK* implicitly indicates not only the unreliability of his narration but also the elusiveness of his quest after a subject in his biography. Secondly, Sebastian Knight, the author-protagonist, is the name of typical Nabokovian characters. The surname "Knight" reminds the reader of its association with a chess game, of which Nabokov is an enthusiastic composer. The given name "Sebastian" can be anagrammatized into "is absent", confirming the elusiveness of the subject.

Brian McHale (1987) analyzes the functions of the author in postmodernist literary works and summarizes that "This oscillation between authorial presence and absence characterizes the postmodernist author ... The author flickers in and out of existence at different levels of the ontological structure ... Neither fully present nor completely absent, s/he plays hide-and-seek with

us throughout the text ... The author ... is another tool for the exploration and exploitation of ontology. S/he functions at two theoretically distinct levels of ontological structure: as the vehicle of autobiographical *fact* within the projected fictional world; and as the *maker* of that world, visibly occupying an ontological level superior to it" (p.202). Nabokov also declared in an interview that "the design of my novel is fixed in my imagination and every character follows the course I imagine for him. I am the perfect dictator in that private world insofar as I alone am responsible for its stability and truth" (Appel & Nabokov, 1967, p.133). This dictatorship defines the relationship between the author's and his characters' worlds. Nabokov, as the maker of his fictional world in *RLSK*, endows his characters with some of his own biographical facts. The mask functions as a medium between the author and his characters. Therefore, the reader should be encouraged to take off the characters' masks and reveal the true faces, or identities, behind them.

V., as a signifier, is often associated with Vladimir Nabokov. As a biographer, he has an inherent authorial consciousness. Critics have noticed this subjective impulse in biographies, as Hermione Lee writes, "Every biography is really a kind of autobiography, revealing as much about the author as about the subject" (quoted in Livingstone, 2014, p.8). Though he asserts that "I have tried to put into this book as little of myself as possible" (p.117), V., while writing the "real life" of Sebastian, actually recreates him in his own image. His authorial consciousness as a biographical agent strongly evokes Charles Kinbote, the narrator in Nabokov's later novel *Pale Fire*. *RLSK*, in this sense, is a fitting example illustrating how biography transforms into autobiography in a modern or postmodern context of life writing.

V. convinces himself of his capability of writing his half-brother's "real life" by virtue of his "inner knowledge" and their "common rhythm". This blood bond and "psychological affinities" provide him with the advantage of writing a biography of Sebastian. In Chapter 4, V. explains how this works — "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" (p.28). This assertion indeed justifies V.'s impulse to share with Sebastian or even dominate the center stage of his biography. For example, despite his desperation to hurry to St. Damier, V. fails to reach Sebastian before he dies as a result of a succession of unexpected mishaps. Quite to his disappointment, V. did not hear the "absolute truth" out of Sebastian's lips and, to compensate for this momentous loss, he decides to write a biography, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, also as an attempt to resurrect his dead half-brother. At the close of the biography, V. admits that "Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I ..." (p.173), in which

he discloses to readers his yearning to impersonate the late Sebastian, or, to live in Sebastian's soul, as revealed in a previous statement — "The soul is but a manner of being—not a constant state—that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden. Thus—I am Sebastian Knight" (p.172). As a Kinbotian biographer in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, V.'s yearning to embed his own life in Sebastian's biography drives him to invent his false identity such as "a bogus relative" or even impersonate Sebastian or inhabit in his soul. V. frequently refers to himself while hiding behind Sebastian's mask, of which he is well conscious when he realizes "as if I were impersonating him on a lighted stage, with the people he knew coming and going ... the pale radiance of Clare's inclined head ... and Nina sits on a table in the brightest corner of the stage ... And then the masquerade draws to a close" (p.172).

Nabokov's novels can be more or less seen as refractions of his life. In his own autobiography, Nabokov (1966) admits that after he "... had bestowed on the characters of my novels some treasured items of my past, ... it became more closely identified with my novel than with my former self, where it had seemed to be so safe from the intrusion of the artist" (p.95). Therefore, we can consume that to write, for Nabokov, is to impersonate. *RLSK* is no exception in that it has a good deal of Nabokov's own life in it. It is easy to find that the author has given some of his own biographical facts or reality to some of his characters, especially the author-protagonist Sebastian Knight. In this sense, Sebastian wears the author's mask to recall some of their shared past or to act in Nabokov's stead. Nabokov and his protagonist both were born into a wealthy and educated aristocratic family in the same Russian city of St. Petersburg and in the same year of 1899. Both had a Swiss governess in their childhood. Both fled the Bolshevik revolution from Petersburg in the same year. Both went to Trinity College at Cambridge, England. Both became émigré writers during their college years and both switched from writing in Russian to English. Both even had similar habits of writing in bed. During his visit to Cambridge, V. is told by Sebastian's best college friend, "Missing him in the lecture hall, I would go to his rooms and find him still in bed, curled up like a sleeping child, but gloomily smoking, with cigarette ash all over his crumpled pillow and inkstains on the sheet which hung loosely to the floor. ... I would go off to lunch, and then call upon him again only to find him lying on his other side and using a slipper for an ashtray" (p.40). In an interview with *Playboy* in 1964, Nabokov (1990) recalled, "But when I was young, in my twenties and early thirties, I would often stay all day in bed, smoking and writing" (p.29). Their fathers both died from incidental tragedies. Sebastian's father fought and

died in a duel to defend his former wife's honor, while Nabokov's father was shot in Berlin in an assassination in defense of his friend. It should also be noted that the lack of closeness in brotherly relationship between Sebastian and V. is another refraction of Nabokov's relationship with his brother Sergey. Both had relatively stable relationships with their partners. Both of their partners, Clare and Vera, resemble each other in many aspects, while their lovers, Irina Guadanini and Nina Rechnoy, share some main qualities of a *femme fatale*. The relationship between Sebastian and Clare was ruined with the intervention of Nina Rechnoy, while that between Nabokov and Vera was severely tested.

Besides these parallels of life experiences, striking resemblances also can be found with regard to their literary life as writers. Nostalgia became the lifelong theme and defining hallmark of their life and work. When vehemently attacking Mr. Goodman's biography, V. writes, "[I]t is obvious that only one who has known what it is to leave a dear country could thus be tempted by the picture of nostalgia. I find it impossible to believe that Sebastian, no matter how gruesome the aspect Russia was at the time of our escape, did not feel the wrench we all experienced. All things considered, it had been his home, and the set of kindly, well-meaning, gentle-mannered people driven to death or exile for the sole crime of their existing, was the set to which he too belonged. His dark youthful broodings, the romantic—and let me add, somewhat artificial—passion for his mother's land, could not, I am sure, exclude real affection for the country where he had been born and bred" (p.23–24). This description of Sebastian is applicable to Nabokov. As usually happens to émigré writers, both lament their loss of their Russian language. V. notes that "Sebastian's Russian was better and more natural to him than his English". A reviewer insinuates Sebastian's inadequate command of English in a statement on his novel *The Prismatic Bezel*, "Mr. Knight is as good at splitting hairs as he is at splitting infinitives". However, in this respect, Nabokov has exhibited a masterful command of English, for which V. S. Pritchett called him "a grammarian of genius". Both experienced anxiety and anguish over adopting English as the mode of expression in literary creation. As V. reveals, Sebastian's "struggle with words was unusually painful and this for two reasons. One was the common one with writers of his type: the bridging of the abyss lying between expression and thought; the maddening feeling that the right words, the only words are awaiting you on the opposite bank in the misty distance, and the shudderings of the still unclothed thought clamoring for them on this side of the abyss" (p.70). The last line of the novel, "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows", reconfirms not only the identification between the narrator and Sebastian but also the convergence of them and the authorial presence,

Vladimir Nabokov himself. The mask of the author emerges on the faces of the alleged subject.

Even some minor characters in the novel wear the masks of those in its author's real life. V. finds that two women, Clare Bishop and Nina Rechnoy, have significant influence on Sebastian's life. He decides to trace them down and ask them to talk about Sebastian. Striking resemblances are revealed to exist between Clare Bishop and Véra, Nabokov's wife, and between Nina Rechnoy and Irina Guadanini. The parallel between Clare and Véra is evident in their supportive roles of assisting the writers with typewriting, proofreading, language polishing, and managing business affairs. The affair between Nina and Sebastian is portrayed as a reflection of that between Irina and Nabokov himself, which might have destroyed Nabokov's family and reputation had it not been terminated promptly. Nina is portrayed as one literary type of *femme fatale* responsible for Sebastian's decline. Though Nabokov gave his female characters the masks of Véra and Irina, their endings in the novel diverge dramatically from their counterparts in Nabokov's life. Vera remains not only Nabokov's beloved wife and his life-long literary partner, while Clare is deserted by the unfaithful Sebastian, marries another man, and dies of childbirth and heartbreak. As previously mentioned, Mr. Silbermann, a private detective, who comes to V.'s rescue on the train from Blauberg, actually resembles Mr. Siller from "The Back of the Moon". Marchesini (2009) argues that Mr. Silbermann can even be considered as an authorial mask, which intervenes to guide the narrator in his hopeless quest.

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#### 4. CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* can be read and appreciated as a metabiographical fiction, whereby we may have a glimpse of Nabokov's artistic views on life writing and fiction. In a 1962 interview with the BBC, Nabokov (1990) stated that "Reality is a very subjective affair. ... You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. ... It's a complete ghost to me—I don't understand a thing about it and, well, it's a mystery to me" (pp. 10-11). Nabokov's profound insights on fiction and reality find resonance in the narrator's questioning of fixed identities and biographical certainties. His pervasive doubts always linger in the process of his "quest for a mask", as he writes, "that Voice in the Mist rang out in the dimmest passage of my mind. It was but the echo of some possible truth, a timely reminder: don't be too certain of learning the past from the lips of the present. Beware of the most honest broker. Remember that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the

listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale” (p.44). This distrust towards the ontological certainties in life writing justifies and precipitates the narrator’s unreliable biographical research after the “real life” of the subject, consequently producing not a biography of the subject but an autobiography of the biographer. In this sense, Nabokov’s novel challenges traditional methodological orthodoxies and ontological certainties, thereby ushering in postmodern metabiographical fictional experimentation.

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