

2008

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Recommended Citation

Priscilla Meyer. "Anglophonia and Optimysticism: Sebastian Knight's Bookshelves" *Russian Literature and the West: A Tribute for David M. Bethea*. Ed. Alexander Dolinin, Lazar Fleishman, Leonid Livak. Stanford, CA: Stanford Slavic Studies, 2008. 212-226.

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Anglophonia and Optimysticism: *Sebastian Knight's* Bookshelves

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“My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses—the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions—which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way.”

--Vladimir Nabokov, "On A Book Entitled *Lolita*"¹

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* Nabokov casts his own transition from Russian to English as a metaphorical death. Writing his first novel in English in 1938-1939 while writing his final one in Russian (*The Gift*), he struggles with the idea that Russian language and culture are henceforth lost to him for the purposes of artistic creation, and overcomes that loss the same way as he does the death of his loved ones in other novels: he conceals among his new set of “implied associations and traditions” works that ponder his abiding concern, the survival of the spirit after bodily death. Amidst the explicit references, Nabokov alludes covertly not only to the English poets Rupert Brooke and Walter de la Mare, as D. Barton Johnson has shown,² but to the prose of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James and particularly Axel Munthe, to create afresh in

English the “baffling mirror” and “black velvet backdrop” which shroud all that has been lost. The Anglophone universe becomes a linguistic afterlife in which Nabokov optimistically hopes to resurrect his Russian art, just as he “optimystically” (the pun belongs to Sebastian Knight’s “Dean Park”) expects that the otherworld preserves the spirits of his dead. These spirits can emanate from the otherworld to penetrate this world on behalf of those they love, a mystical idea which Nabokov represents in *Sebastian Knight* by having Sebastian’s fictional characters infiltrate V.’s non-fictional world.³ In this way the opposition between this world and the other world maps the opposed realms of life/art and Russia/Anglophonia.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight refers to novels, short stories, biography, autobiography, poetry, plays, theological treatises, myths, legends, fairy tales, nursery rhymes, adventure tales, comic tales, boys’ illustrated magazines, monthlies, letters, newspapers and films. With the exception of a very few works by Russian and French authors, all are written in English. The novel alludes unusually openly to its own source materials; Nabokov highlights them in order to explicate his English-language verbal universe to a readership that knows neither the Russian language, its literature, nor his participation in it as reader and writer. In his novel about becoming an Anglophone writer, Nabokov employs the strategy of the *Tales of Belkin*: Pushkin reviews potential genres for constructing a literary language during his transition from poetry to prose;⁴ Nabokov describes the range of his own resources for his transition from Russian to English.

Alexander Dolinin writes that Sebastian’s bookshelf represents “a kind of

dictionary of the basic themes, motifs and sources of the novel; each title mentioned (and/or in a text standing behind it, and also in the creative biography of the author) contains a particular parallel in structure, system of images and meanings, plot of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.”⁵ The books on Sebastian’s bookshelf relate particularly to Sebastian, his life and art, while other explicit references in the novel are associated with V. and Nina.

A more dispersed “bookshelf” concealed in the narrative addresses Nabokov’s thematic concerns. Nabokov’s own references are of three types:

- 1) Titles of books significant for both Nabokov and Sebastian. Nabokov creates Sebastian as a semi-autobiographical character: they share birth year but not birth date; year of flight from the Bolsheviks but not port of exit; their father’s duels, but with opposite outcomes, and so on. Because of this carefully crafted kinship, Sebastian’s bookshelf may be considered to overlap with Nabokov’s own, in some cases having one meaning for Sebastian and an additional significance for Nabokov.
- 2) Titles that belong only to Nabokov’s narrative, which neither V. nor Sebastian has read.
- 3) Nabokov’s subtexts: in addition to titles that are explicitly cited in the narrative of the second type, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* employs subtexts that belong exclusively to Nabokov, of which his characters are unaware.

Sebastian’s bookshelf (*Hamlet*, *Le morte d'Arthur*, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *South Wind*, *The Lady with the Dog*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Invisible Man*, *Le Temps Retrouvé*, *Anglo-Persian Dictionary*, *The Author of Trixie*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Ulysses*, *About Buying a Horse*, *King Lear*) contains only one American

author, Thornton Wilder. Except for a few monuments of classical, Russian and French literature, the shelf and the references Sebastian makes within his novels (other than Freud, who spent his final years in London), all are in written in English: on the shelf appear Shakespeare, Malory, Stevenson, Norman Douglas, H. G. Wells, William Caine, Lewis Carroll, James Joyce, Francis Cowley Burnand; elsewhere he refers to John Keats, Jerome K. Jerome, Rudyard Kipling, Rupert Brooke, A. E. Housman, Wilkie Collins, “Cock-Robin,” *Punch*, *Chums*.

Sebastian’s selection highlights not the history of English literature but his creative universe, which both overlaps with and is distinct from Nabokov’s (type 1). The selections map Sebastian’s young life, beginning in the nursery (Cock-Robin), progressing to boyhood (*Alice in Wonderland*, *Chums*, Kipling) and thence to collegiate life, specifically in Brooke’s and Housman’s Trinity College, Cambridge, and generally in youthful humorous literature--Jerome K Jerome’s three single young men in a boat on the Thames between Kingston and Oxford, the *Punch* editor Francis Cowley Burnand’s *Occasional Happy Thoughts: About Buying a Horse*, William Caine’s comic tale, *The Author of Trixie*, the last of which is the latest-published British work (1923); the latest-published on the shelf, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, is American (1927).

Nabokov’s transition from Russian to English, like Sebastian’s death, is a crossing to other shore, for Nabokov, to Anglophonia, for Sebastian to the asphodel fields. The title of Sebastian’s (apparently) final book, *The Doubtful Asphodel*, suggests that the dying Sebastian lacks faith that his works or spirit will endure. V., on the other hand, rereading it thinks first that “the asphodel remains as doubtful as ever,” but then wonders, “Or are we mistaken? I sometimes feel when I turn the pages of Sebastian’s masterpiece

that the ‘absolute solution’ is there, somewhere, concealed in some passage I have read too hastily, or that it is intertwined with other words, whose familiar guise deceived me” (178). Nabokov’s characters give opposing answers to *Sebastian Knight’s* central question, but Nabokov conceals his “absolute solution” in the novel’s subtexts, which declare his “optimystic” faith in the survival both of his art in his future English novels and of the spirit after death.

Like the protagonist of *The Doubtful Asphodel*, the dying Sebastian can know only “*this* side of the question”; he discovers his ability to enter V.’s world after he is “already on the other side” (175). Sebastian’s hope that the spirit survives after death is expressed in his pun in *The Doubtful Asphodel* that combines optimism with mysticism, which he attributes to “Dean Park” (175). The name may refer to a park owned by William Dean, comprising West Cliff and King’s Park, close to where Stevenson lived between 1885 and 1887 while writing *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.⁶ Stevenson named his house there “Skerryvore” for a lighthouse off the Hebrides designed by his grandfather. In the context of the title of Sebastian’s novel, and the pun, the name Dean Park suggests the attempt to illumine unknown territory off a distant northern shore, Sebastian’s project in his last years of life.

Sebastian’s and V.’s readings contain almost nothing of the mystical attitude to the other world. Both brothers make brief references to well-known Russian works which are readily identifiable by non-Russians (Sebastian alludes to Chekhov’s frequently anthologized “Lady with the Little Dog,” and “The Black Monk”; V. makes a routine reference to the plot—but not the otherworldly implications—of Gogol’s *Dead Souls*), but apart from the Greek classics and a few great French writers who are part of the

Anglophone literary frame of reference—Narcissus, the asphodel fields, Lethe; Flaubert, Maupassant, Proust--the brothers refer principally to British writers. Yet neither is comfortable writing in English. Sebastian can never return to Russian in this life; he is doomed to being, as one of his critics unsympathetically claims, a “dull man writing in broken English,” or a “broken man writing in dull English” (5).⁷ V regrets his own “miserable English” (32) in which he nonetheless trains himself to write Sebastian’s biography, presumably in order to address Sebastian’s readership. As a *cri de coeur* lamenting the death of his Russian frame of reference, even as he explores his nascent English one, Nabokov too pointedly limits himself predominantly to English-language sources in *Sebastian Knight*, but not to a reading of them that precludes the mystical.

The books that Nabokov embeds in the novel’s narrative, as well as some of the novel’s subtexts (both type 3), take as their subject the penetration of ghosts into this world, the continued presence of the spirits of our loved ones. While the novel concludes with V.’s affirmation of something akin to this faith (“Any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations” [202]), and Sebastian struggles toward this belief, Sebastian has not selected the books on his shelf for their relationship to the otherworldly.

While, as D. Barton Johnson writes, “[t]he young Nabokov saw himself as a Russian poet, and poetry was to be his major project during his Cambridge years,”⁸ Sebastian writes English prose. As Brian Boyd notes, Sebastian uses images from the Georgian poets in his novel, *Lost Property*: “‘the blue remembered hills and the happy highways, the hedge with its unofficial rose and the field with its rabbits, the distant spire and the near bluebell...’ (25) is a *mélange* of fragments from poems of Thomas Gray, Housman, and Brooke’s ‘The Old Vicarage, Grantchester.’”⁹ English poetry is a source for Sebastian’s prose description of local scenery. But

Nabokov's involvement with Brooke has a different purpose; as D. Barton Johnson shows, "[t]he heart of Nabokov's essay [on Brooke] focuses on Brooke's theme of death and the hereafter-- even disproportionately so. In Nabokov's words, 'Not a single poet has looked into the twilight of the hereafter [potustoronnosti] with such tormented and creative penetration.'"¹⁰ Unlike Sebastian, Nabokov heightens the Georgian poet's concern with the otherworldly.

In the same way, Sebastian spoofs *Hamlet*, pretending to his very unliterary biographer, Goodman, that its plot is autobiographical, whereas for Nabokov the assassination of King Hamlet and his ghost's appearance to his son had personal (autobiographical) resonance, as we know from his translations and other novels. That significance is hinted at in Sebastian's "most autobiographical work," *Lost Property* (4). On the evening before Sebastian's and V's father is killed in a duel, Sebastian is reading the boys' magazine, *Chums*, in his father's study. The issue includes a typical adventure tale about "[t]he cricket Blue who fielded the knife thrown by a vicious Malay at the cricketer's friend" (12). While Sebastian's father dies in a duel that resembles the one Nabokov's father managed not to fight (described in the story "Orache" and in *Speak, Memory*), the adventure tale from *Chums* hints at the actual death of Nabokov's father. As distinct from Sebastian's memoir, Nabokov's version of his own reality inverts the real life events: on the one hand, the fictional (Sebastian's) father dies but the actual (Nabokov's) father's duel was called off, and on the other, disguised in the parodied exoticism of boys' magazines, the father is fantastically saved—the cricket Blue succeeds in preserving his friend's life, but the real life father dies. The possibility that Nabokov's father somehow survives is no more fantastical than the boys' tale, or than versions of a heaven with angels playing harps, or "Flemish hells with porcupines and things."¹¹ Nabokov hides the theme of the survival of the spirit in the greatest (*Hamlet*) and most trivial forms of literature (adventure stories in boys' magazines)

referred to in the novel.

V. is a businessman, not a man of letters, and his few literary references—*Dead Souls*, Maupassant, Boswell, Byron, *Alice in Wonderland*, “Little Red Riding Hood”—could be made by an undergraduate; as a group they are more generally known, less defining than Sebastian’s, and equally British with a similar dash of French and Russian classics. Besides these, V refers to two more works that are strangely particular.

Regretting the effect that Mr. Goodman’s biography of Sebastian will have on future readers, V. writes:

There will always be some learned inquirer conscientiously climbing up a ladder to where *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight* keeps half awake between Godfrey

Goodman’s *Fall of Man* and Samuel Goodrich’s *Recollections of a Lifetime* (59).

Presumably V. has looked at a library catalogue in order to place Goodman’s name alphabetically on a hypothetical library bookshelf, for these two volumes can have little relevance to him. Their distance from V.’s frame of reference and apparent irrelevance to his quest points to the importance of the two authors for Nabokov.

The first of the two books V. mentions is a theological work of the seventeenth century and the other an American memoir of New England at the turn of the nineteenth century. Godfrey Goodman, Bishop of Gloucester (1582-1656) was chaplain to Queen Anne, wife of James I; Goodman was imprisoned for his Catholic leanings, which he addresses in his *The Fall of Man, or the Corruption of Nature proved by the Light of his Natural Reason* (1616).

The second author, the American Samuel Goodrich (1793-1860) writes his recollections of growing up in Ridgefield, Connecticut, recalling his schooling and giving

the social customs of the day.¹² He published a huge number of books for schoolchildren, many written under his pseudonym, Peter Parley. Thus Goodman's biography of Sebastian is sandwiched between theology and history/geography, as well as between England and America, just as Nabokov's novel bridges British and American works. V. is too naïve a writer to have crafted this metaphor; it can only belong to Nabokov himself, who in this pair of references casts a broad Anglophone net in space, time, genre, web of interconnections and readership.

Goodrich and his Peter Parley books provide multiple connections to Anglophone literature—to James Joyce and Nathaniel Hawthorne in particular. As the tale of the growth of the writer's mind, Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is an implicit subtext of V.'s biography of Sebastian, even if V. is unaware of it, and Nabokov's depiction of Fyodor in *The Gift*, itself a portrait of the artist as a young man, implicitly refers to Joyce's.¹³ Nathaniel Hawthorne's tales are important to Nabokov's own private purposes in *Sebastian Knight*.¹⁴

Goodrich is connected to Joyce and Hawthorne through the Peter Parley books and their role in elementary education of the time. The books include *A Grammar of Modern Geography*, pictorial histories of ancient and modern Greece, ancient Rome, England, France and America. In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus, having been unfairly pandied at Clongowes, thinks of great men who were wrongly punished: "History was all about those men and what they did and that was what Peter Parley's Tales about Greece and Rome were all about. Peter Parley himself was on the first page in a picture...Peter Parley had a broad hat like a Protestant minister and a big stick and he was walking fast along the road to Greece and Rome."¹⁵ In his *Recollections* Samuel

Goodrich too recalls his physical humiliation by a teacher as a schoolboy.

Goodrich was the first to recognize Hawthorne's talent. As editor of an illustrated annual, *The Token* (1829-1840), Goodrich identified Hawthorne's superior sketches among the anonymous submissions, with the result that Hawthorne became a regular contributor to *The Token* where many of the *Twice-Told Tales* first appeared. Goodrich also published the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, and procured its editorship for Hawthorne in 1836. Writing for the magazine, Hawthorne sometimes used Peter Parley books for source materials.¹⁶

For Nabokov's purposes, Parley's books, some of which Goodrich adapted for the English reader and published in London, bridge the British-American divide, and the Anglo-Russian one as well: another book by Goodrich that is therefore "standing behind" (in Dolinin's phrase) his *Recollections of a Lifetime is A Tale of Adventure, or the Siberian Sable Hunter* (1844), which describes a family of Polish exiles in Tobolsk during the reign of Nicholas I who manage to "contend against weakness of heart in the hour of trouble,"¹⁷ like Sebastian's and Nabokov's own exiled families. Published only five years before Dostoevsky's mock execution in Petersburg by Nicholas, Goodrich's book oddly culminates in the false execution of a Count Pinsky, also in Petersburg. Nicholas says to the suddenly resurrected Count, "I ordered you to be shot—but with blank cartridges" (169). V.'s bibliographic items, then, are selected to "bridge the abyss" not only between "expression and thought" as V. says of Sebastian's writing (81-2), but between English and American, as well as between Anglo-American and Russian writing, by creating a web of hidden interconnections more important to the novel's author than to any of his characters. While Sebastian avoids Russian references, Nabokov

filters them through Anglophone sources—Sebastian’s bookshelf contains Norman Douglas, who was in the diplomatic service in St. Petersburg (1894-1896), and H. G. Wells, who met Lenin (1920) and Stalin (1934).¹⁸

In distinction to Sebastian’s bookshelf and concerns, Nabokov’s novel aligns three sets of oppositions: the Anglophone and the Russian cultural worlds; art vs. life; the living and the dead. In the course of the novel, Nabokov reveals the supernatural bridge between each pair. Sebastian returns to his native Russian universe as he dies; from the other shore he enters V’s world, bridging life/death, and uses his fictional characters to guide V., bridging art/life. While a case can be made equally for either Sebastian’s or V.’s authorship of the novel,¹⁹ both readings omit the mystical dimension; only the idea that “Sebastian’s shade is trying to be helpful” (99) conveys its central theme that it is possible to bridge the abyss to the other shore in each of these three oppositions. Only the realization that Sebastian assists V to write the book accounts meaningfully for the ghost/shade theme--the penetration of Sebastian’s novels and spirit into V.’s life.²⁰

Nabokov’s novel is designed to affirm these mystical possibilities. To connect the themes of Anglophonia and his own “optimysticism,” Nabokov requires English language sources that similarly incorporate the supernatural into an apparently realist tale. The range of candidates mentioned explicitly in *Sebastian Knight* stretches from the science-fiction type (*Jekyll and Hyde*, *The Invisible Man*) to the Gothic (*The Woman in White*). Implicitly, in addition to Hawthorne’s ambiguously ghostly stories, Nabokov refers to those of Henry James, whose work bridges America and England. James is best known for *The Turn of the Screw*, an ambiguous tale of possession by spirits.²¹ Nabokov makes use of three other tales by James as well. Will Norman has shown the importance

of James's "The Real Right Thing" for *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in which an author's shade discourages the young biographer from writing his biography.²² "The Aspern Papers" also contributes to the ghost theme. The narrator, in pursuit of his revered poet's love letters, has taken a room under false pretenses in the Venetian palazzo of the poet's now-aged beloved, a subterfuge that he tries to justify to himself:

I had invoked him [Aspern] and he had come; he hovered before me half the time; it was as if his bright ghost had returned to earth to assure me he regarded the affair as his own no less than as mine and that we should see it fraternally and fondly to a conclusion."²³

And in James's "The Figure in the Carpet," whose relevance Neil Cornwell notes, a dead man carries the object of the narrator's passionate quest--the key to his art--to the grave before he can reveal it.²⁴

James's stories treat interaction between the dead and the living; Hawthorne's tales too treat the supernatural. In *Sebastian Knight* it is possible to ignore the supernatural (readings that assign authorship to either one brother or the other are produced by avoiding it), but the novel's puzzle about authorship is designed to lead the reader to discover how the supernatural enables the interpenetration of art and life, as well as between this world and the otherworld.

The character of Nina, who, rusalka-like, lures Sebastian to his death, is built of elements of fairy tale and myth, and has her own "bookshelf." She identifies herself with the Persian princess whose touch kills flowers, a legend Hawthorne refers to in "Rappacini's Daughter" (and several other of Hawthorne's tales standing behind it are related to Nabokov's personal purposes [type 3]).²⁵ In Nina's flat V. sees "several oldish

French novels...most of them by literary prizewinners,” and “a well-thumbed copy of Dr. Axel Munthe's *San Michele*” (151). *The Story of San Michele* is appropriate to Nabokov's characterization of Nina: the Swedish doctor Munthe's book treats death and the uncanny as part of daily life. In particular, it contains Nabokov's subtextual “dead man of the tale” (50), a figure who goes unnamed not only by Nabokov but by Munthe himself, although he is at the center of Munthe's--and Nabokov's--books. The inclusion of this unidentified author smuggled into *Sebastian Knight* in Munthe's memoir, this *Invisible Man*, again shows Nabokov to be among “those whom Dean Park calls optimystics.” His identity, like the soul of the Russian fairy tale wizard Kashchei the Deathless (Immortal--bessmertnyi), is hidden in a box inside of a box (a book inside of a book) in the thrice-ninth kingdom (Sweden).²⁶ Munthe's attitude to death will provide a context for this ploy.

It was Henry James who advised his friend Munthe to write this memoir of his extraordinary life. The book's title refers to the house Munthe excavated and restored on the site of Tiberius's villa at Anacapri. An example of Munthe's experiences of the mystical, one he was unable to explain, is his vision of a sphinx among the ruins of Nero's villa in a cave below Munthe's; he found the sculpture just as he envisioned it and brought it up to place in a niche he had prepared for the vision-become-real. Munthe had worked with Charcot at the Salpêtrière in Paris; while he saw through the charlatanry of Charcot's practice of post-hypnotic suggestion, he himself used hypnotism successfully for anesthetic purposes.

An impressively active, practical man who went to Naples for two years to treat cholera victims, Munthe nonetheless had a mystical attitude toward death. As a doctor,

Munthe encountered death frequently, always “hoping to wrench his terrible secret from him” (319).²⁷ In his memoir, Munthe conveys his rejection of the idea of death in his dream vision of a goblin who has no concept of death: “‘Death,’ [the goblin] chuckled. ‘Well I never! It beats anything I’ve ever heard before! What short-sighted fools, are they not...Death! I never heard such nonsense’” (147). Elsewhere, Munthe dismisses the importance of the body to the spirit after death. In a chapter entitled “The Corpse-Conductor,” Munthe tells how on a train from Heidelberg he confuses the coffin of a young Swede he is taking home to bury with that of a Russian general, a hero of the Crimean war, who is being taken to Petersburg. He realizes this too late, and at the burial of the (undetected) General in Sweden, he muses,

What matters it to you whose grave it is?...You cannot hear the voices of the living overhead, what matters it to you what tongue they speak? You are not lying here among strangers, you are lying here side by side with your own kinsfolk. So is the Swedish boy who was laid to rest in the heart of Russia...The kingdom of death has no borders, the grave has no nationality. You are all one and the same people now...(204)

The spiritual unity Munthe describes transcends physical boundaries; as V says, after his vigil at Mr. Kegan’s deathbed: “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” (202-3).

Munthe’s views provide a context for what is crucial to Nabokov: in his memoir, Munthe tells how he was summoned to treat “the author of *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*” as he is dying (360). Munthe nowhere says who wrote the

book, but the author is Frederick Myers. One of the founders of the Society for Psychological Research, Myers believed in the possibility of the survival of the spirit after death, which he tries to demonstrate in his book, using methods that are as close to scientific as he can devise. Myers, a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge, died in 1901; the abridged edition of his two-volume magnum opus was published in 1919, the year Nabokov arrived there.

Nabokov refers to Myers' most important book in at least two subsequent works, *Bend Sinister* (1947) and "The Vane Sisters" (1951).²⁸ *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death* not only affirms Nabokov's "optimysticism," always expressed indirectly, but speaks to other paranormal phenomena of interest to him as well; in the third chapter of the abridged version, entitled Genius, Myers discusses the phenomenon of the

"calculating boy' or 'arithmetical prodigy,' generally of tender years, and capable of performing 'in his head,' and almost instantaneously, problems for which ordinary workers would require pencil and paper and a much longer time...we find this computative gift resembling other manifestations of subliminal faculty, such as the power of seeing hallucinatory figures...it shows itself mostly in early childhood, and tends to disappear later in life..." (47-8).²⁹

Nabokov describes his own experience of both of these gifts in his own memoir, *Speak, Memory*; he was temporarily an arithmetical prodigy, and had the clairvoyant vision of his mother purchasing a pencil on Nevsky Prospect while he was recovering from a severe illness at home. Myers calls this kind of phenomenon a "psychical excursion," one that may often accompany disease (134-5). Myers' accurate description

of Nabokov's own extraordinary experiences helps to explain Myers' enduring importance to him.

"The Vane Sisters," written more than a decade after *Sebastian Knight*, depicts precisely the kind of communication between the living and the (recently) dead of which Myers gives instances in his book.³⁰ Munthe "had loved and admired [Myers] for years as did everybody else who had ever met him." On August 26th 1910 Munthe was called in to treat Myers, who lay dying in Rome.

He reminded me of our last meeting in London, when I dined with him at the Society for Psychical Research, how we had been sitting up the whole night talking about death and thereafter...As we were speaking, Professor William James, the famous philosopher, one of his nearest friends, entered the room...James told me of the solemn pact between him and his friend that whichever of them was to die first should send a message to the other as he passes over into the unknown—they both believed in the possibility of such a communication. He was so overcome with grief that he could not enter the room, he sank down on a chair by the open door, his note-book on his knees, ready to take down the message with his usual methodical exactitude...

"I am ready, I have no fear. I am going to know at last. Tell William James, tell him..." [ellipsis Munthe's]

His heaving chest stood still in a terrible minute of suspense of life.

"Do you hear me?" I asked, bending over the dying man, "do you suffer?"

"No," he murmured, "I am very tired and very happy."

These were his last words.

When I went away William James was still sitting leaning back in his chair...his open note-book still on his knees. The page was blank. (361-62)

The failed experiment is not reflected in Myers' epilogue to *Human Personality*, where he affirms the "kinship of spirits, which is the foundation of telepathic law...it is the soul in man which links him with other souls...our spirits are systems of forces which vibrate continually to each other's attractive power...*die Geisterwelt ist nicht verschlossen*" (278).

Among the many cases Myers cites, he records two in which a sibling has a dream-vision of a brother's accident. One Canon Warburton, dozing in a chair as he waits for his brother in the latter's London chambers, awakes from seeing his brother trip on the carpet and fall headlong down the stairs of an unknown house; half an hour later the brother rushes in and reports having done exactly that at the party he is returning from. Myers suggests that "[t]he Impression...is as though a jerk were given to some delicate link connecting the two brothers" (81). Similarly, a Mrs. Storrie awakes in the night from a horrible dream of a man, gradually revealed to be her twin brother William, who is hit by a train. She reports her dream: "some one said... 'Now I'm going.' ...I started and at once I saw William's back at my side. He put his right hand...over his face...crossed in front, looking stern and solemn...I felt frightened, and called out, 'Is he angry?' 'Oh, no.' 'Is he going away?'" (83). A week later she learns that on that night "dear Willie died" (84) in precisely the circumstances contained in the highly detailed dream at the very time the dream occurred. Myers comments, "In some few cases the circumstances of death seem to be symbolically *shown* to a dreamer, as though by the deceased person, or by some intelligence connected with him" (81).

In V.'s "singularly unpleasant dream," triggered by receiving Sebastian's letter, V. and his mother are waiting for Sebastian to return from some long journey. Sebastian stumbles on the stairs and "slithered down on his back...I felt he was ashamed of something. His face was pale and unshaven... The whole atmosphere of his arrival seemed so uncanny...as I turned and groped for the latch I heard Sebastian's voice behind me..." (186-87). In retrospect, V recognizes "the delicate revelations of the dream" (188). The dream has an uncanny feel, but is not a message from Sebastian at the moment of his death—V. receives the letter, written at least a day earlier, on a Thursday, and Dr. Starov's telegram, "Sebastian's state hopeless," at noon Friday; V. arrives at St. Damier Saturday evening, and learns that Sebastian had died the day before. The atmosphere is evocative of elements of Myers' case histories; moreover, Myers' conclusions are the same as V.'s:

Inevitably, as our link with other spirits strengthens, as the life of the organism pours more fully through the individual cell, we shall feel love more ardent, wider wisdom, higher joy; perceiving that this organic unity of Soul, which forms the inward aspect of telepathic law, is in itself the Order of the Cosmos, the Summation of Things. And such devotion may find its flower in no vain self-martyrdom, no cloistered resignation, but rather in such pervading ecstasy as already the elect have known; the Vision which dissolves for a moment the corporeal prison-house; 'the flight of the One to the One.' (289)

Although he has failed to reach Sebastian before his death, V. realizes that "any soul may be yours, if you will find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul..." (202).

Myers' book provides a way for Nabokov's Russian spirit to inhabit his English physical universe, to sustain the belief that "no one will ever die."³¹ Myers understands genius to be "the power of utilising a wider range than other men can utilise of faculties in some degree innate in all; a power of appropriating the results of subliminal mentation to subserve the supraliminal stream of thought" (42). Nabokov knows that he himself has this power; he can glimpse the otherworld and incorporate that gift into his art, independent of language. Myers believes that "[l]ove is a kind of exalted, but unspecialized telepathy" (277). V achieves this exaltation after leaving Mr. Kegan's bedside. Whatever Nabokov meant by his words about the existence of God, "I know more than I can express in words," they relate to what he felt were his clairvoyant powers.³² In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov grants V. this insight into the continuity of spirit life, a continuity that Nabokov hopes will enable him to transpose his Russian genius into English. V. achieves this unity through his steadfast love of Sebastian; Nabokov too will overcome his loss through love—of the tradition that he has to abandon, and of the tradition he is newly taking up.

I gratefully acknowledge the insightful editorial assistance of Jenefer Coates and Bronwyn Wallace.

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, introduction and annotations by Alfred Appel, New York: Vintage, 1991, 311-317, pp. 316-317.

² D. Barton Johnson, "'Vladimir Nabokov and Rupert Brooke,'" *Nabokov and his Fiction*, ed. Julian Connolly, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, 177; "Vladimir Nabokov and Walter de la Mare's 'Otherworld,'" *Nabokov's World*, 2 vols., vol. 1, ed. Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin and Priscilla Meyer, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2002, 71-87.

³ See Susan Fromberg, "The Unwritten Chapters in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 13 (1967), 472-42, especially 435-36, for an excellent discussion of how Sebastian's fictional characters enter V.'s life.

⁴ David Bethea and Sergei Davydov, "Pushkin's Saturnine Cupid: The Poetics of Parody in *The Tales of Belkin*," *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 96, no. 1, 8-21, Winter 1981.

⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii amerikanskogo perioda v piati tomakh*, Sankt-peterburg: Symposium, 1997, *Komentarii*, A. M. Liuksemburg, p. 559, quoted from Aleksandr Dolinin, *Kommentarii, Vladimir Nabokov, Romany*, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, Moskva, 1991, 401-410, 403. Dolinin identifies many interesting patternings created by the titles on Sebastian's shelf; he does not address the question of language. See also Fromberg, *op. cit.*, 438-39.

⁶ I am grateful to Matthew Roth for his conjecture, posted to NABOKV-L@LISTSERV.UCSB.EDU on April 24, 2007.

⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Vintage, New York, 1992.

All page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

⁸ D. Barton Johnson, "Vladimir Nabokov and Rupert Brooke," op. cit., 177.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Novels and Memoirs 1941-1951*, notes by Brian Boyd, Library of America, 1987, 675-76, quoted (but incorrectly cited) in D. Barton Johnson, "Vladimir Nabokov and Rupert Brooke," op. cit., 190.

¹⁰ D. Barton Johnson, "Vladimir Nabokov and Rupert Brooke," op. cit., 184.

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, Vintage, New York, 1989, line 226, 41.

¹² Dieter Zimmer identifies Goodman and Goodrich in his notes to Vladimir Nabokov, *Das wahre Leben des Sebastian Knight*, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1996.

¹³ See Yaron Aronowicz, "Along the Moebius Strip: Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Nabokov's *The Gift*," unpublished term paper, Wesleyan University, 2002.

¹⁴ See Priscilla Meyer, "Life as Annotation: Sebastian Knight, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Vladimir Nabokov," *Annotating vs. Interpreting Nabokov*, ed. Maurice Couturier, *Cycnos*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2007, 193-202.

¹⁵ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin Modern Classics, Harmondsworth, 1965, 54.

¹⁶ B. Bernard Cohen, *The New England Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 2. (Jun., 1948), 236-241, 236-7.

¹⁷ Samuel Goodrich, *A Tale of Adventure, or the Siberian Sable Hunter*, Wiley and Putnam, New York, 1844, 12.

¹⁸ For a discussion of Wells' relationship to Nabokov and his family, and of his stories involving "hallucination or extraordinary perception" (535) including "The Inexperienced Ghost," see J. B. Sisson, "Nabokov and Some Turn-of-the-Century English Writers," *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir Alexandrov, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York and London, 1995, 528-536.

¹⁹ For an example and a partial listing of such arguments, see Michael H. Begnal "The Fledgling Fictionalist," Zembla, www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/forians.htm, note 4.

²⁰ The words "ghost," and "shade" in the sense of ghost, occur fifteen times in the novel.

²¹ Neil Cornwell, "Paintings, Governesses and 'Publishing Scoundrels': Nabokov and Henry James," *Nabokov's World*, 2 vols., vol. 2, 96-116, discusses Nabokov's and James's "shared concern with possibilities of communication with or from the dead, and the phenomenon of 'ghostliness'" (100-101).

²² Will Norman, "The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and two stories by Henry James." *The Nabokovian* 55 (Fall 2005), 7-13.

²³ Henry James, *The Aspern Papers*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1994, 40.

²⁴ “‘Ultima Thule’ may be considered a Nabokovian counterpart to Henry James’s ‘The Figure in the Carpet.’ In the tradition of *Sebastian Knight*, it tantalizes the reader with a vital undisclosed secret” (Neil Cornwell, “From Sirin to Nabokov: the transition to English,” *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Julian W. Connolly, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005, 151-169, 165).

²⁵ Priscilla Meyer, “Life as Annotation: Sebastian Knight, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Vladimir Nabokov,” *op. cit.*, 185-87.

²⁶ Kashchei’s presence in Nabokov’s work has been noted by Edward Waysband, “Kashchei the Deathless in Nabokov’s *Gift*,” *Slavic Almanac: The South African for Slavic, Central, and East European Studies*, vol. 8, 2002, 42-52.

²⁷ Axel Munthe, *The Story of San Michele*, John Murray, London, 1947. Page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

²⁸ D. Barton Johnson, “Nabokov and Walter de la Mare’s ‘Otherworld,’” discusses Nabokov’s interest in F. W. Myers, particularly in relation to *Bend Sinister* and “The Vane Sisters.”

²⁹ Frederick W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and its Survival of Bodily Death*, Pelegrin Trust, Norwich, England, 1992.

³⁰ For more on this, see Priscilla Meyer, “Nabokov and the Spirits: Dolorous Haze--Hazel Shade,” *Nabokov’s World*, 2 vols., ed. Jane Grayson, Priscilla Meyer and Arnold McMillin, Macmillan, London, 2001, vol. 1, 88-103.

³¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, G. P. Putnam’s Sons, New York, 1966, 77

³² Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, McGrawHill, New York, 1981, 45. Asked if Nabokov had had some supernatural experience, Dmitri Nabokov said he knew of none.