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September 1998
VLADIMIR NABOKOV, 1938

THE ARTISTIC RESPONSE TO TYRANNY

ANDREW CAULTON

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
of the University of Otago, Dunedin
New Zealand

28 October 2005
ABSTRACT

Nabokov is well known for writing numerous indictments of totalitarian tyranny, most notably Invitation to a Beheading (1935) and Bend Sinister (1947). However, my contention in this thesis is that Nabokov's most sustained and most significant assault on totalitarian tyranny occurred in 1938.

The extent of Nabokov's response to tyranny in 1938 is not immediately obvious. Some of Nabokov's work of the year engages in an explicit assault on tyranny; however, in other cases the assault is oblique and in one instance cryptically concealed. In my thesis I examine each of the works of 1938, and set these against the political circumstances of the year, the tense atmosphere on the threshold of World War II. I find that all of the works of 1938, in one manner or another, respond to the political climate of the day; that Nabokov in 1938 made an unparalleled artistic response to tyranny in a uniquely ominous year.

The thesis is divided into two parts. Part 1 contains studies of each of the lesser works of 1938: chapter 5 of The Gift, "Tyrants Destroyed," The Waltz Invention, "The Visit to the Museum," and "Lik." These studies are inset into a chronological survey of the personal and political circumstances of Nabokov's life in 1938.

Part 2 constitutes the most significant aspect of my thesis, an in-depth study of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Nabokov's main work of 1938. The novel has been regarded as detached from the pre-war climate of the day; however, in an extensive new reading I find that the bright appearance of the novel is only a façade. My reading reveals a triadic, chess-problem-like structure to the novel, where the innocuous surface (the thesis) gives way to a cryptically concealed level of totalitarian themes (the antithesis), before the novel finally emerges onto a notional third level (the synthesis), the novel's "solution." The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, I contend, represents the heart of Nabokov's artistic response to tyranny in 1938. Through the triadic unfolding of the novel and the reader's creative engagement with the text, Nabokov demonstrates that art itself triumphs over tyranny.
Andrew Field has described 1938 as "one of the most obscure years in Nabokov's life" (Field, VN 188). It is also one of the most ominous politically, and one of the most insecure in terms of Nabokov's personal situation. Out of these circumstances - although hitherto it has been overlooked - came the most sustained artistic response to totalitarian tyranny in the whole of Nabokov's career. This thesis is a study of that year in Nabokov's life - principally, the works containing the response to tyranny, but also the political and personal circumstances out of which that response arose.

The first task in such a study is to establish what Nabokov's works of 1938 are. I have followed Brian Boyd's chronology, which in certain cases corrects pre-existing dating. Thus, Dmitri Nabokov states that The Event was completed in 1938 (USSR 124), but Boyd puts the writing of the play at the end of 1937 (RY 446). In addition, Nabokov himself gives a date of 1938 for the poem "We So Firmly Believed" ("My s toboiu tak verili") (PP 89), but Boyd dates the poem 1939 (Boyd, "Chronology" 27). Neither of these works, then, falls within the scope of my thesis. The works which do are: chapter 5 of The Gift, "Tyrants Destroyed," The Waltz Invention, "The Visit to the Museum," "Lik," and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. I also touch in passing on the poem "What Happened Overnight" ("Chto za-noch"), the one very minor exception to the theme of tyranny in Nabokov's works of 1938.

The thesis takes a panoramic view of 1938, so while the focus is on Nabokov's works, these are considered within a detailed personal and political context. Part 1 of the thesis takes the form of a chronological survey of 1938, an account of Nabokov's life and the political developments in the year. Set into this survey are studies of all of the works of 1938 except The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. That novel is discussed in Part 2. As the work which embodies the most complex response to tyranny in 1938, a response that is cryptically concealed, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight requires lengthy analysis which is best dealt with in a section on its own. Nevertheless, the discussion of the novel completes the schema of Part 1. While The Real Life of Sebastian Knight was conceived in the spring, it was the final work written in 1938, and thus a discussion of the novel follows on naturally from the chronological survey of Part 1. In addition, as the main work of the year and the pinnacle of Nabokov's response to tyranny, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight forms an artistic culmination to the first part of the thesis.
I begin the thesis with an introduction which frames the discussion. I have adopted this approach in preference to making general concluding remarks at the end. *As The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* embodies the essence of Nabokov's artistic response to tyranny in 1938, the conclusions I reach regarding the novel in Part 2 provide a natural closure to the thesis.

I should like to thank Associate Professor Chris Ackerley of the University of Otago, New Zealand, for his help and valuable criticism as supervisor of this thesis. I should like, also, to express special thanks to my wife, Suzanne.
# CONTENTS

Abstract                       ii  
Preface                        iii  
References and Abbreviations   vi  

Introduction                  1  

**PART 1: 1938**  
1 January, and Chapter 5 of *The Gift*            7  
2 January to March, and the genesis of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*  20  
3 April to May, and "Tyrants Destroyed"             32  
4 May to September, and *The Waltz Invention*       45  
5 October, and "The Visit to the Museum"             62  
6 November, and "Lik"                                78  
7 December, and the writing of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*  92  

**PART 2: The Real Life of Sebastian Knight**  
1 Thesis                                               97  
2 Antithesis                                           120  
3 Synthesis                                            235  

*Bibliography*                                           252
REFERENCES AND ABBREVIATIONS

References to all works will be given in short form followed by page numbers. All references will appear parenthetically in the text, except where a reference requires comment, when a footnote will be used.

References to works by Vladimir Nabokov will be given using the abbreviations in list 1 below; for example: (LATH 100). An exception is made in Part 2, where references to The Real Life of Sebastian Knight will be given using page numbers only.

References to works by other authors will be given using the author’s name, or, where more than one work by the same author is cited in the thesis, by including a short form of the title; for example: (Carroll 200) or (Gilbert, Descent 104). References to frequently cited works by other authors will be given using the abbreviations in list 2 below; for example: (Adventures 115).

Full bibliographical details of all works referred to in the thesis will be found in the bibliography.

1. Abbreviations of works by Vladimir Nabokov

BS  

Def  

EO  


“Pushkin”  
“Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible.” 1937. Trans. Dmitri Nabokov.  

**RLSK**  

**SL**  

**SM**  

**SO**  

**SSAP**  

**SSRP**  

**Stikhi**  

**Stories**  

**USSR**  

**Waltz**  

2. Abbreviations of works by other authors  
(a) Biographies; (b) Sherlock Holmes books; (c) Scarlet Pimpernel books

(a) Biographies:

**AY**  
RY


Véra


(b) Sherlock Holmes books:

Adventures


Case-Book


HLB


Memoirs


Return


Valley


(c) Scarlet Pimpernel books:

EP


IWR


LSP


INTRODUCTION

Nabokov said: "It is hard, I submit, to loathe bloodshed, including war, more than I do, but it is still harder to exceed my loathing of the very nature of totalitarian states in which massacre is only an administrative detail." These words are taken from the foreword to The Waltz Invention, one of the works that Nabokov wrote in 1938; however, they might just as easily serve as a preface to any of Nabokov's works of that year. For in 1938 Nabokov engaged in an artistic assault on totalitarian tyranny unmatched at any other point in his career.

1938 was a year like no other. On the one hand, tyranny was consolidating and expanding to an unprecedented level; and on the other, the Western powers were offering no resistance. Indeed, in the most momentous events of the year the democracies actually assisted the spread of tyranny. For 1938 was the year of appeasement, when Britain and France allowed Hitler to annex first Austria in the Anschluss of March, and then Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland in the Munich Agreement of September. In 1938 Hitler made the transition from domestic consolidation to territorial expansion, and the West held open the door. In addition, in the Soviet Union Stalin consolidated his dictatorship. The Purge that the Soviet leader had instigated in 1934 rose to a peak in 1938, culminating in the Great Trial of March in which the last remnants of potential opposition to Stalin's regime were crushed. The Purge was one of the great crimes perpetrated on a nation, yet the West continued to view events in the Soviet Union with a mixture of ignorance and disbelief. Meanwhile, in Spain civil war raged, with the support of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin, and in China a belligerent Japan sought territorial expansion of its own, pursuing dreams of empire which would presently embroil the United States and the whole of the Pacific in conflict. It might be said that in 1938 World War II had already begun, but half the world was not yet aware of it. 1938, in short, was a unique year: never before had tyranny held such sway in the modern world, and never again would the democratic nations be so content to accommodate tyrants. In a word, tyranny was on the rise, and nobody was doing a thing to oppose it. For those who could see it, 1938 was a gravely ominous year.

And Nabokov was one of those who could see it. Nabokov had had first-hand experience of totalitarian tyranny. He had witnessed the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the first years of Nazi rule in Berlin. From the former he had fled as a Russian aristocrat in the face of Bolshevik terror; from the latter he had extricated himself and
his family when the atmosphere of Hitler’s regime had finally become utterly unbearable. In 1938 Nabokov was fully aware of the horrors that tyranny’s rise brought in its wake. Moreover, there were personal issues which sharpened Nabokov’s sense of the totalitarian threat. One of the reasons why the Nabokovs had left Nazi Germany was that Nabokov’s wife Véra was a Jew who, along with their son Dmitri, was categorized by Hitler’s regime as a second-class citizen; in any Nazi context Nabokov’s family would come under immediate threat. In addition, Nabokov’s mother was in Czechoslovakia over which Hitler loomed. And added to that, Sergey Taboritsky, the man who had murdered Nabokov’s father, had been made an official in Hitler’s Department of Emigré Affairs - a constant personal reminder to Nabokov of the criminality and corruption of the Nazi regime. Moreover, as Stalin’s Purge spilled over into western Europe in the late 1930s under the auspices of the Soviet secret police, Nabokov had a further dimension of concern. In 1938 Nabokov was in difficult personal circumstances, eking out an existence in France as the emigration disintegrated and the need to establish himself in the West became ever more urgent; yet everything he wrote that year concerned itself with the more sinister developments on the public stage, with the ominousness of tyranny’s unopposed rise.

Nabokov began the year completing the fifth and final chapter of *The Gift* in which the shadows of future Nazism loom in 1920s Berlin over Fyodor and his Jewish sweetheart more darkly than at any other point in the novel. Next came “Tyrants Destroyed,” a story in which a lone man aims to assassinate a tyrant, but fails when the tyrant’s frustrating unassailability brings him perilously close to complete mental breakdown. Then came *The Waltz Invention*, a play in which a tyrant employs intimidation and terror on a grand scale in a bid for ultimate power, with catastrophic results. Then “The Visit to the Museum,” a story in which an innocent man in a free country is engulfed by a nightmare which finally resolves into the hellish reality of a totalitarian state. And then “Lik,” a story in which a man’s passive acquiescence to the demands of a tyrant-like bully draws him towards the abyss of self-destruction. In these works (obliquely in the case of “Lik”) Nabokov highlights the horror of totalitarian regimes, the total destruction towards which they tend, and the fatal mistake of affording them latitude. And the sequence culminates in the main work of 1938, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.

*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* appears to be a frivolous work quite detached from the critical issues of the day. However, that frivolousness is a façade. Like all Nabokov’s other work of 1938, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* responds to the rise of tyranny at the time; it is just that that response is concealed. Beneath the innocuous
surface of the novel a second level of narrative exists, in which Sebastian Knight engages with dark tyrannical forces in a world of espionage and totalitarian terror. Indeed, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* Nabokov’s sense of the ominousness of tyranny’s unopposed rise is depicted in more terrifying shades than in the other works of 1938. The novel which appears at first glance to bear no relation to the political developments of the day turns out on closer inspection to contain the darkest shadows of all the work of 1938. Remarkably, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov’s first novel in English, is perhaps the most artistically complex assault on tyranny in the whole of Nabokov’s career.

Yet if everything Nabokov wrote in 1938 responds to tyranny’s unopposed rise, Nabokov’s work of the year does not, in fact, form a unified whole. For chapter 5 of *The Gift* is something of an odd one out. As the finale to the great Russian masterpiece that Nabokov started to plan even before Hitler came to power, chapter 5 of *The Gift* belongs to a different creative epoch. It closes an earlier project before the work of 1938 proper comes into being. Chapter 5 of *The Gift* in a sense does not truly belong to Nabokov’s response to tyranny of 1938. What it does is to anticipate it. For the chapter shadows forth at the start of the year a pre-existing concern over totalitarian tyranny on Nabokov’s part, that explodes in intensity in the works which come later.

And what seems to have caused this later explosion is the events of March: the *Anschluss* and the Great Trial. All of Nabokov’s work that originates in 1938 comes into being following these two events. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is thought to have begun its evolution in the spring; that is, in the immediate aftermath of the events of March. And the genesis of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* seems to have sparked off the series of works written during the preparation of the novel: “Tyrants Destroyed,” *The Waltz Invention*, “The Visit to the Museum,” and “Lik.” It seems that Hitler’s annexation of Austria, coupled with the climax of Stalin’s Purge, unleashed a great burst of anti-totalitarian creative energy in Nabokov, energy that no doubt was fuelled by the later developments in the year, particularly the Sudetenland crisis which escalated throughout the summer. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, then, and the works written in its shadow, represent Nabokov’s real response to tyranny in 1938, a group of works that form a creative unit characterized by a common theme. For the foreboding palpable in chapter 5 of *The Gift* intensifies in these works into a profound sense of ominousness, the sense of an abyss of darkness and terror threatening to engulf the individual and the world. If in the finale to *The
Gift Nabokov intimates trepidation about what lies ahead, in these later works he puts the writing on the wall.

However, if Nabokov’s works of 1938 - particularly those following the events of March - highlight the ominousness of tyranny’s unopposed rise, the business of putting the writing on the wall is only one dimension of Nabokov’s response to tyranny in 1938. For in addition to warning of tyranny, and the danger of leaving it unopposed, Nabokov addresses it, counters it, by offering opposition of his own.

In a lecture on Pushkin in 1937 Nabokov spoke of a “divine spirit” firmly established in the modern world, and said that while philistines feared the world was going from bad to worse, the philosopher could see “that the essential things do not change, that goodness and beauty retain their place of honor” (“Pushkin” 42). Although by 1938 the world in certain respects had experienced a decline, Nabokov maintained this positive view. He may have seen disaster looming on the horizon, but he believed that whatever catastrophe tyranny might cause, the divine spirit and the essential goodness of the world could never be extinguished.

For Nabokov, the divine spirit was an artistic spirit, one which existed artfully and sometimes concealed. As he said in his Pushkin lecture, the divine spirit was ever present, “one must simply be capable of seizing it” (“Pushkin” 42). And the key to seizing it was the imagination. In a lecture given in the early 1940s Nabokov referred to the “divine standards” of the imagination (LL 373), and in 1938 he sought to foster those divine standards, and to direct them towards the divine spirit abiding in the world.

In chapter 5 of The Gift Fyodor senses an artist’s hand in nature and consciously cultivates his perception of it; but while Fyodor’s perceptions are somewhat naïve, the theme of directing the human imagination towards the divine artistic spirit achieves its mature and fullest expression in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. The framing “plot” of the novel is V’s quest for his artistic self, a quest which draws him towards the author-divinity; in addition, the reader’s unravelling of this quest within a cryptically constructed novel calls upon the “divine standards” of the imagination and brings the reader himself creatively closer to the author-divinity.

And this directing of the reader’s imagination towards divine artistry in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is done with the clear intention of demonstrating that artistry’s transcendence over the forces of evil. For on the one hand, V, in attaining his artistic
self, progresses beyond the totalitarian horrors in the lower regions of the novel to pass to a higher state of reality; and on the other, the reader, in unlocking the novel's multi-layered structure, reveals a creative spirit underlying reality that explodes the materialistic creed of the totalitarianism hidden within the novel. In other words, tyranny is concealed in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* in order to show how the divine artistry transcends it.

In his works of 1938 Nabokov warns of the grave danger of leaving tyranny unopposed, but at the same time he insists - in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in particular - on the permanence of a divine goodness which will outlast tyranny’s evil. Or to put it another way, if Nabokov in 1938 puts the writing on the wall for Western civilization, he ultimately puts the writing on the wall for tyranny itself. In 1938 Nabokov opposed tyranny on the highest possible plane, countering its absolute evil with divine artistry: in the absence of adequate public or political action, Nabokov gave the *artistic* response to tyranny.
PART 1

1938
At the beginning of 1938 Nabokov and his family were living in Menton on the French Riviera in a pension called Les Hespérides (11 rue Partouneaux), where they had been since mid-October 1937 (RY 445). There is a photograph in *Speak, Memory* of Nabokov on the steps of Les Hespérides, looking like a man of mystery (SM 106-07). Nabokov told Andrew Field the only thing he remembered about the pension was that another Russian was staying there, “a secret agent who was very nice to Dmitri” (Field, VN 187).

The Nabokovs were in the south of France because it was cheaper to live there than in Paris, and they were in Menton because of its mild winters (RY 445, 479). Menton has been wryly referred to as the “last resort” on the Riviera, not only because it is a stone’s throw from the Italian border, and has the warmest climate on the coast, but also because in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries it was popular as a winter refuge for consumptive invalids from northern Europe: Robert Louis Stevenson, Katherine Mansfield, and D. H. Lawrence all brought their tortured lungs here in search of relief. There is a saying: “Cannes is for living, Monte Carlo for gambling and Menton for dying” (Stirton 295-96). Nabokov had bronchitis in January (*Véra* 95), but he was hardly perishing; still, the winter sun could not disguise the fact that the Nabokovs themselves were at the end of the road in Menton. They had no money, no work permits in France, nowhere to go, and no real prospect of improving their circumstances. Perhaps that is why Menton seems like such a luckless place in Nabokov’s fiction of 1938: in “The Visit to the Museum” the narrator becomes ensnared in a nightmarish museum that is based on the one in Menton (RY 493); Virginia Knight dies of “Lehmann’s disease” in nearby Roquebrune; Lik, sweating his way through a brief theatrical season in the town, runs into a hated former acquaintance, which throws his whole existence into turmoil; and that former acquaintance himself, Koldunov, blows his brains out in his Menton lodgings, after unsuccessfully prevailing on Lik (his last resort) for some much needed cash.
Global horrors were not far from home either. The Nabokovs may have fled Hitler’s regime, but totalitarianism was still on their doorstep. Menton’s proximity to fascist Italy provided a constant reminder of the dark political forces in Europe’s midst, and of the perilously thin line between freedom and totalitarian dictatorship. Indeed, at the end of 1937 the Nabokovs had briefly and illegally crossed the border into Mussolini’s country to humour an insistent three-year-old Dmitri (RY 446), the token defiance of fascism no doubt adding relish to the dare. However, the border with Italy was not the only French frontier keeping fascism at bay: France was flanked in the east by Hitler’s remilitarized Rhineland, while General Franco’s Nazi-sponsored armies lay in Spain to the south.

The bright Côte d’Azur sun belied both the murky uncertainty in Nabokov’s personal circumstances and the looming shadows in the world at large. However, in spite of the bleak outlook, Nabokov held steadfastly to his art, which provided a kind of antidote to the disintegration around him. In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov recalls the bits of broken pottery discovered by his son on the beach at Menton, and links those patterned fragments with others found by himself and earlier generations of the family on the same shore in the past, so as to imaginatively reconstruct a complete earthenware bowl - a symbol of art’s triumph over material disintegration and the depredations of time (SM 236). Since Nabokov’s art provided the family’s only source of income in 1938, it also kept body and soul together. It was fortunate, then, that Nabokov was at his prolific and brilliant best. Menton was not an auspicious town for writers, but Nabokov was never one to follow a trend; indeed, everything he wrote in 1938, apart from *The Waltz Invention*, seems to have originated one way or another in the town.

In January he completed the great concluding chapter of *The Gift* (RY 446), bringing to a close a project begun five long years earlier. Conceived before Hitler came to power, and set in the late 1920s, *The Gift* belongs to a brighter age. Yet with the Nazi era dawning just as Nabokov began to work on the novel, *The Gift*’s bright world of the past took shape entirely in the shadow of Hitler’s nauseous rise. And it shows. Frequently in the novel’s pages Nabokov shadows forth the monstrous regime which, for his characters, lay in an unforeseen future. “Here and there history shows through artistry,” Nabokov states in his foreword (*Gift* 7). Nowhere is this more evident than in chapter 5. This brilliant final chapter, bringing together all of the novel’s themes, represents the fullest expression of *The Gift*’s fundamentally radiant and optimistic vision of life, yet it also contains the darkest shadows of looming Nazism, and the harshest swipes at Germany and the Germans, to be found anywhere in the novel. In
early 1938 Nabokov’s concern over the dangerous potential of Hitler’s regime appears to have been graver than ever before.

II

The Gift (Dar): Chapter 5

The world of The Gift is encapsulated in the epigraph:

An oak is a tree. A rose is a flower. A deer is an animal. A sparrow is a bird. Russia is our fatherland. Death is inevitable (Gift 11).

Life and death, beauty and loss, are inextricably linked; but in The Gift this is ultimately not a source of grief. As the very essence of beauty is its transience, death and loss play a meaningful role in the beauty of the world. All things are incorporated into a design as essentially harmonious as the epigraph; death, though the inevitable end of every mortal life, is merely one element in a scheme of infinite beauty. This is something felt rather than understood by Fyodor; life is a mystery, but he believes it possible to sense the existence of a solution shimmering beyond the veil of ordinary perception (“For there really is something, there is something!” [Gift 299]). It is a faith in this - implying the fundamental generosity of life and the beneficence of fate - that Fyodor develops throughout the novel, culminating in chapter 5, with his acknowledgement of life’s unique gift to him, in all its facets. Yet at this very point the novel intimates that retaining this faith and this gift amid a darkening outside world will not be easy.

“Give me your hand, dear reader, and let’s go into the forest together,” says Fyodor as he enters Berlin’s Grunewald for a day’s meditation and recreation in the summer sun (Gift 301). Here, away from the noise of the city, among the woods and glades, where nature, unobstructed by civilization, is in its purest most elemental state, the great mystery of things is laid bare. Fyodor opens himself up to embrace the wonder of this mystery, hoping to get in touch with the beneficent force he believes lies concealed behind the surface of things. Through Fyodor’s eyes the Grunewald becomes a “primeval paradise,” in which he - himself in a state of nature - figures as a latter-day Adam discovering the marvels of a new world (Gift 303). However, for Fyodor this is no Eden; this is a fallen world, a mortal world, where death and decay go hand in hand with life and growth. Yet this is not a source of fear and regret, since death is one of the vital and interdependent rhythms of nature, part of a mystery which Fyodor wants to embrace in its entirety. So Death walks freely in Fyodor’s Arcadia. Thus a
discarded mattress among the undergrowth ("don’t disdain it") is as integral to the picture of beauty as a tree’s dappled light and shade; and the “wonderfully graceful curve” of a dead dog lying neatly in a pit dug in preparation for death illustrates death’s unintimidating nature and its harmony with the contours of all things (Gift 301-02). Death is just one facet of life’s mystery, a mystery concealing something in which all things are explained, an “infinity, where all, all the lines meet” (Gift 300).

Fyodor hopes to imbibe the mystery of things just as his body imbibes the sun’s rays. Indeed, taking his communion with nature to its ultimate extension, he imagines melting under the influence of the sun into his surroundings: “My personal I . . . had somehow disintegrated and dissolved; after being made transparent by the strength of the light, it was now assimilated to the shimmering of the summer forest with its satiny pine needles and heavenly-green leaves” (Gift 304). Here, where his communion with nature reaches its peak, Fyodor’s method, like his body, becomes most transparent. Like the boy in the storybook in Glory whom a young Martin Edelweiss pictures disappearing into the watercolour painting of a forest (Glory 15-16), Fyodor’s melting into the woodland scenery is an artistic rather than a natural experience. Fyodor merges not with observable nature but with an image of nature that he himself has artistically conjured up. Indeed, he makes no secret of using art, stating that his vision of the forest is an “image I had raised as it were by my own efforts” (Gift 303), a “charmed fabric” he had “so carefully spun” (Gift 306).

Moreover, in using his art, Fyodor is only responding in kind to what he perceives to be something artful in nature: its striking juxtapositions, its deceptions, its magical combinations. Indeed, this artistry he perceives in nature is the key intimation of something “concealed behind all this, behind the play, the sparkle, the thick, green grease-paint of the foliage” (Gift 299), a guiding hand shaping everything according to some great artistic design, in which every detail has a meaningful place. By reading these artistic hints and intimations on the underside of the weave, one can gain an inkling of the great pattern figuring on the upper, invisible side of the fabric (Gift 287). However, these hints are not immediately obvious; one must know how to look for them; one must, Fyodor implies in his Grunewald vision, cultivate the artist’s eye. To experience the world at its richest, reality at its most intense, one must meet art with art.

Fyodor knows that seeing the world in this way is not the prevailing reality. The image he raises is an ideal reality. To see things the way he does requires an effort, a concentration and artistic sensibilities, which the average person is not disposed, or unable, to muster. Though Fyodor does not share the average person’s reality -
indeed, distances himself from it at every opportunity - it is nevertheless something with which he is forced to contend. Fyodor is painfully reminded of this while still in the Grunewald. Descending to the lake shore, he encounters a crowd of Berliners taking their pleasure, whereupon his magical vision of beauty “completely fell to pieces”:

Old men’s grey legs covered with growths and swollen veins; flat feet; the tawny crust of corns; pink porcine paunches; wet, shivering, pale, hoarse-voiced adolescents; the globes of breasts; voluminous posteriors; flabby thighs; bluish varices; gooseflesh; the pimply shoulder blades of bandy-legged girls; the sturdy necks and buttocks of muscular hooligans; the hopeless, godless vacancy of satisfied faces; romps, guffaws, roisterous splashing - all this formed the apotheosis of that renowned German goodnaturedness which can turn so easily at any moment into frenzied hooting. And over all this, especially on Sundays when the crowding was vilest of all, there reigned an unforgettable smell, the smell of dust, or sweat, or aquatic slime, of unclean underwear, of aired and dried poverty, the smell of dried, smoked, potted souls a penny a piece (Gift 306).

Fyodor’s revulsion at the lakeside leisure-seekers is more than just a swipe at the great unwashed, at the ignorant souls who are oblivious of the artistic beauty of the natural world. It is tinged with anti-German prejudice. And Fyodor’s comments here are just the tip of the iceberg. On the other side of the lake, Fyodor ponders the occupation of a young German with whom he shares a park bench: “Perhaps a poet? After all, there must be poets in Germany. Puny ones, local ones - but all the same not butchers. Or only a garnish for the meat?” (Gift 313). That night he writes to his mother:

Generally speaking I’d abandon tomorrow this country, oppressive as a headache - where everything is alien and repulsive to me, where a novel about incest or some trash, some cloyingly rhetorical, pseudo-brutal tale about war is considered the crown of literature; where in fact there is no literature, and hasn’t been for a long time; where sticking out of the fog of a most monotonous democratic dampness - also pseudo - you have the same old jackboot and helmet; where our native enforced ‘social intent’ in literature has been replaced by social opportunity - and so on, and so on . . . I could go on much longer - and it is amusing that fifty years ago every Russian thinker with a suitcase used to scribble exactly the same - an accusation so obvious as to have become even banal. Earlier, on the other hand, in the golden middle of last century, goodness, what transports! ‘Little gemütlich Germany’ - ach, brick cottages, ach, the kiddies go to school, ach, the peasant doesn’t beat his horse with a club! . . . Never mind - he has his own
German way of torturing it, in a cosy nook, with red-hot iron (Gift 318-19).

Even when he is on the point of attaining his happiness with Zina, Fyodor cannot resist a swipe at a German couple - “a boar and his sow” - at a neighbouring restaurant table (Gift 329).

After fleeing the oppressive ugliness at the crowded Grunewald lakeside by swimming to the other shore, Fyodor manages to recapture some of the magic of his vision, manages to patch up the rents in the diaphanous fabric he had woven, when he witnesses a group of nuns singing and gathering flowers in such harmony with one another that to Fyodor “it all looked so much like a staged scene - and how much skill there was in everything, what an infinity of grace and art, what a director lurked behind the pines, how well everything was calculated” (Gift 313). Fyodor’s faith in that unseen beneficent force is unshaken by his recent disturbance. He even manages to look on the theft of his clothes - which becomes apparent immediately afterwards - philosophically. However, from a reader’s perspective, the lapse in Fyodor’s radiant vision is ominous, like the rainclouds which presently close in over the sunny day.

Fyodor confidently writes to his mother that he thrives on “the wonderful, beneficent contrast between my inner habitus and the terribly cold world around me” (Gift 319), but looking beyond the end of the book - as the book invites the reader to do - one wonders how Fyodor’s “inner habitus” will fare when the blaring, the “frenzied hooting” of the outside world becomes infinitely colder under the Nazis. Then it will not be so easy for him to turn away from the obtrusive vulgarity, as he had done at the Grunewald lakeside. Fyodor may have a sensitive artistic soul, but one foresees that his conceited aloofness and intolerance of Germans will be a source of some anguish in the painful times ahead. The cheeky German’s theft of Fyodor’s belongings in the Grunewald is only a wry token of what he may be dispossessed of in the future; the thief is merely a petty forerunner of the forces soon to come down, which represent the antithesis of nature’s giving.

And the chapter leaves no doubt of the Nazi future lying in store for the unwitting Fyodor. The Gift paints a vast canvas of the subtlety and elaborateness of the workings of fate, as it hints at and foreshadows future events which it works tirelessly towards bringing about, in spite of the obtrusions of chance. Fyodor frequently misses the foreshadowings of his meeting with Zina, just as he also misses the foreshadowings of his likely future confrontation with the Nazi regime, which are just as surely woven into the tapestry of the novel, and nowhere more so than in chapter 5.
In his review of Fyodor’s book on Nikolai Chernyshevski a Professor Anuchin writes: “In our day, thank God, books are not burned by bonfire, but I must confess that if such a custom were still in existence, Mr Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s book could justifiably be considered the first candidate for fuelling a public square” (Gift 280-81). This in 1929; only four years later Vera Nabokov herself would be cautiously dodging a public book-burning in Berlin on her way home one evening, as Nazi supporters all over Germany joyfully consigned the works of Jews, Marxists, and other condemned writers to the flames (RY 401; Snyder 35-36). Professor Anuchin may be no Nazi, but his ostensibly distancing himself from public book-burnings is undercut by the relish with which he condemns Fyodor’s book to hypothetical flames. Nabokov here alludes to the propensity soon to be revealed even among those nominally opposed to such things, for complicity and collaboration in Nazi practices.

After the cremation of the Jewish Alexander Chernyshevski, the emigré writer Shirin approaches Fyodor to get him to support a move he is making to replace the members of the Committee of the Society of Russian Writers in Germany. The current vice-president and two of his fellow committee members are suspected by Shirin and others of embezzling the society’s funds. Shirin plans to put forward a new list of candidates for the committee at the coming elections, and to have “a regular battle with these gangsters” (Gift 291). The crisis in the society is a satire on the political situation in Germany which allowed Hitler to emerge as Chancellor a few years later. The shady trio whom Shirin sees as the culprits foreshadow the Nazi triumvirate of Hitler, Göring, and Goebbels. The first of these is one Gurman, whose name sounds like a rearrangement of syllables taken from “Hermann Göring,” and whose fatness and “massive sloping shoulders” evoke the ample frame of Hitler’s second in command (Gift 291). Next to him at the committee table is the treasurer, “a small but sturdily resilient barrister, with a jutting jaw,” and a defective left eye; this “alert fiery man,” who spoke with “the precise severity of a hardened duellist” (Gift 291), calls to mind the small and caustic Joseph Goebbels, who delivered his speeches with a fierce venom which may have owed something to a physical defect of his own - a clubfoot. The third of the trio is a “loose-fleshed . . . languid” individual, “resembling a peaceful toad that wants only one thing - to be left in complete peace in a damp place” (Gift 291-92); Nabokov regarded Hitler as a “toad,” and blended his image with those of two other “toads,” Lenin and Stalin, to create the dictator Paduk, the “Toad,” in Bend Sinister. Gurman and his two associates have been able to carry out their nefarious business unchecked, thanks to the passivity of the other two committee members, and to their having alienated the committee president, Vasiliev, the

1 See Nabokov’s note on “Tyrants Destroyed” (Stories 655).
eminently respectable senior statesman of the Berlin emigré literary world, who resembles the elderly and beleagured President Hindenburg, the veteran Field Marshal, who only grudgingly appointed the scheming Hitler (whom he disliked) as his Chancellor, and then witnessed him promptly assume effective control of the country.

Gurman’s rise to his position of power - he somehow “oozed through” into what until then had been a highly respectable committee, “and then gradually pulled his pals in” (Gift 289) - is reminiscent of the crude Nazi Party’s unlikely ascension to government in Germany, and its stamping out opposition once it had got there. However, as Shirin points out, if Gurman’s current position seems surprising and undesirable, there is really no mystery behind it:

“The ones to blame for all this are us, the members of the Union. If it were not for our idleness, carelessness, lack of organization, indifferent attitude to the Union and flagrant impracticality in social work it would never have happened that Gurman and his chums from year to year elected either themselves or else people congenial to them” (Gift 290).

Shirin’s placing responsibility for a society’s leaders on the shoulders of the society itself is clearly an authorial comment on the political situation in Germany; on a society that could opt for Hitler, as the writers’ union had opted for Gurman. The outcome of the elections in the writers’ union is not seen, but the squabbling between various factions, the resignation of the president Vasiliev (whom Shirin had wanted to retain as the cornerstone of his alternative committee), do not augur well for Shirin’s reforms. Indeed, if the parallel with the Nazi regime continues to hold, Shirin and company will be enduring the machinations of Gurman and his associates for some time to come - Hitler had still not been toppled when Nabokov was writing this scene. However, the plight of the writers, already struggling under a “Nazi”-like yoke, only serves to highlight how on the national political stage at the time (1929), Hitler, unlike Gurman, was not yet in power, and how the German public still had every opportunity to prevent a Gurman-like situation from arising. Instead, they brought upon themselves a situation of which the crisis in the writers’ union is only a trivial parody.

Fyodor does not support Shirin’s stand against Gurman; moreover, he even abstains from voting in the union’s elections, leaving the meeting early, preferring to distance himself from such general affairs. One cannot blame him for this; after all, Gurman is only a parody of a Nazi dictator, not a real one. However, one fears that Fyodor’s
action, or rather lack of it, portends a much greater tension in the future between, on
the one hand, his insistence on withdrawing into his private ideal world, and, on the
other, the cold world around him, when, in place of Gurman’s friend the “toad,” will
come a far more venomous creature: Hitler.

On the final day of the novel’s narrative, political demonstrations take place in Berlin
- a further omen of the storm to come:

It was some kind of a national holiday. Three kinds of flags were
sticking out of the house windows: black-yellow-red, black-white-red,
and plain red; each one meant something, and funniest of all, this
something was able to excite pride or hatred in someone. There were
large flags and small flags, on short poles and on long ones, but none
of this exhibitionism of civic excitement made the city any more
attractive. On the Tauentzienstrasse the bus was held up by a gloomy
procession; policemen in black leggings brought up the rear in a slow
truck and among the banners there was one with a Russian inscription
containing two mistakes: serb instead of serp (sickle) and molt instead
of molot (hammer). [Later that day the public excitement is still
evident:] A truck went by with a load of young people returning from
some civic orgy, waving something or other and shouting something or
other (Gift 326, 329).

Nabokov is quite specific about the date: 29 June 1929; yet it appears that no such
political demonstrations took place in Berlin on that day. There were, however, large-
scale demonstrations in the city the day before. Friday, 28 June 1929 was the tenth
anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The Nazis and the other groups
on the political right regarded the treaty as a national disgrace, since it imputed to
Germany sole responsibility for World War I, and imposed on the country hefty
reparation payments to the Allies. The anniversary of the signing of the treaty was
traditionally an occasion for political demonstration, particularly as the date coincided
with the anniversary of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on
28 June 1914. In 1929 the day was marked in Berlin with mass demonstrations and
disturbances. The Times reported on a “day of mourning”:

From a few private buildings in the city this morning flags, mostly the
old Imperial colours, were flown with black mourning crape. The
Nationalist-Fascist University students distinguished themselves by
creating a riot in Unter den Linden. . . . The police were surprised and
were unable to prevent the violation of the sacred ‘Bannmeile,’ the

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2 See Nabokov’s note on “The Circle” (Stories 653). In The Gift itself Nabokov explicitly points out
that the preceding day is 28 June (Gift 307).
area in the centre of the city containing the chief official buildings, in which no demonstrations are allowed. One policeman fired warning shots into the air from his revolver... Reinforcements were sent in motor lorries, and a struggle ensued, in which rubber truncheons were several times used with some violence, and 11 arrests were made (The Times [London] 29 June 1929, 11).

The flags flown from the houses, mostly the Imperial black-white-red; the ostentatious German nationalism; the rowdy youths, seem to identify this incident with what is depicted in The Gift. Indeed, the corresponding details in the novel are clearly intended to foreshadow Hitler’s regime, just as the violent actions of the fascist mob in the demonstrations on the 28th anticipate the Nazi era. Moreover, the events commemorated on 28 June 1929 are themselves significant in terms of the Nazi darkness Nabokov foreshadows. Hitler exploited the war-guilt issue effectively to gain popular support (and 1929 was a year which saw the Nazis make substantial advances); while, as Chancellor, Hitler’s fanatical desire to extinguish the shame of Versailles by re-establishing the might of Germany, was pushing Europe, at the time Nabokov was writing, towards a Second World War, just as the assassination of the Archduke had precipitated the First. In addition, the murder of Franz Ferdinand may have a more specific link with the demonstration in the novel. Fyodor notices that one banner carries a garbled Russian inscription: “serb instead of serp (sickle) and molt instead of molot (hammer)” (Gift 326). The banner-writer’s mistake may have been influenced by the occasion: it was a Serb separatist who murdered the Archduke on 28 June 1914. The murder of the Archduke would have particular relevance to The Gift: Nabokov’s father was the victim of a political assassination, also on the 28th day of the month, and V. D. Nabokov’s death resonates through the theme of the dead father in the novel; indeed, Nabokov dates The Gift’s foreword on the fortieth anniversary of his father’s death (28 March 1962) (Gift 9).

Yet the demonstrations in The Gift take place on the 29th of June, not on the 28th. Might Nabokov have confused the dates, and mistakenly placed the Versailles demonstration on the 29th? The alternative is that he deliberately created a fictional event on the 29th, blending the demonstrations of the day before (largely fascist, according to The Times) with a communist presence (the red flags flown from the windows, the Russian hammer and sickle) to suggest, as was his wont, the kinship between the evils of fascism and communism, and to create a composite picture of the general political turmoil in Germany at the time. 1929 was a year of considerable unrest in Germany, when extremists on both the left and the right tried to take advantage of the government’s weakness. During the May Day celebrations, for
instance, thirty-three people were killed in clashes between communists and police on the streets of Berlin. Meanwhile, Hitler was participating in a right-wing united front, with the aim of pressurizing the government into opposing reparation payments and abolishing the shame of Versailles (Gilbert, *History: Volume One* 757-58). Certainly, to Fyodor’s eyes the scenes on the streets of Berlin conjure up an image of general political fanaticism; indeed, it is not the fascist menace in Germany, but the tyrannical regime in Russia, “with its superbly organized removal of dead bodies,” which springs immediately to Fyodor’s mind while he watches the demonstration (*Gift* 326). However, if Nabokov means to convey a kinship between fascism and communism in the Berlin demonstration, and if those twin evils reflect the conflict between left and right in Germany which was still very real in 1929, he writes with the knowledge of who - up to 1938 at least - had emerged the victor in that particular historical tussle in Germany; and Nabokov’s appearing to juxtapose the demonstrations in *The Gift* with the fascist riots of 28 June 1929 further loads the episode, from a reader’s perspective, with the looming menace of Nazism.

Fyodor, in spite of fiercely protecting his inner world, is quite conscious of the turbulent political currents in the outside world. After mentally evoking the atmosphere of terror in the Soviet Union while watching the demonstration, he conjures up the image of an “ambitious failure” (a type of Stalin or Hitler, presumably) who “vent[s] his frustration on the simpletons dreaming of a good life” (*Gift* 326). Later that day, he speaks ironically of wanting “to reach a final dictatorship over words” (*Gift* 332); and the night before, he had written to his mother complaining of “the same old jackboot and helmet” sticking through Germany’s so-called democracy (*Gift* 319). Yet if Fyodor already senses the ugliness of Hitler (and Stalin), he will not, in 1929, have realized the full danger of the situation in Germany; will not have foreseen the extent to which Hitler’s “frustration” would indeed seduce the hearts of “simpletons,” let alone the horror which this would bring in its wake. As an alternative to dictatorships Fyodor proposes his own kingdom, “where everyone keeps to himself and there is no equality and no authorities - but if you don’t want it, I don’t insist and don’t care” (*Gift* 326), and he then turns away from the demonstration, dismissing it, just as he had turned away from the writers’ union and the lakeside rabble. But will Fyodor, one asks, be able to “keep to himself” in the dark future ahead? Will he continue to shrug off the actions of others so nonchalantly? Particularly at these times, when “history shows through artistry” and the Nazi shadow looms over him, one feels a certain naïvety in Fyodor’s self-assured aloofness.
What makes the ominousness of the political demonstration so poignant is the fact that the march takes place on the very day when the novel’s central strand is brought to fruition: the consummation of Fyodor’s and Zina’s love. Zina’s mother and stepfather depart for Denmark, leaving Zina and Fyodor with the house to themselves for the first time. The couple look forward to a new period of freedom for their love. But as they walk together back to the house they are unaware that fate has a wry practical joke up its sleeve, obstructing their freedom just when they thought they were on the point of attaining it. Fyodor, his house-keys lost to the Grunewald thief, assumes that Zina will let them in; Zina, her keys left by her mother on the doormat before departing, expects Fyodor will be able to use his; as the book ends, neither Fyodor nor Zina is aware of the predicament. Nabokov concludes his novel by asking his readers to raise their eyes to the future: “the chords of fate itself continue to vibrate... the shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page” (*Gift* 333); and in his foreword he writes: “I wonder how far the imagination of the reader will follow the young lovers after they have been dismissed” (*Gift* 8). Far enough, of course, to picture their dismay at being locked out, but further to the more serious obstacles and closed doors which fate will put in their way in the decade ahead, when perhaps they will find themselves cast out in the harsher cold of a darker night, in which something far more terrifying than a political demonstration will be taking place.

Chapter 5 marks the culmination of all of *The Gift*’s themes, including the German-Nazi theme which runs throughout the book. Nowhere in the novel is Nabokov’s feeling of revulsion towards Germany - its politics, culture, people - more evident than in this final chapter. Nabokov marshals his themes in such a way as to leave the reader at the close with a predominant sense of joyful anticipation for Fyodor and Zina, but also with an underlying apprehension. Just when Fyodor is on the point of coming into full possession of his gifts, and of basking in “life’s new light (in which blended somehow the maturing of his gift, a premonition of new labours, and the approach of complete happiness with Zina)” (*Gift* 298), Nabokov raises the possibility of that light and those gifts being taken away, by a future which has no time for his kind of art, and cares still less for Jews like Zina. Nabokov thus highlights the detestable nature of the Nazi regime that would soon obscure the essentially radiant beauty of the world, but highlights, above all, the preciousness of that world which must not be taken for granted. One senses that in the latter there is a lesson for Fyodor. His challenge in the future will be to retain his gifts and his sense of the artistic beauty of the world amidst the gathering darkness. To do so he will probably need a keener sense of their vulnerability, which will mean dispensing with a certain
characteristic naivety in his conceited detachment from events taking place around him.

One fears, however, that Fyodor may have to learn this lesson the hard way. Fyodor believes in "the circular nature of everything in existence" (Gift 188), and one senses that the book is ending as it began; that while Fyodor anticipates the bright rising of his star, he is being set up for a fall. For fate's practical joke with the house-keys recalls Fyodor's falling for Alexander Chernyshevski’s April Fool’s joke at the beginning of the novel, and one fears that as the book ends fate is preparing a much heavier blow for Fyodor, which this time he will wish were a diabolical practical joke. While Fyodor at the end of the novel may be a young writer coming into full possession of his gift as an artist, he, like everyone else, is the plaything of the superior artistry of fate; yet while everyone is blind to fate's intentions, one fears that precisely Fyodor's naïve self-conceit over his artistic gift, which had laid him open to Chernyshevski's prank, only compounds his problem and makes him more susceptible. It is one thing to confidently and self-assuredly denounce in a book the materialism of a Nikolai Chernyshevski; it is quite another to cope with, let alone to publicly oppose, the fascist inheritors of that philosophy who wield such awesome power.3

The "chords of fate itself continue to vibrate." Nabokov will have been conscious of how this phrase applied to him at the time he wrote it, for he did not know how things would turn out for himself, or indeed, what the fate of the Nazis would be. Yet if Nabokov's completing the fundamentally optimistic The Gift is testimony to his keeping his inner vision of the world intact at this time, the fact that his foreshadowing of a Nazi darkness peaks in chapter 5 would seem to indicate that he had growing fears of a threat in store not only for Fyodor in 1929, but also for himself and everyone else in 1938. The "shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page," writes Nabokov; perhaps he sensed that the darkest of those shadows, cast by the looming menace of Nazism, would stretch far beyond January 1938 and the completion of The Gift.

3 In 1939 Nabokov would plan a sequel to The Gift (RY 505), in which Fyodor would be seen struggling to come to terms with Nazism in the late 1930s, and in which, moreover, fate would deal him the cruellest blow - the death of Zina. This second volume would end with France at war and "with much less radiance ahead" than at the end of The Gift (RY 516).
JANUARY TO MARCH, AND THE GENESIS OF THE REAL LIFE OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT

I

Nabokov called The Gift “the longest, I think the best, and the most nostalgic of my Russian novels” (SO 13). The Gift is, notwithstanding its shadows, an essentially bright work, and it cannot have been easy in gloomy 1938 to relinquish that luminous, nostalgic world of the past, not only because it encapsulated a time before the Nazis had come to power, but also because it was a world that was eminently Russian. Nabokov knew that the next novel he would embark on (The Real Life of Sebastian Knight) would be written in a language in which he was not comfortable, a project which might take him away from Russian for good. Completing The Gift may have made Nabokov feel the wrench from bright past to troubled present more acutely at this time. A poem he wrote in Menton in 1938, “What Happened Overnight” (“Chto za-noch’”), depicts the desolation of suddenly finding oneself completely severed from the past:

What happened overnight to memory?
It must have snowed: such stillness! Of no use
Was to my soul the study of Oblivion:
that problem has been solved in sleep.

A simple, elegant solution.
(Now what have I been bothering about
so many years?) One does not see much need
in getting up: there’s neither bed, nor body (PP 91).

This is worlds away from The Gift. Fyodor’s artistic self-assimilation into the Grunewald landscape has transmuted here into self-dissolution and personal oblivion. And where Fyodor gratefully acknowledges the world’s generous gifts to him, the speaker of the poem is in a state of numb shock at finding himself dispossessed of memory, and therefore of past and identity.

Following the completion of The Gift Nabokov composed a series of chess problems (RY 485), an exercise that would carry over into the composition of the elaborate
puzzle of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. The chess-problem theme seems to be touched on in lines 4 and 5 of “What Happened Overnight”: “that problem has been solved in sleep. / A simple, elegant solution.” If, in addition, a faint trace of Nabokov’s bout of illness at the start of the year can be detected in the speaker’s confinement to bed; and if, furthermore, the mention of snow (line 2) suggests winter, one might hazard a guess that Nabokov composed the poem in January or February, after the completion of *The Gift*. If so, it did not take long for the enchanted world of Nabokov’s longest, best, and most nostalgic Russian novel to evaporate. Once *The Gift’s* bright image of the past had itself become history, all that remained in view was the grim landscape of the present day.

II

Yet the word “grim” does not really capture the horror of what was happening in the Far East at this time. Since the summer of 1937 Japan, seeking to extend its territories on the Asian mainland, had been waging full-scale war on China. Dogged Chinese resistance was no match for the superior firepower of the Japanese military machine, and the invaders made steady gains. However, it was not the terrifying force of the invasion that distinguished this conflict, but the abominable treatment of Chinese soldiers and civilians by their captors. The barbarism displayed by the Japanese army in China has few parallels in modern history.

In December 1937 Nanking, the former Chinese Nationalist capital, fell to the Japanese and was subjected to an orgy of destruction lasting months (Chang 159). Tens of thousands of Chinese men were herded to the outskirts of the city to be machine-gunned, bayoneted, or burned alive (Chang 4). Others were killed in live burials, fatally mutilated, torn apart by dogs, hung by their tongues, or doused in acid. Thousands of women were raped, tortured, and forced into military brothels. Even children and babies were killed for sport (Chang 87-99). One foreign observer wrote on 18 December: “Today marks the 6th day of modern Dante’s Inferno, written in huge letters of blood and rape” (Gilbert, *Descent* 165). The horrors of Nanking were meted out to other cities as the Japanese juggernaut rolled forward. By the end of 1938 Wuhu and the strategically important cities of Canton and Hankow had been captured (Gilbert, *Descent* 167-68). American journalists, who had witnessed the first days of the Nanking massacre before leaving the city, published reports of the Japanese atrocities in major US newspapers (Chang 144-45). But it was Harold

Although the theatre of war widened after 1938, the atrocities did not worsen. It was hardly possible for them to do so. Even Hitler and the Nazis could not inflict harsher torture on innocent civilians than had already been perpetrated on the Chinese. Although the method of mass murder differed, the Jewish holocaust had been anticipated by the genocide in China. In Nanking alone, the number of Chinese killed exceeded the combined death toll in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 (Chang 6). One did not have to wait for Auschwitz to see what one group of people, inspired by a master-race mentality, were capable of inflicting on their so-called inferiors. If only the lessons of the Japanese campaign in China had been heeded in the West, perhaps the “Final Solution” would never have happened. However, there were those at the time who did sense the seriousness of what was at stake in the Far East. The US ambassador to Germany wrote in his diary in December 1937: “the democracies must save China or themselves soon come into grave danger”; modern civilization, the ambassador feared, was “on the verge of disaster” (Gilbert, *Descent* 166). The democracies, however, were in no hurry to intervene in the Far East, a fact that no doubt gave encouragement to Adolf Hitler’s dreams of imperial expansion. Indeed, in 1938 the Western powers did as little to block Germany’s designs on sizeable chunks of Europe as they had done to starve Japan’s appetite for China, with the result that twelve months after Nanking the “grave danger” which the US ambassador to Germany had spoken of had become the unignorable writing on the wall for the whole of Europe. The flag of the Rising Sun flying high over Chinese cities in 1938 was the ironic symbol of a dawning dark age for millions of tyranny’s future victims around the world.

III

On 10 January 1938 the Japanese took Tsingtao on the Yellow Sea. A day later, half a world away in space, but alarmingly close in spirit, nationalist forces in Spain carried out air raids on Barcelona and a number of coastal towns, as Europe’s worst civil war for several centuries pounded its way into a new year of carnage and destruction (Gilbert, *Descent* 214). Nine months earlier the nationalist air raid on the Basque town of Guernica had shocked the world at the devastating nature of modern total warfare, prompting Picasso’s *Guernica*, which helped to fix the massacre in the public mind as one of the great evils of the century (Gilbert, *Descent* 136-38).
However, they were not Spanish planes which attacked Guernica, or Spanish bombs that rained down repeatedly on Barcelona during the early months of 1938. The civil war - which began in July 1936 - quickly became not just Spain’s war between right and left, but an ideological battleground for the whole of Europe, and it was not long before the totalitarian powers, along with International Brigades of communists and left-wing sympathizers, were backing the respective sides in the conflict: General Franco’s nationalist rebels on the one hand, and the republican forces loyal to the government on the other (Palmer 345). The demolition of Guernica had been the work of the Luftwaffe’s Condor Legion supplied by Hitler, who sent in total at least 10,000 personnel to swell the nationalist ranks in Spain. Mussolini, for his part, dispatched four times as many men to support Franco, and it was mainly Italian planes that struck Barcelona (Gilbert, Descent 135-36, 214). The Soviets, meanwhile, assisted the republicans with arms, advisers, and technicians (Gilbert, Descent 135; Palmer 345), although Stalin soon became more interested in using NKVD killing squads to purge the republicans of suspected Trotskyists, than in helping to defeat Franco (Andrew, Mitrokhin 88, 95-98).

As the war blazed on through 1938 increased assistance from Hitler and Mussolini had a decisive effect. In April nationalist forces reached the Mediterranean coast at Vinaroz, cutting republican Spain in two. However, Franco was premature in thinking he had delivered the knockout blow. In July the republicans staged a major counter-attack across the River Ebro, halting the nationalist advance on Valencia. Yet their success was shortlived. Franco drove the loyalist troops back across the Ebro in October, and two months later launched a massive attack on Catalonia, the final big push of the war (Gilbert, Descent 214-15). Republican defeat, however, was partly self-induced: internal divisions, and a withdrawal of Soviet support, led to a rapid collapse of loyalist forces in early 1939, and Franco finally triumphed in March that year (Palmer 345; Gilbert, Descent 233-35).

In a stance that would become familiar in the late 1930s, the Western powers avoided becoming embroiled in the Spanish conflict; and as was the case with the other foreign crises from which they stood aside, the democracies’ hands-off policy over Spain only made their own eventual time of reckoning the more severe, as Hitler in particular took full advantage of the conflict to promote his evil ambitions. Indeed, the Nazi leader did not want the war in Spain to end too soon: it enabled him to continue to pose as the defender of Europe against Bolshevism; it also distracted the Western nations while he pursued his principal goal of territorial expansion in the
east; and it threw Italy and Germany into closer alliance, resulting in the Berlin-Rome axis in November 1936 (Stackelberg 166-67). In more practical terms, Spain served as a testing ground for the Blitzkrieg techniques, the pilots and weaponry, which would be used by the Wehrmacht in 1940 and 1941 (Stackelberg 166; Palmer 345). Even more than the conflict in China, the Spanish Civil War set the stage for World War II. It was the deadly dress rehearsal for the most catastrophic human tragedy in recorded history.

The war caught the imagination of Western writers, many of whom, such as Auden, Hemingway, and Orwell, travelled to Spain and supported the republican cause in various ways (Skelton 19). Nabokov may not have felt the urge to join the International Brigades with other writers, but he had plenty of opportunity of keeping abreast of the conflict in the newspapers in any of his three main languages. If he read The Times he would have seen a young Kim Philby’s reports1; in France, which shared a border with Spain, the war was naturally given extensive newspaper coverage; while the Russian emigré press also widely reported events in Spain, seeing in the war a continuation of Russia’s own national tragedy (Kostikov 434).

In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight V sees written on the wall of a Paris café in January 1936: “Vive le front populaire” (RLSK 195). The slogan anticipates the Popular Front government which came to power in France in May that year; it also has ironic relevance to the collapse of that very government shortly before the writing of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. However, the slogan may refer, in addition, to the Popular Front government in Spain which took office in February 1936, and which in December 1938, when Nabokov’s novel was being written, was in a desperate position with not long to “vive” at all. Essentially, though, the slogan on the café wall encapsulates left-wing (particularly communist) political sentiment, while the slogan alongside it, “Death to the Jews,” indicates the opposite end of the political spectrum: fascism. Together the pair of slogans conjure up an image of political extremism in its crudest, most elementary shades. The war in Spain evoked the same image: it was a conflict sponsored by the two political regimes Nabokov most despised. The destruction wrought by Hitler and Stalin in Spain perhaps epitomized for Nabokov the odious nature of totalitarian tyranny. If the graffiti V sees in the café is quite literally the writing on the wall regarding the spread of totalitarianism, perhaps Nabokov, like many others, had already seen in Spain the first intimations of the writing on the wall for Western civilization.

1 Philby was working under journalistic cover on his first major intelligence assignment for Moscow: to gain entry into Franco’s entourage and help organize the assassination of the rebel leader himself (Andrew, KGB 176-77).
IV

If the global outlook seemed bleak to Nabokov, the situation was no brighter on the domestic front, as the search for employment in France, Britain, and America continued to prove an uphill battle. On 1 February Nabokov wrote to George Vernadsky, a historian at Yale whom he had seen in Paris the year before, about the possibility of establishing a permanent Russian literature course at the university. Vernadsky, however, replied in the negative (RY 485). Two days later, Nabokov was writing to his friend Mark Aldanov of his “utterly desperate” financial situation. “It’s a mystery to me how I exist at all,” he declared (RY 480).

Another and quite different kind of letter posted by Nabokov this same week turned out to be the last act in a turbulent personal drama which had unfolded over the previous year. In February 1937 in Paris, while Véra was still in Berlin, Nabokov had begun an affair with Irina Guadanini which nearly destroyed his marriage (RY 432-33). Even after confessing the liaison to his wife in Cannes in July, Nabokov had continued to write to Irina in secret, and only when Véra discovered the deception did he decide to call off the affair, telling Irina, when she made a desperate visit to Cannes in September, that he could not leave his wife (Véra 89-90; RY 443). Nabokov wrote asking Irina to return his letters, but she refused. In the first week of February 1938 he wrote again, for the final time, but his letter was not even opened (Véra 94; RY 444).

V

While a personal crisis in Nabokov’s life was moving towards resolution, a political one was coming to a head. Few human catastrophes can compare with the terror unleashed by Stalin on the Soviet Union in the Great Purge of the 1930s. With the aim of rooting out alleged subversion - supposedly consisting of a vast counter-revolutionary conspiracy penetrating all levels of Soviet life - millions were executed or sent to perish in remote labour camps. The Party, Red Army, and NKVD were decimated, but their casualties were far outnumbered by the ordinary citizens accused of plotting to undermine the state. Those who, for the time being, escaped arrest, lived in constant fear. In one tidal wave of brutal oppression Russia was silenced and broken.
In early 1938 the Terror was at its peak. From 2 to 13 March, twenty-one "Rightists and Trotskyites," including Bukharin, Rykov, and Krestinsky (all members of Lenin’s Politburo), and former NKVD head, Yagoda (Stalin’s chief functionary in the early years of the Purge), appeared in the dock in the greatest of Stalin’s show trials (Conquest 496-573; Andrew, KGB 108-09). The defendants were charged with a staggering array of crimes, ranging from espionage and wrecking to the overthrow of the Soviet system and the restoration of capitalism. They had allegedly united all shades of opposition to Stalin in one great network of international intrigue, involving the intelligence agencies of foreign powers. On learning of the allegations against him, Bukharin had protested: “I am experiencing a sense of half-reality: is it a dream, a mirage, a madhouse, a hallucination? No, it is reality” (Gilbert, Descent 210).

Bukharin and his fellow accused were found guilty on all charges. Only three (Bukharin was not amongst them) escaped the death penalty, receiving lengthy prison sentences instead. In an unprecedented reign of terror Stalin had crushed all possible sources of opposition to his leadership. The Great Trial of March 1938 was “little more than a victory parade” (Conquest 496). Out of the ruins left by the Purge he had instigated, Stalin emerged as the unchallenged dictator of the Soviet Union.

Foreign reaction to the situation in Russia was mixed. The previous year Nabokov, in England in search of an academic job, had heard his old pro-Lenin Cambridge friend denounce the Stalinist Terror: “The thunderclap of purges that had affected ‘old Bolsheviks’, the heroes of his youth, had given him a salutary shock” (SM 209). However, not everybody was as horrified as “Nesbit.” Many in the West misjudged what was happening in the Soviet Union, and, worse still, accepted the Stalinist version of events, as was reflected in various sections of the Western Press (Conquest 671-73). Among those misinformed about the situation in the Soviet Union, or disbelieving what they heard, was the eminent Russian scholar Sir Bernard Pares, with whom Nabokov had corresponded in 1936 (Conquest 675-76; RY 431). While virtually the entire Purge was carried out behind a veil of secrecy, the great trials were public affairs that were blatant frame-ups, but even Western reporters and observers present in the courtroom were duped.

Nabokov would do his bit to shatter the illusion. “Solus Rex” - the original chapter 2 of his final Russian novel, left uncompleted in 1940 - contains a sharp satire on the show trials. A Dr Onze, the model of moral probity, confesses to an array of preposterous crimes at a public trial staged by a group of conspirators (with Onze’s co-operation), in a bid to discredit the crown prince of Thule, whose libertine character is transparently what is really on trial in the charges against the doctor. The
public, reading of the trial in the papers, merely laugh at the whole charade (Stories 539-43). Nabokov may have had the Great Trial of March 1938 specifically in mind. One of the defendants at the trial was a Dr L. Levin, who was accused - most probably falsely - of assisting Yagoda in various medical murders. The doctor’s name may have prompted Nabokov to a spot of bilingual wordplay: “L. Levin” sounds like “eleven,” which in French is onze. Nabokov’s Dr Onze is not a medical doctor, but, in addition to the echo in his name, Onze’s fate is reminiscent of what was thought to have become of Levin: Onze, sentenced to eleven years’ hard labour, is at the last minute granted a full pardon, while it was rumoured that Levin, handed the death penalty, had his sentence commuted (Conquest 569 n.).

VI

While Stalin was imposing his dictatorship to a hitherto unparalleled degree in the Soviet Union, Hitler’s tyranny was also pushing back frontiers - quite literally. On 12 March, as coverage of the Great Trial continued in the world’s daily newspapers, Nazi troops marched into Austria in pursuit of Hitler’s vision of a Greater Germany. Not a shot was fired, as the government in Vienna had already capitulated to Hitler’s belligerence. Few options in fact had remained open to them. The British had let it be known they were not prepared to run the risk of war for Austria’s sake; the French had taken an equally non-committal stance, and were, besides, in the midst of a governmental crisis of their own when matters came to a head on 11 March; and as for the Italians, the Berlin-Rome axis decided Mussolini’s loyalties. Politically isolated, the Austrian government finally caved in under Hitler’s furious threats to invade if they did not surrender peacefully. Deciding not to endanger the lives of Austrian citizens by offering military resistance, the Chancellor and his colleagues resigned their posts to prominent Austrian Nazis and left their country to its fate (Gilbert, Descent 175-76; Fischer 415-22).

Years of Nazi propaganda, however, had done its work. Thousands of Austrians greeted the Anschluss, formalized on 13 March, with enthusiasm (Fischer 420). However, to the country’s Jewish population the sight of swastikas lining the streets was a terrifying nightmare. Overnight they became subject to the full spectrum of Nazi antisemitism (official and unofficial) which in Germany had evolved over a period of five years. SS terror ran rampant. Jews were beaten in the streets. Tens of thousands were sent to German concentration camps, or fled abroad. Others, however (and not only Jews), saw only one way out of their misery: suicides were a frequent
occurrence, and eventually rose to over a hundred a day. The atrocities made news around the world (Gilbert, *Descent* 179-80, 183; Gilbert, *Holocaust* 60). Nazism had erupted over Europe. From this point, it would only continue its deadly surge. His high-handed tactics proven, Hitler turned without pause to the next step in his great plan to unite all “Germans” in a single Reich: the acquisition of Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland.

### VII

A week after the *Anschluss* a venomous antisemitic article appeared in the pro-Nazi Russian newspaper *Novoe slovo* in Berlin (RY 489). The article attacked Nabokov for slurs against Germany in *The Gift*, and proclaimed his work, along with that of other supposedly degenerate (particularly Jewish) artists, as fit only for the infernal sewers:

> [In the boiling pots, all those “exercises” by the sirins [“Sirin” being Nabokov’s Russian nom de plume], the chagalls, the knuts, the burluiks, and hundreds of others will be cleansed entirely. And all those “works of genius” will flow where flows all filth, opening the passage to fresh, national art.]

Vilification can only have strengthened Nabokov’s commitment to opposing antisemitism and all forms of persecution and intolerance. In the spring *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* probably began to take shape (RY 496).

It is surely no coincidence that the novel - perhaps Nabokov’s most artistically complex assault on Nazi and Soviet tyranny - is thought to have emerged in the wake of both Germany’s invasion of Austria and the Great Trial in Moscow which marked the height of the Stalinist Terror. If the sense of ominousness in the final chapter of *The Gift*, regarding the coming Nazi regime (and to a lesser extent the imminent horrors of Stalin’s Purge), reflects an element of foreboding in Nabokov’s attitude to the contemporary situation at the start of 1938, the *Anschluss* and the Great Trial can only have realized those fears - and intensified them. The two events were watersheds in the consolidation of totalitarianism in Europe and Russia. Hitler could thereafter set his sights on further territorial claims with some confidence, while Stalin was able to enjoy the prospect of absolute rule and the unopposed enforcement of his will.

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2 Quoted by Maxim D. Shrayer (Shrayer 76-77).
The Anschluss and the Great Trial were ominous - to those who could see it - not only because they seemed to indicate that Hitler and Stalin were just getting into their stride, but also because they demonstrated how the Western nations could be so thoroughly taken in by a tyrant’s duplicity. The Great Trial showed Stalin perpetrating the most barefaced injustices and yet hoodwinking a global audience. The Anschluss had been brought about with ease, because Hitler had duped the British and French into believing his intentions in Europe were peaceful; that in annexing Austria he was merely fulfilling the natural desire of similar peoples to live together (Fischer 415). These two landmark events clearly demonstrated that by means of secrecy, lies, and falsification, Hitler and Stalin could enact their terror with impunity on the world stage. Nabokov did not need convincing of tyranny’s duplicity, nor of that duplicity’s effectiveness, in 1938; he had known it since 1917 in St Petersburg, and since 1933 in Berlin. However, never before had the regime of the lie achieved so much, nor ever looked set to achieve so much more. With Western governments deceived by dissembling despots, Europe was effectively at the mercy of totalitarian tyranny.

Winston Churchill warned the British government, on 14 March, that if they persisted in not taking a stand against Hitler, the time may come when “continued resistance and true collective security would become impossible.” The seriousness of the Austrian takeover, he told the House of Commons, “cannot be exaggerated”:

“Europe is confronted with a programme of aggression, nicely calculated and timed, unfolding stage by stage, and there is only one choice open, not only to us, but to other countries who are unfortunately concerned - either to submit, like Austria, or else to take effective measures while time remains to ward off the danger and, if it cannot be warded off, to cope with it” (Gilbert, Descent 184-85).

If Churchill spoke of “choice” in the face of the mounting Nazi threat, for him personally, as for Nabokov, there was only one option when it came to dealing with tyrants. Neither man had much else at his disposal at the time than fighting words (though Nabokov may have wanted nothing more), but both were determined to use them with all their might to oppose the disaster they saw looming on the horizon. The result in Nabokov’s case was The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. At a time when Western governments were blind to the totalitarian threat, Nabokov’s first English novel exposes the horrors of tyranny and warns of its dangerous spread. The vague atmosphere of impending terror which closes in at the conclusion of The Gift condenses in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight into the writing on the wall, a cryptic
omen of evil, relating, as in *The Gift*, not only to the time of the novel (1936), but also to the time of its composition.

If, while the stormclouds gathered over Europe, Nabokov had needed any further spur to rouse him to action, he did not have to look far. Throughout his lifetime, sometimes at considerable personal risk, Nabokov’s father had stoutly defended his liberal beliefs. 28 March was the sixteenth anniversary of his death, and liberalism had never needed its champions more urgently. The country where, in Nabokov’s words, his father as a young man had “resolutely plunged into antidespotic politics” (*SM* 136) was now ruled by a tyrant whose grip on the nation effectively extinguished for Nabokov the hope of returning to a free Russia. The city where V. D. Nabokov as an emigre had edited a liberal Russian-language newspaper, and where he had died at a public meeting promoting the democratic cause, was now the centre of a vile totalitarian regime which was threatening the very foundations of democracy in Europe. The Jews, the persecution of whom V. D. Nabokov had condemned so vehemently thirty-five years earlier (*SM* 136), were now being forced by SS hoodlums to scrub Vienna’s streets on their hands and knees using water mixed with acid (Gilbert, *Descent* 179). Meanwhile, the only reason why V. D. Nabokov himself was not alive to register his vociferous protest was that he had been murdered by thugs inspired by the same fascist creed as was driving Himmler’s henchmen to carry out their unspeakable acts in Austria. Indeed, V. D. Nabokov’s very killer, Sergey Taboritsky, held a position of authority in the Nazi regime (*RY* 427-28), which was now bursting its muddy banks, sweeping all before it; while the man responsible for Taboritsky’s being there - the prophet of the ideology which had caused V. D. Nabokov’s death - was poised to become ruler of a twentieth-century Napoleonic empire. If Nabokov’s father had staunchly fought for liberalism right up to his death, what more reason had Nabokov himself to do the same in a world the darkness of which his father’s lifetime had never known, not even during the First World War or the Russian Revolution, when totalitarian tyranny had barely taken its first awkward steps? If his father had risked his career for the Jews of Kishinev in 1903, what more reason had Nabokov, with a Jewish wife and son, to protest against the current far more serious level of antisemitic violence? V. D. Nabokov had laid down his life defending an old friend from fascist gunmen; it was time for Nabokov to insist that his father’s stand for freedom, and his death, had not been in vain.

The influence of the dead father plays a crucial role in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and Nabokov himself, I suggest, felt his own father’s presence at his shoulder as he began to construct his antidespotic masterpiece. While Western democracies
vacillated over Hitler, and Stalin secured his dictatorship; while Franco bled his country dry, and China burned, Nabokov took up the fight against the deepening darkness with his pen as his only weapon. A sense of physical powerlessness in the face of a rising tide of totalitarianism may have helped drive him to new artistic heights. At any rate, the motivating force behind The Real Life of Sebastian Knight must have been great indeed, as not only is the novel itself highly elaborate, but embarking on it unleashed an all-out assault on tyranny unparalleled at any time in Nabokov's career. "Tyrants Destroyed" would soon burst from its cage, to be followed by The Waltz Invention and "The Visit to the Museum." The barrage engaged in here (and it is unmistakably, if indirectly, present in "Lik" also) would provide an outlet for forces that required so much restraint in the construction of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.
APRIL TO MAY, AND “TYRANTS DESTROYED”

On 23 April Nabokov turned 39. He was now making forays into the hills between Menton and Roquebrune in search of butterflies, and “dreaming up amid the wisteria a long new story” (*RY* 486). It took Nabokov from mid-May to the end of June to write “Tyrants Destroyed,” a relatively long time, notwithstanding the story’s length; but then *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, with its similar themes, was taking shape at the same time.

“Tyrants Destroyed” (“Istreblenie tiranov”)

After years of “enraged silence” (*Stories* 459), harbouring a hatred which, on pain of death, cannot speak its name, a poor drawing teacher in a provincial city high school resolves to assassinate the tyrannical ruler of his country. The story - the teacher’s “chronicle” - is the record of his thoughts on why and how he must kill the tyrant. His tyrannicidal plans, however, grow ever more desperate as the impossibility of the task becomes apparent; and his bid to destroy the tyrant brings him perilously close to self-destruction, before leaving him at last to look for a rather equivocal victory among the ruins of his shattered life.

The narrator hates the fact that his country has been transformed into “a vast kitchen garden” where the people’s chief care is for “the fat vegetable in the good earth” (*Stories* 441). He loathes the mood of dejection that has set in, and the slavery of the people to the tyrant’s ignorant will. However, the core of his hatred, the crux of the matter as far as the narrator is concerned, relates to the fact that the tyrant’s own personality has come to permeate all aspects of society. The narrator began to notice that the obligations of citizens, admonitions, restrictions, decrees, and all the other forms of pressure put on us were coming to resemble the man himself more and more closely, displaying an unmistakable relation to certain traits of his character.
and details of his past . . . everything around him began taking on his appearance (Stories 441).

The narrator goes on:

I soon had the feeling that he . . . was penetrating everywhere, infecting with his presence the way of thinking and the everyday life of every person, so that his mediocrity, his tediousness, his gray habitue, were becoming the very life of my country (Stories 442).

Against this pervasive persona, the product of immense personal power and a massive, myth-making propaganda machine, the narrator takes aim. The man whose regime is founded on a monolithic personality cult is subjected by the narrator to a kind of character assassination.

It turns out that there is a personal connection between the narrator and the tyrant. The narrator knew the tyrant in his youth, and he uses his knowledge of the man behind the myth to demolish the official, semi-divine image of the tyrant. The narrator’s chronicle reads like a muck-raking exposé. The tyrant is shown to have been a dirty, uncouth, vulgar, and sullen young man. “He gave off a goatish smell,” met members of the narrator’s family with “a surly nod,” and possessed an “innate mournfulness” (Stories 443-44). He was disliked (one boy put a toad in his pocket); he had a faithless girlfriend who ridiculed his letters to her in the presence of the narrator; and was illegitimate, the son of “a thickset broad-nosed woman with a fringe who worked in an alehouse at the city gate” - “father unknown” (Stories 451). All of which has culminated in his now being “a limited, coarse, little-educated man - at first glance a third-rate fanatic and in reality a pigheaded, brutal, and gloomy vulgarian full of morbid ambition” (Stories 440).

However, there are intimations of a much darker undercurrent to the narrator’s hatred, a dark personal link between narrator and tyrant which the narrator intimates strongly but never allows fully to take shape. The narrator’s personal acquaintance with the tyrant stems from the latter’s friendship with the narrator’s brother, Gregory. Gregory and the tyrant had been members of the same radical group. Gregory died at twenty-three, and the circumstances of his death are suspicious. He drowned while bathing in a river one summer evening. Conditions were calm (the narrator depicts “a shiny spread of water” [Stories 442]), and the river a local one with which Gregory must have been familiar. Which begs the question: how could a young man drown while bathing under such circumstances? Suspicion of foul play is never made explicit, but
the narrator loads his account of the incident with numerous suggestive details. A month after Gregory’s death the tyrant disappears. He goes north and immediately sets up a new revolutionary circle, diametrically opposed to the ideas espoused by the group to which he and Gregory had belonged (which former group promptly dissolves). The narrator remarks that he now finds it amazing how, at the time, “no one noticed the long, angular shadow of treason that he [i.e., the tyrant] dragged behind him wherever he went” (Stories 445), a shadow which the tyrant had allowed to “interfere strangely” with the shadow of the banister as he was shown out of the narrator’s house one night, perhaps the very night that he - who had evidently been at the scene - brought the news of Gregory’s death, carrying his friend’s clothes with him. Indeed, that “long, angular shadow of treason” recalls the “long, black cloud crossing another, opulently fluffed-up and orange-colored one” which the narrator imagines in the sky at the time of his brother’s drowning (Stories 442): the “long, black cloud” of death, that is, interfering strangely, sinisterly, with the radiant glow of Gregory’s soul. At the time of his acquaintance with the narrator’s brother the tyrant had written to a girlfriend of “the machinations of mysterious enemies” (Stories 445), and he and Gregory sometimes came to blows, or, as the narrator puts it, would practise “Gypsy wrestling” (Stories 441). The loaded revolver that Gregory possessed at the time of his death may have been intended as a more decisive form of protection in the event of a more serious confrontation. Gregory’s death, moreover, “did not evoke any visible signs of grief” in the tyrant (Stories 446). The details amount to a fairly clear intimation that the tyrant murdered Gregory in order to remove an obstacle hindering his “merciless lust for power” (Stories 445).

“I am dull and fat, like Prince Hamlet. What can I do?” laments the narrator immediately after relating how he had missed an opportunity to kill the tyrant shortly after Gregory’s death (Stories 447). The narrator has in mind the Ghost’s words to Hamlet after the latter has pledged himself to avenge his father’s murder: “I find thee apt. / And dullest shouldst thou be than the fat weed / That roots itself in ease on Lethe wharf, / Wouldst thou not stir in this” (1.5.31-34; my italics). On the most basic level, the Hamlet theme in “Tyrants Destroyed” highlights the parallel between two men (the narrator and Hamlet) who wish to dispose of a hated ruler. On this level, the narrator is as “dull and fat” as a weed in the Lethe because, like Hamlet (for most of the play at least), he does not stir in dispatching the villain. However, the allusions to Hamlet in Nabokov’s story share a more specific reference: namely, to Hamlet’s task of avenging his father’s murder. In addition to the first allusion (above), the narrator alludes to King Hamlet’s murder with the words “horrible, horrible!” (echoing the Ghost’s “O horrible! O horrible! most horrible!” [1.5.80]) after experiencing his own
visitation from the ghost of a father (the tyrant's) (Stories 453); and the narrator later rebukes himself for not having yet killed the tyrant, with a reference to Hamlet's prevarication over his task of revenge: "O Hamlet, O moony oaf!" (Stories 454). These *Hamlet* allusions, linked by the theme of revenge for a father's murder, add a further layer to the intimations of foul play in Gregory's death, and hint that in his bid to kill the tyrant the narrator is motivated in part by a desire to avenge the murder of a close relative.

But then, just how certain is the narrator that the tyrant killed his brother? The fact that he never makes any explicit accusation may hint at a lack of certainty. Moreover, after drawing attention to the tyrant's "shadow of treason" in the past, the narrator concedes that this past shadow - which no one (not even the narrator himself, presumably) noticed at the time - may be the evil of the present throwing its darkness backwards. Furthermore, the narrator is aware how one's impressions in the present can obscure the truth of the past: "The present," he remarks,

always exercises such a perverse influence on reminiscence that now I involuntarily single him out [i.e., the tyrant] against the indistinct background, awarding him... the kind of somber, concentrated will deeply conscious of its sullen self, which in the end molds a giftless person into a triumphant monster (Stories 442).

A brother's surprise death can take on ominous significance in the light of a man's later unspeakable crimes, particularly when so many of those who knew the tyrant in the past have, like Gregory, mysteriously perished.¹

Nevertheless, the narrator's suspicions regarding his brother's death cannot simply be dismissed as a symptom of present paranoia (though undoubtedly the narrator's frame of mind is paranoid to some extent). The evidence against the tyrant, though only circumstantial, is certainly suggestive; and the present, while sometimes obscuring the past, can also illuminate it by revealing patterns which were undeveloped at the time. It may be that Gregory's death was the first in a series of strategic murders along the tyrant's path to power. However, while the narrator's suspicions are palpable through the weight of suggestive detail he brings to his account, perhaps the real problem is that they remain merely that - suspicions, strong but unproven. If the narrator already feels those suspicions when, gun in pocket, he steps out alone with the tyrant that day shortly after his brother's death, he does not act on them; and it seems clear now that

¹ Compare the fate of Stalin's pre-revolutionary acquaintances. Edward Ellis Smith states: "most of the people who had personal knowledge about Stalin's first thirty-seven years were executed after being forced to write adulatory and falsified accounts of that knowledge" (Hingley 107).
if a lingering sense of doubt was holding him back at that time he has made no progress towards certainty since. One imagines that all that has happened in the years following Gregory’s death, and particularly since the tyrant’s rise to power, is the accumulation of suggestive details, inconclusive hints, contributing to the narrator’s growing hatred of the tyrant and the degree of punishment he would like to inflict on him, but lacking proof.

A search for this elusive proof may explain the narrator’s curious investigations into the tyrant’s past. Why, for instance, does the narrator choose to visit specifically the lodgings which the tyrant occupied during his acquaintance with Gregory? Was he looking for a scrap of incriminating evidence, or hoping to interview the landlord and former lodgers? Does he for the same reason want “to search out and interrogate” one of the tyrant’s former girlfriends, and wish he could have access to the tyrant’s letters mentioning “mysterious enemies,” written at the time of the tyrant’s acquaintance with Gregory (Stories 445)? If he does, he must be disappointed: the former landlord is dead, the lodgers are untraceable, the old girlfriend, he assumes, is “safely dead” (Stories 445), and the letters long since destroyed. A desperate search for proof of a brother’s murder that is apparently thwarted at every turn, a deep suspicion which now has virtually no chance of being resolved, might go some way towards explaining the narrator’s increasingly frustrated and obsessive state of mind. It would also bring him closer to Hamlet who, for much of the play, is tormented by his lack of proof of Claudius’s guilt. Perhaps one reason why the narrator has not yet carried out his stated aim of killing the tyrant is that he, like Hamlet, is waiting till he has proof of guilt before he acts. Unlike Hamlet, however, his wait, one senses, may be in vain. The narrator’s tragedy is that he probably knows this, a knowledge which may be quietly turning him insane.

Whichever way one looks at it, the death of the narrator’s brother is of major significance in the narrator’s attitude to the tyrant. He devotes nearly a quarter of his chronicle to the account of Gregory’s death. Moreover, the narrator is writing his damning indictment of the tyrant twenty-five years (a significant anniversary) after his brother’s death, and the gun he dreams of using on the tyrant is the same gun - containing even the same bullets - that his brother had owned at the time of his death. In contrast to the nation’s crude worship of the tyrant, the narrator over the years has nurtured a dignified reverence for his dead brother, who stands at least symbolically, if not actually, as the tyrant’s first victim on his dreadful ascent to power, and thus takes on something of the stature of a martyr, a hero. One can see in him shades of V. D. Nabokov who, killed by Russian fascists in Germany in 1922, might be seen as an
early victim of the movement that brought Hitler to power. Such a parallel would bring the *Hamlet* theme of the murdered father into sharper focus, and may shed light on Nabokov’s intention regarding the nature of Gregory’s death.

Whereas in the first half of the story there is a sense of relatively rational resolve and determination (“he must be killed” [*Stories* 439]), at the start of the second half a note of desperation creeps in. Initially, the narrator had controlled and channelled his hatred into a clinical assassination of the tyrant’s character and the nature of his regime, and had recounted his brother’s death (laden with dark suggestions) with subtlety and restraint. The first half of the story is a kind of exposition: the narrator puts his case, lays the charges against the tyrant. In the second half, however, something begins to slide, as the narrator turns from pressing charges to handing down the sentence, carrying out his stated aim: assassination.

The narrator starts to pursue the tyrant, but finding the physical pursuit of him a continuous impossibility, is left to hunt his quarry not through the corridors of the tyrant’s prison fortress, but through the endless windings of his imagination which, virtually the only resource left to him, becomes a prison itself, with the natural result: frustration, despondency, and desperation. “What can I do?” he asks (*Stories* 447). “How can I get rid of him?” “O cubic monster, how can I eradicate you?” (*Stories* 457). Finding, like Hamlet, no answer in action to this self-questioning, the narrator is reduced to conjuring up ever more delusive schemes for getting at the tyrant. He recounts a meeting he has with the tyrant’s attendants - his tailor, masseur, physician, barber, baker - whom he wanted “to palpate... so as to partake at least in that way of their mysterious rites, of their diabolical manipulations; it seemed to me that their hands were imbued with his smell, that through those people he, too, was present” (*Stories* 449). The meeting, however, proves to be nothing more than a dream. And the narrator’s sense of the boundary between illusion and reality blurs further when he describes a visit paid him by the tyrant’s father, which turns out to be a figment of his unbalanced imagination. “[M]y mind is lucid,” the narrator optimistically asserts shortly afterwards, only to add with demented shrillness, “and yet I don’t know, I don’t know how to go about killing him” (*Stories* 454).

As frustration gives way to incipient madness, the narrator’s obsession which at the start had been a fairly focussed entity - “a thing that somehow belongs to me and that is entrusted to me alone for judgment” (*Stories* 440) - begins to lose all rational proportion. The narrator’s bid to exterminate the tyrant finally plumbs the limits of absurdity when he spends an entire day trying to fall in line telepathically with his
adversary’s thoughts: “Many times, of late, I have summoned all the force of my mind to imagine at a given moment the flow of his cares and thoughts, in order to duplicate the rhythm of his existence, making it yield and come crashing down” (Stories 455). By the end of the day, he believes he “must have achieved a certain secret liaison with him,” but, he regrets, the meeting of minds never becomes close enough to spark off the necessary explosion.

Obsession grades into possession. The tyrant’s image verges on the total mental eclipse anticipated by the narrator at the start. It had been signalled by the tyrant’s infiltrating the narrator’s dream via his attendants, and even his penetrating the narrator’s dream-self as the latter finds himself dressed, fed, and prescribed for, by the tyrant’s tailor, baker, and physician. However, the correspondence between narrator and tyrant goes much further than that; in fact a whole pattern of parallels can be traced. In the very first sentence of the story the narrator establishes a parallel rhythm between himself and the tyrant: the narrator’s hatred has grown in accordance with the tyrant’s rise; and the narrator likens this hatred to the tyrant himself, its “arms folded like those of his image” (Stories 438). The two men are contemporaries, and the narrator had been “one of the few to know well” the tyrant’s personality (Stories 441). They had, it seems, at one time shared (unknown to the tyrant) the favours of the hunchbacked girl who destroyed the tyrant’s letters to her in the narrator’s presence. The narrator has followed in the tyrant’s footsteps, visiting his old lodgings, trying to grasp “the key to his life” (Stories 452). Harbouring his secret hatred, having no wife or children, and perhaps keeping a low profile for fear of meeting the same fate as others who knew the tyrant in his youth, the narrator is even as isolated as the tyrant holed up in his prison fortress. Furthermore, the narrator’s obsessive attachment to one idea, his blinkered view of reality, mimics the tyrant’s megalomania. Indeed, this narrowness of view is reflected in the very structure of the narrator’s chronicle: it is a monologue - a series of soliloquies or the diary of a madman - in which no other point of view is presented, where everything is filtered through the narrator’s own consciousness, where the speech and action of other characters (some of whom are mere figments of the narrator’s imagination) are reduced to a minimum. The narrator, it might be said, presides over his work like a little dictator.

As the narrator’s desperation rises to a peak, he complains: “everything has become his [i.e., the tyrant’s] likeness, his mirror image” (Stories 457). Now, it seems, even the narrator himself has become some distorted reflection of his adversary, as if Dr Jekyll were being undermined by Mr Hyde (as Dan E. Burns states: “the tyrant himself becomes the hero’s double” [Burns 511]). The ultimate manifestation of this
convergence of tyrant and narrator is the latter’s shock “conversion,” which in truth constitutes nothing short of a total nervous breakdown brought on by prolonged mental strain, a kind of implosion of the narrator’s obsession. The breaking point is the narrator’s resorting to suicide as a positive solution to his task of assassinating the tyrant: “By killing myself,” he reasons, “I would kill him, as he was totally inside me, fattened on the intensity of my hatred” (Stories 457). Ironically, however, the narrator’s preparing to rid himself through suicide of the tyrant who “was totally inside me,” triggers his ultimate union with the image of the tyrant (his “conversion”) - it seems that the narrator’s gravitation towards the tyrant goes deeper than his conscious awareness of it. The narrator’s obsession with bringing down the tyrant thus ultimately attains proportions which border on total dominance of his soul, an ironic corollary of the totalitarian regime threatening him from the outside.

Fortunately for the narrator, however, the “conversion” is a fit which passes: Jekyll triumphs over Hyde. For the time being at least. For one wonders just how stable this fortuitous and unlooked-for equilibrium is, particularly when the narrator seems satisfied with the rather dubious victory he tries to salvage from his ordeal. One wonders if it will not ultimately all end in disaster as in Stevenson’s story. Nevertheless, the narrator has achieved something which stands as a lasting example, even if it ends up outlasting his own mental stability. But this achievement is elsewhere than the narrator thinks. The narrator’s claim of damning satire does not carry conviction; it feels like an afterthought - empty rhetoric - although undoubtedly the narrator’s chronicle is a damning indictment of totalitarian regimes. The prevailing sense at the end of the story is that the narrator has simply managed to scramble to a rocky ledge out of the turbulent sea which had threatened to engulf him completely; that he has come through a struggle; that he has survived. The spoils of this “victory” are not great, but, against the odds, this lone man, who tried to stand up for his own beliefs, his own world (“I die only for myself, for the sake of my own world of good and truth” [Stories 453]), has managed to keep hold of that personal truth and independence of mind (battered but intact) in the face of the massed pressure of the state to conform. The narrator’s stated objective was attack, but in attacking and failing, his most notable achievement is the defence of his inner world; he prevents - just - the outside from getting in.

However, this is not a story about positive outcomes and satisfying resolutions. It is a story which ends with a whimper rather than a bang. The narrator’s retaining his independence of mind was never a stated objective, and what he has retained has been sorely shaken. Moreover, even satire has its limitations: “Contemptuous laughter is
all right,” Nabokov later told an interviewer, “but it is not enough in the way of moral relief” (SO 58). It is a story of how extremism breeds extremism, of how even a relatively decent civilized man, such as the narrator, can be reduced to the point where he feels compelled to jeopardize his sanity and his life in an attempt to bring down the evil that is oppressing him, virtually destroying himself, as opposed to the tyrant, in the process. It is a story in which things remain unresolved: the narrator’s quest to kill the tyrant; the true nature of the narrator’s brother’s death; and the fate of the narrator himself as one of the few remaining unexecuted people who knew the tyrant before his rise to power - how long will he survive? Writing his chronicle has been a cathartic exercise for the narrator, an “exorcism” as he calls it (Stories 459); but the demons have only been driven out, not destroyed, and they remain at large in the hell outside, through which he must continue to walk alone. And as he buries his book, he must pray that posterity will be the first to discover it, and not the secret police.

III

In his prefatory note to “Tyrants Destroyed” Nabokov states: “Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin dispute my tyrant’s throne in this story - and meet again in Bend Sinister, 1947, with a fifth toad. The destruction is thus complete” (Stories 655). If Hitler, Lenin, and Stalin dispute the throne, Stalin makes the strongest claim. While the story’s unnamed country is fundamentally a composite of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, the latter seems to have the greater stake in the nation. The narrator lives in a land of peasants and snow, and, in undergoing his conversion to the tyrant’s regime, is overwhelmed by a wave of tenderness as “crimson” as the Soviet flag (Stories 458). Moreover, while our fictional tyrant is bald like Lenin (Stories 443), he has “legs strong as steel” (Stories 444) - an unmistakable allusion to the derivation of the name “Stalin” from the Russian stal’, “steel” - and an unsophisticated rustic quality which was not characteristic of Lenin. Nor did Lenin wield the kind of absolute power our tyrant enjoys. The latter presides over an agrarian state where, during “gigantic festivities,” millions of citizens march by “with shovels, hoes, and rakes on their slavish shoulders,” and where “secret mourning in every other family” has become a way of life, while “colossal portraits” of the tyrant, displayed for public veneration, are a measure of the overblown proportions of his personality cult (Stories 447). All of which speaks more of Stalin than his predecessor, and naturally it is principally his image which a Russian reader in 1938 would mentally conjure up, not having recourse to Nabokov’s later note. The regime in “Tyrants Destroyed” deliberately embraces all of totalitarianism’s worst features; the title pointedly pluralizes the
story’s target; but the prevailing atmosphere is of the Soviet Union during the Great Terror: the eerie, tense silence of an oppressed people living in constant fear of the secret police.

_The Gift_ had reflected Nabokov’s increasing revulsion towards Nazi Germany over the long period of its composition, and that hatred had been reiterated in _Invitation to a Beheading_ (1935; written 1934) and “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (1937) while the longer work was in progress. But since describing the plight of Cincinnatus C under a Nazi-Soviet style system of terror, four years before the completion of _The Gift_, Nabokov had not significantly taken issue with Stalin’s regime in his published work. In 1938 the situation in Russia was far uglier than it had been in 1934, and Nabokov seems to have been moved to make up for his intervening silence. Accordingly, his assault on Stalinism becomes more direct, no longer simmering in the melting pot of a general attack on totalitarianism, but aimed at the man himself. “Tyrants Destroyed” is the most emphatic and sustained attack on Stalin that Nabokov had published up to that time - or indeed, ever would publish. The blend of Hitlerism, Leninism, and Stalinism in _Bend Sinister_, for instance, is more evenly balanced than in the 1938 story. If “Cloud, Castle, Lake” is an attack on Hitler’s regime, “Tyrants Destroyed,” Nabokov’s next story, is its Stalinist counterpart.

This public return to the war with Stalinism was privately heralded by a scathing denunciation of Stalin that apparently did not find its way into print during its author’s lifetime. In 1937 Nabokov satirized Stalin in an eight-line poem parodying a eulogy of the dictator. The poem’s savage irony intensifies as the speaker’s imagery soars to ever loftier heights of extravagant praise. “Iosif Krasnyi” (“Joseph the Red,” with a pun on the second meaning of _krasnyi_: “beautiful, wonderful”), who has turned Russia into an abundant kitchen garden with one radiant glance, is the “Wild boar of the mountains! Higher than the mountains! Better than one hundred Lindberghs and three hundred pole stars.” Radiating light from beneath his thick moustache, he is, in short, the “Sun of Russia: Stalin!” (_Stikhi_ 257; my translation). Nabokov’s swipe at the Soviet dictator is in the vein of Osip Mandelstam’s now famous 1933 poem denouncing Stalin as “the Kremlin mountaineer, / The murderer and peasant-slayer” with fingers “fat as grubs” and leering “cockroach whiskers” (Mandelstam 13, incl. n.2). Mandelstam was well aware of the dangers of composing such things. His poem, never committed to paper and recited only to acquaintances, fell into the hands of the secret police; after three years’ exile, and a second arrest at the height of the Terror, Mandelstam died in a transit camp in December 1938 (Shentalinsky 168-96). Nabokov later referred to Mandelstam’s “heroically” continuing to write great poetry.
in spite of the persecution to which he was subjected, and confessed: “when I read Mandelshtam’s poems . . . I feel a kind of helpless shame, being so free to live and think and write and speak in the free part of the world” (SO 58). That “helpless shame” may have motivated Nabokov to write his 1937 poem on Stalin. It was perhaps his way of emulating something of the courage of people like Mandelstam. There would have been nothing phoney or pretentious in his doing such a thing. If Nabokov enjoyed in the West an overall freedom denied to Mandelstam, his poem on Stalin existed within a totally different context. Even though Nabokov was a Russian living abroad, he was not necessarily any safer from Stalin’s paranoid ire at this time than Mandelstam and others in the Soviet Union.

In 1938 the Great Terror was at its height not only inside Russia. Stalin’s fear of international conspiracies knew no bounds, and so-called “enemies of the people” were relentlessly pursued throughout western Europe in the late 1930s (Andrew, Mitrokhin 98). By 1938 the euphemistically named “Administration for Special Tasks,” the arm of the NKVD responsible for assassination and abduction abroad, was the largest section of Soviet foreign intelligence, claiming to have 212 illegals operating in sixteen countries (Andrew, Mitrokhin 54, 100). Outside Spain, the main field of “Special Tasks” operations was France, where Nabokov was living (Andrew, Mitrokhin 95, 98). In September 1937 General Miller, head of ROVS, the White Russian Combined Services Union, was abducted in broad daylight on a Paris street, transported to Moscow, interrogated, and shot. In February 1938 Lev Sedov, Trotsky’s son and principal organizer, died in suspicious circumstances at a small private clinic run by Russian emigrés in Paris. Although it has never been proven that Sedov was assassinated, the NKVD had a sophisticated medical section and at the time were certainly planning to kill him. A few months later, Rudolf Klement, secretary of the Trotskyist Fourth International, was abducted by the NKVD from his Paris home. Klement’s headless corpse was discovered washed ashore on the banks of the Seine (Andrew, Mitrokhin 98-100). Neither the Trotskyists nor the White Guard posed any credible threat to Stalin’s regime, and yet both were hunted down with furious zeal. In such an atmosphere any kind of “counter-revolutionary” activity was potentially dangerous. If Mandelstam, an insignificant figure in relation to Stalin’s regime, could be driven deliberately to his death, no writer opposing Stalin could consider himself safe. Indeed, the NKVD could extend the category of “enemy of the people” to anyone who dared utter a word of criticism (Conquest 574). It would no doubt have caused Nabokov some alarm that the woman revealed to have been closely involved in the NKVD plot against Miller, Nadezhda Plevitskaya, knew him - Nabokov - personally (AY 59; Appel 288).
Although Nabokov’s poem on Stalin was not published at the time, it was potentially no less dangerous because of that, as Mandelstam’s case showed. The “Kremlin mountaineer” naturally never reached a Soviet press, but the mere recitation of the poem to a select audience cost Mandelstam his life. Nabokov neatly, if superficially, parries the charge of slander by dressing his poem up as praise of Stalin, reminding one of the shrewd children in *Bend Sinister* who, mischievously smudging the wet paint on public benches, trace the words “Glory to Paduk” in order to avoid punishment (*BS* 129). Nevertheless, it is from its very implicitness, its vicious sarcasm, that the poem’s assault on Stalin derives its power (indeed, note that “*Iosif Krasnyi*” echoes “*Ivan Groznyi,*” Ivan the Terrible). Material like that was no trifling matter in the climate of the time, and Nabokov (long outspoken in his criticism of the Bolshevik regime) wisely kept the poem private. Merely writing it and keeping it close to his chest was an act of defiance (which its inclusion in the posthumous *Stikhi* volume is perhaps meant to acknowledge).

When Nabokov did take his assault on Stalin into the public arena with “Tyrants Destroyed,” the object of his attack is obscured behind an anonymous mask. In spite of that, however, and a fictional country and narrative, the intimations are transparent, as stated above. If Nabokov was brave in writing and preserving his manuscript poem in 1937, it must have taken some courage to put his name publicly to “Tyrants Destroyed” (published in August), a Russian story in which the narrator describes his unalterable decision to assassinate the ruler of his Fatherland, a ruler who resembles no-one so much as Stalin. Mandelstam’s poem had not gone so far. In view of Stalin’s extreme paranoia, which saw conspiracy even in the most improbable quarters, Nabokov’s story was a provocative piece - and no doubt was meant to be. It takes nerve to do such things; indeed, at the very time Nabokov was writing the story - May 1938 - Mandelstam was arrested for the second time and was only months away from a dingy death. Nabokov’s actions appear still more daring when one considers that he wrote the story in a pension of which his one abiding memory was the presence of a Russian secret agent who tried to befriend Dmitri (Field, *FN* 187). If Nabokov suspected ulterior motives in the agent’s attentions to his son, he would have had reason to feel nervous. Even were the agent no longer in the house at the time “Tyrants Destroyed” was being composed, the feeling that the NKVD were never far away would have been in Nabokov’s mind as he wrote about a tyrannical state in which, at public appearances of the tyrant, “everyone is watched by a guard of incalculable proportions (to say nothing of the secret agents and the secret agents watching the secret agents)” (*Stories* 448). Nabokov perhaps did not have to look far
for something out of which to create the fear felt by his story’s narrator, who compiles
his indictment of the tyrant in absolute secrecy, hidden away from the ubiquitous eyes
of the secret police. Given the climate of terror in which the story was written, the
mere existence of “Tyrants Destroyed” is a measure of Nabokov’s commitment to
fighting the evils of Stalinism.
MAY TO SEPTEMBER, AND THE WALTZ INVENTION

I

If it was mainly Stalin who occupied Nabokov’s thoughts during the writing of “Tyrants Destroyed,” Hitler was the dictator who commanded more attention on the public stage at this time. The bid for autonomy among ethnic Germans in Czechoslovakia’s Sudetenland escalated following the Anschluss, and Hitler continued to encourage their demands which provided a pretext for Nazi intervention in Czechoslovakia (Stackelberg 171; Fischer 423). In mid-May rumours began to circulate in Prague that a German invasion was imminent, and on the 20th, in response to intelligence information (in fact incorrect) that German troops were massing at the border, the Czech government mobilized its forces (Stackelberg 171; Andrew, Secret Service 393). This gave rise to the most serious war scare in Europe since Hitler had come to power.

The writing on the wall stood out more clearly. However, Nabokov had more immediate personal concerns. The sale of the US rights to Camera Obscura had seemed like a windfall in late 1937 (RY 445), but deductions considerably reduced the sum paid before it reached Nabokov’s hands. To make matters worse, the novel itself, published on 22 April under the title Laughter in the Dark, was not selling (RY 486). By May Nabokov’s financial woes were as acute as ever. The generosity of admirers, however, went some way towards alleviating the burden. After writing to a journalist of his “ghastly destitution,” the author of The Gift found himself, on 28 May, the recipient of a gift of 2,500 francs from Sergey Rachmaninov, a fellow émigré whose particular art was more portable and therefore more saleable than Nabokov’s (RY 486).

II

While the Nazis deliberately whipped up war fever over the Sudetenland crisis throughout the summer, the campaign against Germany’s Jews intensified. In 1938 the Nazis started to plan the systematic expropriation of the Jews and their exclusion from the German economy. Jewish proprietors continued to be coerced (often
violently) into the "voluntary" surrender of their businesses to non-Jews, but on 6 July expropriation of Jewish firms started to become law, with the prohibition of a range of Jewish commercial enterprises, including real estate agencies and brokerage firms. In July, also, Jewish doctors were forbidden to practise (they would be followed later in the year by Jewish lawyers). A decree calling for compulsory "Aryanization" of all Jewish businesses had already been drafted (Dawidowicz 130-32; Stackelberg 148-49).

However, it was not only increasing economic restrictions with which the Jews had to contend. The continuing plans for war were synchronized with plans to place Jews under the complete control of the police. A decree of 23 July required all Jews to carry identification cards (in October a "J" would be stamped in their passports); and on 17 August the Interior Ministry ordered all male Jews to assume the given name "Israel" and all female Jews the name "Sarah" in order to make them easier to identify (Dawidowicz 132-33; Stackelberg 148-49). A still more alarming development was the extension of the powers of the Gestapo and SS in 1938. Mass Jewish arrests began in late May. In June 1,500 Jewish so-called "anti-socials" were interned in Buchenwald; many were guilty only of a parking violation. Jews who avoided arrest might still fall victim to the mobs and hoodlums, however. Amid the mounting war hysteria over Czechoslovakia violence broke out again in the streets, and Jews and Jewish businesses came under intensifying attack (Dawidowicz 133-34). As Lucy Dawidowicz observes, the escalation of various forms of anti-Jewish persecution, both official and unofficial, "converged that summer of 1938 in a tidal wave of terror" (Dawidowicz 135).

III

The overall aim of Nazi Jewish policy in the 1930s was to pressurize Jews into leaving Germany, but on one occasion in 1938 coerced emigration turned into expulsion. At the start of the year Himmler ordered all Russian Jews to leave Germany within ten days (Dawidowicz 133). Véra Nabokov had left Berlin only months earlier. She was lucky to have escaped the orbit of the SS, but her personal circumstances in the summer of 1938 were nevertheless far from stable. In the second week of July the Nabokovs moved to the Hotel de la Poste in Moulinet, an out-of-the-way village in the hills behind Menton (RY 487-88). The family had little money, but butterfly hunting was free and offered its own treasures. On the steep flowery slopes above the village, Nabokov caught his first new subspecies, a silky blue creature
which he later named *Lysandra cormion* and cherished as “a great and delightful rarity” (*NB* 238-41; *SM* facing 107).

War fever, however, reached even the Nabokovs’ secluded spot. A military camp occupied the fields around Moulinet, and shots from manoeuvres could be heard in the village (*RY* 488). A wave of German emigration in the wake of Nazi oppression had taxed French sympathy for foreigners, and while Nabokov finally obtained a *carte d’identité* in August, which legalized his stay in France, he was still officially unable to work (*Véra* 97). He had been based in France for over a year and a half, but his stay in the country remained precarious.

And that precariousness is reflected in the Nabokovs’ frequent changes of address in 1938. In the final week of August the family moved again, this time to a pension in Cap d’Antibes. Villa les Cyprès was the “very Russian” House of the Union of the St George Cross for Disabled Veterans (*RY* 488). The old soldiers living here were the men Stalin had feared so much that he ordered the NKVD to abduct General Miller. At Villa les Cyprès Nabokov would write *The Waltz Invention*. No doubt the old Russian war invalids in whose midst Nabokov lived provided some of the raw material for the generals who appear in act 2; indeed, in the English version of the play, incorporating revisions made in 1939, the Minister fondly recalls “Christmas parties for disabled soldiers” (*Waltz* 19). Perhaps living amongst so much evidence of war helped give rise to the explosive idea behind the play.

### IV

However, the main motivation for *The Waltz Invention* came from the mounting crisis over Czechoslovakia. On 12 September at Nuremberg, in a venomous speech broadcast throughout Europe, Hitler demanded self-determination for the Sudeten Germans (Gilbert, *Descent* 198-99). He spoke like a man possessed, “intoxicated by his performance, gazing at the sky and being absolutely delighted by his own words” (Fischer 612 n.). Pro-Nazis in the Sudetenland took Hitler’s speech as a cue to revolt. Twenty-four people were killed in the ensuing violence, largely directed at Czechs and Jews. The Czech government declared martial law (Gilbert, *Descent* 199; Fischer 425).

The Nabokovs had spent some time in the Sudetenland in the previous year, where Véra had taken treatment for rheumatism at the spas (*RY* 438-39). At Marienbad
(now Marianske Lazne) Nabokov wrote “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” the story of a Russian emigré savagely beaten by a group of Berliners during an excursion into the countryside. The brutal treatment of the Slavic Vasily Ivanovich at the hands of the German pleasant-trippers may reflect Sudeten German hostility towards the Czechs which was running high even in the summer of 1937 when Nabokov was writing his story. At the death of former president, Thomas Masaryk, in September that year, Sudeten Germans spat at photographs of him displayed by Czech mourners (Gilbert, *Descent* 132-33).

The Nabokovs’ stay in the Sudetenland appears to be alluded to in a rather sinister image in *Speak, Memory*. Recounting his family’s movements across Europe in the late 1930s, Nabokov describes a scene which seems to relate to their visits to the Czech spas: “Cuffed hands of wood nailed to boles in the old parks of curative resorts pointed in the direction whence came a subdued thumping of bandstand music” (*SM* 235). The image of hands nailed to trees evokes the crucifixion of Christ (whose Roman executioners bequeathed the concept of fascism to the twentieth century), an event symbolized also in Vasily Ivanovich’s having his palms and feet pierced with a corkscrew in “Cloud, Castle, Lake” (*Stories* 437). “Cuffed hands,” in addition, suggest handcuffs, which in turn connote police-arrest, imprisonment, and torture. The martyred hand-shaped signs (like the biblical disembodied hand that sets the writing on the wall) point ominously to the nearby bandstand music which betrays a distinctly German-military thump, as if warning of the threat of the neighbouring Nazi regime. Nabokov wrote *Speak, Memory* in the late 1940s, knowing what Czechoslovakia’s fate had been following his stay there, but his image of signpost and band may illustrate a sense of foreboding, concerning a Nazi threat to the Sudetenland, felt by Nabokov at the time. The spectre of German annexation of the region had haunted the Czech government since 1936 (Gilbert, *Descent* 104). Indeed, that threat of annexation is perhaps reflected in “Cloud, Castle, Lake” where there are intimations that the unnamed destination of the Nazi-style state-sponsored “Pleasant trip” is the Sudetenland itself. After two days’ travel by train and foot, the excursionists arrive at a castle (suggestive of border defences) near which Vasily Ivanovich meets an innkeeper (resembling a Russian war veteran) who speaks German poorly and understands Russian “as in a dream” (*Stories* 435).

If “Cloud, Castle, Lake” and *Speak, Memory* suggest that Nabokov felt a sense of ominousness regarding the fate of the Sudetenland in 1937, *The Waltz Invention* indicates that by September 1938 he was under no illusion at all about Hitler’s devastating potential in Europe. Unfortunately, others - the British Prime Minister,
for instance - were. Britain had no defence obligations to Czechoslovakia, but as Prague’s international alliance system hinged on the French, who were disinclined to act without Britain’s support, Neville Chamberlain held the key to Czech security (Fischer 423; Gilbert, Descent 197). Eager to avoid another European war, Chamberlain sought to appease the Nazi leader, believing that limited concessions would satisfy Hitler’s territorial ambitions. But Chamberlain fatally misjudged Hitler and displayed extraordinary naivety in his dealings with him. If the old Russian soldiers living in Nabokov’s pension provided some of the inspiration for the generals bamboozled by a belligerent Waltz in act 2 of Nabokov’s play, Chamberlain, and other elder statesmen in Britain and France, perhaps also served as models.

On 15 September, with war threatening, Chamberlain flew to Germany in an attempt to resolve the Czech crisis peacefully. In talks with Hitler cession of the Sudetenland was agreed in principle, but Chamberlain reserved a final commitment until he had consulted his cabinet and the French government. A week later, the British Prime Minister was back in Germany with an Anglo-French proposal (more or less imposed on the harassed Czechs) for a plebiscite followed by the cession of those German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia which voted for it. Hitler, however, was impatient and insisted that annexation go ahead at once without a plebiscite. Chamberlain the next day accepted Hitler’s demands, but Prague flatly rejected the new plan and the Czechs mobilized (Gilbert, Descent 199-201; Fischer 426-28; Stackelberg 172). On 27 September, as Europe braced itself for war, Chamberlain broadcast to the British nation: “How horrible, fantastic, incredible it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here, because of a quarrel in a faraway country between people of whom we know nothing” (Gilbert, Descent 201). His words illustrate just how out of touch he was with the political climate of the time. He had the sense, however, to mobilize the Royal Navy (Kirk 129). He also persuaded Hitler at the eleventh hour to agree to further talks. The Nazi leader’s position was essentially non-negotiable, but Hitler called Chamberlain, the French Prime Minister Daladier, and Mussolini to a conference to be held in Munich on 29 September in order to settle the question of the Sudetenland along the lines already agreed by Britain, France, and Germany. The Czechs were excluded from the discussions. On the eve of the conference the British finally wrung from a reluctant Eduard Benes, the Czech president, his acceptance of the Anglo-French and German plan for the transfer of the Sudetenland to Hitler (Gilbert, Descent 201-02). The Munich Agreement of 30 September put that transfer into writing, and the next day German troops marched into the ceded Czech territories (Gilbert, Descent 205).
British and French negotiators congratulated themselves on averting war, but the triumph was all Hitler’s. Even more than the Anschluss the Munich Agreement was of pivotal significance in promoting the Nazi cause. The last surviving democracy in east-central Europe was fatally undermined; French security, which had involved a treaty with Czechoslovakia, was eroded; Romania and Yugoslavia were exposed to Nazi influence; Poland was isolated; an incipient Nazi military plot against Hitler lost all momentum in the face of his new prestige (Fischer 425, 430); Hitler’s own sense of infallibility was reinforced; nationalist euphoria put new sting into the persecution of Germany’s Jews; and most significantly of all, Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin concluded that the West was not serious about fighting fascism. A declaration of Anglo-German friendship signed at Munich fed Stalin’s fears of an anti-Soviet front and led to his seeking accommodation with Hitler in order to preclude the possibility of fighting the Germans alone (Stackelberg 173-74).

The writing was on the wall more starkly than ever. Chamberlain, however, hopelessly blind to Hitler’s duplicity, returned from Munich in triumphant mood to deliver the most famous of all famous last words: “This is the second time in our history that there has come back from Germany to Downing Street peace with honour. I believe it is peace for our time” (Knowles 200). Winston Churchill saw only the ominousness and shame of it all. Speaking at a parliamentary debate, Churchill warned his colleagues: “you will find that in a period of time which may be measured by years, but may be measured only by months, Czechoslovakia will be engulfed by the Nazi regime” (Fischer 431). Nabokov had a personal reason to dread such predictions: his mother and siblings (two sisters and a younger brother) were in Prague. By the time he came to write The Real Life of Sebastian Knight his mother had fallen seriously ill and Hitler’s tightening grip on Czechoslovakia made it impossible for him to go to her (RY 496). As it turned out, Nabokov’s visit to Czechoslovakia the previous year was the last time he saw his mother (and also one of his sisters). If, in putting Irina Guadanini behind him, Nabokov had kept his small family unit - himself, his wife, and his son - from the general disintegration around him, the family he was born into was slipping further from his grasp.

As were the means to live. “Our situation is particularly disgusting now,” Nabokov wrote in a September letter, “we’ve never been so broke before, and this slow death doesn’t seem to upset or even worry anyone” (Véra 94; RY 488). To the US Russian Literary Fund he reported that his circumstances had never been “so terrible, so desperate.” The fund nevertheless could spare only twenty dollars (RY 488-89). With war looming in September, the Nabokovs’ lack of money must have been particularly
distressing. Some of that desperation and frustration perhaps found its way into the character of Waltz who owns nothing but grandiose fantasies and crazy dreams. Nabokov hoped his play, which he wrote in September, would be doubly remunerative: in print and on stage (RY 489).

V

The Waltz Invention (Izobretenie Val’sa)

In June 1938 a new comic strip appeared: Superman. The Nazi idea of the “superman,” or Übermensch, by contrast, was proclaimed not as science fiction but as science fact, and was behind Hitler’s territorial claims in 1938, designed to unite the master race under the Great German Reich. In a comment deleted from a lecture on Dostoevsky Nabokov remarked: “the rulers of Germany’s recently fallen regime based on the theory of Superman and his special rights were . . . either neurotics or ordinary criminals, or both” (LRL 114 n.). At a time when these rulers were poised to appropriate parts of Czechoslovakia and draw the Sudeten Germans to the bosom of the Fatherland, Nabokov ridiculed and demolished the theory of the superman in a play in which the central character believes himself to be just such a superior individual, but is shown to be nothing more than a neurotic and an ordinary criminal. Nabokov made his comment on the Nazi leadership in connection with Crime and Punishment, whose hero he regarded not only as neurotic and “not quite sane” (LRL 114), but also as being inspired to commit his crimes by “fascist ideas” about “the herd and the supermen” (LRL 113). The Waltz Invention can be seen as a direct answer to - a correction of - Dostoevsky’s novel in which a “fascist” would-be “superman” journeys towards salvation along the road of sin.

The Waltz Invention is set in an imaginary country, and its action - all but the very end - consists of a dream had by its central character, Salvator Waltz, as he waits for an interview with the Minister of War, an interview which, in reality, takes place only in the play’s final scene. Mad Waltz has come to tell the Minister about his “invention,” an extraordinary weapon of mass destruction, which in fact is only a figment of his mad mind. As Waltz waits for his appointment, his dream unfolds a vision of the fabulous autocratic power he imagines his machine will bring him, while at the same time it intimates, with increasing insistence, the inherent disastrousness of his fantastic ambitions.
In the foreword to the play Nabokov makes much of inviting us to look into the “nether life” glimmering through Waltz’s dream. He draws attention to a song in act 3:

(1)
There are lights in the dark,
And a ferry is there,
And the river is wide
Where we part in despair.

(2)
And there’s someone unknown
Who is singing ahead.
How I held you, my own,
But away you were led!

(3)
And the fragments of light
That the ripple retains,
And the shouts of the guards,
And the clank of the chains -

(4)
All repeat in the dark
That my life comes to nought
As they ferry away
The daredevil they caught.

“Strange song! Sad song!” muses Waltz. “Good god.... A wide, desolate Siberian river.... I’m beginning to remember something....” (Waltz 101). Nabokov prompts us to ponder this: “What is the macabre and mysterious memory linked with Siberia, which a convict’s dirge sung by a whore so strangely evokes?” That “convict’s dirge” was written by Waltz himself (Waltz 101). Did he write from first-hand experience? Was Waltz a convict in Siberia? Is that what he is referring to when he mentions “the raw cold of the past” (Waltz 28)? Notice that the song “strangely evokes” the epilogue of Crime and Punishment. The epilogue begins:

Siberia. On the bank of a wide remote river stands a town, one of the administrative centres of Russia; in the town is a fortress, in the fortress is a prison. In the prison Rodion Raskolnikov, second-class convict, had been confined for nine months. It was almost eighteen since the day of the murder (Dostoevsky 512).

The song’s “wide, desolate Siberian river,” the convict, the prison, are mirrored in Dostoevsky’s novel, while the romantic theme of the song, sung by a prostitute,
recalls Raskolnikov's relationship with the prostitute Sonya, who follows him to Siberia. Does the parallel with Crime and Punishment suggest that Waltz, like Raskolnikov, was sent to Siberia as a murderer? Is that the "macabre and mysterious memory"? Is that the truth about Waltz's "nether life" glimmering through his dream?

Note that the final line of the poem refers to the convict as "The daredevil they caught." This echoes the Colonel's reference to the person who attempts to assassinate Waltz as a "daredevil - who unfortunately has not yet been caught, but who shall be caught" (Waltz 78; my italics). The connection thus made between the Siberian convict in the song (who may be Waltz) and the gunman who shot Waltz might extend to the nature of their crimes. The verbal echo between the poem and the Colonel's remark does not occur in the original Russian text (SSRP 5.564-65, 578); Nabokov seems to add it to the English translation in order to provide a clearer clue to the convict's crime, just as he supplies pointers to Waltz's "nether life" in the English foreword. Note, too, what the Minister says of Waltz: "a character like that can murder one" (Waltz 17). Waltz does not bat an eyelid when he murders the 600,000 inhabitants of Santa Morgana.

The intimations of murder in Waltz's past can be linked to a specific victim. In the foreword Nabokov highlights one detail in particular relating to Waltz's "nether life": "What upsets him so atrociously when he sees a toy on a table? Does it bring back his own childhood? Some bitter phase of that childhood? Not his childhood perhaps, but that of a child he has lost?" The toy to which Nabokov refers is a toy car, whose successive appearances, in various forms, provoke in Waltz an increasing panic, and which at one point recalls to his mind a "little red car with the paint scratched off on one side of the hood that I had when I was a boy" (Waltz 66). However, Nabokov's hinting that the traumatic significance of the toy car lies in its association with childhood may be a deliberate false scent (it certainly seems unlikely that Waltz ever had children of his own: he says he is a bachelor [Waltz 10] and sexually inexperienced: "somehow it so happened, Trance, that I've never, never once..." [Waltz 98]). The recurring image of the toy car needs to be understood in the context of a general theme of cars in the play, of which the toy forms only a part; and the significance of this theme seems to lie elsewhere than childhood. The theme reaches its climax when Bump describes the assassination of the king: "I... was at the wheel of a luxurious automobile when our last king - may God be his judge - was killed inside it, by a gunshot through the window" (Waltz 92). As if to emphasize the link between the toy car motif and this image of a real car, Bump adds that he has with
him a model of the vehicle that has been ordered for Waltz, which causes the latter to exclaim: "Damn it! No, I don’t want to see" (Waltz 92). The car theme stops here. So too does the theme of assassination: earlier Bump feared that the Minister had been shot (Waltz 21); Waltz himself was the victim of an assassination attempt (Waltz 77); and the murder of the king was previously referred to (Waltz 58). It is as if the two themes (car and assassination), recurring through the play, have found their definitive form (murder of the king) and, having fulfilled their purpose, do not need to appear again. It is as if Waltz resists for a long time, but at last the image of his crime crystallizes in his dream. Whereupon the image of his punishment follows, with the song of the convict which describes his imprisonment a few pages later.

Waltz would have political motive for killing the king. He appears to hold certain socialist ideas. One of Waltz’s decrees when he becomes ruler is the redistribution of wealth: “Every rich man shares his wealth with nine beggars” (Waltz 75). Waltz’s killing the king would also explain why his neurotic dream contains an attempt on his own life as ruler - a case of the paranoid criminal afraid of becoming a victim of his own crime. By the present time of the play, Waltz would have served his sentence - or escaped (the Colonel suggests he has escaped from a mental hospital [Waltz 34]). After many years’ incarceration, the effects of age, an assumed name (“A chance pseudonym, fancy’s bastard” [Waltz 9]), a totally new regime with new people in charge, nobody at the Ministry of War would recognize in Waltz the former assassin. And perhaps the image of his past crime exists in Waltz’s diseased mind as an event which happened in his childhood - a circumstance which Waltz’s present infantile state of mind would only compound - hence its manifesting itself in the shape of, among other things, a child’s toy car.

However, when the only frame of reference is a madman’s dream, can one be sure that what glimmers through from Waltz’s “nether life” is in reality regicide? One might ask, why is Waltz’s song so evocative of Crime and Punishment? Moreover, if Waltz killed the king of an imaginary country, could he have been imprisoned in a real Siberia? Waltz’s “nether life” may in fact consist of little more than a madman’s neurotic imagination and a copy of Crime and Punishment, found in the library of a lunatic asylum, the mental hospital from which the Colonel suggests Waltz has escaped (the “Siberia” of the insane). The whole business of the murder, and the imprisonment, and the convict’s song, may be a demented Dostoevskian hallucination, as much Waltz’s invention as his fabulous “Telemort.” Indeed, what matters is not whether or not the regicide took place in reality, but that through the
murder and imprisonment (on whatever level they exist) a link is established with Raskolnikov which illuminates Waltz’s aims and motives in his cataclysmic dream.

Note that Waltz - by his own account, at any rate - shared in his youth the harsh circumstances Raskolnikov lives under: “I used to live in stuffy, dirty tenements . . . it’s best not to remember” (Waltz 90). He recalls “privations, early in life, a narrow chest, symptoms of consumption, too much intellectual work” (Waltz 94). He used to be “a pauper and a dreamer” (Waltz 66). “Allow me to say that my life has consisted of such material privations, of such mental torments” (Waltz 28). “I’ve been through a lot, have learned all the horror of life and so on” (Waltz 98). Waltz is also a madman like Raskolnikov, whom Nabokov categorizes as a Dostoevskian psychopath, a case of “lucid madness” (LRL 108).

Raskolnikov murders the old moneylender, Alyona Ivanovna, in order to find out if he is one of the “extraordinary” men who, he believes, have the right to commit crime - including murder, even mass murder - in order to achieve their progressive ends (Dostoevsky 249-50). One such extraordinary man, according to Raskolnikov, was Napoleon: “[T]he real ruler, to whom everything is permitted, destroys Toulon, butchers in Paris, forgets an army in Egypt, expends half a million men in a Moscow campaign, shakes himself free with a pun in Wilno, and when he is dead they put up statues to him; everything is permitted to him” (Dostoevsky 263). Raskolnikov admits to Sonya: “This was it: I wanted to make myself a Napoleon, and that is why I killed her” (Dostoevsky 397). It seems that Waltz, also, idolizes Napoleon. Waltz comes across his old school atlas with a blot on Corsica - evidently he had marked the point of his hero’s origin (Waltz 35; SSRP 5.539). Later, as his dreams of empire crumble, Waltz retreats into self-imposed Napoleonic exile on the island of Palmora (compare Nabokov’s poem “Napoleon in Exile” [“Napoleon v izgnanii”] [1919], in which the emperor is pictured sharing his pitiful banishment with a lone palm-tree [SSRP 1.512]). In addition, it may not be insignificant that the waltz rose to popularity at the time of the Napoleonic wars. Raskolnikov reasons that men like Napoleon obtain power above all through their daring to stoop and take it: “There is only one thing needed, only one - to dare! . . . I wanted to have the courage, and I killed . . . I only wanted to dare, Sonya, that was the only reason!” (Dostoevsky 401). As we have seen, Waltz describes the Siberian convict in his poem (i.e., himself) as a “daredevil.” The implication is that that “daredevil” committed his crime in order, like Raskolnikov, to see if he was one of the “extraordinary” men, a “superman.”
One of the details of the song in act 3 is of particular importance: “And there’s someone unknown / Who is singing ahead.” It echoes the singing Raskolnikov hears while a prisoner in Siberia, heralding his epiphanic realization that he loves Sonya and that this love can bring him “a perfect resurrection into a new life” (Dostoevsky 526):

Raskolnikov went out of the shed on to the bank, sat down on a pile of logs and looked at the wide, solitary river. . . . From the other bank, far away, was faintly borne the sound of singing. . . . Freedom was there, there other people lived, so utterly unlike those on this side of the river that it seemed as though with them time had stood still. [. . . ] his mind had wandered into daydreams; he thought of nothing, but an anguished longed disturbed and tormented him (Dostoevsky 525).

Nabokov thought Raskolnikov’s spiritual regeneration “through the love of a noble prostitute” suspect and “incredibly banal” (LRL 98). In Waltz he depicts a man who, by the start of the play, has undergone a totally phoney and superficial regeneration in his mad mind. If Waltz’s “spiritual regeneration” is suggested by his poem’s allusion to Raskolnikov’s epiphany, it is corroborated by the name he assumes: Salvator Waltz. Salvator means “saviour,” and the word “waltz” comes from the German walzen “to revolve.” Thus the full name connotes the saviour revolutionary who Waltz clearly imagines himself to be. In his dream Waltz claims to be on a mission to save the world. He has found the “solution” to the problem of the world (Waltz 67), and will bring to everyone “a new life” (Waltz 65). “My game has only one rule - love of mankind,” Waltz declares (Waltz 55), “And Good shall blossom, and all Evil melt / Amid the radiance of my cloudless code” (Waltz 69). Waltz seems to align himself with Christ, bringing peace on earth. The opening of act 2 (dreamed by Waltz), set in the council chamber, mimics the Last Supper: “There are thirteen of us! . . . It’s unpleasant that we are thirteen” (Waltz 39). Later in the act Waltz speaks of his “resurrection” (Waltz 63). In addition, in the very first scene of the play the Colonel attempts, rather ham-fistedly, to remove a speck from the Minister of War’s eye, an image which recalls Christ’s sermon on the mount (Matthew 7:3). The dreaming Waltz thus alludes to the misguided blindness of his opponents. However, the analogy backfires, only highlighting Waltz’s own defective vision, for Waltz tries to remove the mote in the eye of the world while overlooking the beam in his own. While Christ saved mankind by sacrificing his life, Waltz’s idea of saving mankind ultimately leads to sacrificing the lives of others, and involves no preparedness to make personal sacrifices. On the contrary, Waltz’s mission is fatally bound up with a desire for personal gain. Moreover, instead of preaching salvation, as Christ did,
Waltz dictates it; instead of giving a sermon on the mount, Waltz blows the mountain up.

Nabokov was cynical about Raskolnikov’s anticipated spiritual regeneration because, in the entire course of the book, “innerly...Raskolnikov does not go through any true development of personality”; “whether he will kill again is impossible to say” (LRL 109, 114). Waltz follows the same pattern. His mock regeneration does not change the murderous daredevil within, it merely makes him feel as if he is a divinely anointed superman. When Waltz returns from “Siberia,” equipped with his “Telemort,” he renews in his dream the cycle of crime and punishment, but this time on a much larger scale. Not only does Waltz kill again, he turns from regicide to genocide.

The dreaming Waltz now enacts far more fully than he ever could have before, the “fascist ideas” espoused by Raskolnikov. These are, as described by Nabokov:

that mankind consists of two parts - the herd and the supermen - and that the majority should be bound by the established moral laws but that the few who are far above the majority ought to be at liberty to make their own law. Thus Raskolnikov first declared that Newton and other great discoverers should not have hesitated to sacrifice scores or hundreds of individual lives had those lives stood in their way toward giving mankind the benefit of their discoveries. Later he somehow forgets these benefactors of humanity to concentrate on an entirely different ideal. All his ambition suddenly centers in Napoleon in whom he sees characteristically the strong man who rules the masses through his daring to ‘pick up’ power which lies there awaiting the one who ‘dares’. This is a fast transition from an aspiring benefactor of the world toward an aspiring tyrant for the sake of his own power. A transformation which is worth a more detailed psychological analysis than Dostoevski, in his hurry, can afford to make (LRL 113-14).

In this passage are enumerated the mass of contradictions which make up the “fascist” madman Waltz. In act 1 he is the “superman” who comes to bestow his genius on mankind, his vision of a peaceful unarmed world; and yet this peace is to be secured by means of his great discovery, his deadly “Telemort.” In act 2 Waltz believes he is so far above the laws governing ordinary men that he would be permitted to murder whole towns of people in order to seize power and thereby ensure that all the world experienced the benefit of his rule (Waltz 63). Waltz heralds a new life, but announces that it must be enforced through his will:
A threat can work much better with a child
Than any persuasion; lessons based
On fear are lessons rammed into the marrow. [...]
Once mankind is accustomed to the thought
That in six days I can destroy a world,
You can live free within the spacious circle
That hems you in, and there devote yourselves
To arts and crafts, to science and romance . . . (Waltz 67).

By act 3 Waltz's selfish motives have become painfully apparent. His role as so-called benefactor has been forgotten, and he has made the transition to self-centred Napoleonic tyrant, peremptorily dispensing his will, and arrogating to himself enormous wealth and power. When a rebel shoots at him, Waltz takes his revenge - on a suitably Napoleonic scale - by annihilating the city of Santa Morgana in the gunman's native country (Waltz 81).

However, like Napoleon, Waltz meets an ignominious end. After committing the murder, Raskolnikov suffers terrible anguish. It is not his conscience, however, which is wounded, but his pride. Raskolnikov remains unrepentant about dispatching the worthless moneylender; his main regret is that he failed the test he had set himself, to prove whether or not he was an extraordinary man. He is tortured by the thought that, after all, he has turned out to be merely a "louse" like everyone else (Dostoevsky 402). Waltz, too, in spite of his position as dictator, is harassed by intimations of his inadequacy, as his dream figures to him - in the recurrent motifs of car and assassination - the image of his regicide, which is the image of his failure: a murder which resulted not in his "picking up" power, but in his capture and imprisonment. Waltz tries to avoid the "terrible thoughts, which I don't want to let in, not at any cost" (Waltz 109), but the unpleasant truth stares him in the face with increasing insistence. Far from being the "superman" he imagines himself to be, Waltz's past failure is only magnified in the present: no matter how many people he kills, he cannot obtain the true omnipotence he craves. Waltz's regime is a failure: he is constantly thwarted and resisted, defied by foreign powers, shot at by gunmen, and weighed down with tedious paperwork. He is, as the Colonel he dreams points out, a "bungling dud" (Waltz 87). Waltz's dream persistently confronts him with signs which, in the words of his poem, "All repeat in the dark / That my life comes to nought."

Indeed, the whole of the dream tends towards the revelation at the end: namely, that Waltz is really nothing but a madman and has no machine. The Colonel in particular insists Waltz is insane, at one point going so far as to assert: "We are all only
participants in your delirium, and everything that is taking place is the ringing and throbbing inside your sick brain” (Waltz 77). The very name of Waltz’s attendant, Trance, alludes to the unreality of everything taking place: “He’s merely a figment of the imagination,” as Gump observes. “A trance, a daze, a dream” (Waltz 41). The ominous signs of the truth which Waltz tries to deny build up with increasing insistence as the play progresses, until the dream - the vision of the “superman” - finally crumbles internally just at the point of Waltz’s waking. In parting, Trance whispers in his ear: “I want to reveal one little truth to you. Waltz, you have no machine” (Waltz 109).

However, as Waltz wakes he forgets the intimations of his dream, and, in the presence of the Minister of War, continues to insist on the existence of his machine and on his sanity. Just when it seemed that the dreaming Waltz was moving to a point of self-recognition, he undergoes not a spiritual “awakening” but awakens to defeat and humiliation. And symbolically to much worse. For while Raskolnikov is dubiously rewarded by Dostoevsky with the prospect of redemption, Nabokov is quite clear that Waltz - who does not even consciously acknowledge his failure as a superman, let alone show remorse for his crimes - deserves a far different fate. Nabokov does not suffer the would-be “superman” to “sin his way to Jesus” (LRL 104) as Dostoevsky’s hero seems to be on the point of doing. Waltz sins his way directly to hell.

In recalling the redemption episode in Crime and Punishment the convict’s song sounds an ironic note placed where it is in the play, for Waltz is already on the slippery slope to damnation. This is emphasized by another literary parallel. In order to inspect the entourage accompanying him to his island hideaway, Waltz has seven people of various occupations appear before him in a manner that recalls the parade of the Seven Deadly Sins in Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus (2.1). Waltz views and questions Dump the chef, Bump the chauffeur, Lump the dentist, Rump the housekeeper, Hump the sports instructor, Stump the gardener, and Mump the physician (Waltz 91-97), just as Faustus - who, like Waltz, craves infinite power and wealth, and is prepared to obtain it by illicit means - surveys the figures of Pride, Covetousness, Envy, Wrath, Gluttony, Sloth, and Lechery, brought before him, as a taste of what he will possess in hell, by his attendant demon Mephistophilis, a forebear of Waltz’s crafty factotum, Trance, who officiates at the inspection of Dump and the others.

The parallel with Marlowe’s play extends. Waltz’s dream, in which most of the action of the play unfolds, and in which he imagines living out his fantasy of total
power, must come to an end when the time arrives for his appointment with the Minister of War, rather like Faustus's twenty-four-year satanic spree which will end at the appointed hour, the final midnight. Perhaps for this reason Waltz shows a preoccupation with the time of twelve o'clock (Waltz 18, 63, 83, 84). Note in particular the account of the first explosion that Waltz sets off at noon, as a demonstration of the capability of his machine (Waltz 20). The Colonel says to the Minister: “In a moment we'll hear the clock strike.” Faustus, by comparison, in despair as time runs out for him, considers the inevitability of his fate: “The stars move still, time runs, the clock will strike” (5.2.153). Following a word from the Minister, a stage direction states, “The clock strikes,” just as in Marlowe’s play, as the deadline is reached, “The clock strikes twelve” (5.2.192-93). As the chimes of noon ring out, “There is the sound of a distant explosion of tremendous force,” caused by Waltz’s blowing the top off a local mountain, while as Faustus hears midnight strike, his doom is signalled by “Thunder and lightning.” And while hell gapes before Faustus, the Minister exclaims at the corresponding point in Nabokov’s play: “Good heavens!” - a remark laden with irony given the parallel. Devils enter to carry Faustus off to hell, and Waltz, at the end of the play, at his appointment with the Minister, meets a similar fate when he is forcibly removed by guards. Waltz will no doubt be deposited in a maximum-security mental hospital, but the metaphorical significance of his departure is reinforced by Trance’s earlier comparison of Waltz to Don Juan (Waltz 55) - the Don Juan, that is, of Mozart’s Don Giovanni and Pushkin’s The Stone Guest, who is dragged down to hell. Nabokov asks: “Why is [Waltz] such a tragic figure?” To call him “tragic” may be overstating the case, but there are certainly resemblances between his career and The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus.

However, Nabokov’s crowning punishment of the dreaming Waltz is not so much condemning him to an abstract future damnation as pointedly denying him the redemption that Raskolnikov seems to be promised through a woman’s love, the prostitute Sonya. Nabokov has Waltz crave the love of a pure girl, Annabella Gump - the antithesis of a prostitute - but be denied. Waltz, whose whole mission is bound to a desire for personal gain, is thus brought to the point of absolute powerlessness when he is denied what he finally realizes is the one thing he craves above all else. Standing in his way is a father’s selfless love for his child, a man willing to lay down his life to protect his daughter and defend what he believes - thus coming far closer to Christ than Waltz ever does, and in the process demonstrating the love Waltz lacks and does not know how to obtain.

1 Nabokov quotes the preceding line - “O lente, lente, currite noctis equi” - in Lolita, slightly modified (Lo 218).
Thus poetic justice is served, and thus Nabokov “corrects” the “fascist” *Crime and Punishment*. Villainy is not rewarded, the murderous “superman” does not prevail, but is exposed as a neurotic and an ordinary criminal, and gets his deserts. However, the final insult Nabokov aims at Dostoevsky is the very form of his work. Dostoevsky, says Nabokov, “seems to have been chosen by the destiny of Russian letters to become Russia’s greatest playwright, but he took the wrong turning and wrote novels” (*LRL* 104). Nabokov only rubs in what he sees as the inherently play-like nature of Dostoevsky’s novels by parodying *Crime and Punishment* in a play.

One can be thankful that Waltz’s reign of terror is just a dream. Meanwhile, real tyrants were at large in Europe with as flawed and deluded an agenda as Waltz, and were having much more success in transforming their dreams into terrifying reality. It is no accident that the name Salvator Waltz combines an italianate forename with a germanic surname: it symbolizes the two fascist states of Europe. Furthermore, the home of the waltz is Vienna which had just “revolved” into Hitler’s hands when he waltzed into Austria without firing a shot at anybody (just as Waltz takes over the republic in the play by a mere demonstration of his power). Yet if *The Waltz Invention* follows “Tyrants Destroyed” in demolishing a despot through ridicule, it also shows a more practical, effective method. Even though Waltz, in order to obtain Annabella, hurls every possible threat in her father’s face, Gump stands firm, ready to lay down his life in defence of what he believes, thus bringing Waltz to a state of absolute desolation. Nabokov implies that the way to destroy a greedy, clutching tyrant is to deny him what he wants, to face him with defiance and resistance. There can be little doubt that Nabokov had his mind on the political situation in Europe. At a time when Britain and France were inclining towards appeasing Hitler and ceding him the Sudetenland, Nabokov seems to suggest that if the governments followed Gump’s example, and denied Hitler his Annabella, it would bring him to his knees. Instead, they opted for appeasement, and Hitler took the Sudetenland, furthering his imperial claims in Europe and thus paralleling the conquests made a century earlier by the Napoleon whom Hitler - like Raskolnikov and Waltz - also admired. The French ambassador to Germany reflected on his final meeting with Hitler in the wake of the Sudetenland crisis: “This much is certain: he was no normal being. He was, rather, a morbid personality, a quasi-madman, a character out of the pages of Dostoevsky, a man possessed!” (Fischer 431).
OCTOBER, AND “THE VISIT TO THE MUSEUM”

I

In mid-October, after more than a year in the south of France, the Nabokovs moved to Paris, where a friend had secured an apartment for them at 8 rue de Saigon between the Etoile and the Bois de Boulogne (RY 492). It was their fourth home in as many months. The flat was “charming,” Nabokov recalled, but not especially suited to their needs:

It consisted of a huge handsome room (which served as parlor, bedroom, and nursery) with a small kitchen on one side and a large sunny bathroom on the other. This apartment had been some bachelor’s delight but was not meant to accommodate a family of three. Evening guests had to be entertained in the kitchen so as not to interfere with my future translator’s sleep. And the bathroom doubled as my study (SO 89).

In this bathroom Nabokov would write The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. By that stage, however, he must have been quite accustomed to his sterile working environment. There “Lik” must have taken shape (in which the central character is pictured in his “antiseptically white” room [Stories 466]), and before that perhaps “The Visit to the Museum,” which was written in October, if not earlier (RY 493).

II

“The Visit to the Museum” (“Poseshchenie muzeia”)

“The Visit to the Museum” revisits the totalitarian dream reality of The Waltz Invention, but with a chilling difference. Where the play explores the mad mind of a tyrant, the story depicts an innocent individual’s entrapment within the world that mind has created. Where the former is the distorting dream of a disturbed individual, the latter is a terrifying nightmare. However, it is not merely in the shift from villain to victim that “The Visit to the Museum” gains its frightening power. As Waltz’s dream reaches its chaotic climax it crumbles into everyday reality, and the terrors of his megalomaniacal fantasy are instantly dispelled; by contrast, when the narrator’s
terrifying dream-like experience appears to have reached its peak, and he believes he has emerged into reality’s fresh air, the worst of his ordeal is yet to come. In “The Visit to the Museum” Nabokov presents totalitarianism as a nightmare from which one is unable to wake.

The narrator attempts to retrieve an old portrait painting from a French museum. However, after signing an agreement with the curator to purchase the painting, he finds himself trapped inside the museum’s maze-like interior, and emerges at length into the darkness of Soviet Leningrad where he is arrested by the secret police. The narrator’s terrifying experience is an elaborate metaphor for the dangers of succumbing to emigré nostalgia and returning to Russia in search of the pre-revolutionary past. The story warns that attempting to recapture Russia’s past is an impossibility, an illusion, and worse, a trap consigning one to a fate far harsher than any homesick emigré: the Soviet hell of Russia’s present.

The painting the narrator is trying to recover is symbolically a fragment of the Tsarist past. The Portrait of a Russian Nobleman was painted before the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 (when the subject of the portrait died); that is, before Tsarist autocracy was challenged by revolution and curbed by the establishment of a Duma in 1905. The artist’s name, Leroy, meaning “the King,” connotes the monarchism of Tsarist Russia. The narrator’s bid to retrieve the portrait symbolizes an attempt to recapture the pre-revolutionary past - or at least a piece of it.

However, in his depiction of the museum at Montisert (a fictional town in the south of France) where the portrait hangs, Nabokov implies that that past is neither able to be recaptured - in whatever degree - because it is quite dead, nor worth recapturing even were it possible to do so, because it constitutes so much fossilized poshlost’. The museum represents the past world of pre-revolutionary Russia - or rather its grave. Leroy’s Portrait of a Russian Nobleman - jostling for room with a skull, some rusty tools tied with “a funereal ribbon,” and a sarcophagus - is joined by other dusty and banal exhibits symbolizing the relics of an extinct Tsarist past. A stuffed “Grand Duke” eagle owl poised above a case of old coins evokes the Grand Dukes of Tsarist Russia (Stories 278). A photograph of Louis Pradier, Municipal Councillor and Knight of the Legion of Honour, sporting a pointed beard and “dominating” a display of black minerals discovered by him in 1895 (Stories 278), calls to mind the last tsar, Nicholas II, with pointed beard, who has often been compared with Louis XVI of

63
France, and the first year of whose reign was 1894-1895. Pradier’s photograph adorns his lumps of “frozen frass” in their “open graves,” like the tsar’s ghost presiding over the dubious ruins of Russia’s past. A Chinese vase, “probably brought back by a naval officer” (Stories 279), recalls the war with Japan in the Far East, a humiliating defeat for the tsar, and one of the catalysts for the revolution of 1905 - the beginning of the end for the old regime. Reverently overseeing the controlled decay of these exhibits is “a banal pensioner with an empty sleeve” (Stories 278), whose role as custodian of the museum recalls the veterans of the White Army who even after the Civil War optimistically rallied together in the emigration behind the banner of ROVS, guardian of the Tsarist past, characterized by Nabokov in his story “The Assistant Producer” (1943) as “a sunset behind a cemetery” (Stories 549). Attempting to retrieve anything of this paltry, defunct Tsarist past, mummified by emigre nostalgia, would be, Nabokov implies, about as pointless as trying to revive the pale worm preserved in clouded alcohol on display in the museum.

The narrator’s odyssey begins when he discovers the Portrait of a Russian Nobleman in the Montisert museum. Standing in the museum (that ghost of old Russia) and looking at the portrait (image of the Tsarist past), the narrator symbolizes the emigrés as they were prior to the revolution, in possession of the old world of the ancien régime, then so vividly before their eyes. The narrator then leaves the museum, narrowly avoiding being knocked down by “a furious red bus packed with singing youths” (Stories 279-80). These youths later appear in the museum itself, vandalizing the displays. The colour of their bus, and their disruptive behaviour inside the “Tsarist” world of the museum, suggest a symbolic connection with the Bolsheviks, a connection which may elucidate the “festive emblems” the youths are wearing (Stories 281), since it is October, the month in which the Russian Revolution took place. The narrator’s near collision with the red bus symbolizes the emigrés’ escaping from Russia and the incoming Bolsheviks at the time of the revolution, taking with them the memory of the past, just as the narrator leaves the museum with the image of the painting in his mind.

The narrator then calls on M. Godard, the curator of the museum, in order to inquire about retrieving the painting. Godard, however, tells him that no such painting is held in the museum. There is one Leroy, he says, “not a portrait but a rural landscape: The Return of the Herd” (Stories 280). The narrator, nevertheless, is convinced that the painting is in the museum and decides to go back in order to prove it, having agreed with Godard that he can take the picture if it is there. The narrator symbolizes the emigrés who arrange with the Soviets to return home to Russia in order to reclaim a
corner of the old Tsarist past they are convinced still exists. The emigrés thus imitate the returning herd in the Leroy landscape. However, the metaphor of the returning herd intimates the danger of such a move, since it implies a bovine stupidity in those who do return, blindly placing themselves in the hands of a Soviet “shepherd” (Stories 280) who leads them not to the anticipated shelter and comfort of home but, as it were, to a collective farm where their individuality will be lost amongst the communist “herd.”

Indeed, Godard, like a treacherous shepherd, leads the narrator into a trap. Although the Leroy portrait proves to be in the museum, Godard’s deal is a con - he tears up the agreement with the narrator. What is more, on their return to the museum the narrator discovers that the place has been overrun by the rowdy youths in the bus. The mayhem they create makes it impossible for the narrator to press his claim with Godard. Any arrangement to return home that an emigré makes with the Soviets, Nabokov implies, is bound to result in betrayal. The past one hopes to retrieve will not be obtainable, just as the narrator does not obtain the painting. The old Russia the emigrés knew has been overrun by the Bolsheviks in their absence, the past violated, just as the rowdy youths have run riot in the “Tsarist” world of the museum while the narrator was visiting Godard.

At the same time, however, Nabokov’s story demonstrates that time itself has destroyed the past as much as the Soviets have. The narrator’s journey through the halls of the museum, after he has returned with Godard, reflects the inexorable progress of time through Russia’s history from the pre-revolutionary past to the Soviet present. Bursting into the moribund “Tsarist” museum the rowdy youths symbolically re-enact the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, sweeping aside the old order and rearranging Russia’s furniture. Indeed, one of the defining moments of the revolution was the storming of the Winter Palace, which the Soviets subsequently incorporated into the Hermitage museum (housed in the Hermitage adjoining the Winter Palace at the time of the revolution). The Hermitage bears a certain resemblance to the museum in the story, as the latter metamorphoses into a large building from which the narrator emerges next to - he speculates - the Moika Canal in St Petersburg near which the Hermitage is situated (Stories 285). Moreover, following the revolution, the Soviets added to the Hermitage art collection a large amount of artwork expropriated from the aristocracy, something which may be reflected in the Montisert museum’s acquisition of the Leroy. Such acts of expropriation symbolize the Soviet desecration of the pre-revolutionary past. Just as the museum in the story will not part with its Leroy, so the Soviets will not return the expropriated paintings to their
original owners - and emigrés will not regain their past by a return to the Soviet Union.

Leaving the hubbub in the first hall, the narrator and Godard make their way into the second, whereupon the “whole company immediately swarmed after” them, like the herd of emigrés fleeing the revolution (Stories 281). The two men move on to another hall. Here books “with a half-baked look and coarse, foxed pages” are displayed, while along the walls are ranged “dummy soldiers in jackboots with flared tops” (Stories 282). The sinister soldiers call to mind the Red Army’s defence of the Bolshevik government after the revolution, their guarding of the books symbolic of Soviet control of publishing, the suppression of freedom of speech, and moreover, the rewriting of a “half-baked” and “coarse” history of Russia - a further example of Soviet defacement of the pre-revolutionary past, so that a returning emigré will not find even a true record of it. The narrator and Godard are once again intruded upon when the one-armed custodian runs in, followed by the “merry crowd” of youths (Stories 282), replaying symbolically the loss of the Civil War when the White Army was forced into retreat and the crowd of emigrés into abandoning Russia altogether.

The halls through which the narrator subsequently passes are suggestive of the Sovietization of Russia. The Soviet taste for the large scale is evident in the sudden increase in size of the halls and exhibits. The appearance of locomotives, railways, and “the ring of hammers” reflects the Soviet emphasis on heavy industry; while the nation’s vast agricultural economy is evoked by a greenhouse “with hydrangeas and broken windowpanes” (Stories 283). An “infinitely long passage, containing numerous office cabinets” calls to mind the bureaucratic apparatus of the Soviet state, while a model of the universe and a laboratory “with dusty alembics on its tables” reflects communist Russia’s obsession with scientific progress (Stories 283). Throughout, the presence - explicit or implicit - of large numbers of people gives the impression of a communist mass labour force. This is the Russia of Stalin’s five-year plans.

Having been brought to the modern day, the narrator’s metaphorical journey through time can go no further. Pushing his way through a door he finds himself outside the museum, only to discover that he is in Soviet Leningrad, as though, like Jonah (note the skeleton of a whale displayed in the museum [Stories 283]), having been swallowed up by the museum in France, he has been spewed out onto the streets of a latter-day Nineveh.
The story implies that if the Soviets have desecrated the legacy of the Tsarist past, time has actually destroyed that past. Even if there had been no revolution, the past would just as surely have died away. The story emphasizes that the past does not exist as a fixed entity, but as a transitional point on a continuum of time. The past is not revisitable, and any attempt to recapture it inevitably entails a confrontation with the present, just as the narrator, returning to the museum, is irresistibly swept away from the portrait by the tide of time drawing him on to Soviet Russia and preventing his settling a deal with Godard.

The cautionary message is clear. The belief that the pre-revolutionary past and the old way of life are still recapturable in some way, in spite of the new regime, is a mistaken one. That past has gone, utterly and irrevocably: time and the Soviets have obliterated it. The sentimental dreams of reliving one’s memories, inspired by the banal relics of nostalgia, are really phantoms luring one into disaster.

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The Tsarist past symbolically enshrined in the Montisert museum is a fossil, an embalmed corpse. Nabokov further emphasizes the danger and futility of trying to retrieve that bygone age by giving the narrator’s visit to the museum another level of metaphorical significance: a journey into the world of the dead. At one point in his peregrinations through the museum, the narrator comes across “a pool with a bronze Orpheus atop a green rock” (Stories 283). Orpheus tried to retrieve his past (in the shape of Eurydice), and had to travel to the underworld to do it. In “The Visit to the Museum” the tragic myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is used as a parallel for the narrator’s experience, and as a metaphor for the overreaching émigré’s quest to recover his past.1

On this level, the painting is like a dead soul in the underworld. After the Russian nobleman’s death, his portrait wends its way southward from Paris to the museum at Montisert, in the manner of a dead soul journeying down to the underworld. The old man is said to resemble Jacques Offenbach (1819-80), who wrote the opera Orpheus in the Underworld (1858) (Stories 279). The portrait is displayed among the museum’s trappings of death - the minerals in “open graves,” the skull, the “funereal ribbon,” the sarcophagus, the worm - like Eurydice’s soul in the underworld. As if to confirm this, when Godard stands before the painting he steps back to admire it, “and

1 Galina De Roeck discusses “The Visit to the Museum” as a journey into the underworld, but does not examine the Orpheus-Eurydice parallel closely.
his feminine heel trod on somebody's foot" (Stories 281), just as Eurydice treads on a snake which bites her ankle and kills her, sending her soul to Hades. The narrator's desire to retrieve the painting leads him to make an agreement with the museum curator, just as Orpheus arranges with the lord of the underworld to have Eurydice returned to him. The narrator goes back to the museum to view the painting for the second time in order to ensure it is there before purchasing it. But, although the painting is indeed in the museum, he is unable to obtain it, and has to make his way back to the outside world empty-handed, just as Orpheus, looking anxiously back at Eurydice, loses her, and has to leave the underworld alone.

In Nabokov's story the fatal backward-looking of Orpheus is a metaphor for the potential danger of nostalgia. If nostalgia is taken to the Orphean extreme of trying to recapture the past, it will inevitably lead one to the underworld (the gloomy lifelessness of the Soviet Union) and to failure, since the past - like a dead soul, symbolized by the painting - is not retrievable.

The parallel between the narrator's experience and the Orpheus-Eurydice myth has further layers of complexity which reinforce the great peril of such a bid to recover the past. For the narrator in truth suffers a fate worse than Orpheus's. For one thing, the narrator's passage out of the museum underworld is a journey of gradually intensifying terror, leading him not back to where he entered, but to somewhere worse than the museum he has just quitted, as if, in spite of all his wanderings, he has not left the abode of the dead at all. For another, the narrator does not, like Orpheus, lose the painting through his own failing; he is double-crossed. Malignant forces are at work, as they are not in Orpheus's case. The whole atmosphere of the narrator's ordeal is more sinister. For the underworld he enters is as much a Judeo-Christian hell as a classical world of the dead; and the presiding power as much Satan as Hades. The museum bears some resemblance to Dante's Inferno: "a gilt inscription" appears above the door (Stories 278), recalling the words over the entrance to the Inferno: "Abandon every hope, you who enter" (Singleton); and the same door is flanked outside by "lion-legged" benches, recalling the leopard, lion, and wolf which cross Dante's path in the dark wood before he reaches the Inferno. Moreover, the museum's labyrinthine succession of halls is reminiscent of the unwinding circles of hell, through which Dante is led by Virgil, just as the narrator is guided through much of the museum by the custodian and the curator. This curator, Godard (the first syllable of whose name dissimulates his allegiances), resembles the Devil, with his wolf-like features and black fingernail resembling a satanic claw (Stories 280).2

2 Galina De Roeck and Leszek Engelking highlight some of the infernal aspects of the story.
The influence of these demonic forces distorts the Orphean paradigm of the narrator’s quest, giving it a surprising twist. While the narrator is muddling his way through the constantly metamorphosing museum, he himself undergoes a symbolic transformation, a doomful role reversal. At the start, the narrator, like Orpheus rescuing Eurydice, takes the initiative: the elderly custodian follows his lead around the museum, and gives him the address of the curator when demanded. But from the moment when the narrator signs the agreement with the duplicitous Godard, he is in the curator’s power. Their agreement is not in the end like Orpheus’s with Hades, the lord of the underworld, where Orpheus was never deprived of his freedom. This agreement is symbolically a Faustus-like contract - set down in blood-red (and Soviet-red) pencil - binding the narrator to the diabolical Godard. And the demon does not allow his subject to escape his realm; the narrator’s journey to the infernal underworld becomes a trap from which he cannot escape. The narrator’s Orphian mission is taken out of his hands, he becomes no longer the leader but the led - the doomed Eurydice. Godard now dictates proceedings; he is the Orpheus-like guide. However, this treacherous Orpheus, unlike his classical forebear, all along intends to abandon his Eurydice in the underworld. While Hades cautions Orpheus not to look back at Eurydice, the satanic Godard tricks the narrator into returning to the museum to view the painting for a fatal second time, by claiming there is no Leroy portrait in the museum. From this point the narrator’s transformation from an Orpheus into a Eurydice is sealed.

After entering the underworld of the museum (now the scene of infernal pandemonium, thanks to the rowdy youths) and viewing the portrait - that symbol of a dead soul - the two men look for an exit in order to conclude their negotiations in peace (though Godard in fact has already shredded their contract). Symbolically, they, like Orpheus and Eurydice, begin their ascent to the upper world, as Godard ostensibly guides the narrator through the museum’s halls while all the time drawing him deeper into an infernal labyrinth. “‘Make way, please!’ shouted M. Godard, pushing aside the curious”; “‘Let us move on,’ said M. Godard, tugging at my sleeve, and we passed into the section of Ancient Sculpture” (Stories 282). In this section a giant and giantess are exhibited, whose identity as Orpheus and Eurydice is indicated when M. Godard is shown searching for the narrator behind the giantess’s “white ankle” (recalling Eurydice’s snake bite). The statues illustrate the symbolic relationship between Godard and the narrator. And Eurydice’s fate - descending back to Hades – is recalled when a man falls to the floor from the top of the statue of the giantess. Presently, the two men race up a staircase, thus imitating Orpheus’s and
Eurydice's flight to the upper world. From the gallery above, they look down upon a giant model of the universe, and in so doing repeat Orpheus's fatal backward glance which sealed Eurydice's fate. Accordingly, the narrator is parted from his guide at this point: "He had already vanished" (Stories 283). The treacherous Orpheus, Godard, has abandoned Eurydice, the narrator, in the darkness of the museum. Ominous symbols pointing to the narrator's doom appear at every turn. He sees a sculpted Orpheus atop a green rock, as though symbolizing his identity as a Eurydice figure, with Orpheus above him, departed on his journey to the upper world. The narrator glimpses stone stairs that "descend into misty abysses" - again an intimation of his Eurydicean downward fate (Stories 283). The narrator tries "to find the way back" through the museum (Stories 283), but, like Eurydice, is unable to retrace his steps out of the museum-underworld. And when at last he emerges from the museum into what appears to be outside reality, his exulting is short-lived, for he has not returned Orpheus-like to the surface world whence he came, but remained in the hellish underworld which has now resolved into the terrifying image of contemporary Soviet Russia. As the awful truth begins to dawn upon him, he passes more steps descending to a house's cellar - a further token of his fate. Then the narrator encounters a man with a briefcase who "gave me a startled glance, and turned to look again when he had passed me" (Stories 285; my italics). The man's Orphean double-take is the final token of the narrator's Eurydicean fate. The narrator's Orphean rescue mission has ended in Eurydicean desolation. What at first glance had appeared to be an Orphean paradigm to the narrator's mission proves to be a mockery of one. Just as he enters the museum in France and leaves it in Soviet Russia, so he enters the museum a would-be Orpheus and leaves it a desperate Eurydice. And as he tries frantically to cast off his clothes and belongings, which identify him as an emigre, he reverts to the nakedness of a newly-dead soul wandering alongside a Styx-like canal in the Hadean misty darkness of a Leningrad night.

Extreme effort finally enables the narrator to extricate himself from Soviet Russia, but the symbolic significance is clear. Nabokov implies that if one returns to Russia in search of the past, like Orpheus; if one signs an agreement with a Soviet "Godard" (symbolically selling one's soul to the Devil), not only will the result be failure, as in Orpheus's case, but also it will be impossible to return like Orpheus to the upper world - one will remain trapped below like Eurydice; the "metamorphosis" will not be reversible.

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Written in 1938, “The Visit to the Museum” describes events that take place “Several years ago” (Stories 277). Nabokov’s warning emigrés against a return to Soviet Russia is a response to the contemporary situation at the time of writing, but at the same time evokes a period stretching back to the early years of the decade. In the 1930s the emigré’s perennial dilemma of whether or not to return home reached something of a crisis, as conditions arose which had the potential to tip the scales in favour of a journey back to the Soviet Union. These conditions are symbolized in the circumstances that prompt the narrator to take the initial fateful step into the museum:

I was caught in a violent downpour which immediately went about accelerating the fall of the maple leaves, for the fair weather of a southern October was holding on by a mere thread. I dashed for cover and found myself on the steps of the museum... I saw that the rain had set in for good, and so, having nothing better to do, I decided to go inside (Stories 277-78).

The “violent downpour,” precipitating the fall of the leaves, evokes the onslaught of Nazism in the 1930s. Hitler’s rise to power in 1933 triggered the disintegration (like falling leaves) of the Berlin emigré community, while the Nazis’ conquests in Europe in 1938 were causing millions to flee before them. The “fair weather” of peace and political stability in Europe held on “by a mere thread,” as the Nazi winter loomed with increasing ominousness throughout the decade. Running into the museum out of the rain, and getting drawn into a sequence of events which leads him to the nightmare of Soviet Leningrad, the narrator symbolizes the emigré who is prompted by the Nazi “downpour” to seek shelter through the doorway to his Russian past, only to discover that it leads him to the unforeseen hell of Stalin’s Soviet Union.

However, Nabokov knows that it is not only the Nazi menace that prompts emigrés to try to reclaim their past; additional factors come into the equation. The violent October downpour which causes the falling of the leaves may, in addition to representing the emigrés’ flight from the Nazis, symbolize the exodus from Russia following the Revolution in October 1917. Thus the downpour and its destructive effect, incorporating symbolically the turmoil caused by both the Nazis and the Soviets, would encapsulate the plight of the emigrés, who had shuttled from one dictatorship to another. That exhausting and demoralizing experience, coupled with the apparent impossibility of escaping successive totalitarian regimes, might persuade an emigré to give up and return to Russia in search of what remains of the past; to run for cover from the present Nazi “downpour” into the museum.
In addition, while the rise of the Nazis in the early thirties had all but destroyed the Berlin emigré community, and while Hitler’s territorial conquests in 1938 were sending shockwaves through Europe, the collapse of the Soviet regime, and a return to a free Russia, had become a virtual impossibility. After twenty years of dogged existence, the emigration as a whole was perilously destabilizing. With few prospects for an emigré to look forward to in a non-Russian environment in the future, the temptation to look back to the past would become stronger. At a loose end, like the narrator on the steps of the museum with “nothing better to do,” one might feel further inclined to look for the remnants of the past in communist Russia; to duck out of the Nazi “downpour” into the museum.

However, the narrator makes a big mistake about the rain. He assumes it has “set in for good.” As it happens, the shower quickly passes, and bright sunshine has come out by the time he leaves the museum in search of Godard. By now, though, it is too late for the narrator; he has been drawn into a sequence of events which leads him to disaster. The story implies that if one only rides out the storm, does not panic and seek dubious shelter, the sunshine will come. However exhausted, fed up, despondent, and homesick an emigré may feel, he should not buckle and return to Russia, but trust in a brighter future.

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“The Visit to the Museum” is a cautionary tale for emigrés, illustrating the delusiveness of searching for a dead Tsarist past in a terrible Soviet present. In particular, the story warns against seeking out the past as a means of refuge from the contemporary ills of emigré life. Floundering in the labyrinth of the infernal museum, the narrator at one point states: “I lost my way” (“ia zablutlipieta” [SSRP 5.403]); and at another: “I found myself in darkness” (“ia popal v temnotu” [SSRP 5.405]). His words echo the beginning of Dante’s Inferno: “I found myself in a dark wood, for the straight way was lost” (Singleton). The 1930s were indeed a “dark wood” for Russian expatriates, as the emigration disintegrated with the rise of Nazism and the vanishing hope of a return to a free Russia, leaving the emigrés with the prospect of surviving in a non-Russian future. “The Visit to the Museum” warns against panicking in that dark wood and losing one’s way, by abandoning the path that has led out of Russia in order to take the track one hopes will lead to the past but only proceeds towards the inferno of Soviet reality. Nabokov implies that in spite of the present darkness, in spite of the storm clouds overhead, one should not deviate from the winding path of exile, but walk on, trusting in a brighter road ahead. The only way out of the darkness
is to do as Orpheus was advised: to look towards the light. To do as Orpheus did - to panic in the dark and look back - will only lead to disaster.

However, if the story is a cautionary tale, it is also a statement of personal resolve. The path out of the dark wood that Nabokov indicates is the path he himself will take: the continually unfolding path of exile. The story represents Nabokov’s poignant farewell to his Russian past, as he prepares to face an English future. In “The Visit to the Museum” Nabokov acknowledges that he will never return to his homeland, or his native town, except in his nightmares. He distances himself likewise from the émigré world of old Russia, which is represented, in the depiction of the Montisert museum, as a dead thing. He even foreshadows the loss of his Russian language in the narrator’s terrifying discovery that the word “sapog” on a shop sign is written in the Soviet orthography (Stories 284). However, as well as severing the ties with his irretrievable past, and looking to the English road ahead, Nabokov reflects on the forces that have brought him to this point: his being driven from Russia into permanent exile by the Soviets, and the destruction of the emigration by the Nazis. It is as if Nabokov is justifying - to his conscience, to his Russian muse - his moving towards English, by demonstrating that he is compelled to do so: that if an émigré community can no longer support his writing in Russian, returning to the Soviet Union in order to keep his Russian muse alive is an impossibility. Nabokov demonstrates in “The Visit to the Museum” that his Russian life is effectively over, because the Russian past is dead and the Russian present hell.

III

However, there may be a further, and very sinister dimension to “The Visit to the Museum.” The nightmarish story may reflect not only ill-fated émigré attempts to capture the Russian past, but also more successful attempts by Russia to capture émigrés. It has been suggested that the statues of Pushkin and Peter the Great noted by Nabokov at the entrance to the Menton museum early in 1938 provided the blend of France and Russia which gave rise to the story (RY 493). In addition, however, there existed at the time a more immediate and obtrusive example of Russia’s presence in France, and one which, unlike the statuary at the Menton museum, inherently encompasses the nightmare atmosphere of the story: namely, the activities of Special Tasks, the NKVD’s kidnappers and killers abroad.
While Nabokov was writing "The Visit to the Museum" the trial of Nadezhda Plevitskaia, for complicity in the abduction of General Miller in 1937, was approaching. The Miller case, which caused a sensation in the emigration, would supply the subject matter for Nabokov's story, "The Assistant Producer." However, in addition, Miller's fate at the hands of Special Tasks presents a striking real-life parallel of the narrator's experience in "The Visit to the Museum." In broad daylight on a September afternoon, Miller set out to meet his colleague General Skoblin at the corner of a Paris street. Skoblin, a Soviet agent, led Miller straight into an NKVD trap. Miller was anaesthetized and woken in the Soviet Union where he was interrogated by the secret police, and shot (Andrew, KGB 126-27). At the time it was not known that Miller had been transported to the USSR alive. The Sûreté investigation concluded that Miller had been killed in Paris and his body placed in a large trunk and loaded onto a Soviet freighter at Le Havre (Andrew, KGB 126). The loading of the trunk onto the Russian ship, seen by several witnesses, was extensively reported in the press after the kidnap (Kostikov 449). The Sûreté had no hard evidence that Miller had been killed, but assumed that the general could not have been alive inside the trunk; in fact he was, heavily drugged. With no proof of murder, Nabokov could have speculated about Miller's arriving in the Soviet Union alive. Indeed, Marina Grey, investigating Miller's case in depth some forty years after the event, and lacking the conclusive proof of his fate that emerged later, considered that the Soviet plan was to return the general to Russia alive for interrogation (Grey 210).

In "The Assistant Producer" the fate of the Miller character (General Fedchenko) does not categorically entail a precipitate death: he simply disappears without trace (Stories 555). Yet whatever Nabokov thought had been Miller's fate - to be killed and disposed of in France, or transported to Russia dead or alive - the simple fact of his disappearing off a French street in broad daylight; of his being suddenly apprehended by Soviet agents in France, is paralleled in "The Visit to the Museum" in the narrator's being double-crossed by Godard in Montisert and engulfed by the Soviet Union and ultimately the NKVD.

Considered further, the Miller case casts a lurid light over the whole of "The Visit to the Museum," throwing into relief a chilling possibility: namely, that the entire nightmarish story, extending as far as the narrator's discussion with his friend at the start, constitutes, in the vague manner of a dream, a Miller-like plot to entrap the narrator. Each of the steps taken by the narrator along his journey into the hell of Soviet Russia is prompted or directed by someone else. He pursues the purchase of the portrait at his friend's request; he returns to the museum because Godard claims there is no such portrait on display; he is trapped in the museum after Godard destroys
their agreement and urges him inwards into more distant halls; and he finally emerges into Leningrad to be arrested by the NKVD. The narrator is successively delivered, as it were, from the friend to Godard, and from Godard to the secret police.

The idea of abduction is introduced at the very beginning of the story: the painting (which depicts a person) is to be "ransomed" (vykupit' [SSRP 5.398]), as if it has been "kidnapped" by the museum. Moreover, just as it was Miller's Paris friend and colleague, Skoblin, who sprang the trap for the general by asking him to meet some "Germans," so it is the narrator's Paris friend who asks him to inquire after the painting. The narrator's bid to obtain that painting symbolizes an attempt to recover the pre-revolutionary past, and it was ultimately the dream of restoring the old Tsarist order that Miller had in view on that fateful day in 1937 when he proceeded to the meeting with the so-called Germans. The war veteran whom the narrator encounters at the Montisert museum evokes, as already mentioned, the ROVS organization which Miller headed, and the photograph of Louis Pradier presiding over the black minerals perhaps connotes (in addition to the last tsar's ghostly reign over a defunct kingdom) Miller's presidency of ROVS. Pradier's pointed beard and his being a Knight of the Legion of Honour recalls Miller's characteristic goatee and his military decorations. One can imagine something like Pradier's "astonished" expression (Stories 278) passing over the general's face when he realized he was trapped. The narrator's calling on Godard and Godard's treacherously accompanying him back to the museum recalls Miller's meeting Skoblin on the street and the latter's escorting the general to the appointment with the supposed German officers (Andrew, KGB 126). At their initial interview Godard darkly inquires if the narrator appreciates the museum's sarcophagus (Stories 280), an object which brings to mind the large trunk in which Miller's body was transported. Parked outside the museum when the narrator and Godard arrive is a "red tourist bus" (Stories 281); the Sûreté concluded that after Miller had been taken to a building belonging to the Soviet embassy (a "red tourist" institution, so to speak), and killed, his body was driven to the coast in a Soviet embassy van (Andrew, KGB 126; Grey 210-11). Inside the museum the narrator is led by Godard into the midst of a group of rowdy youths. These hoodlums, the passengers of the "red tourist bus," are suggestive of something like a Soviet youth group on a field trip abroad, an image that evokes the "mobile groups" of Special Tasks. One of these groups was entrusted with Miller's abduction, which involved overpowering the general before loading him into a van, just as the youths harass the narrator inside the museum, while their red bus is parked outside. Like Miller's, the narrator's harrowing experience, beginning in broad daylight on the
It is as if Nabokov’s story is Miller’s case seen through the distorting prism of a nightmare. Or to put it another way, one might imagine the narrator, hearing of the Miller case, having a nightmare of something similar happening to him; of his being the victim of a Soviet abduction plot. Or if not the narrator, then the author himself. Nabokov said the subject matter of his dreams “may be anything, from abduction to zoolatry” (SM 167). Presumably he means abduction by the Soviet secret police. Appearing in these dreams from time to time, Nabokov says, is the image of the pavilion on his family’s Vyra estate where he conceived his first poem after having “sought shelter during a thunderstorm.” The image of the pavilion “hangs around, so to speak, with the unobtrusiveness of an artist’s signature. I find it clinging to a corner of the dream canvas or cunningly worked into some ornamental part of the picture.” Perhaps that image of the pavilion is “cunningly worked” into Nabokov’s dream-like story in the shape of a museum in which the narrator seeks shelter from a downpour, and in which he discovers the “dream canvas” of his friend’s grandfather, while sliding deeper into an abyss that may resemble his author’s nightmares of abduction. Nabokov’s poem, “The Execution” (“Rasstrel”) (1927), describes a nightmare of being transported to Russia to be murdered: “On certain nights as soon as I lie down / my bed starts drifting into Russia, / and presently I’m led to a ravine, / to a ravine led to be killed” (PP 47). If “Tyrants Destroyed” was composed with an awareness of NKVD activities abroad, a passage in The Waltz Invention intimates that that concern remained with Nabokov in the autumn. The Minister describes the unscrupulous neighbouring state as “all steel, a hedgehog of steel!” (Waltz 6). Aleksandr Babikov sees in this reference to steel a probable allusion to Stalinist Russia (compare “Tyrants Destroyed,” where the Stalin-like tyrant has “legs strong as steel” [Stories 444]), and notes that the “hedgehog of steel” may hint at Stalin’s secret police chief, Nikolai Ezhov, whose surname derives from the Russian ezh “hedgehog” (SSRP 5.773). The Minister complains that his country’s steely neighbours “do nothing but send us spies and mischief-makers” (Waltz 6), and as head of the NKVD Ezhov was the man ultimately responsible for Special Tasks operations abroad.

Nabokov wrote “The Visit to the Museum” probably after moving to Paris where Special Tasks was based, where General Miller had been abducted, and where Nadezhda Plevitskaia (whom Nabokov knew) was about to stand trial for complicity in the Miller affair. Perhaps it was this set of circumstances - or a nightmare provoked by them - that provided the motivational force for Nabokov’s story. The
Miller case and the activities of the NKVD abroad epitomize the horror that had engulfed Russia by 1938, while the general’s fate is a warning of the futility and danger of clinging to a past which has been snuffed out. However, if the Miller kidnap and the work of Special Tasks provide all the justification needed for the underlying theme of “The Visit to the Museum” - the discarding of a debased Russia - the evocation of the affair in Nabokov’s story perhaps indicates a recognition that contemporary Russia is a nightmare from which one is not permitted to wake completely (note that the transparent nightmare quality of the story is never explicitly acknowledged; the narrator does not “wake up”). No matter how determinedly one turns away from Russia’s nocturnal gloom, the abduction of General Miller shows that Russia still retains terrifying proof of its nightmarish nature: the capacity to strike its victim unawares, wherever he is, like an uninvited bad dream. “The Visit to the Museum” may show Nabokov cutting his ties with Russia and looking towards an English future, but there was little he could do to prevent what caused his nightmares of abduction.
The blurring of the boundary between nightmare and reality in “The Visit to the Museum” seems particularly fitting in the atmosphere of 1938, when unprecedented acts of terror were being committed openly and with relative impunity in so-called civilized countries. Indeed, the violence and desecration perpetrated by the hoodlums in the Montisert museum is a mere shadow of the medieval barbarity unleashed that year on Germany’s Jews.

On 7 November, in protest against the expulsion of Polish Jews from Germany, a young Jewish student, Herschel Grynzspan, assassinated an official at the German embassy in Paris (Dawidowicz 135). Grynzspan’s crime was immediately seized upon by the Nazis as a pretext for launching a massive attack on German Jewry. Starting in the early hours of 10 November a wave of antisemitic violence swept across the German Reich. Thinly disguised as a spontaneous outbreak of anti-Jewish hostility following the shooting in Paris, the government-instigated orgy of sadism and destructiveness resulted in the deaths of 100 Jews and the demolition of 177 synagogues and 7,500 shops (Stackelberg 151; Dawidowicz 137). Thousands of Jews were chased and beaten in the streets; Jewish property was looted, burnt, and vandalized, and Jewish cemeteries desecrated. No village where Jews lived was left untouched (Gilbert, Holocaust 69-71; Stackelberg 151). During the night thousands of Jewish men were arrested and sent to Buchenwald, Dachau, and Sachsenhausen concentration camps. In the following few days the number sent to the camps approached 30,000 (Dawidowicz 137-38; Gilbert, Descent 209; Fischer 392).

However, neither their suffering nor that of Germany’s other persecuted, tortured, and murdered Jews would remain the abiding image of that night’s atrocities. The shards of glass littering Germany’s streets in the wake of the rioting led the Nazis to dub the pogrom Kristallnacht, “Crystal night” (or “The Night of Broken Glass,” as it is sometimes called), a deliberately belittling term for what was the most destructive pogrom in Central Europe since the fifteenth century.

Although the pogrom met with widespread condemnation abroad, there was no mitigation of Nazi Jewish policy in the aftermath. On the contrary, Kristallnacht
prompted the Nazis to dispense with the last vestiges of restraint and to proceed with the total expropriation of the Jews and the complete removal of their freedom. On 12 November Göring issued the “Decree on Eliminating the Jews from German Economic Life,” and at the same time imposed a fine of a thousand million marks on the German Jewish community to pay for the damage done during the pogrom (Gilbert, Holocaust 73; Dawidowicz 139-40). Three days later Jewish children were forbidden to attend German schools, and the following month Jews were prohibited from entering German parks, forests, theatres, concerts, and cultural exhibits (Dawidowicz 139; Stackelberg 152). Compulsory Aryanization of Jewish businesses began in December (Kirk 162; Stackelberg 151). By the end of the year, Lucy Dawidowicz states: “Everything relating to the Jewish question, it seemed, had been disposed of, except the Jews themselves” (Dawidowicz 140). The Nazis, however, were intent on stamping out Jewish life in Germany altogether. Early in 1939, while Nabokov was still writing The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, the forced emigration of German Jews was stepped up (Dawidowicz 140-41). However, perhaps the most sinister effect of Kristallnacht, as Roderick Stackelberg observes, was that it marked “the transition to legalized physical violence and foreshadowed the coming annihilation” (Stackelberg 150). The writing was well and truly on the wall.

Nabokov’s father had written famously in protest against the Kishinev pogrom of 1903 and the part played by the Tsarist police in promoting it (SM 136). Thirty-five years later the state-sponsored Kristallnacht was a more shocking event because of its nationwide scope in one of the world’s most modernized and cultured countries. It can only have added fuel to The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Nabokov’s own masterly indictment of antisemitism. However, Nabokov was not yet ready to write his novel. There was another aspect of totalitarian tyranny he wished to deal with before tackling the year’s major work: a misguided belief, a warped perspective on life, the phoney logic that had caused the Nazis to condemn the Jews to the dark and terrifying no-man’s-land they now inhabited. “Lik,” another long story like “Tyrants Destroyed,” was written in November (RY 493).
The main theme of “Lik” is the fallaciousness of determinism, the idea that everything that happens is determined by a necessary chain of causation; that human action is determined by external forces which preclude free will. In “Lik” Nabokov subjects this idea to a *reductio ad absurdum*, demonstrating that a life that is ideally bound by a belief in determinism will inevitably sink into the abyss of self-destruction. The story indirectly highlights the flawed foundations of totalitarianism: the Darwinist biological determinism underlying Nazi racial doctrine, and the Marxist social determinism which provided the ideological basis of communism.

The theme of determinism is introduced at the beginning of the story via a fictional play. The narrator describes this play - *The Abyss* - as “ideally idiotic, or, putting it another way, ideally constructed on the solid conventions of traditional dramaturgy” (Stories 461). In other words, *The Abyss* follows the conventions of dramatic determinism which Nabokov abhorred. In his lecture, “The Tragedy of Tragedy” (1941), Nabokov attacks what he calls the “iron bars of determinism which have imprisoned the spirit of playwriting for years and years” (USSR 326), and observes: “the idea of logical fate which, unfortunately, we inherited from the ancients has, ever since, been keeping the drama in a kind of concentration camp” (USSR 328), so that a stage tragedy is - with a few radiant exceptions - nothing more than “a clockwork toy made in Greece that little children wind up on the carpet and then follow on all fours” (USSR 327). *The Abyss* is the result of another airing of that clockwork toy. The playwright, Suire (whose name comes close to the French *suivre* “to follow, to conform”), has merely carried out an exercise in following deterministic rules, the result being a play which is devoid of originality (“every speech bears the trademark of a respectable tradition” [Stories 461]), is constrained by logic as to how it may unfold (“there is not a single jolt of talent to disrupt the ordered course of action” [Stories 461]), and is idiotically blind to reality: after hastily establishing early in the play that the character Igor is Russian, Suire discards any foreign mannerisms of speech when he becomes caught up in “the turbulent flow of the drama” (Stories 462). Preoccupied by the iron rules of causation driving his play, Suire overlooks the most basic demands of verisimilitude. Fittingly, after its first appearance the play sinks into the oblivion of a theatrical “Lethe” (as the narrator describes it [Stories 461]), the abyss of the underworld of the ancient Greeks who were responsible for originating the deterministic principles of drama. The abysmal play (and its fate) symbolizes the abyss into which determinism leads.
Significantly, Lik emerges into the story out of the description of Suire’s play. First the play is described, then the Igor character, and only at this point does Lik appear as the actor who plays Igor. Nabokov thus puts Lik into context. Lik’s introduction into the story in the shadow of the deterministic play reflects his sense of his place in the scheme of things: he is the small satellite orbiting deferentially round determinism’s consolidated bulk. Robert Grossmith has discussed “Lik” in terms of the twin abysses preceding birth and following death, as described by Nabokov at the start of *Speak, Memory*; taking up that idea, one might say that Lik emerges from the description of *The Abyss* as though being born out of the prenatal void. It is also during a performance of Suire’s play that Lik imagines his death will come: he will sink through *The Abyss* into the afterlife. Furthermore, one could say that Lik is most alive when playing Igor. The deterministic *Abyss* thus symbolically encloses and defines Lik’s existence. When the narrator remarks that Suire’s play is “trueto life” he is being heavily sarcastic (*Stories* 461), but in Lik’s view the laws of determinism governing his actions in *The Abyss* apply just as ideally offstage.

Indeed, Lik sees his life itself as a kind of deterministic tragedy written by fate and handed down to him to act out. Lik, “like many protagonists,” suffers from an incurable heart condition (*Stories* 463), and he imagines his having this heart condition means he will inevitably die from it and that his death is bound to be imminent: “he would die soon,” he thinks to himself (*Stories* 465); deterministic death “had apparently determined to give him precedence” (*Stories* 467; my italics). Lik imagines his death “would certainly come onstage” (*Stories* 465), as though in actual life he were merely a poor player acting out a role. And from one play, Lik imagines passing into another in the afterlife: “he would not notice his death, crossing over instead into the actual world of a chance play, now blooming anew because of his arrival, while his smiling corpse lay on the boards, the toe of one foot protruding from beneath the folds of the lowered curtain” (*Stories* 465). Death, Lik hopes, will release him into a new and better life; it will provide him with an “exit” from the dull unreality of the stage play of his life into the “true reality” of a new play (*Stories* 467).

However, Lik’s belief that he is tragically fated stems from more than his heart condition. Learning of his illness merely sets the seal on what Lik sees as a whole sequence of misfortunes dealt him by a fate that is determined to wear him down and deny him the means of leading a happy, fulfilling existence. Lik blames fate, for instance, for his exile from Russia, the early death of his parents, his unstable education, his lack of a solid job, his lack of friends: “He reflected that he had been
condemned to live on the outskirts of life, that it had always been thus and always would be” (*Stories* 467). Perceiving a logical pattern of misfortune in his past life, Lik believes that pattern will inevitably continue until he dies, like a logically plotted tragedy.

The effect of Lik’s belief in determinism is to undermine his self. Lik’s conviction that he is powerless against fate completely paralyses his will, leaving him passive and inert. Lik is unable to assert himself or take the initiative in his life in any way. He would like to be part of the social circle among his acting colleagues, yet “he did not seek their company”; and he is disappointed when his absence from gatherings fails to give him personality (*Stories* 464). Lik follows the Thespian path without any sense of vocation or purpose, and “with the absent manner of a man looking for signposts” (*Stories* 462-63), as though his narrow mind retains some subliminal fragment of hope that he might leave the unhappy path he is on, yet - crucially - expects that any such possibility will be signalled to him from the outside, as if that is in fate’s hands. He does not realize that any such “signposts” can only be an outward projection of an inner will, and since passive Lik cannot imagine the possibility of directing the course of his own life, he will never see these signposts, except perhaps in dreams; they “do not exist” in reality.

Unable to will anything, Lik waits for things to happen to him. The role of Igor falls to him “by chance” (*Stories* 462); the friendships he has had “came his way” (*Stories* 463); and even the better afterlife he hopes for is something he imagines death presenting him with: he will simply sink into this new element one day without having to do anything himself. Lik is only the shadow of a man who is living and engaged with life. He treats his life as a tragic part that fate has given him, and which he plays without enthusiasm; or as an actor’s mask that he wears but does not truly inhabit and control. Even his name (which means “face” in Russian) is a pseudonym, something he does not inhabit in a real way (*Stories* 462). Indeed, he is nothing but a lik, a surface, a façade, with no will, no inherent motivation behind.

Determinism further undermines Lik’s self by trapping his imagination in the logic of cause and effect. Lik’s belief that his fate is harsh and unfolds according to the inexorable logic of causation leaves him unable to imagine happiness as a genuine possibility. As a result Lik is caught in a miserable and lifeless existence as his belief becomes self-fulfilling. Just as Lik performs on tour only in Suiè’s deterministic *Abyss*, although there are two other plays in the repertory, so offstage he is trapped in a single role. The real world around Lik constantly provides proof that his prison is
an illusion of his own making, by presenting him with doorways and windows of opportunity to escape, but Lik does not have the imagination to see them. In insisting that his world conforms to the shape of a logically unfolding deterministic tragedy, Lik, like Suire, loses sight of reality, and perpetuates his miserable entrapment.

Lik, in the narrator's words,

resembles a room with a number of different doors, among which there is perhaps one that does lead straight into some great garden, into the moonlit depths of a marvellous human night, where the soul discovers the treasure intended for it alone. But, be that as it may, Lik had failed to open that door (Stories 462).

The deep and dark garden represents the antithesis of the abyss of determinism; here Lik would find true self-fulfilment (the treasure intended for him alone). But Lik, his imagination blinkered by his deterministic view, does not realize the attainability of that magic, believes that the tragic script he is acting out has no room for scenes in enchanted gardens.

None the less, the opportunity to enter the garden remains open to Lik, although he continues to be oblivious of the fact. Sitting in the stage-like atmosphere of his illuminated room, Lik feels that fate constantly baits him, causing even the small luxuries he allows himself as consolation for his lot (an expensive watch, for instance) to break and spoil. Boxed inside his room, in the glare of his "antiseptically white" deterministic stage, Lik is, as it were, prevented by the stage conventions of his life from entering the mysterious darkness beyond the proscenium of the window frame, the pension garden where "everything was in bloom and smelled of candy" (Stories 466). Even at the last, the enchanted garden is present. Sitting on a bench at the seafront, fearing that he is on the point of a fatal heart attack, Lik hears "the sound of two gay female voices coming from behind the stone wall of a nearby villa" (Stories 478). Magical reality beckons Lik from the villa's walled garden, but he dismisses the sound as unreal in relation to the thought of his opening line in The Abyss. Thus, once again Lik is blinded by the limelight of determinism from perceiving the mysterious and magical possibilities of life. The enchanted garden exists, but is separated from Lik by a wall of solid logic. And so, unaware of the enchantment within his reach, Lik proceeds towards the story's abysmal end.

In surrendering to the dictates of fate Lik loses his individual will; in believing himself to be trapped by the logic of cause and effect he suffocates his imagination.
Without these two things, the essence of individuality, Lik’s self is an empty shell. Yet while Lik consciously submits to logical fate, he does not realize the full effect of doing so. While he acknowledges that his life is dull, that he has no inner treasures or personality, the idea that his very existence as an individual is being undermined does not enter his head. On the contrary, the dullness of his life, his lack of inner treasures and personality, is all part of what Lik perceives to be his singular harsh fate, a fate which, because of its supposed uniqueness, distinguishes him, gives him individuality. The whole axis of Lik’s self-pity is that fate has taken upon itself to victimize him personally: death has given him precedence. That, and the belief that fate has isolated him from other people and excluded him from life, makes Lik believe he is a lone sufferer. To Lik, his fate is his part in the play, and as such has the distinction and individuality that any character in a play has.

Determinism decrees that circumstances reign supreme. Lik, the slave of determinism, surrendering to what he believes to be his unique fate, does not realize that circumstances alone do not make one unique, but one’s actions in the face of those circumstances; that individuality does not reside outside oneself but inside. Lik sees himself as a tragic figure, the “protagonist” overshadowed by a harsh fate and imminent death, but he ceases to be tragic precisely because he believes himself to be so, and because he simply submits to his presumed tragic fate. The real tragic hero, on the other hand, continues to struggle to enforce his will however circumstances conspire against him. Lik seems to think that his supposed tragic mask, which has been shaped not by anything within but by circumstances that have buffeted it from without, sets him apart from others. He does not realize that circumstances are often shared, that other faces have borne the same buffets, taken the same imprints, shaped the same mask. When Lik discovers he has a heart condition, he resents the “precariousness of his very being” (Stories 463), but it turns out that Lik’s very being is precarious in a manner altogether unanticipated by him. An unexpected event occurs, which turns Lik’s deterministic world inside out. A violent “jolt” suddenly disrupts “the ordered course of action.”

In his lecture on tragedy, in which he reviles the strict patterning of determinism, Nabokov says he would like to see more chance in drama: “What even the greatest playwrights have never realized is that chance is not always stumbling and that the tragedies of real life are based on the beauty or horror of chance - not merely on its ridiculousness” (USSR 340-41). He also says: “The highest achievements in poetry, prose, painting, showmanship are characterized by the irrational and illogical, by that spirit of free will that snaps its rainbow fingers in the face of smug causality” (USSR
Two of these “highest achievements” are among the few tragedies Nabokov admired - King Lear and Hamlet - which he called “dream-tragedies” because “dream-logic, or perhaps better say nightmare-logic, replaces here the elements of dramatic determinism” (USSR 327).

While Lik is wallowing in self-pity, Oleg Koldunov, a figure of terror from Lik’s past, turns up totally unexpectedly in Menton - he was supposed to be dead. Koldunov’s name derives from the Russian koldun, “magician, sorceror,” and, just as lightning presumably starts the fire in the pinewood which sets the action of The Abyss in motion, so Koldunov’s sudden appearance, like a sorceror materializing out of a bolt from the blue, sets in motion a new drama in which the logical dissolves into the magical. The determinist play in which Lik thought he was acting suddenly veers into the realm of dream-logic, or rather nightmare-logic. Indeed, as soon as Koldunov is revealed to be alive, the story plunges into the realm of nightmare as Lik’s bad dreams of his old acquaintance, which have haunted him for years, are recounted. Just as Lik’s emerging from the deterministic Abyss at the beginning of the story establishes his context, so Koldunov’s emerging out of Lik’s nightmares establishes his. Koldunov is a nightmare figure, and the magical forces of irrational reality he brings into the story prove that the laws of determinism are nothing but an illusion.

Koldunov turns the whole of Lik’s ordered existence into turmoil. The very fact of Koldunov’s turning out to be alive upsets the neatly ordered assumptions which make up Lik’s mental universe. Lik

simply could not recall what data had led him to conclude that Koldunov had perished, and why, in the past twenty years, there had been such a strengthening in the chain of dim initial information out of which Koldunov’s doom had been wrought (Stories 468).

This is a significant point, since if Lik’s assumptions about Koldunov’s doom prove to be mistaken, it puts a question to the whole of Lik’s deterministic belief, particularly the idea of his own harsh fate, the inevitability of his own doom, which has been wrought over years by just such assumptions and inferences. Indeed, Koldunov’s bursting the “chain” of Lik’s misconception about his having died symbolically reflects his bursting the iron chains of determinism itself, by proving, in his unexpected appearance, that assumptions - which are the essence of a belief in logical fate - are dangerous, and moreover, by bringing into the story illogical forces

1 In “Zud,” a short parody based on “Lik” that Nabokov wrote in 1940, the Koldunov character is called Koshmarenko, from the Russian koshmar, “nightmare” (SSRP 5.735-36).
which constitute a refutation of determinism. Lik himself acknowledges that extracting from his brain the idea that Koldunov is dead threatens to “vitiate the entire order of his other notions and concepts” (Stories 468).

The metaphysical disturbance caused by Koldunov’s arrival is reflected in more material terms. Each time Koldunov encroaches on Lik’s sphere Lik is pushed off his ordered course. Koldunov crosses Lik’s path as the latter is on the way to catch a bus for the Italian riviera. He bumps into Lik just as Lik is getting a pair of new shoes before making his way to the theatre for the final performance. He takes Lik back to his lodgings in a part of town to which Lik has never been, and gets him drunk, causing Lik to forget his shoes, jeopardizing his ability to perform in the play that night, and, worse still, nearly bringing on a heart attack.

If Koldunov’s presence undercuts Lik’s ordered world with an element of chaos, he also blurs Lik’s very perception of reality, turning the world into a kind of dream. Koldunov remembers fishing with Lik - but they never had; Koldunov tells Lik that the woman at the seaside is his wife - but it is just a joke; Koldunov proposes selling to Lik for a thousand francs a gun worth less than a hundred; and Lik gets drunk on Koldunov’s wine, resulting in his stumbling down to the seafront in a dream-like daze.

When Koldunov is on the scene, Lik, like a sleepwalker, is not properly in control of himself: he is in the thrall of the lord of the nightmare. Koldunov manipulates Lik like a puppet, lying, deceiving, tricking him, taking his money, leading him around, and getting him drunk. And even though Lik, when he is not in Koldunov’s company, tries to steer clear of him, he seems to be trapped into his orbit. Lik runs into Koldunov on the way to catch a bus for the express purpose of avoiding him; he runs into him again on a last brief trip into town to get a pair of shoes; and he finally has to go back to Koldunov’s place when he realizes he has left his new shoes there, after he had just been thinking he had finally escaped Koldunov’s oppressive influence. These events are the stuff of nightmares: the dreamer is trapped in the horror just when he feels he has broken free of it.

In effect, where in the first half of the story Lik submissively allows himself to be manipulated and trapped by logical fate, in the second half he is manipulated and trapped by the nightmare that is Koldunov. The elements of dramatic determinism that had supposedly been governing Lik’s life are replaced, as in Hamlet and King Lear, by nightmare logic.
Yet the nightmare is really of Lik's own making. Just as there are no deterministic rules trapping Lik but the mistaken thoughts of his own narrow mind, so there is no nightmare trapping Lik but the one in his head. It is only Lik's deterministic view that turns the irrationality ushered in by Koldunov into a nightmare. The very eeriness of Koldunov's turning out to be alive is due to Lik's mistaken assumption that Koldunov was dead in the first place. And Lik's persistence in mistaken assumptions about his own perceived harsh fate only intensifies the nightmare. So confirmed is Lik in the idea of his maligna fate, that he cannot see his mistake about Koldunov's being dead as innocent, or Koldunov's turning up in the same town as himself after twenty years as pure chance, but must incorporate this into the idea of his harsh fate. Something bad must come from Koldunov's arrival, he believes: “the possibility of meeting him seemed ominous, fateful, dimly linked to the whole system of evil, with its premonitions of torment and abuse, so familiar to him” (Stories 470). Indeed, it is as if Lik expects the sequence of Koldunovian bad dreams which have trapped him for years in their haunting recurrence, to continue now in reality, for Lik persists in treating Koldunov as if he were a figure of his nightmares:

Now . . . when Koldunov proved to be alive . . . he could not conquer the same sensation of helplessness . . . that oppressed him in dreams when from behind a curtain, smirking, fiddling with his belt buckle, stepped the lord of the dream, a dark, dreadful schoolboy (Stories 470).

Moreover, when Koldunov wants Lik to drink, Lik, against his better judgement, is unable to refuse, “obeying the oppressive influence he knew well from his nightmares” (Stories 474), while if Koldunov’s appearance has deteriorated over the years, “the coefficient of nightmare remained unchanged” (Stories 475).

Both times that Koldunov unexpectedly crosses Lik’s path on the streets of Menton it is pure chance, but since submissive Lik does not have the will-power to shrug off Koldunov it becomes a trap, an unpleasant trap because Koldunov is an unpleasant, bitter character and Lik has a preconceived dread of him and an expectation of fate’s harshness. Moreover, once trapped, Lik proceeds to ensnare himself further, thus intensifying and prolonging the nightmare. Koldunov may urge Lik to drink, but it is Lik who, too afraid to object, gets drunk, forgets his shoes, and is forced into confronting Koldunov for a third and final time when he returns to collect them. Caught in Koldunov’s unpleasant orbit, Lik would call it proof of fate’s system of evil against him, but really it is the nightmare that results when illogical reality throws a
series of chance events in the way of a man who is obsessed with the idea that everything tends towards his misery and doom.

However, if Koldunov brings illogicality and irrationality into the story, which turn Lik’s life into a nightmare, from his own point of view he is the very thing he symbolically contradicts. For Koldunov, like Lik, is a determinist, or “an old fatalist” in his own words (Stories 475). Like Lik, he regards their re-encounter as the work of fate: “Meeting you is an omen for me. It is a sign that all is not lost yet” (Stories 471). Like Lik, who feels his heart ailment is “undeserved,” Koldunov pities himself for a perceived harsh fate: “I just want to know what went wrong, then I’ll be satisfied. Why has life systematically baited me?” And, just as Lik does, Koldunov thinks of himself as trapped into acting a crumby role given him by a harsh fate: “Why have I been assigned the part of some kind of miserable scoundrel who is spat on by everybody, gypped, bullied, thrown into jail?” (Stories 475).

Yet if Koldunov is a determinist, his similarity to Lik is only another way in which he undermines the foundations of Lik’s world. For the part Koldunov believes he has been assigned is the very part Lik has been playing for years: the disenchanted, embittered emigré supposedly victimized by a harsh fate. The only difference is that Koldunov is giving a more bravura performance in the role than meek Lik. Koldunov holds up a mirror to Lik, reflecting back the image of Lik’s own self-pity and resentment but in a concentrated, intensified way, heightening its ugliness. And as the bigot in Sui’s play says: “the reflection of flames is at times more dangerous than the conflagration itself” (Stories 462; my italics). For if Lik is defined by the mask he wears in his role; if he amounts to no more than the circumstances that have shaped that mask, what is left when those circumstances and that mask turn out to be someone else’s? The answer is hinted at in the effects of Koldunov’s wine on Lik. Lik’s senses are blurred, a “tickling fog permeated every part of his body” (Stories 475); Lik, who never drinks, is not his usual self; he feels as if his body is dissolving and disintegrating, he “seemed to consist of ripples and dots,” “his arms and legs belonged to different people” (Stories 477). Lik’s self is being undermined in a rather surprising manner.

If only Lik could see it. But Lik seems unaware of the threat to his monopoly of the tragic part he is playing. Lik acknowledges that he and Koldunov have something in common (“I’ve been through it all myself, the hunger and so forth . . .” he says [Stories 476]), but if he recognizes facets of himself in Koldunov it is at best not a conscious recognition. On leaving Koldunov’s place, Lik dismisses him as a
“drunken, moralizing moron” (Stories 477). And if Lik does not recognize the ugly image of his own fallacious fatalism in Koldunov, a further indication that Lik’s deterministic belief remains intact is his focussing on his opening line in The Abyss as a means of restoring some mental equilibrium after his drunken encounter with Koldunov. Igor’s first words seem “far more real” to Lik than any other image in his mind (Stories 478); only the idea of Suire’s logically ordered drama is able to give Lik a grip on reality. Moreover, when Lik realizes he has left his shoes at Koldunov’s, it is his “perfectly clear and logical” plan to retrieve them that saves him from the brink of collapse (Stories 479). Lik’s “salvation,” however, is ironic. If Lik’s physical life is “saved,” his self, deterministic to the last, only confirms its passage to oblivion. For on Lik’s return to Koldunov’s house to collect his shoes the likeness between the latter and himself, which Lik had refused to see, comes into sharper focus, and in a manner which graphically depicts what is left when a determinist’s mask-like identity - shaped solely by circumstance - is revealed to be not unique.

When Lik arrives at Koldunov’s place, he encounters the final and most startling surprise of the nightmare. Koldunov is revealed lying on the floor, “his face blasted by a gunshot in the mouth,” and, what is more, wearing the very shoes Lik has come to retrieve (Stories 479). Lik had imagined an early death for himself, dying onstage with a foot protruding beyond the lowered curtain, and Koldunov, only two years Lik’s senior, lies with his feet sticking out and wearing the white shoes Lik had intended to wear onstage, while an audience of onlookers gathers round. Koldunov has stolen more than Lik’s shoes; he appears to have appropriated the very image of Lik’s death too.

Metaphorically, he has gone further. The gunshot, blasting Koldunov’s face, leaves an identitiless body; indeed, Koldunov is not named. When Lik imagined his death, he imagined dying without noticing, his spirit crossing over into a new realm while his body lay on the stage. And as Lik stands over the faceless corpse, it is as if he himself has died without noticing and is now the spirit of the body laid out before him in the image of his own imagined death. Lik, as it were, becomes the living ghost of the dead Koldunov. The two men metaphorically merge, and Lik’s individuality, his self, is symbolically nullified. And by the same token so is Koldunov’s. In the English translation of his story Nabokov considers the provenance of the word “lik”: “the word means ‘countenance’ in Russian and Middle English,” he says (Stories 462). Lik is obsolete Russian for “face” (in modern usage it denotes the face on an icon). In Middle English lik (a variant of lich) means “the living body” or “a dead body, a corpse” (compare “lich-gate”), and also has the cognate meaning, “like,
The trio of meanings neatly encapsulate the story’s final image. In destroying himself Koldunov becomes a corpse, a lik; in destroying his face he merges with Lik, the “face”; and the two men become alike, lik.

The metaphorical merging of Lik and Koldunov in the latter’s death sets the seal on their similarity in life. The two men had been playing the same part, wearing the same mask in the play - the embittered emigré victimized by a hostile fate - and when that mask is shown to be not unique and is removed, all that is left is a faceless body. In “Tyrants Destroyed” the narrator imagines duplicating the tyrant’s thoughts and thus destroying him; in “Lik” Koldunov and Lik symbolically duplicate one another and cancel one another out. Their situation at the end of the story represents Nabokov’s reductio ad absurdum of determinism: the logical consequence of leading one’s life by determinism’s rules is destruction of the self. Lik’s deterministic submissiveness to fate and his sense of being trapped by his logical doom undermines his self, destroys his individuality, and makes of him nothing more than a product of circumstances, a mere actor’s mask which has no unique identity. Furthermore, his submissiveness to fate and his sense of being trapped causes him to be drawn into Koldunov’s orbit, a nightmare of his own making which leads him to the horror of the final scene. Koldunov likewise sacrifices his individuality on the altar of determinism, and his self, like Lik’s, is negated by being mirrored in another. But in the end Koldunov takes matters into his own hands. Driven to the limit of despair by his sense of an inescapable harsh fate, Koldunov physically destroys himself, his blasted face a symbol of determinism’s erasure of his identity. Lik is left at the end stranded outside the border of his life. He had imagined sinking into a new and wonderful play, but instead he metaphorically sinks into the deterministic abyss of self-oblivion.

It is an “illusion,” says Nabokov, “that life and thus dramatic art picturing life should be based on a steady current of cause and effect driving us towards the ocean of death” (USSR 337). The fate of Lik and Koldunov illustrates the ultimate logical consequence of believing in that illusion: the destruction of the self. Nabokov undermines determinism with the very logic that defines it. If a person is subjugated to a dictatorship of external forces and is denied free will and therefore the means to influence the course of his own life; if the freedom of that person’s mind is denied by a set of logical rules, so that the imagination is neither free nor at liberty to inspire the will, then that individual is no longer truly an individual, but a mere inert object, the pawn of an outside power: the self is negated. Moreover, if such a person believes himself to be the victim of a harsh fate, he has no means of escape, and the logical
The consequence of hopeless suffering is suicide. The abyss of personal oblivion is Nabokov's *reductio ad absurdum* of determinism.

However, Nabokov’s attack on determinism has wider relevance than the personal dimension. For Koldunov, the man of nightmares, is also a kind of tyrant figure, and reflects the deterministic forces oppressing much of Europe at the time: the biological determinism of the Nazis, and the social determinism of the communists. Koldunov accuses Lik of being “as stingy as a Jew” (*Stories* 475); he calls the French “crooks” and France “a corrupt country” (*Stories* 476). A veteran of the White Army in the Russian Civil War, Koldunov resembles the Russian fascists - monarchist, racist, antisemitic - who rallied round Hitler (two of whom were responsible for the death of Nabokov’s father). At the same time, Koldunov shows sympathies for the Soviets: “I’m even willing to respect them - God knows, they are honest murderers” (*Stories* 476). Recall Nabokov’s comment about dramatic determinism: ever since the ancient Greeks, he says, the idea of logical fate has been “keeping the drama in a kind of concentration camp.” Writing his lecture in 1941, Nabokov uses the concentration camp as a topical image for a prison, but it was precisely Nazi racial determinism which filled those camps with Jews and other so-called inferior races. Nabokov perhaps had this in mind when using the image of the camp in his anti-deterministic lecture. In the same lecture Nabokov takes a swipe at Marxist-Leninist social determinism: “Tragedies based exclusively on the logic of conflict are as untrue to life as an all-pervading class struggle is untrue to history” (*USSR* 340). Nabokov’s attack on determinism in “Lik” is more than a condemnation of the individual who destroys himself. By incorporating in his story a “tyrannical” figure with Soviet and particularly fascist sympathies, who precipitates the destruction of another man, Nabokov broadens his target to include the political world, where determinism destroys the individual by subjugating it to the race and the state. And in the process destroys more than individuality. Lik only destroys his own life by subscribing to the deterministic view, but the destruction is far greater when people who have control over millions of lives use the rules of determinism to further their political ambitions. At the time Nabokov was writing “Lik” Nazi racial doctrine was pushing Europe ever closer to war, to another “velika voïna” (“great war”) like the one mentioned in *The Abyss* (*Stories* 462). “Lik” perhaps betrays a presentiment, on Nabokov’s part, of a deterministic abyss far more awful, more devastating and wider-reaching than the self-destruction of a Lik or a Koldunov.
DECEMBER, AND THE WRITING OF THE REAL LIFE OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT

I

From 5 to 14 December the trial of Nadezhda Plevitskaia - the famed popular singer of both pre-revolutionary Russia and the emigration - took place in Paris (Krivitsky 262; Grey 125, 155). She was charged with complicity in the abduction of General Miller on 22 September 1937 (Grey 131).

The leading role played by Plevitskaia’s husband, General Skoblin, in the kidnap was revealed by a note Miller left before his disappearance, stating that he had an appointment with Skoblin that afternoon and suspected a trap.\(^1\) When the note came to light later in the day, Skoblin fled and vanished, which served to underline his guilt. Plevitskaia, however, claiming that her husband’s disappearance showed that he too had been kidnapped (Grey 152), held to the alibi she and he had constructed for him on the day of the crime. At the time of Skoblin’s rendezvous with Miller, Plevitskaia had been trying on clothes at a fashion store and had taken trouble to pretend to the shopkeeper that her husband was waiting outside in the car (Grey 130, 223). Such a flimsy alibi could not stand up to scrutiny; moreover, a witness had seen Skoblin and Miller at the appointed rendezvous (Grey 128, 210). Although maintaining she knew nothing about the disappearance of General Miller, Plevitskaia was arrested and remanded in custody until her trial (Grey 154).

The main question in the judgement of Plevitskaia at the trial was her motive in aiding and abetting her husband. Had she acted solely out of love for him, or was she acquainted with his machinations and knowingly a party to the kidnapping? The court found that she did know of her husband’s intrigues, and was complicit in the crime (Kostikov 450). However, while the Sûreté investigation had concluded that Miller had been killed and disposed of by the NKVD (Andrew, KGB 126; Grey 210-11), and few doubted that the Skoblin family had acted on the orders of Moscow (or Berlin), the court found no conclusive evidence to prove that either of them was an intelligence

\(^1\) For a photocopy of Miller’s handwritten Russian note: see Grey 127. For the note transcribed in Russian: see Kostikov 443. For the note translated into English: see Krivitsky 260-61.
agent (Kostikov 450-51, 454; Grey 204).² Plevitskaia was convicted not as a spy, but as an accomplice in the kidnapping. She was sentenced to twenty years’ hard labour, and died in prison on 21 September 1940 (Grey 132, 166).

Miller’s abduction and the subsequent investigation and trial caused a scandal in the emigration, not least because of the involvement of General Skoblin, a hero of the civil war, and Plevitskaia, the doyenne of Russian popular song. The trial, billed as one of the trials of the century (a century which had witnessed the Moscow show trials), was covered in detail by the French and emigre press (Grey 125; Kostikov 435). One can assume that Nabokov followed it with some interest, not only because five years later the Miller case supplied the subject matter for his story “The Assistant Producer,” but also because he was personally acquainted with Plevitskaia: “we met many times in Berlin and Paris,” he told Alfred Appel (Appel 288). Indeed, Nabokov wrote a poem in Plevitskaia’s honour in the 1920s, which unfortunately has not been located (RY 494; Nicol 157).

II

While Plevitskaia’s trial ran in Paris, Nabokov began writing The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, a novel with its own covert theme of espionage. With the ink barely dry on his monumental Russian novel, The Gift, it is remarkable that at this point Nabokov produced a masterpiece in English. However, he had powerful motives for doing so.

With his life in crisis on a number of fronts in the late 1930s Nabokov had to look beyond Russian, the emigration, and Germany, for safety and financial security. England and English were the obvious choice (Field, Life in Part 207). Yet if by 1938 a switch to English seemed inevitable, Nabokov still had not managed to establish himself and his family in England. And with no work permit in France, and nowhere else to go, the Nabokovs’ situation was desperate. In a bid to remedy these circumstances Nabokov decided to write a novel in English to try and make a name for himself in England.

It was a bold move, as Nabokov still had concerns about the fragility of his English (SO 292), and would have to compose the novel not in an English environment, but in

² In 1989 the KGB released documents confirming that the couple had been recruited by the OGPU (the Soviet secret police) in 1930 (Mlechin 18.37-39, 20.38; Kostikov 454; Andrew, KGB 117).
France, speaking Russian at home and French in the street. The move was bolder still, as Nabokov was not well acquainted with the English milieu he would have to write about to the English themselves, and would be embarking on the project having just immersed himself in his richest and most panoramic Russian fictional world, so that the business of producing the novel would necessarily have an element of illusionism to it. Moreover, he was penniless and had no publication contract for the work. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was no steady and cautious launch of an English career. It was an out-and-out attempt to break into England with a brilliant work of art. Indeed, so eager was Nabokov to impress, that he made certain he finished the novel in time for a British literary competition (RY 496).

Yet if *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a response to Nabokov's personal circumstances, it is also a response to the rise of tyranny in 1938. When Nabokov began to write the novel in December, everything he had previously written that year, attacking tyranny, culminated in a pièce de résistance of antidespotism. Nabokov wrote his first English novel at a time when Britain in particular was blind to the totalitarian threat, and he wove into his book a chilling warning for British readers of the danger of leaving tyranny unopposed.

“And he applies his mind to obscure arts,” as Ovid says of Daedalus who finds himself in a corner with his son, and in need of a cunning plan. Nabokov the Russian author needed to write a brilliant English novel to give him (and his family) wings to fly the entrapment of his dead-end circumstances, a novel that would also address the ominous shadows of the day. The creation he came up with was worthy of the “cunning artificer” he was. The British had been raised on the literature of detection, espionage, and fantastic otherworlds in the works of Conan Doyle, Baroness Orczy, H. G. Wells, and Lewis Carroll. In writing his elaborate and deceptive novel Nabokov took the English on at their own game - and tried to outdo them. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* Nabokov invites his reader first to ponder the unassuming exterior, and then to pass through the mirror into a realm of totalitarian terror and fantastical events, before emerging finally to see the book in a new light. The reader - and the novel - thus progress from the thesis, through the antithesis, to the synthesis. Where in the other works of 1938 totalitarianism’s destructiveness looms large, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* tyranny is ultimately superseded by a higher, creative level of reality. Like Sebastian Knight’s *The Prismatic Bezel*, Nabokov’s novel “soars skyward” (*RLSK* 89). Nabokov himself called the work a tour de force (Field, *VN* 214). There is little danger of overstatement in that remark.
On 29 January 1939 Nabokov reported to a friend that he had finished *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and posted it in order to meet the competition deadline at the end of the month (*RY* 496). A day later Hitler gave a speech to the Reichstag on the sixth anniversary of his appointment to the chancellorship:

“Today I will once more be a prophet: if the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed in plunging the nations once more into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevizing of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe!” (Fischer 393).

The writing on the wall enshrined in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* only became clearer and clearer thereafter. It may not have won the literary competition, or the recognition in England Nabokov so badly needed, but in addition to its other brilliant features Nabokov’s first English novel surpasses anything in H. G. Wells’s fantasias in its startlingly prophetic nature.
PART 2

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight
THEESIS

1

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight purports to be the biography of the author Sebastian Knight by his half-brother V. The biography takes the form of an account of V’s researches into Sebastian’s life. The result is that the book is both a record of Sebastian’s life from birth to death, and a narrative of a journey of discovery by V.

What V discovers, however, is not what one would expect in a biography. Hard facts about Sebastian’s life repeatedly slip through V’s grasp: the task of piecing together Sebastian’s boyhood eludes him (15); Sebastian’s dotty governess is no help; V wonders if he has got the “real story” of Sebastian’s Cambridge years (50); he does not talk to Clare Bishop about her relationship with Sebastian (77); he does not talk to Goodman about his time as Sebastian’s secretary (57); Sebastian’s friends, whom V interviews, were never close enough to penetrate his secretive personality; V’s own meetings with Sebastian in adulthood are brief and never frank or intimate; he burns Sebastian’s letters which would have revealed the identity of Sebastian’s Russian mistress; he does not question Madame Lecerf when he deduces finally that the mistress was she; and his account of Sebastian’s life falls away into acute anticlimax when he describes how he arrived too late at St Damier hospital to hear what Sebastian wanted to tell him before he died. However, after being eluded by Sebastian at almost every turn in his researches, V concludes his biography by announcing all of a sudden that he has discovered that he himself is Sebastian Knight:

Whatever his secret was, I have learnt one secret too, and namely: that 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 (202-03).

Yet the idea that V has found and followed the undulations of Sebastian’s soul seems quite absurd given the short supply of solid information about Sebastian that V has

1 Page numbers in parentheses refer to the Vintage edition of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.
been able to find and follow; and the suggestion that Sebastian’s spirit has taken up residence in V’s soul after death seems equally preposterous.

At St Damier hospital, on his visit to see his dying brother, V has a profound sense of spiritual communion with Sebastian, only to discover that Sebastian has already died. V says this experience completely changed his life (202). If one relates this to V’s subsequent statement about acquiring Sebastian’s soul, V’s idea seems to be that, during this communion with Sebastian, he is unconsciously entered by Sebastian’s already-dead soul, and then discovers this soul within him, finds and follows its undulations, in the course of his biographical researches. It is instructive to note that if V’s experience at St Damier provides the inspiration for the biography, the biography, V’s journey of discovery, thus ends where it began: V comes full circle. No doubt this coming full circle is intended by V to represent a cycle of renewal, the end of Sebastian’s life constituting a new beginning as he enters V and helps him write the biography. Yet it seems representative not of a spiral but of a closed, unproductive circle. For the truth is that if that profound imaginative experience at St Damier launches the biography, V does not move beyond that level; he makes no material progress towards a closer knowledge of Sebastian’s life after that time; V’s sense of connecting with Sebastian remains entirely on an imaginative level; that is to say, his whole idea of getting in tune with Sebastian is all in his imagination.

V is a Russian emigré in Paris, with no family and a job that is giving him “business difficulties” (139). His outlandish idea that he has found and followed Sebastian’s soul and laid claim to it looks like a rather mad attempt to appropriate the life of a famous man because his own life is so banal. Note what happens in the opening paragraph of the book: V appropriates a Russian lady’s diary - her biography, as it were - and then, after pointing out her desire to remain anonymous, rather oddly reveals that she is Olga Orlova. In the same way, V appropriates the biography of Sebastian Knight and then bizarrely reveals that Sebastian is he. Moreover, just as Olga’s diary is singularly uncommunicative, so Sebastian’s life seems not to yield to V, but to remain remote and unattainable.

II

Yet if so many facts about Sebastian’s life elude V, there are nevertheless a number of curious correspondences between V’s biography and Sebastian’s life and work.
Consider Mr Silbermann, the man V meets on the train to Strasbourg. This Mr Silbermann bears a striking resemblance to the character Mr Siller, who helps three train passengers in three different ways in Sebastian’s story “The Back of the Moon.” Silbermann is “a little man with bushy eyebrows” (123), “a pink bald head,” “big shiny nose,” “small moustache” (124), an “Adam’s apple rolling up and down” (125), and “bright brown eyes” (130), and Siller is described as a little man with “bushy eyebrows,” “a bald head, big nose,” “modest moustache,” “a bulging Adam’s apple, and brown eyes” (102). In addition, Silbermann’s name means “silver man” and “Siller” is a variant form of the word “silver”; and Silbermann uses the phrase “de odder side of de moon” (130), which echoes the title of Sebastian’s story. Clearly, the Mr Silbermann V meets and the Mr Siller of “The Back of the Moon” are one and the same man. In this connection consider another point. Mr Siller is described as a “meek little man waiting for a train” (101), whose bulging Adam’s apple moves like the shape of “an arrased eavesdropper” (102), and just prior to this description Sebastian, at work in his flat, loses his temper with Clare while “a meek little man” waits at the door (101). One makes the obvious connection: namely, that the real-life “meek little man,” who, in waiting patiently in the hall, cannot fail to over hear - or eavesdrop on - Sebastian’s altercation with Clare, provides the model for Mr Siller in Sebastian’s story, the “meek little man” waiting for a train whose Adam’s apple evokes the “arrased” Polonius eavesdropping on Hamlet’s tirade against Ophelia in the “nunnery scene.” And if the meek little man who calls on Sebastian thus provides the model for Mr Siller in Sebastian’s story, the irresistible inference is that the meek little visitor is the same real-life man as Silbermann who so resembles Mr Siller; in other words, that the man who calls at Sebastian’s flat is Silbermann, and that Silbermann is depicted in Sebastian’s story as Siller. Yet it seems an extraordinary coincidence that Silbermann, some ten years after visiting Sebastian in London and providing the model for a character who helps train passengers, should get into the same train as V and provide vital help just when V is despairing of ever identifying Sebastian’s Russian mistress.

Consider also the curious fact that when V’s researches lead him to the flat of Pahl Rechnoy, the latter comes to the door holding a black chess-knight (140). Sebastian as a boy uses the image of a black chess-knight as a signature beneath his poems (15), and Rechnoy’s having this very piece in his hand appears to be a sign that V’s investigations are on the right track, since it is Rechnoy’s first wife who turns out to have been Sebastian’s mistress.
It is also curious that in tracking down Sebastian’s mystery woman V encounters a number of people who resemble characters in *The Doubtful Asphodel*, Sebastian’s final novel. First, at Pahl Rechnoy’s flat V meets the chess-playing “Uncle Black,” who amuses Rechnoy’s young son with drawings and stories; one of the characters in *The Doubtful Asphodel* is a “gentle old chess player Schwarz [‘Black’], who sits down on a chair in a room in a house, to teach an orphan boy the moves of the knight” (173). Second, one of the women V encounters in his quest to find Sebastian’s mistress is Lydia Bohemsky, “a fat elderly woman with waved bright orange hair” (151); appearing alongside Schwarz in Sebastian’s novel is a “fat Bohemian woman” with a “grey streak showing in the fast colour of her cheaply dyed hair” (173). Third, Pahl Rechnoy curiously resembles a character in *The Doubtful Asphodel*: the novel’s cast includes “a pale wretch noisily denouncing the policy of oppression . . . in an ill­famed public-house” (173); as Anthony Olcott has noted, the words “pale wretch noisily” contain a phonetic approximation of Pahl Rechnoy’s name (Olcott 112). Fourth, at Madame Lecerf’s country house V watches as Helene von Graun, the contralto singer, climbs from her car straight into a puddle (168); another of *The Doubtful Asphodel*’s characters is the “lovely tall primadonna” who “steps in her haste into a puddle” (173). And fifth, V’s search for Sebastian’s mistress takes him to the home of Helene Grinstein who at that moment has just returned from a funeral and is attending to an old man (133); also making an appearance in Sebastian’s novel is “a soft-lipped girl in mourning” who soothes a sobbing old man (173).

Moreover, there is a further curious correspondence between V’s biography and *The Doubtful Asphodel*. V races to his dying brother’s bedside at St Damier in order to hear what he believes will be an “extraordinary revelation” (192), but discovers, when he finally reaches the hospital, that Sebastian has already died; in *The Doubtful Asphodel* the hero, on the point of death, has an overwhelming secret to impart, but dies before revealing it.

Finally, V’s visit to see his dying brother echoes another Knight work. V travels to St Damier, where he communes with Sebastian’s spirit, only to be told later that he has been sitting at the wrong bedside, and in *Lost Property* the narrator goes to Roquebrune, where he communes with his mother’s dead spirit, only to be told later that he has been to the wrong town (17-18).

Combined, these correspondences between V’s biographical researches and Sebastian’s life and work go beyond the bounds of mere coincidence, and present a curious possibility. Has V, one asks, imagined his whole quest for Sebastian Knight,
and blended details from Sebastian’s life and work into his book? If that were the case, one would have to elevate V from the status of a mere madman to that of an artist. No longer could one say that V was simply a crackpot trying to latch onto a famous person’s life. Indeed, the possibility that V is an artist raises a suggestive point, for one aspect of V’s biographical style is rather familiar. A characteristic feature of Sebastian Knight’s work is what V calls the “Knightian twist” (156). One example is the Roquebrune episode in Lost Property, where the narrator is told he has visited the wrong town; another instance is the hero’s dying before revealing the anticipated secret in The Doubtful Asphodel. V proves to be adept in the use of this device: it is seen not only in his account of turning up at the wrong bedside at St Damier, but also, for example, at the very start of the book where, after relating Olga Orlova’s plea for anonymity, V promptly reveals her identity. One feels drawn to the conclusion that as a man who appears to be an artist reworking elements of Sebastian Knight’s life and work, and as a skilled practitioner of the “Knightian twist,” V is one and the same as Sebastian Knight himself.

Supporting this idea is the fact that certain details in Sebastian’s life anticipate V. In Dr Starov’s telegram summoning V to St Damier, Sebastian’s name is given in its Russian form: “Sevastian” (188); the presence of the Russian “V” in the name prefigures V’s claim that he and Sebastian meld into one. In addition, Sebastian states, in a death-bed letter to V, that he began his letter addressing a different person, and then turned his thoughts to V after the word “life” (184); V’s suggestion that Sebastian’s soul enters him after death is thus foreshadowed in Sebastian’s turning to V in, as it were, the after-“life” of the letter. These anticipations, in Sebastian’s own life, of V’s idea that he and Sebastian become one seem to confirm that the two men are one and the same.

It has to be said, then, that in spite of V’s appearing to be continually eluded by Sebastian in his researches, V is after all, as he claims, Sebastian Knight. One man must have invented the other; but has V invented Sebastian, or has Sebastian invented V?

III

To answer that question one needs to look at Sebastian’s life, as presented in the biography.
Sebastian Knight is born in St Petersburg in 1899 to a Russian father and an English mother. His mother leaves the family for another man when Sebastian is about four, and dies when Sebastian is nine; his father dies when he is thirteen. At eighteen Sebastian flees revolutionary Russia with his stepmother and half-brother. While the latter pair go to Paris, Sebastian enters Cambridge University. He adopts his mother’s surname, Knight, and begins to cultivate an English persona, discarding his Russianness. After Cambridge Sebastian remains in England, where he begins a career as an English author and starts a long-term relationship with Clare Bishop. His first novel, *The Prismatic Bezel*, is published in 1925. In 1926, on the brink of achieving fame with his second novel *Success*, Sebastian is diagnosed with Lehmann’s disease, an incurable heart condition from which his mother died. In spite of the acclaim *Success* receives, Sebastian’s mood now changes drastically, and he becomes obsessed by an “acute sense of mortality” (102). He writes the three stories, “The Funny Mountain,” “Albinos in Black,” and “The Back of the Moon,” and then in 1929 visits Blauberg, a spa town in Alsace, in order to get special treatment for his illness. At Blauberg he begins an affair with a Russian woman. On returning to England, Sebastian splits up with Clare and writes *Lost Property*, a semi-fictional autobiography, and spends a great deal of time pursuing his fickle mistress on the Continent, a pursuit which undermines his health further. From 1931 his heart condition grows steadily worse, and around 1933 he begins his masterpiece, *The Doubtful Asphodel*. In early 1936, his mistress having finally discarded him for good, and his health failing, Sebastian is admitted to St Damier hospital in France under his Russian name. He writes a letter in Russian to his half-brother, asking him to visit him, but V arrives too late. Sebastian dies alone in January 1936, and is buried in the cemetery at St Damier.

A critic says Sebastian Knight’s life falls into two periods: “the first - a dull man writing broken English, the second - a broken man writing dull English” (5). The opinion may be flippant, but there is some truth in the idea that Sebastian’s life falls into two parts. The turning-point is his being diagnosed in 1926 with an incurable heart-disease. Prior to the diagnosis Sebastian is about to make his name as an English author; he has found an ideal woman in Clare; and the spring of 1925 is said to be “probably the happiest period of [his] existence” (84). After the diagnosis, in spite of success with his novel, Sebastian’s life seems to go out of control. He is not interested in his literary success; his behaviour becomes erratic, with “dreadful fits of temper” (100); he distances himself from Clare and his friends; he begins a crazy and humiliating affair; his health deteriorates; and he becomes quite isolated. Moreover, even his Englishness, which he had been at such pains to cultivate, crumbles away:
after distancing himself from his English love, Sebastian starts an affair with a Russian woman, from whom he receives Russian letters; after visiting Blauberg he dines with V at a Russian restaurant; he spends less and less time in England; he drifts completely away from his English love; his final novel, according to V, would be easy to translate into Russian; his final letter is written in Russian; and he dies in France under his Russian name, attended by a Russian doctor, in a hospital where he is regarded as the “Russian gentleman” (202).

Sebastian Knight’s life takes the form of a rise and fall. It is the story of an attempt to build an English life which is shattered by the intrusion of an incurable illness. Yet if Lehmann’s disease undermines Sebastian’s health, his fall appears to a certain degree to be self-imposed. After the diagnosis Sebastian seems to give up on the life he has created. The English persona he had taken such trouble to develop he gradually abandons. Moreover, there is a suggestion that in his pursuit of the affair with the Russian woman he is abandoning his very life too. The affair begins at Blauberg where Sebastian seeks specialist treatment for his condition; but he drops the treatment early in order to pursue the woman in Paris, and within days is looking “worn and ill” (105). This Russian mistress is a woman who does not love Sebastian, and merely toys with him, as is clear from Madame Lecerf’s story to V, in which she implies that it is Helene von Graun who has the affair with Sebastian, when in fact it is she herself (156-59). She is, moreover, clearly the sort of woman Sebastian could not really love: Nina Rechnoy (later Nina Lecerf) “would have got on [Sebastian’s] nerves immediately,” thinks V (147), while V is “at a loss to imagine” how Sebastian could have been attracted by the woman in Madame Lecerf’s story (that is, Madame Lecerf herself) (159). Furthermore, a letter in Lost Property, in which the character “L” writes of being “desperately unhappy” with his mistress (111), suggests that as early as 1929 Sebastian is miserable in his new relationship. Yet Sebastian, with an incurable heart-disease, throws himself into an exhausting pursuit of this woman for nearly six years, in spite of his health’s being undermined. This hardly seems the action of a man trying to defy death and gain a new lease of life; or even of a man helplessly obsessed with an alluring woman. There is something wilfully self-destructive in it. It rather seems that after the diagnosis, and especially from the time of Blauberg, Sebastian gives up not only on his former life, but also on his life itself, as if driving himself towards death.

However, it would be wrong to conclude that Sebastian spends the last years of his life a bitter and broken man. There is one aspect of Sebastian’s life which does not decline after the diagnosis: his art; indeed, on the contrary, Sebastian writes his
masterpiece in the final period of his life. Sebastian’s books, moreover, provide insights into the motives behind his actions.

Sebastian’s first book, *The Prismatic Bezel*, written two years before the diagnosis, is a parody of a detective novel. It has, so to speak, three movements. First, one of the lodgers at a boarding house, one G. Abeson, is found murdered in his room, and the other lodgers are examined by the local police-officer. Second, while a London detective is summoned, the story shifts focus, and the close relationships between the lodgers are revealed. Third, the narrative shifts again as the detective finally arrives and begins his inquiries; suspicion falls on a passerby called Nosebag; however, Nosebag at last takes off his disguise and reveals himself to be G. Abeson: “one dislikes being murdered,” he says (93). The novel’s working title, *Cock Robin Hits Back*, evokes an image of the dead Cock Robin from the famous nursery rhyme returning from the grave, while its final title, *The Prismatic Bezel*, suggests a rainbow edge, the borderline between two states, visible and invisible, life and death; a borderline which Abeson, as it were, crosses. In this his first novel Sebastian deals with the idea of cheating death, and in particular with doing so by means of an assumed identity. One can perhaps relate this to Sebastian’s adoption of the “Sebastian Knight” persona at Cambridge; indeed, note that the name “Nosebag” - Abeson’s adopted persona - evokes horses, and thus, by association, a chess-knight, the piece with which Sebastian identifies himself. Sebastian adopts his English persona perhaps not just simply to escape his native Russian self, but also to defy death, a gesture of liberation from the burden of his mortal self.

*Success*, Sebastian’s second novel, shows Sebastian dealing with the artistry of fate, probing “the aetiological secret of aleatory occurrences” (94). A man and a woman live happily ever after following a chance meeting when they accept a lift in a stranger’s car. The novel traces the man’s and woman’s separate paths to this meeting, showing how artistic fate has been in persevering to bring them together. If Nosebag in *The Prismatic Bezel* hints at Sebastian himself, Percival Q - with a name combining Arthurian chivalry and chess notation - also hints at Sebastian himself. Sebastian in this novel seems to be paying tribute to the benevolence and beauty of fate in his own life, and its leading him to a position of great happiness, as an English author with an ideal woman in Clare Bishop (compare *The Gift*, where Fyodor acknowledges much the same thing). The novel could be taken as indicating Sebastian’s sense of personal fulfilment.
However, with the diagnosis of Lehmann’s disease, things are turned upside down. Indeed, Sebastian’s new mood encroaches even into Success, which he is completing at the time of the diagnosis. The character William, apparently suffering from a heart condition, is obsessed with mortality, lamenting that his relationship with his fiancée is “no good, because we are dying,” that “happiness at its very best is but the zany of its mortality,” and that in the midst of life all matter, all thought and action is already dead (97).

Sebastian next writes the stories “The Funny Mountain,” “Albinos in Black,” and “The Back of the Moon.” A few years later these stories are collected under the title The Funny Mountain. There is something dark and nightmarish about this trilogy. While “The Funny Mountain” is the only Knight work not explicitly quoted in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, there are intimations as to the story’s nature. V says “The Funny Mountain” makes him think of a child “laughing in its sleep” (6), but if “funny” hints at an element of humour in the story, there are intimations of deeper and darker undercurrents: Sebastian while writing the story tries “to keep to a steep slippery track among the dark crags of neuralgia” - an image of a mountain of pain - and throws his pen in frustration against the wall (100-01). The title of the second story, “Albinos in Black,” evokes an image that is rather lugubrious: people wear black to funerals, while albinos are, as it were, deathly pale; indeed, the one excerpt from this story that is quoted concerns a hotel room that is suggestive of “the worst tragedies” (7). The title of “The Back of the Moon” likewise suggests something dark and sinister. In short, the prevailing atmosphere of the trilogy is dark: the dark crags, the black of the albinos, the dark side of the moon. The stories seem to reflect a kind of terror - that acute sense of mortality with which Sebastian now becomes obsessed.

In addition to the trilogy’s theme of darkness and terror, there is a sense of unattainability about the three stories. Sebastian is imaged scaling the slippery track of a mountain with difficulty, while the back of the moon, as Silbermann says, cannot be seen (130). There are intimations of the unattainable in the second story, too. The image of albinos wearing black suggests an attempt to attain one’s antithesis, the opposite of one’s personal reality, an attempt, however, which results merely in a kind of superficial disguise, the donning of a coat rather than the attainment of a new state of existence. Indeed, the story evokes H. G. Wells’s The Invisible Man (a copy of which appears on Sebastian’s bookshelf [39]), in which the title character, an albino, can regain only superficial visibility by wearing clothes, a motley disguise. “Albinos in Black” thus suggests a link between the trilogy’s atmosphere of unattainability and the impossibility of escaping one’s personal reality. This can be related to Sebastian’s
attitude to his English persona. The albinos’ vain attempt to touch a reality beyond themselves hints that Sebastian now sees his English persona as merely an illusory escape from his personal reality, like wearing a coat to acquire superficial blackness or visibility. In *The Funny Mountain* trilogy Sebastian seems to acknowledge that one is trapped in one’s mortal self; that it is impossible to experience what lies beyond oneself, to see the back of the moon, to gain the view from the mountain-top. Additionally, the atmosphere of unattainability in this trilogy has a wider relevance, pointing to the impossibility of understanding a world of such bewildering cruelty as to trap each of us in our mortal selves and then to inflict indiscriminately fatal illnesses. Sebastian perhaps feels the impossibility of reaching the mountain’s summit, seeing the back of the moon, or touching the antithetical side of reality, that would grant him the great solution to the mystery.

Sebastian’s next book, *Lost Property*, is a semi-fictional autobiography. The main excerpt from the book that V presents is an episode about a plane crash. The pilot and all the passengers but one are killed, and the sole survivor is unscathed, having merely the toothache with which he started the journey; letters from the airmail bag are scattered in a field, and two of these have been placed in the wrong envelopes (109-10). In *Lost Property* Sebastian returns to the theme of fate which he deals with in *Success*, but now things have changed. This fate is clearly not the transparently benevolent fate seen in the earlier book. It is a fate which, with one sudden action, takes the lives of a number of unsuspecting people. It is a fate which, with the same action, prevents vital letters from reaching their destination. In *Success* Sebastian traces the lines of fate to a predestined conclusion; in *Lost Property*, by contrast, the seeming lines of destiny are broken: the plane passengers and the letters head for an intended destination, but suddenly their course flies off at a tangent. This is a fate that thwarts and disrupts, an unfathomable fate which leaves the plans of men in a state of disarray: a crashed plane, scattered letters. This is clearly the fate that deals Sebastian his incurable illness out of the blue.

Yet while this fate is not the transparently benevolent force seen in *Success*, neither is it malignant: it spares the sole survivor, just as it kills the other people on the plane. Indeed, it is a whimsical fate, leaving the survivor completely unscathed but still suffering dreadfully from toothache, and working it so that a writer muddles his letters and puts a love letter, in which he calls a certain businessman an “ass” (112), in an envelope addressed to that very businessman. A whimsical fate, then; and in that whimsicality there is an intimation of a mysterious design, the hand of a hidden artist. This intimation appears more clearly in another excerpt from *Lost Property*. The
narrator goes to Roquebrune to visit the place where his mother died. He has a moving vision of his mother, but is told later that he has visited the wrong town. Fate directs the narrator’s footsteps to the wrong Roquebrune, and yet in doing so affords him a profound emotional experience. A whimsical fate with a hidden purpose.

Lost Property presents us - our lives - as lost property tossed by an unfathomable fate (like the letters). Yet there is, in this non-malignant, whimsical fate, an intimation of a hidden design. V calls Lost Property a “halt,” a “setting of bearings” (109), and indeed, with this book Sebastian seems to turn a corner from the darkness and terror of The Funny Mountain trilogy. It is true that the sense of the unattainability of what lies beyond one’s mortal self, which is intimated in the stories, is still apparent: the narrator recalls wandering down London streets and coming upon something very like “the selfest of my own self” (66-67); he refers to “the oneness of human perception, the oneness of individuality” (103); and the character “L” states in his letter that there is “only one real number: One” (111). However, in Lost Property there is not the feeling of desperation about the inescapability of the self that is intimated in the story trilogy. And if Sebastian is now reconciled to the unattainability of what lies beyond his mortal self, so too has he accepted the impossibility of understanding the workings of fate. In Success Sebastian presumes to trace fate’s threads, but in Lost Property he acknowledges its unfathomability. He now seems to be a man who has come to terms with what fate has dealt him, and who, though no longer feeling as if he is in control of his life (as seems to be the case in The Prismatic Bezel and Success), senses there is some other power out there, with an artistic design.

In 1933, around the time that Sebastian begins his final work The Doubtful Asphodel, Roy Carswell paints a portrait of Sebastian in which Sebastian’s face appears as if reflected in a pool of water (116-17). V says the painting shows Sebastian looking “Narcissus-like” at his own reflection (117), yet surely it depicts Sebastian looking beyond his reflection to the depths below. Sebastian’s mission in life has been to find what lies beyond the self, but he is thwarted - just as Sebastian is seen peering intently into the water, yet no glimmer of discovery lightening his brow. However, the idea that Sebastian is portrayed looking into water for the answer (or solution) is brought to its culmination in The Doubtful Asphodel.

The theme of The Doubtful Asphodel, V says, is simple: “a man is dying” (172-73); but really the theme of the book is the hereafter, or rather, the nature of the hereafter. The novel’s title alludes to the Plain of Asphodel in The Odyssey, the place in the underworld where the dead dwell, leading a shadowy extension of their lives in the
The novel rises to a point where "a wave of light suddenly floods the book" (176), and the secret of what happens in death is intimated: the "absolute solution" is to be revealed. But the dying man, who has discovered the secret, dies before telling it, and the reader is left apparently as doubtful as ever. However, the answer to the nature of death is written all over the book. One of the novel's major themes is the sea: the dying man's thoughts are thrown up as if emerging from "grey seas"; a thought-image is tossed out onto the shore of consciousness, and presently returns to the ocean "where it sinks or is strangely transfigured" (173); the reader is kept ignorant as to where the dying man's deathbed stands "or floats"; the man's life is described as "wrecked" (173); V likens the thematic interplay of the novel to the music of "a Chinese buoy" (174), and even the climactic moment of illumination is described as a "wave" of light which "floods" the book (176). This theme of the sea is evocative of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The dying man's thought-images drawn back to the ocean to be "strangely transfigured" recalls Ariel's song in which the king's supposed death by drowning is referred to as a "sea-change / Into something rich and strange" (1.2.401-02). In addition, the dying man's "wrecked life" recalls the king's shipwreck in Shakespeare's play; while the description of the dying man's thought-images as "sluggish fancies which crawl and then unfurl eyed wings" (173) ties in with Ariel's notion of death as a transformation. If this evocation of *The Tempest* hints at death as a "sea-change" in Sebastian's novel, dissolution in water is also intimated in the "absolute solution." Death, *The Doubtful Asphodel* seems to suggest, will be a metamorphosis into something rich and strange.

Yet there is more to the novel's theme of the hereafter than that. V shows how *The Doubtful Asphodel* splits into three parts, corresponding with a threefold process of dying, whereby action is taken in turn "by the brain, the flesh, the lungs" (174). First, the brain considers certain ideas about death: "sham-clever thoughts" (174), and poetical and religious thoughts (175). Second, the physical sickness of the flesh smothers all thought in "mountains of pain" (175). And third, a moment of illumination arrives, when it is realized that the "absolute solution" is written all over the world; that the world is a landscape that can be spelled. In other words, it is realized that the world is appointed by a divine artist, and that one must observe it with an artistic eye in order to understand it: "Re-modelled and re-combined, the world yielded its sense to the soul as naturally as both breathed" (177). This is the action taken by the lungs, the "breathing" of the soul as it perceives the sense of the

108
world; that is, the “inspiration” of the soul when, having observed the world with an artistic eye, the divine artistry is revealed.

Just what is revealed to the dying man in his perception of this divine artistry is unknown. However, his failure to tell of his great discovery before he dies is perhaps meant to intimate to the reader that the real “absolute solution” is not attainable in this life; that the most one can do in viewing the world is to perceive the existence of the divine artistry but not its meaning or purpose. “The man is the book,” V says (173), which implies that he has an author, an author to whom he returns in death when the book is written. *The Doubtful Asphodel* seems to suggest that it is only then - in death - that all the answers are given; that, in fact, death itself is the “absolute solution.”

One passes through death’s “sea-change” and returns to the mind of the divine author, where one’s personal mystery - the “close-fitting dream of one’s own personality,” to quote Sebastian’s novel (177) - is solved and dissolved. There can be little doubt that this is Sebastian’s personal conclusion: one of the characters who goes through the shipwreck in *The Tempest* is called Sebastian. On completing *Success* Sebastian imagines himself as a kind of world-creating deity enjoying his “Sabbath rest” (88), but now it seems he is deferring to a higher authorial power.

At one point in his biography of Sebastian, V refers to what he calls Sebastian’s “literary journey of discovery” (109), and indeed, Sebastian’s literary works can be seen to reflect a journey of discovery, manifesting a development of ideas relating to his coming to terms with his mortality. In *The Prismatic Bezel* Sebastian deals with the idea of escaping his mortal self by means of an assumed identity. In *Success* he traces the lines of fate. These early novels are works of self-assurance, of a man who feels he has the measure of life. In *The Prismatic Bezel* death seems conquerable, in *Success* fate seems comprehensible, even benevolent. However, with the diagnosis of Lehmann’s disease, death, in a completely unexpected twist of fate, steps terrifyingly close, and suddenly Sebastian’s assured ideas are found wanting. In *The Funny Mountain* trilogy Sebastian seems to be lost in a dark and nightmarish world. His first two books deal with successful outcomes, goals achieved, but these stories intimate a despairing sense of the unattainability of his earlier dream of escaping his mortal self, and, in general, of the mystery of a life which can suddenly strike one down with an incurable illness. However, in *Lost Property* a new kind of equilibrium seems to emerge, a sense that in spite of the unattainability of true knowledge of life, there is nevertheless an intimation of a governing artistry. Sebastian’s friend, P. G. Sheldon, says that in the late 1920s, when *Lost Property* is begun, *The Doubtful Asphodel* was already casting its shadow on Sebastian, and that Sebastian was heading towards “a
certain imminent goal” (102), while V says Sebastian’s mood at this time can only be understood with reference to The Doubtful Asphodel, which would soon become “the outline of a shore” (104); and indeed, Lost Property displays the first ripples of The Doubtful Asphodel’s sea-death theme: the businessman referred to in the mis-addressed letters is a character called “Mortimer” (110, 112), a name which derives from the French mort, “dead,” and mer, “sea.” V says Lost Property represents “a setting of bearings” (109), and it seems that with this book, which is a semi-autobiographical summing up of his life, Sebastian is already setting his bearings for death, the “shore” of the undiscovered country, Sheldon’s “imminent goal”; a death where the unfathomable pattern of one’s life is solved when one returns to the divine artist. Finally, The Doubtful Asphodel represents the culmination of Sebastian’s journey of discovery, an acknowledgement that life remains a mystery, but that one’s mortal self is at last solved and dissolved in death when one returns to the mind of the divine artist. Sebastian’s is a journey of discovery which begins on the wrong path, reaches a dead end at a time of crisis, and then has to search for the right path, the right course: a journey with a change of direction, a knight move.

It appears, then, that Sebastian’s drive towards death - the discarding of his English persona and his life itself - after the diagnosis of Lehmann’s disease, and especially after Blauberg, is not a bitter and cynical resignation to his mortality, but a bid for personal apotheosis. Sebastian’s whole life has been a quest to penetrate his mortal self, to see beyond himself; and his recreating himself as “Sebastian Knight” is one of the ploys he adopts. However, with the diagnosis of Lehmann’s disease it seems that a new sense of vulnerability makes Sebastian realize the impossibility of touching a reality beyond his mortal self in his lifetime, and therefore the vanity and futility of his “Sebastian Knight” persona, which he consequently begins to discard. And the discarding of this vain persona becomes more emphatic when Sebastian begins to sense an unfathomable artistry in life, and starts to surrender to that artistic fate which will culminate in the “absolute solution” of death.

The affair with the Russian woman is essentially the vehicle for this surrender. Sebastian does not love Nina, nor is he fatally obsessed with an alluring woman. If his acute sense of mortality cuts him off from the life and dreams he had with Clare, it will certainly not bring him close to Nina. If his illness shows him the vanity of his former aspirations, it will certainly not obscure the vanity of an affair with a flighty woman. The affair is a display of deliberate recklessness, not romance, on Sebastian’s part. Nina the fickle is merely the agent of the unfathomable fate which will carry Sebastian to death. Her very name points to her role. “Rechnoy” is a
Russian adjective meaning “river” or “riverine,” and Nina is the river that will carry Sebastian to his “sea-death,” where his personal mystery will be solved; a “sea-death” which Sebastian immediately intimates in _Lost Property_ in another name, “Mortimer,” right after the affair begins. Nina is the femme fatale, the woman who Sebastian knows will be fatal to him; she is the rivermaid, the _rusalka_, who will lure the man to his watery death. She is a means to an end. In pursuing this Russian _rusalka_ Sebastian gradually discards his phoney English persona and his life itself, as he heads towards his true goal: death. He divests himself of all his earthly trappings, strips his soul bare of all vanities, before diving into the sea of death. In his 1933 portrait of Sebastian Roy Carswell considers including “the shadow of a hand” to symbolize Sebastian’s mistress, but ultimately decides against it (117-18). The result is that Carswell’s portrait is more representative of Sebastian’s actual state of mind at the time. Sebastian does not have his thoughts fixed on Nina, but on the watery death he begins to write of at this time in _The Doubtful Asphodel_. Nina is essentially incidental to Sebastian’s main quest, which is to unravel his personal mystery by means of the “sea-death.” In the final year of his life, following the break-up with Nina, Sebastian goes three times to see a film called _The Enchanted Garden_ (182). V wonders if Sebastian goes in order to get a glimpse of Nina, who V thinks may be in the film. Yet Sebastian, who has a copy of _The Invisible Man_ in his flat, surely goes to the film because of its evocation of H. G. Wells’s story, “The Door in the Wall,” in which Lionel Wallace’s childhood vision of an “enchanted garden” behind a green door serves as a premonition of paradise in the afterlife, of a magical realm accessible only in death. In his trio of visits to see the film - recalling Lionel Wallace’s three sightings of the green door in the final year of his life - Sebastian does not have his sights set on Nina, but on the hereafter; and this is the case throughout the entire relationship.

At the last, Sebastian ties up the loose ends of his life. He marks letters “to be destroyed” (36), tidies his flat, bequeaths everything to V. As a final act of making peace with his earthly life, and as a means of avoiding the loneliness which at the last minute is causing him a little nervous fear about death (he is troubled by the “bare branches and twigs” that he can see from his hospital window [184]), he writes to V, his only living relative, asking him to visit him before he dies. In his letter Sebastian refers to what are presumably his discarded identities (the Russian identity of his youth, the English identity of his adulthood), calling them “shed snake-skins” (183), since - one assumes - they revealed, like so many sloughed snakeskins, not a new life beneath, but merely the same inescapable pattern of self. Now, having resumed his Russian name, and taking solace for the first time in “the obvious and the ordinary”
Sebastian anticipates the sloughing off of a final snakeskin, or rather chrysalis - the shedding of his life itself in death, the metamorphosis, the only place where the self can be truly escaped.

Sebastian’s looking to death as a metamorphosis coincides, of course, with what V suggests happens: that Sebastian’s spirit enters him after death, metamorphoses into him. It has been suggested above that Sebastian and V are one and the same. Does Sebastian, then, really die? Could it be that he imagines his death and imagines entering a fictitious biographer, V, as a way of glimpsing the escape from the self and the return to the divine author which he anticipates in death? This would tie in with *The Prismatic Bezel* where Abeson stages his death and masquerades as Nosebag. Moreover, there is a suggestion that Sebastian contemplates writing a “fictitious biography” after completing *The Doubtful Asphodel* (38). Does this project evolve into *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*? Does Sebastian - in a swan-song before his health finally gives out - venture that one step further than *The Doubtful Asphodel* and imaginatively cross the boundary of death, to glimpse what lies beyond the mortal self, and to try and approach the divine author’s external perspective of his life?

It seems unlikely. If one suggests that Sebastian is the prime mover in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* - that he imagines his death and invents V - one has to contend with the fact that so many aspects of his life seem artificial. The chess patterning, for example: Sebastian, who consciously cultivates the chess connotations of his surname (he signs his youthful poems with a black knight [15]), has a long-term relationship with a woman called Bishop; his mother’s cousin, one H. F. Stainton, calls to mind the grandmaster and endorser of a famous chess-set, Howard Staunton (1810-74); and his mother dies at the town of Roquebrune, a name which echoes the word *roque*, an old French name for the rook (Golombek 411). In addition to this chess theme, there is a patterning of names relating to Sebastian’s gravitation towards death following the diagnosis of Lehmann’s disease. If “Rechnoy” suggests the river that will carry Sebastian to a “sea-death” intimated in the name “Mortimer,” the doctor who sends Sebastian to Blauberg, where he meets Nina Rechnoy, is called “Oates” (104), a name which conjures up an image of Lawrence Oates (1880-1912) who, during Captain Scott’s fateful expedition to the South Pole, deliberately stepped out into the blizzard to his death. There is also a numerical patterning in Sebastian’s life, based on the number 3 and its multiples: the move of the chess-knight consists of three squares; on the day of his father’s duel, Sebastian works at school on Pythagoras’s Theorem concerning right-angle triangles (12); Sebastian’s Cambridge college is Trinity (41); he goes three times to see the film *The Enchanted Garden*; he is born in 1899; 18 + 9
+ 9 = 36, and Sebastian lives at 36 Oak Park Gardens in a flat that has three rooms (34); he spends eighteen years in Russia, followed by eighteen years in Europe as “Sebastian Knight,” before reverting, at 36, to his original Russian name; and the telephone number of his Russian doctor is 61-93 (194), which transposed gives 1936, the present time in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Besides name and number patterns in Sebastian’s life, there is a basic symmetrical pattern in Sebastian’s œuvre: the first work, The Prismatic Bezel, reflects the last, The Doubtful Asphodel, in title (both have the form: “The + Adjective + Noun-ending-in-‘el’”), ternary structure, and theme (a probing of the life after death); Success mirrors Lost Property in its treatment of fate (indeed, a lost property office features in the earlier work [95]); and standing at the centre, The Funny Mountain trilogy splits into three, where the middle story, “Albinos in Black,” concerns the thesis and antithesis of life - the white and black - just as the trilogy itself stands at the symmetrical axis of Sebastian’s literary life, dividing thesis (the work prior to the crisis caused by the diagnosis of Lehmann’s disease) from antithesis (the work following the crisis).

If Sebastian had imagined his death and reviewed his life trying to glimpse the divine author’s artistry in it, he could not have uncovered such an elaborate level of artistic patterning. Surely Sebastian is presented as a conspicuously artificial character. If Sebastian and V are one and the same, it must be V, then, who has invented Sebastian; V who has written a fictitious biography about a character he has invented.

IV

But why would he do this? Why would V write a book about researching the life of a character who aims for personal apotheosis in death and dissolves into V himself? To answer that question one has to look closer at the nature of V’s search.

V says the meaning of Sebastian’s enigmatic behaviour is often disclosed in a “subconscious turn of this or that sentence put down by me” (32). Later he says: “if now and then unconscious cerebration has not led me to take the right turn in his private labyrinth, then my book is a clumsy failure” (181). The role of the subconscious in V’s quest for Sebastian Knight is emphasized at the end of the biography when V says 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” (202-03). V seems to be suggesting that Sebastian’s spirit enters his unconscious after death, and that he, V, then finds and follows the
undulations of that spirit within him. In other words, V finds and follows something within his unconscious; and indeed, there are intimations that V’s entire quest for Sebastian is a journey into his unconscious.

After receiving Sebastian’s death-bed letter, V has a dream in which he believes Sebastian is trying to tell him an important secret. The garbled sentence V brings out of his dream he likens to a common pebble which seemed like a jewel while it lay beneath the water (188). And in those dreamy-watery depths of his subconscious V seems to carry out his whole search for Sebastian Knight.

Sebastian appears to be a creature of the water. Carswell’s portrait shows Sebastian’s face reflected in a pool; Sebastian regards death as a “sea-change” and an “absolute solution”; and his affair with Nina Rechnoy is symbolically the river that carries him to the sea of death. Sebastian’s whole life, in fact, seems river-like. During his youthful romance with Natasha Rosanov, Sebastian rows down a river in the “golden” air of the “dreamland” of Russia (136, 138), images that evoke the lines of verse at the close of *Through the Looking-Glass* which depict life as a dream-like stream: “Ever drifting down the stream - / Lingering in the golden gleam - / Life, what is it but a dream?” Indeed, V refers to his biography of Sebastian as a “stream” (123), and speaks of following “the bends” of Sebastian’s life (32). Other images of water appear in connection with Sebastian. As a boy Sebastian paints with water-colours (14), and his early poems are full of “the call of the sea” (15). When Sebastian learns of his heart condition he is holidaying by the sea (85-87), and he receives treatment for his illness at an Alsatian spa, where there is “Good water,” according to Silbermann (126). The date of Sebastian’s death seems to V to be like a reflection of Sebastian’s name “in a pool of rippling water” (181). Moreover, if V regards his biography as a stream, he literally gets wet in his quest for Sebastian: it is “raining hard” when he leaves the governess in Switzerland (21); it is “raining too hard” to view the Backs when he visits Sebastian’s college friend in Cambridge (49); and on his taxi ride to St Damier to see the dying Sebastian, rain sweeps against the window-panes (196-97). Furthermore, puddles, snow-falls, rainbows, umbrellas and raincoats appear as recurrent motifs throughout the text.

If V plunges into sunless seas in search of Sebastian, he also descends into the world of sleep and dreams. V says: “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” (135); and at an earlier stage in his investigations, V likens his lack of progress to the “leaden sluggishness of dream-endeavour” (122-23). The dream
atmosphere of the biography is established right at the start when V uses an old postcard to conjure up the St Petersburg of Sebastian’s birth: the picture shows a “dream-wide street” with droshkies all awry (4). V depicts Sebastian with his first love in the “dreamland” of Russia; and later in life Sebastian is seen by Roy Carswell getting into a train wearing bedroom slippers (114). Moreover, in the story of her relationship with Sebastian, which she thinly disguises as an account of events in Helene von Graun’s life, Madame Lecerf tells of Sebastian’s speaking of “his dreams, and the dreams in his dreams, and the dreams in the dreams of his dreams” (157), a formula which is analogous to the structure of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, where Sebastian and his dreams are all part of V’s own dream: dreams within dreams. Indeed, in The Doubtful Asphodel Sebastian refers to “the close-fitting dream of one’s own personality” (177).

V’s quest into the realm of sleep and dreams in search of Sebastian culminates at the end of the biography in his journey to St Damier, a place whose very name is an anagram of “dreams it” and “is dreamt”: V dreams it, Sebastian is dreamt. The journey remains in V’s memory as a kind of “distorted dream impression” (162), and indeed, the impetus for this part of V’s quest comes from a dream, the dream in which he senses that Sebastian is trying to communicate to him something of extreme importance. The night following the dream, V boards a train to Paris, and finds himself in a third-class carriage packed with dozing passengers: “Somebody’s heavily-booted dream tried to get in between my shins and then was slowly withdrawn” (190). The dark, rocking compartment, V recalls, “seemed to me a section of the dream I had had” (190); and while V himself tries to get some sleep, an “optical paintbox” of images drifts across his inner vision as in a dream (192). The whole atmosphere of this train-journey is of a voyage into darkness and the unknown, the dark glass of the windows providing an objective image of obscured consciousness, of seeing through a glass darkly. Between two of these windows V notices a map which, he states, “had nothing to do with the course of my journey” (192); it is a metaphor for his entering the uncharted territory of sleep, dreams, and the subconscious. The same idea resurfaces in V’s taxi-ride from Paris, where the driver loses his way in the dark and labours fruitlessly over his map (196-97). On the final short train-journey to St Damier, V is concerned that he might have dozed off and missed the station (197); and when he finally arrives at the hospital, he finds the night-porter wearing slippers and presenting to him a face which glistens with “the slime of sleep” (198). V’s journey ends with his being shown to the room of a sleeping man, an unconscious man, whose breath is so low that, V recalls, “I could
hardly distinguish it from my own” (201). It is as if V’s whole quest for, and biography of, Sebastian Knight leads him to a metaphor for his own unconscious.

V and Sebastian are half-brothers, and I suggest this hints metaphorically at their being two halves of a single persona. Sebastian is V’s other half, his subconscious self. One of the images in the “optical paintbox” which drifts across V’s mind in the train is “Sebastian’s unshaven chin” (192). What, presumably, V actually sees is the image of his own chin as reflected in the dark glass of the window: V says he feels “excruciatingly unshaven” and has a “bristly cheek” (194). Sebastian Knight is the man in V’s mirror; and that is why V’s search for Sebastian takes V right back through his own life, and his own past. Sebastian is another side of V himself. “Our life is two-fold: Sleep hath its own world,” says Byron in “The Dream,” a poem to which V refers when describing Sebastian’s first romance (137); and indeed, Sebastian is V’s other half, his subconscious self who inhabits the world of dreams.

V

So why does V write a book about searching for, and blending with, a character who represents his subconscious self? At one point V says of Sebastian: “Two modes of his life question each other and the answer is his life itself, and that is the nearest one ever can approach a human truth” (135). V’s book, I suggest, depicts a quest to unite two “modes” of his own life in order to discover his “life itself.” That is, V, the conscious self, searches for Sebastian, his subconscious self, in order to attain the complete self. Thesis searches for antithesis in order to attain the synthesis. And this synthesis, this complete self, is, I suggest, figured in the unknown “someone” who is referred to in the very last words of the book; V states: “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows.”

However, there is more to it than that. On the literal level V’s search for Sebastian is a search for an artist, and on the figurative level, too, I suggest, V’s quest is a quest for an artist, his artistic self. In art the conscious self draws upon the boundless creativity of the dream-making subconscious to create the work of art. That is, conscious self blends with subconscious self and becomes the artist. Indeed, is it not only in art that the conscious and subconscious selves truly and harmoniously unite? In other words, is it not only in art that the complete self - one’s personal synthesis - is attained? This is the idea behind V’s quest. V, the conscious self, searches for
Sebastian, his subconscious self, in order to unite with him as the artistic self, the complete self, the unknown “someone.”

V’s book, then, his fictitious biography of Sebastian Knight, is a depiction of the quest for his artistic self. The quest - and therefore the book too - is presented in a binary form, as a convergence of the two halves of the personality - conscious and subconscious - which unite to form the artist. On the one hand there is V’s journey of discovery; and on the other Sebastian’s journey of discovery. Chronologically, the former follows the latter, but in terms of narrative structure they run parallel (V intends to follow Sebastian’s life “stage by stage without overtaking him” [51]), and converge together at St Damier hospital where, V implies, Sebastian’s dead spirit enters him. The idea is that the two halves of the personality move towards one another on either side of the mirror. As V, conscious self, searches inwards into his inner life for Sebastian, he imagines Sebastian, his subconscious self, searching outwards, trying to see beyond his mortal self, and ultimately trying to break out of his life through death; and while V searches for the artist inside himself, Sebastian searches for the artist outside himself, the divine artist. In short, V, as it were, imagines himself as a leaf falling to the pool of his subconscious, with Sebastian his reflection rising to meet him out of the watery depths.

As the two lives gravitate to the point of union at St Damier, V races to see Sebastian, whose life is hurtling towards death. On the train V forgets the name of the hospital, and, in his attempt to remember it, can form only broken sounds as in a dream: “Mar...Matamar...Mar” (191). “Mar” sounds like mare, the Italian for “sea,” while “Matamar” sounds like “Mortimer” (evoking the idea of “sea-death”) and “metamorphosis.” V, on his dream-like train journey, is as it were heading towards the sea of his unconscious, where he will undergo “sea-death” and metamorphose with Sebastian. Indeed, while V sits at the bedside of the unconscious patient at St Damier, he says his former eagerness to learn Sebastian’s secret has been “drowned” in a “wave of love” (200). Sebastian likewise heads towards that same sea, which for him is the sea of his death; and the two men dissolve together in the “absolute solution,” blurring into one in the murky darkness of the hospital room. And thus conscious self, searching for the artist within, and subconscious self, searching for the

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2 Nabokov here dismisses the psychoanalytical theories of Freud, whom he called “the Viennese witchdoctor” (Foreword to Invitation to a Beheading). Where Freud presents the subconscious as an entity that is in conflict with the conscious mind, and as a well of universal primitive urges, Nabokov in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight portrays the subconscious as a harmonious partner of the conscious mind in a psychological terrain as unique as the individual himself. As if to clarify his anti-Freudian stance, Nabokov has Sebastian Knight chide those who have been “shaken up in a modern way with a dash of Freud or ‘stream of consciousness’ or whatnot” (53).
artist without, unite to form the complete self, the artist, the "someone" who V and Sebastian both are.

Of course, if V's book depicts the quest for his artistic self, it represents a self-reflexive formula, since V's book is a work of art, a novel. V the artist is already a fait accompli, and the quest, therefore, is a retrospective metaphor for the construction of his artistic self.

Or is it? Is it really V's metaphor? If one looks closer at V's life his position becomes less secure, as his personal reality is seen to be somewhat shaky. V's life is so dovetailed with the fictional Sebastian Knight's as to be impossible to extract on its own. It is said, for instance, that V's father dies following a duel fought over Sebastian's mother; but if Sebastian is fictional, it puts a question-mark next to his mother's reality, and therefore also the reality of the duel and the death of V's father, a landmark event of V's life. It is, then, impossible to see a clear reality for V that is independent of the fictional Sebastian Knight; the two men's lives are inextricably bound up with one another. Thus V, too, in the end, appears as a fictional creation, and consequently grades away from the focal centre of the work. So The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is ultimately the unknown "someone"'s book, his metaphor for the construction of the artistic self: conscious self (V) searches for, and merges with, subconscious self (Sebastian Knight), and becomes the artist, the unknown "someone" - the ghost of the author writing the book. Thus, in the end, it is that unknown "someone" who "dreams it" and V, like Sebastian, who "is dreamt."

VI

However, if The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is essentially a metaphor for the construction of the artistic self, there is a further, personal dimension to the metaphor for Nabokov. V's quest for Sebastian Knight is a quest for an English artist, and this can surely be seen as a metaphor for V. Nabokov's own search for the English artist within himself as he embarks on his first English novel. For Nabokov, contemplating a major creative work in another language, the process of artistic creation was enormously complicated by the arduous preliminary of constructing a plausible artistic self. What had formerly been a natural and automatic process was turned into a matter of self-conscious construction. Nabokov, a Russian, was as it were faced with the problem of fusing conscious and unconscious selves into a synthesis that was English. The working out of this problem became the central theme of the novel. The
book, then, is ultimately an elaborate metaphor for its own construction: conscious Russian self searches for English writer in the depths of his unconscious, and the result is the unknown “someone,” the ghost of Nabokov writing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, a novel by an English artist who is a Russian.
If *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* represents an elaborate metaphor for its own construction, there remains something of a problem. For if the idea is that V, the conscious self, unites with Sebastian Knight, the subconscious self, to form the unknown “someone,” the artist, that union in a sense does not take place entirely convincingly. It was stated at the beginning of the preceding essay that while V claims to unite with Sebastian, Sebastian remains a hazy figure who eludes V throughout his biographical research; that Sebastian’s life seems to be essentially remote and unattainable to V. Thus, while the fact of V’s and Sebastian’s being one and the same may be clear enough, there is a feeling that a certain distance lies between them, as if they are still looking at one another through a glass darkly, instead of face to face. One is reminded of the image relating to V’s dream, where V speaks of reaching into water for a jewel and pulling out a pebble (188): it is as if V reaches into the watery depths of his unconscious for Sebastian and pulls out something which may symbolize a jewel, but which somehow lacks vividness and fails to sparkle. Thus, the novel appears slightly anomalous, presenting a metaphor for its own construction which does not quite work satisfactorily, which does not quite “click,” leaving a sense of the book’s being somehow incomplete.

Consider a comment of V’s on *The Doubtful Asphodel*:

> 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. I don’t know any other book that gives one this special sensation, and perhaps this was the author’s special intention (178).

One might apply V’s observation to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* itself, where after an initial reading one is left with the “special sensation” of something not quite finished, of an idea unfulfilled. V suggests that an “absolute solution” might be concealed in Sebastian’s novel in certain passages he has read too hastily, but then leaves the tantalizing possibility dangling in the air, neglecting to pursue the idea
further. However, if one takes V’s lead and looks again at *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, at passages one perhaps has read “too hastily,” a new meaning begins to emerge. More than that, the novel turns inside out, and a whole new plot, a new drama comes to light, where Sebastian is no longer a hazy and elusive figure, and where the real life of Sebastian Knight takes on a completely different appearance.

The novel passes through the mirror into a fantastical level of reality. Beyond the looking-glass, Sebastian Knight, the English author, is seen to exist within a world of English — or rather British — fiction, his new life being a distillation of Sherlock Holmes’s cases and the Scarlet Pimpernel’s adventures; of H. G. Wells’s fantasies and Agatha Christie’s mysteries. Sebastian inhabits the world of Kipling’s Great Game and Carroll’s wonderlands, a world which embraces the dark side of reality explored in Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. As in Roy Carswell’s portrait, one gazes beyond the bright reflections on the surface of the pool to the shifting shadows in the depths. The reader’s journey through the mirror contains strange — and terrifying — visions, but ultimately leads to a deeper and more complex “solution” to the elaborate metaphor presented by the novel.

II

If a flippant literary critic sums up Sebastian Knight as “a dull man writing broken English” (5), a close examination of objects in Sebastian’s flat suggests there is more to Sebastian’s life than obviously meets the eye.

Sorting through Sebastian’s personal effects following his brother’s death, V finds a slip of paper on which the following words appear:

As he a heavy A heavy sleeper, Roger Rogerson, old Rogerson bought old Rogers bought, so afraid Being a heavy sleeper, old Rogers was so afraid of missing to-morrows. He was a heavy sleeper. He was mortally afraid of missing to-morrow’s event glory early train glory so what he did was to buy and bring home in a to buy that evening and bring home not one but eight alarm clocks of different sizes and vigour of ticking nine eight eleven alarm clocks of different sizes ticking which alarm clocks nine alarm clocks as a cat has nine which he placed which made his bedroom look rather like a (37-38).

V takes the passage to be a rough fragment of a story that Sebastian had begun to write; however, the passage has been constructed rather more carefully. Consider the
numbers mentioned: “not one but eight alarm clocks . . . nine eight eleven alarm
clocks . . . nine alarm clocks as a cat has nine.” Excluding the number 1, which is
negated (“not one but eight”), the numbers form the following sequence: 8, 9, 8, 11, 9,
9. In this sequence there is one multiple of one (11, a prime number); there are two
multiples of two (8, 8); and three multiples of three (9, 9, 9). Thus the numbers fall
into a triadic arrangement: 1 (11); 2 (8, 8); 3 (9, 9, 9). Indeed, if, in a triad, thesis
blends with antithesis to form the synthesis, so 1 plus 2 equals 3, and 11 plus 16 (8
plus 8) equals 27 (9 plus 9 plus 9). Moreover, if the numbers form a pattern amongst
themselves, they also have a wider relevance. 27 plus 16 plus 11 equals 54: there is a
total of 109 words in the passage, and depending on whether one reads “to-morrows”
and “to-morrow’s” as the same word or as two different words, there are, in that
total of 109, either 54 individual words, or 54 repeated words. Furthermore, 27 plus 16
multiplied by 11 equals 473, and there are 473 letters in total in the passage. What V
takes to be a rough fragment of a story appears to be something quite different,
something more intricate.

Another curious object V finds in Sebastian’s flat is a book into which Sebastian has
pasted newspaper cuttings. V notes, when he peruses this book at leisure, that all the
cuttings refer to “incongruous or dream-absurd incidents which had occurred in the
most trivial places and conditions. Mixed metaphors too, I perceived, met with his
approval, as he probably considered them to belong to the same faintly nightmare
category” (37). Mr Goodman, on occasion, has caught Sebastian in the act of pasting
cuttings into this book, but Sebastian neither tells Goodman of the book’s contents,
nor allows him to view it (Goodman imagines the cuttings to be reviews of
Sebastian’s works); indeed, Sebastian keeps the book locked up in his desk (114). In
discussing The Prismatic Bezel V states that the novel is Sebastian’s parody of the
modern reaction from “the Sherlock Holmes vogue” (92), and Sebastian’s interest in
Sherlock Holmes is suggestive. Holmes takes a great deal of time and trouble to paste
newspaper cuttings into a whole series of albums, or “commonplace books,” as
Watson calls them (Adventures 216; Memoirs 114; HLB 95). In these books Holmes
keeps a record of a vast range of events and people for future reference in solving a
case, and in one he files the agony columns of various London journals: “‘Dear me!’
said he, turning over the pages, ‘what a chorus of groans, cries, and bleatings! What a
rag-bag of singular happenings! But surely the most valuable hunting-ground that
ever was given to a student of the unusual!’” (HLB 99-100).
V also finds in Sebastian’s desk an envelope containing photographs. He expects to find “lots of girls,” but he is mistaken:

The two dozen or so of photographs I shook out of a large envelope with the laconic Mr. H. written on top in Sebastian’s hand, all featured one and the same person at different stages of his life: first a moonfaced urchin in a vulgarly cut sailor suit, next an ugly boy in a cricket-cap, then a pug-nosed youth and so on till one arrived at a series of full-grown Mr. H. - a rather repellent bulldog type of man, getting steadily fatter in a world of photographic backgrounds and real front gardens. I learnt who the man was supposed to be when I came across a newspaper clipping attached to one of the photographs:

“Author writing fictitious biography requires photos of gentleman, efficient appearance, plain, steady, teetotaller, bachelors preferred. Will pay for photos childhood, youth, manhood to appear in said work” (38).

There is something odd about asking for photographs of a real person to use in a fictitious biography. However, consider the Sherlock Holmes story, “The Bruce-Partington Plans.” Holmes and Watson search the London flat of a man called Hugo Oberstein. In the study Holmes finds a locked cash-box on the desk, and, prising the box open, discovers “an envelope with some small newspaper slips inside it,” which he shakes out onto the table. The newspaper slips prove to be a record of a series of messages in the advertisements of The Daily Telegraph agony column. Just as the advertisement V discovers requests certain photographs in return for payment, so the newspaper advertisements Holmes finds request certain “goods” in return for “Payment in hard cash” (HLB 61).

If the echo of the Holmes story raises a question-mark over the photographs Sebastian requests for a “biography,” consider another literary connection. In the Somerset Maugham story, “Giulia Lazzari,” Ashenden is shown by his boss, R., photographs of a man whom the Secret Service wants to track down, one Chandra Lal, “a fat-faced, swarthy man, with full lips and a fleshy nose,” looking ill-at-ease in European clothes (Maugham 88). Like Mr H, Chandra Lal is shown getting fatter with the passage of time, and is pictured in different costumes, and in one case against a photographic background. In addition, the person requested in Sebastian’s newspaper advertisement is a “teetotaller,” and Chandra “neither drinks nor smokes” (Maugham 89).
Ashenden lives at 36 Chesterfield Street, Mayfair (Maugham 87), and Sebastian, in Oak Park Gardens, also lives at number 36. Ashenden is an English author, like Sebastian, but what is of particular interest about him is that he, at the same time, is a British spy.

III

In 1919 Sebastian Knight enters Trinity College, Cambridge, where he studies English literature; and there he undergoes a certain transformation. At first Sebastian tries to be “a standard undergraduate” (44), but after a year or so he suddenly drops out of the rhythm of college life and becomes more solitary in his habits. On the face of it, Sebastian retreats into the lonely world of the writer, as he makes his first efforts to become an author in English, but there are intimations that this period marks the beginning of something quite different.

V describes the onset of Sebastian’s transformation in this way: “Then, after three or four terms of this sort of thing a curious change came over Sebastian” (45). There is an echo here of the Holmes story, “The Creeping Man.” The story concerns the strange case of Professor Presbury of Camford University, a fictional conflation of Cambridge and Oxford. The professor’s university life has proceeded quite happily without any untoward events, but then he makes an unexpected trip to Prague which brings about a radical disturbance in the current of his life: “From that time onwards a curious change came over the Professor” (Case-Book 54). Presbury seems to be under a shadow, and the people around him at Camford feel that he is not the man they had known. The cause of the professor’s “curious change” is his becoming involved in a secret transaction with a shady colleague.

Following his “curious change” Sebastian begins to skip lectures, and his acquaintance at college comes to check on him. He finds Sebastian in bed, smoking, with cigarette ash all over his pillow and inkstains on the sheet. Calling again after lunch, the acquaintance finds Sebastian still in bed, smoking; and later in the afternoon he leaves Sebastian huddled up by the fire in his dressing-gown (45-46). Supposedly, Sebastian has been occupying his time with writing a poem, but there are some suggestive points about this episode. The acquaintance relates that Sebastian would “only grunt” in reply when he called in, and that Sebastian would cheer up “like a monkey” when later he brought him a bunch of bananas (46). In “The Creeping Man” Professor Presbury’s “curious change” is caused by his taking a
certain serum which he obtains from his shady colleague, and this serum produces monkey-like behaviour in the professor: at night Presbury secretly leaves his bed to embark on bizarre sprees, taunting his dog and climbing the ivy-clad walls of his house. And there is another Holmes echo here. In “The Golden Pince-Nez” Professor Coram, a Russian posing as an Englishman, lies in bed for half the day, smoking prolifically, with nicotine stains on his hands and beard, while engaged in compiling a book on religion. Sebastian Knight, by comparison, a Russian who is cultivating the appearance of an Englishman, lies in bed for most of the day, smoking, with inkstains on his sheet, while working on a poem. Coram is visited in his bedroom by Sherlock Holmes who is investigating a murder that has occurred in the professor’s house; Holmes leaves for lunch, and then returns to the professor’s bedroom in the afternoon, to find Coram dressed and out of bed but still smoking. Sebastian is visited in his bedroom by his acquaintance, who hovers around for a while and then returns again after lunch to find Sebastian still smoking. While Holmes is having his lunch, Coram secretly passes food to a woman - the very murderer for whom Holmes is searching - who is hidden in a compartment behind one of his bookshelves. The behaviour of the two Holmesian professors, Presbury and Coram, who get out of bed to engage in secret activities behind the backs of those around them, raises a question as to the supposedly bed-bound Sebastian’s occupation during his acquaintance’s absence.

Sebastian’s connection with the Sherlock Holmes stories at Cambridge sheds an interesting light on another of his activities. Following his “curious change,” Sebastian cycles in the dusk out of Cambridge along a certain path skirting meadows, and there sits on a fence and gazes across the countryside (47). In the story, “The Missing Three-Quarter,” Sherlock Holmes investigates the disappearance of a Cambridge University student. At Cambridge Holmes hires a bicycle one dark evening and rides out of the town and into the outlying country roads; his purpose is to follow a person who he believes is implicated in the student’s disappearance (Return 258), and one of the things Sebastian is imagined to be thinking of while on his evening ride through the Cambridgeshire countryside is a girl he “once followed” across the common (47). The image of Sebastian as a lone male cyclist on a country road also calls to mind the Holmes story, “The Solitary Cyclist,” in which Bob Carruthers tails Violet Smith by bicycle along country roads. Indeed, if Sebastian thinks of a cockney girl he once followed across the common and accosted and kissed, Violet Smith is a London girl who is followed along a road which skirts a heath, and is ultimately accosted and subjected to a forced marriage.
At the end of his ride Sebastian looks out over the countryside and contemplates the world around him and his place within it. Seated on a fence and considering - among other things - the “old, old question of Who are you?” (48), he resembles the White Knight in *Through the Looking-Glass*, who sings: “I saw an aged aged man, / A-sitting on a gate. / ‘Who are you, aged man?’ I said. / ‘And how is it you live?’” (Carroll 214-15). The White Knight rides to a certain place in the countryside, and there briefly meets Alice, to whom he sings his song with “the setting sun gleaming through his hair,” and with “the black shadows of the forest behind” (Carroll 214). Sebastian, who has taken the name “Knight” at Cambridge, rides out on his bicycle - an “iron horse” - and, V imagines, thinks of such things as a young girl he briefly met, and a “misty sunset beyond a black Russian fir-wood” (47-48). Sebastian’s link with the White Knight here is suggestive, as the White Knight is following his adversary, the Red Knight.

One thing V feels confident Sebastian is thinking of during his trip into the country is the image of a “ghostly battlefield which he would cross in due time” (48). Ostensibly, this “ghostly battlefield” relates to Sebastian’s career as an English author; indeed, it is later said that during the composition of his novel *Success* Sebastian felt exhausted after “battling with a particularly rebellious chapter” (85). However, given the evocation of the White Knight’s clash with the Red Knight, the idea of a “ghostly battlefield” is cast in a rather different light. Indeed, if Sebastian contemplates this “battlefield” while seated atop a fence and surveying the countryside before him, one is reminded of Alice, atop the little hill, realizing that the countryside before her is “marked out just like a large chess-board” (Carroll 141), a chessboard which is the “battlefield” for the White Knight.

In *Lost Property* Sebastian speaks of having “Kipling moods” (66), and Sebastian’s mood, as he sits on the fence, seems to echo a passage in *Kim*. Kim, travelling to college by train, contemplates his curious position:

“It is my *Kismet*. No man can escape his *Kismet*. But I am to pray to Bibi Miriam, and I am a Sahib.” He looked at his boots ruefully. “No; I am Kim. This is the great world, and I am only Kim. Who is Kim?” He considered his own identity, a thing he had never done before, till his head swam. He was one insignificant person in all this roaring whirl of India, going southward to he knew not what fate (Kipling 166).

Compare this with Sebastian sitting on the fence, asking himself “Who are you?,” and contemplating the significance of one pebble “among millions and millions of
pebbles,” while anticipating a journey across a certain landscape, a “ghostly battlefield,” which it is his “destiny” - his kismet - to make. The echo is suggestive, as Kim is in the process of being recruited into the greatest of chess-like “ghostly battlefields”: the Great Game of British intelligence.

The image of knights and battlefields leads to Sebastian’s friend at Cambridge, D. W. Gorget, since a gorget is a piece of armour worn round the neck. V states that Sebastian meets Gorget fifteen years prior to his, V’s, visit to Cambridge (42). As V visits Cambridge in February 1936, this puts Sebastian’s first meeting with Gorget around February 1921. The date seems significant. Sebastian’s “curious change” is said to take place “after three or four terms” of his time at Cambridge. Sebastian’s fifth term would be Lent Term 1921, running from January to March, the period when he meets Gorget. If Professor Presbury’s “curious change” comes about as a result of dealings with a certain colleague, there is an intimation that Sebastian’s “curious change” coincides with his getting to know a certain fellow-student. It is a suggestive point. For Gorget’s name also has more modern military associations: a gorget is a crescent-shaped badge worn round the neck by officers on duty. Gorget spurns the academic garb of his peers, and blithely goes about campus “in a town-hat plus umbrella” (42). The image of a gorget as the badge of a military officer, coupled with Gorget’s civilian dress, which is virtually synonymous with the corridors of power in London, conjures up an image of a certain discreet government service. Moreover, there is another suggestive point about Gorget’s name. Immediately prior to his “curious change” Sebastian visits a cinema with a “silent companion” (45). A dark cinema is the classic venue for a secret meeting, and if Sebastian’s “silent companion” is given no name, one notes that Gorget’s initials are shared by D. W. Griffith (1878-1948), the silent film maker who recruited characters into a world of shadows, a “through-the-looking-glass” world which one might call the “great game” of the black-and-white screen.

Kim is recruited into British intelligence to serve in the great secret war against the Russians, and although a revolution had intervened, and a radical upheaval in Russian society, the old battle lines were still drawn in the twentieth century. British intelligence in the early 1920s was obsessed with Soviet subversion, not only in India but also at home. It had some reason to be. While the Soviets had established a permanent trade delegation in London in 1921, by means of which communist activity in Britain was encouraged and sponsored (Costello 87-116), Soviet subversion was going on in the early 1920s in Cambridge as well. With Ernest Rutherford heading pioneering work in nuclear physics at the Cavendish Laboratory, Cambridge was the
world’s leading centre of scientific research in the early 1920s, and this made the university a major target of Soviet intelligence (Costello 47, 115-16). A Russian emigré at Cambridge whose allegiances were with England, and who could blend Kim-like into a Russian language setting, would have been an invaluable asset at this time to the British Security Service, MI5. And one notes that if Sebastian’s bike ride into the country evokes the White Knight’s pursuit of, and clash with, the Red Knight, Sebastian Knight is a “White” Russian and the Soviets are the “Reds.”

Indeed, there are hints of Soviet sympathies on the campus around Sebastian - and very close to home. Sebastian’s acquaintance at Cambridge is planning a book called *The Laws of Literary Imagination* (45). The title indicates a scientific rationalist approach to literature, but there are also intimations of a more political nature, as the principal force imposing laws on the imaginations of writers in the early 1920s was the Soviet government, as Nabokov has pointed out. However, if the acquaintance’s book hints at a communist leaning, there are intimations that his political views also embrace another set of ideas. When V observes that Cambridge students are now all carrying umbrellas which formerly were an unfashionable accessory, Sebastian’s acquaintance remarks that Gorget’s umbrella “has bred” (43); and it is he who brings Sebastian a bunch of bananas and states that Sebastian behaved “like a monkey” (46). These observations hint at a Darwinist view of the world, a subject which forms the background to “The Creeping Man.” Moreover, the acquaintance’s book about the laws of literary imagination wins the “Montgomery Prize” (45), recalling Montgomery, Doctor Moreau’s assistant on the evil island where the Beast People chant a set of commandments called “The Law.” If there are hints of Soviet sympathies in the Cambridge acquaintance’s world-view, the Darwinist intimations evoke Nazism, the other force which was rising in the 1920s with the aim of imposing on the very fabric of human society a set of authoritarian laws. These hints of dubious political views held by Sebastian’s acquaintance highlight certain other aspects of his personality. During his interview with V, the acquaintance has virtually nothing complimentary to say about Sebastian. On the contrary, while he acknowledges his own ineptitude for tennis, he simultaneously mocks Sebastian’s sporting abilities, saying he was “definitely poor at games” (43). He criticizes Sebastian for “trying to out-England England” (44); he says Sebastian “pained” him following his “curious change” (45); he points out inadequacies in Sebastian’s spoken English (46), and states that Sebastian’s Cambridge poems are the kind of little things which are “the darlings of oblivion” (47). Moreover, from this acquaintance V learns of Sebastian’s bicycle rides into the country. If there are hints of the clandestine about these bike

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1 See “Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers” (*LRL* 1-12).

128
rides, how does the acquaintance know of them, and of their destination? Furthermore, following Sebastian’s “curious change,” it is Sebastian’s acquaintance who calls unexpectedly at his rooms, “hovering around,” only to return again later, similarly unannounced. Indeed, if in this scene Sebastian’s acquaintance is aligned with Sherlock Holmes who comes to snoop around Professor Coram’s bedroom, he corresponds also with the young man who shares Professor Presbury’s house, and who keeps the strangely altered professor under observation, and follows him on one of his monkey-like excursions. With his questionable political views, his uncomplimentary comments, and his efforts to keep an eye on Sebastian, there is an intimation that Sebastian’s Cambridge acquaintance is not the great friend we are led to believe.

In his final year at Cambridge Sebastian works a good deal: “his subject - English literature - was a vast and complicated one; but this same period was marked by his sudden trips to London, generally without the authorities’ leave” (48). The pairing of English literature with a Cambridge student’s unauthorized trips to London evokes the figure of Christopher Marlowe, who, as a graduate student at Cambridge, and a rising English author, was absent without leave from university for some months in 1587. The reason for Marlowe’s absence is that he was an agent in the British Secret Service, and was engaged in a mission on the Continent against Catholic conspirators who were plotting the downfall of Elizabeth I. Marlowe’s absence got him into trouble with the Cambridge authorities, and it is after one of his unauthorized trips to London that Sebastian has a strange talk with his tutor. The tutor tells Sebastian all the Russian words he picked up on “a journey to Moscow years ago” (48-49), but Sebastian denies having been born in Russia, and claims to be a Bulgarian; and when the tutor asks for a sample of the language, Sebastian makes up a new dialect on the spot. The tutor, a linguist, is greatly puzzled by this, but then something suddenly occurs to him: “it dawned upon him that Sebastian.” (49).

The tutor is called Mr Jefferson, a name which evokes Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), third president of the United States. This evocation in turn calls up another. Thomas Jefferson is the author of the Declaration of Independence, a document which came into effect on 4 July 1776, and, as W. H. Auden has pointed out, 4 July is “as memorable a day in the history of literature as it is in American history” (Gardner 21), the reason being that it was on 4 July 1862, on a boat trip up the Thames, that Charles Dodgson (alias Lewis Carroll) first unfolded what was then called “Alice’s Adventures Underground.” The image of Charles Dodgson not only ties in with the “vast and complicated” field of English literature, but Dodgson, like Sebastian’s
college tutor, was an Oxbridge don who once made a journey to Moscow. In coming up with his fabricated Bulgarian dialect Sebastian “invented a new idiom on the spur of the moment” (49). The phrase recalls the White Knight in *Through the Looking-Glass*, one of whose attributes is his capacity for creating bizarre and ineffectual devices which he indicates proudly with the refrain: “It’s my own invention” (Carroll ch.8). If Charles Dodgson saw through the looking-glass to the White Knight taking part in a great game of chess, there is a suggestion that Sebastian’s Dodgson-like tutor, Jefferson, *sees through* Sebastian to the “Knight” who takes part in the Great Game; in other words, that what dawns upon Jefferson is that Sebastian is concealing his Russianness, and making unauthorized trips to London, for professional reasons; that he, like Alice, is having adventures “underground.” There is a further reason for thinking so. If Sebastian’s tutor’s name evokes Charles Dodgson, it also recalls Nabokov’s own Cambridge tutor, Ernest Harrison (1877-1943), who served in the Intelligence Department of the Admiralty in the First World War, and was known in Cambridge as “Spy.”2 There are intimations that Sebastian’s college tutor sees in Sebastian a secret agent, recognizing in his young student another Christopher Marlowe.

IV

In *Lost Property* Sebastian describes a visit to the editor of a review who, he hoped, “might print some of my Cambridge poems” (65). Sebastian does not state explicitly where or when this visit takes place, but V quotes the extract from *Lost Property* after referring to a time of Sebastian’s life which he calls “the close of his Cambridge period” (64). Sebastian’s visit to the editor recalls a significant episode in *Kim*.

Sebastian looks through the editor’s window to a view of “roofs and chimneys,” and while he is doing so “a queer musty smell in the room (of roses rotting in the waste-paper basket?)” causes him to forget what he means to say, and instead to start telling the editor - whom he is meeting for the first time - about the business of a mutual friend (65-66). Kim goes up to Simla to see a jeweller called Mr Lurgan, and when Lurgan and Kim go out onto the back veranda of Lurgan’s shop, “they looked down into their neighbours’ chimney-pots, as is the custom of Simla” (Kipling 200), while when Kim first enters Lurgan’s shop, a fragrance “that smelt like all the temples of the East” is so overpowering that Kim forgets to address Lurgan - whom he is

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2 *The Times* (London) 30 March 1943, 6 (Harrison’s obituary); *SM* 199; Andrew, *Secret Service* 96 (Andrew incorrectly states that Harrison was on the staff at Oxford University).
meeting for the first time - in English, and starts to speak in the vernacular (Kipling 197). The view of chimneys, a strange overpowering smell, and the meeting of a man for the first time, link Kim’s experience in Lurgan’s shop with Sebastian’s in the office of the editor. It is a suggestive point. For Kim has been sent up to Lurgan by British intelligence to receive training in the ways of the Great Game.

Sebastian sees through the editor’s window “a combination of angles in the pattern of roofs and chimneys, all slightly distorted owing to a flaw in the glass of the window-pane,” and one of the things Lurgan gets Kim to do, in order to develop his powers of observation, is to play the Jewel Game, in which a combination of jewels is placed on a tray, the object being to memorize them in detail in as brief a time as possible. The first time Kim plays his observations are not particularly acute, but a Hindu boy, another of Lurgan’s pupils, is able to enumerate the gems in meticulous detail, including two “flawed sapphires,” four “flawed emeralds,” and a balas-ruby, “flawed” (Kipling 205). Just as Sebastian sees an angular pattern of roofs and chimneys framed in the flawed glass of the editor’s window, so the Hindu boy, following Kim, sees a combination of faceted gems, flawed, and framed by the tray.

The parallel with Kim extends. In the continuation of the extract from Lost Property Sebastian describes his “endless vague wanderings” round London. He states that these excursions now recur to him as the memory of “a sun-dazzled window suddenly piercing the blue morning mist or of beautiful black wires with suspended raindrops running along them” (66). After spending the night in Lurgan’s shop, Kim wakes to a bright sunny day, and is struck by the sight of Lurgan’s jewellery work on the table: “It blazed in the morning light - all red and blue and green flashes, picked out with the vicious blue-white spurt of a diamond here and there” (Kipling 200). The connection is suggestive. For if Sebastian engages in “endless vague wanderings” in London, his thoughts are sent on “long and intricate errands” while he looks through the editor’s window. Lurgan trains Kim to play the Jewel Game in order to develop in him the surveillance skills of a spy, and there is a suggestion that in his wanderings round London Sebastian has been sent by a certain Lurgan-like editor to play, as it were, the Jewel Game, that game of looking, memorizing, and reporting on what one has seen. Indeed, it is at this time that Sebastian speaks of his “Kipling moods” (66).

Consider the world in which Sebastian moves. Sebastian writes in Lost Property:

The blind man’s dog near Harrods or a pavement-artist’s coloured chalks; brown leaves in a New Forest ride or a tin bath hanging outside on the black brick wall of a slum; a picture in Punch or a purple
passage in Hamlet, all went to form a definite harmony, where I, too, had the shadow of a place (66).

Features of this world are suggestive. "Pavement artist" is a term used in intelligence to denote a secret agent who engages in surveillance; the term is recorded in use around 1945, and while this is a few years after the writing of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, the pavement artist in the novel is paired with a similarly suggestive image: the blind man with his dog is the classic type of cover for a surveillance agent. The "brown leaves in a New Forest ride" are evocative of what is called in espionage a "dead drop," a location in which secret material is concealed by an agent and later collected by a colleague (in Look at the Harlequins! two Soviet agents use a gash in a tree in this way [LATH 158]), while the "tin bath hanging outside on the black brick wall of a slum" is suggestive of what is known in intelligence as an "indicator," an object placed as a visual signal to indicate such things as the presence of material ready for collection in a "dead drop" (in Look at the Harlequins! a "half-drawn curtain and alabaster vase" are used to indicate to an agent from Russia that it is safe to enter a certain house [LATH 77]). And if in a "dead drop" an agent might place a coded communication, "a picture in Punch or a purple passage in Hamlet" represent publications which might be used in creating a code; indeed, in Speak, Memory Nabokov recalls as a boy turning a purple passage in Hamlet - "To be or not to be" - into cipher for amusement (SM 57). Sebastian states that these facets of the London of his youth went to form a "definite harmony, where I, too, had the shadow of a place," and if the images he describes suggest a "definite harmony" of aspects of the secret world, the word "shadow" is itself intelligence jargon for a surveillance agent.

Sebastian goes on to describe other aspects of his city-wide walks:

I seem to pass with intangible steps across ghostly lawns and through dancing-halls full of the whine of Hawaiian music and down dear drab little streets with pretty names, until I come to a certain warm hollow where something very like the selfest of my own self sits huddled up in the darkness (66-67).

Again the details are suggestive. Sebastian's passage "across ghostly lawns" recalls the image of the "ghostly battlefield" which at Cambridge he had so longed to "cross." There is also a literary echo here. The creature "huddled up in the darkness" recalls the Sherlock Holmes story, "The Copper Beeches," in which a savage mastiff is kept in an outhouse where it sits "huddled up in the darkness" (Adventures 286). What is of particular interest about this echo is Sebastian's likening the creature he
encounters to “the selfest of my own self.” For if Sebastian does indeed run up
against a watchdog, his claiming kinship with it further intimates his role as a watcher
or shadow around the streets of the capital. Indeed, there is a secondary echo of the
Holmes story. On one occasion the mastiff is seen on its nightly patrol: “It walked
slowly across the lawn and vanished into the shadow upon the other side,” like a
“dreadful silent sentinel” (Adventures 286), an image which recalls Sebastian, passing
“with intangible steps across ghostly lawns.”

V

As a boy Sebastian writes poems in English which he signs with “a little black chess-
knight drawn in ink” (15). This emblem recalls “the little drawing in the corner, done
in red ink, and representing a small, star-shaped flower,” which is the secret signature
of the Scarlet Pimpernel, one of the most famous of British spies (EP 16). Indeed, the
world of the Scarlet Pimpernel seems to be evoked in Sebastian’s poems themselves.
For if Sir Percy Blakeney’s secret emblem is a red flower shaped like a star, his
frequent missions to France always begin and end with a sea-voyage, and Sebastian’s
poems are full of “dark roses” (suggesting red flowers), “stars,” and the “call of the
sea.” Indeed, this final image is particularly evocative, as the rallying cry of the
League of the Scarlet Pimpernel is the thrice-repeated “call of the sea-mew” (JWR
174). The young Sebastian’s identifying himself with the romantic British spy
provides an interesting prelude to events which unfold at Cambridge, while his
picturing himself as a black chess-knight anticipates the image of the Great Game.
But in addition to that, the evocation of the Scarlet Pimpernel in Sebastian’s youthful
poems reflects suggestively on his first published novel.⁴

From April to October 1924 Sebastian writes The Prismatic Bezel (79). The plot is a
parody of detective fiction. A certain G. Abeson stages his death at a boarding-house
where there are twelve lodgers; returning to the scene in the disguise of old
“Nosebag,” Abeson finally unmaskes himself after the police discover that his body
has disappeared, and explains: “one dislikes being murdered” (93). Prior to
publication Sebastian calls his novel Cock Robin Hits Back, and Clare Bishop points
out that this alludes to the nursery rhyme, “Who Killed Cock Robin?” (70). However,
it also alludes to something else. Compare the titles The Prismatic Bezel and Cock
Robin Hits Back with the titles The Scarlet Pimpernel (1905) and Sir Percy Hits Back

⁴ Note also that the young Sebastian refers to his governess as “Zelle” (20). Margaretha Gertrud Zelle
was the real name of Mata Hari (1876-1917), the most famous woman spy, who is mentioned later in
the novel (143).
(1927), the first and eighth books respectively in the Scarlet Pimpernel series. Moreover, compare G. Abeson with the Scarlet Pimpernel himself. The Pimpernel is a master of disguise who frequently assumes different identities; who escapes from dangerous and life-threatening situations; who suddenly and miraculously disappears, seemingly before his adversaries’ very eyes (just as Abeson’s body vanishes from his room); and whose ingenuity in devising deceptions is boundless. If Sebastian evokes the world of the Scarlet Pimpernel in his early poems, he appears to do the same in his first published novel.

Indeed, the figure of the Pimpernel casts a certain light over Sebastian himself following the completion of his novel. For Sir Percy Blakeney’s stock in trade is secret missions to France, and just before The Prismatic Bezel comes out, France is where Sebastian is seen.

On a grey afternoon in Paris in November or December 1924 V catches sight of Sebastian “through the glass front of a popular café,” and on entering sees “the back of Sebastian’s glossy dark head and the downcast bespectacled face of the girl sitting opposite him” (69). Sebastian’s appearing “through the glass” in the company of a woman called “Miss Bishop” (69) evokes Through the Looking-Glass, where Alice enters the mirror world to find the chessmen “walking about, two and two” (Carroll 127). Moreover, Sebastian’s very appearance evokes the image of a chess piece: his “glossy dark head” suggests a black chess-knight, the piece which forms the Pimpernel-eseque signature beneath his early poems.

If Sebastian resembles a looking-glass chess piece, he also displays the features of another figure in the Carrollian universe. V says Sebastian appeared “well-groomed and fit”:

His finely-shaped white face with that slight shading on the cheeks - he was one of those unfortunate men who have to shave twice a day when dining out - did not show a trace of that dull unhealthy tinge it so often had. His rather large slightly pointed ears were afame as they were when he was pleasurably excited (70).

With a “white face,” whiskers, and “large slightly pointed ears,” Sebastian recalls the White Rabbit. Indeed, following the above description, V states that Sebastian reached for a watch in his waistcoat pocket (71), and one of the most remarkable things Alice notices about the White Rabbit is that it “actually took a watch out of its waistcoat-pocket” (Carroll 10). Moreover, after looking at his watch, Sebastian, with
Clare and V, searches for one of Clare’s gloves under the seats and under the table, and the White Rabbit, after being pursued down the rabbit-hole by Alice, drops his gloves, which he subsequently searches for. Indeed, where the White Rabbit has “white kid-gloves” (Carroll 17), Clare’s gloves are suede - that is, *kid* - with a *white* lining. What is suggestive about Sebastian’s association with the White Rabbit is that when Alice intrudes on the White Rabbit’s affairs - startling him and causing him to drop his gloves - he is in the middle of trying to keep an urgent appointment.

V certainly feels as if he has “ barged in” on something when he enters the café (71); and the possibility that he has disturbed important business of Sebastian’s and Clare’s is further suggested by something Clare says. Shortly after V’s appearance at the café, Clare takes her handkerchief out of her bag, dabs her nose, and says: “Cold getting worse” (70). It is a curiously spare phrase: neither “My cold is getting worse,” nor simply “Cold’s getting worse.” In his lectures on *Anna Karenina* Nabokov notes that when a voice in Anna’s head says to her, “Warm, very warm, hot,” it relates to “a game where you hide an object and hint at the right direction by these thermal exclamations” (LRL 157). What Clare might be trying to communicate to Sebastian is that, with V’s unexpected arrival, things are moving rapidly in the wrong direction; that she and Sebastian are cold, and getting colder.

Indeed, there is a further suggestion of cryptic communication between Sebastian and Clare outside the café. As Sebastian, Clare, and V walk up the Champs Elysées, Clare suddenly stops short and says, “My parcel,” whereupon Sebastian goes back to the café and returns shortly afterwards with a bag of sweets (71-72). This exchange recalls an old trick; indeed, one which appears in another of Nabokov’s works. In “The Assistant Producer” General Golubkov goes with his wife, La Slavska, to a Paris dressmaker, and at one point is sent back to fetch a dress which La Slavska wants adjusted and claims to have forgotten. Golubkov leaves the shop and returns a little later with the dress. However, the whole thing has been a deception. During his absence Golubkov does not return home but takes part in the kidnap of a General Fedchenko, while the dress he brings back to the shop is one he had placed in his car long before (Stories 554). The circumstances of this little ruse - staged in Paris and involving a wife’s sending her husband to fetch a certain object - resemble the situation with Sebastian and Clare outside the café. It is a suggestive point. For if there is an intimation of Sebastian’s having an urgent appointment like the White Rabbit, his exchange with Clare would give him a chance to return to the café alone in order to make a telephone call or leave a message. Indeed, while Golubkov and La Slavska have a great deal of time in the preceding days to arrange their little scheme,
Sebastian and Clare, even in the brief time following V's unexpected arrival in the café, have sufficient opportunity to make such a plan. Consider the search for Clare's glove. V states: "For some time we searched under the table and under the plush seats for one of Clare's gloves. . . . At last I retrieved it" (71). Not only does the search take "some time," but for part of that time V is "under the table." Moreover, it is he who finally retrieves the glove. With V searching for the glove under the table, Sebastian and Clare would have an opportunity to communicate above it. Indeed, in Through the Looking-Glass, after disturbing the White King and Queen, Alice goes to search for some water, and returns to find the royal couple - whom she has placed upon the table - talking in whispers (Carroll 129-130). Consider a further literary echo. In "The Golden Pince-Nez" Holmes, Watson, and Detective Hopkins engage in a search in Professor Coram's bedroom: "For a minute or two," writes Watson, "we were all on our knees retrieving stray cigarettes from impossible places" (Return 235). The spillage of the cigarettes is no accident. Holmes deliberately upsets the cigarette box as a means of solving the case. If, then, Clare's observation, "Cold getting worse," recalls a game in which one hides an object, it is possible that Sebastian and Clare are deliberately playing a similar game with the glove, causing V to look under the table, and diverting his attention from them - and thus arriving at a solution to a problem, just as Holmes arrives at the solution to the case.

The nature of Sebastian's and Clare's business in Paris is further intimated when an incident occurs on the street. As Sebastian, Clare, and V are about to cross the Avenue Kleber, Clare is nearly knocked down by a bicycle. The world of chess is intimated when Sebastian, taking Clare by the elbow, calls her a "fool" (72): Sebastian and Clare are in France, and the French word for the chess-bishop is fou, meaning "fool." It is as if Clare's nearly being knocked down by the bicycle is a case of a chess-bishop nearly being taken by an opposing piece.

And the threat to Sebastian and Clare is emphasized by a literary echo. In "The Final Problem" Sherlock Holmes is targeted by Professor Moriarty's agents. Holmes recounts to Watson one of his lucky escapes in London: "As I passed the corner which leads from Bentinck Street on to the Welbeck Street crossing, a two-horse van furiously driven whizzed round and was on me like a flash. I sprang for the footpath and saved myself by the fraction of a second" (Memoirs 256). Holmes's close shave seems echoed in Clare's near miss with the bicycle. Indeed, the image of "a motor-lorry in the act of avoiding a furniture-van," which is described after Clare has reached the pavement (72), not only mirrors Clare's own narrow escape, but seems to echo Holmes's brush with "a two-horse van."
In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the groan of the veering motor-lorry causes a flock of pigeons to seek the safety of the Arc de Triomphe, and Clare blames her near miss on these very birds: “Far too many pigeons,” she says (72). In the café Clare had said *Cock Robin Hits Back* was a silly title, because “a bird can’t hit” (70); but in Wonderland pigeons can. At one point Alice finds her head among the trees and receives a nasty shock: “a large pigeon had flown into her face, and was beating her violently with its wings” (Carroll 47). Many of the creatures Alice meets are figures found in nursery rhymes - such as the Queen of Hearts and Humpty Dumpty - and given Clare’s reference to the original title of Sebastian’s novel, the pigeons crowding round her and Sebastian outside the café inevitably evoke the birds which kill and dispose of Cock Robin. All of which paints a vaguely sinister picture of the Parisian pigeons. And Sebastian and Clare have quite a lot to say about them. After Clare observes there are far too many pigeons, Sebastian agrees, and says they smell. “What kind of smell?” asks Clare; “Iris and rubber,” replies Sebastian (72). One meaning of the word “pigeon” is “stool-pigeon” or “spy.” It is possible, then, that Sebastian and Clare are hinting to one another that they are - or may be - under threat from enemy agents, or “pigeons,” just as Holmes is in danger from Moriarty’s agents, and just as G. Abeson is in danger from his fellow lodgers, who evoke the birds which dispose of Cock Robin.

One final detail defines the atmosphere surrounding Sebastian and Clare on the street. As Sebastian and Clare walk away arm in arm - like the chess pieces Alice finds on passing through the mirror - V watches them from a certain location. If V enters the café like Alice passing through the looking-glass, he is left at the entrance to the Etoile underground, a kind of rabbit-hole, as it were: the other portal into the magical realm. Thus the scene in Paris is framed by these two magic portals, as if the whole episode takes place in that wonder-world created by Carroll, a world where adventures “underground” blend with adventures in a “great game” of chess.

When V catches sight of Sebastian through the café window on the Champs Elysées, and thus discovers that Sebastian has arrived in Paris without contacting him, he is deeply “pained” (69). However, there are intimations as to the reason for Sebastian’s wishing to keep to himself. Sebastian appears to be engaged on a secret mission with Clare as his partner, a mission which, it would seem, is either totally compromised or severely disrupted by V’s unexpected appearance. If Sebastian plays a kind of “Jewel Game” in the London of his youth, in Paris in 1924 he displays new dimensions. And the most serious new dimension is the danger apparently descending upon him - and
upon the woman he loves. It all goes to further intimate a link between Sebastian and the Scarlet Pimpernel. For Sir Percy Blakeney is a man who travels from Britain to France on dangerous and life-threatening missions; who is constantly hounded by foreign agents; who has in his wife Marguerite a devoted companion who supports his secret work; but who, at the same time, has in this woman a person he has to protect, and occasionally to save, when she becomes embroiled in his secret missions.

VI

In the summer of 1926 Sebastian travels to a German seaside resort, and Clare, having some business in London, arranges to join him a week or two later. Sebastian has supposedly decided to take “a month’s holiday abroad” (85), but there are signs that the trip was never meant to be a vacation.

When Clare arrives at the resort she is informed at the hotel that Sebastian has left for “an unknown destination” and will not be back for another couple of days (85). In the meantime Clare occupies herself alone. She takes a walk along the waterfront, but when she passes beyond the beach the atmosphere becomes decidedly eerie:

Farther down the coast there was a beech-wood, deep and dark with no undergrowth except bindwood patching the undulating brown soil; and a strange brown stillness stood waiting among the straight smooth tree-trunks: she thought she might find at any moment a red-capped German gnome peeping bright-eyed at her from among the dead leaves of a hollow (86).

The personification of the strange brown stillness, which “stood waiting,” coupled with the image of a red-capped German gnome “peeping bright-eyed at her,” creates the impression of Clare’s being watched. Indeed, the gnome evokes a certain association which is further suggestive in this regard: the gnome’s being “German” and “red-capped” calls to mind the tale, “Little Red-Cap,” the German version of “Little Red Riding Hood,” a story to which V later refers (114). The evocation of the fairy tale is darkly suggestive in relation to Clare: Little Red Riding Hood is a girl in a distinctively coloured cap wandering through a forest alone, where she is stalked by the Wolf, and Clare is dressed in a conspicuous “blue mackintosh” (85) as she walks through the beech-wood alone. Indeed, Clare’s blue mackintosh evokes a further sinister association. In Nabokov’s Korol’, dama, valet (1928) Dreyer takes a long walk through a coastal beech-wood while staying at a Baltic resort, and, just like
Clare, wears a distinctively coloured coat: a blue blazer. However, as Dreyer walks through the beech-wood a threat looms over him, for he is to be picked up in a rowing-boat by Martha and Franz who plan to murder him on the return journey. There is, indeed, a suggestion that Nabokov deliberately drew a parallel between Dreyer and Clare when preparing the English version of his novel in 1967. Martha hallucinates sinking Dreyer’s blazer in the Baltic, and in *King, Queen, Knave* the blue jacket at one point takes on the appearance of a “blue mackintosh” (*KQK* 267; cf. *SSRP* 2.302). If there are signs in Paris in 1924 of Clare’s being in danger from enemy agents, there are intimations of a similar shadow hanging over her at the German seaside resort in 1926. Moreover, if Clare “thought she might find at any moment a red-capped German gnome peeping bright-eyed at her,” the suggestion is that Clare is quite aware of the threat.

When Sebastian arrives back at the resort there is “something not quite natural in his demeanour” and he looks “nervous and troubled” (86). He begins to tell Clare of his meeting a man and driving along the coast with him, but Clare suddenly interrupts and, peering into Sebastian’s face, asks him what the matter *really* is, adding: “I wonder if you are telling me the truth” (86). Clare’s cutting in on Sebastian before he has barely uttered a sentence is rather peculiar, but given the intimations of Clare’s sensing she is being watched in the beech-wood, the hotel itself cannot be regarded as safe. Clare, in other words, may be questioning the truth of what Sebastian is saying not because she disbelieves him, but because she fears he may be overheard. Clare is fully aware of how sound travels in the hotel: that very morning as she is reading in her room, “the whine of a child wanting to play in the corridor” is heard coming from another part of the hotel (86). In the afternoon the couple go to the beech-wood, and here, after Clare urges him to talk, Sebastian gives a different account of his absence from the resort, saying that his story about meeting a man was a deception and that what he actually did was to take a trip to Berlin to see a doctor, because he felt a pain in his chest and arm (87). If, during her lone walk in this beech-wood, Clare senses she is being watched, it is curious that she should bring Sebastian to this very spot and encourage him to talk. Indeed, it is also curious that Sebastian, before launching on his story, should intimate the presence of an audience: “One half-expects to see a brownie among those dead leaves and convolvulus,” he remarks (87). Moreover, one detail of his story does not ring true. Sebastian says he discussed with the doctor “coronary arteries and blood supply and sinuses of Salva” (87), but there are no such things as “sinuses of Salva”: the correct term is “sinuses of Valsalva,” after the physician Antonio Valsalva (1666-1723) who first described them. If Sebastian *had* been to see a doctor, it would be strange for him, a writer, a man of words, to muddle
his terms, particularly where his own health is supposedly at stake. However, Sebastian’s mistake would not be so strange if he were inventing a story on the spur of the moment - as he does in the interview with his Cambridge tutor - relying on his own imperfect knowledge of cardiac anatomy. Sebastian and Clare, that is to say, may be staging a little charade for the benefit of eavesdroppers. Their two exchanges at the resort may have the opposite sense of what appears on the surface. Where ostensibly Clare cuts Sebastian short at the hotel because she feels he is lying and then later in the beech-wood worms out of him the truth, there is a suggestion that Clare cuts short Sebastian’s story about meeting the man because it is the truth and later prompts him to lie.

There is a further reason for thinking that Sebastian’s story about meeting a man and driving in his car is the truth. Sebastian makes the trip to the German seaside resort during a break in the writing of his second novel, *Success* (85). The central event of that novel is the meeting of two people in a car. A man and a woman, who do not know one another, accept a lift from a stranger, and being thus thrown together end up “happy ever after” (94). The novel is a study of how this meeting has been deliberately and meticulously prepared by fate. V comments: “The disclosure of these secret preparations is a fascinating one and the author seems argus-eyed as he takes into account all the colours of place and circumstance” (95). One might apply the words “secret preparations” and “argus-eyed” to the watchful work of a spy, who must “take into account all the colours of place and circumstance” in order to ensure that an intended meeting is brought about seemingly innocuously. In Sebastian’s novel fate’s machinations are so delicate that when the two people are finally brought together the meeting seems accidental: “not the merest click is audible” (96), and when Sebastian returns to the resort, he says he had “come across” the man and had gone with him in his car (86); that is, the meeting Sebastian says he had is purportedly accidental and takes place, as it were, offstage, so that “not the merest click” is audible.

The idea that *Success* may be based on Sebastian’s own secret preparations for a meeting gains support from other details. The hero of the novel is one Percival Q (94). “Q” evokes the initials by which members of British intelligence are identified; indeed, Nabokov gives the name “Harley Q” to a British Secret Service man in *Look at the Harlequins!* (*LATH* 161). “Q” is also chess notation for the Queen, which invokes the image of the Great Game. Moreover, “Percival Q” recalls Sir Percy Blakeney, with whom Sebastian identifies.
Indeed, the evocation of the Scarlet Pimpernel in Sebastian’s novel is particularly suggestive, as the world of Baroness Orczy’s hero is reflected in the scene at the German seaside resort. As Clare waits in her room for Sebastian to return from the “unknown destination,” she reads Donne (86), and in *Eldorado* (1913), the fourth Scarlet Pimpernel novel, Marguerite Blakeney waits at home reading Fielding, trying to distract herself from anxious thoughts about her husband who is engaged on a secret mission in France (Omnibus 759, 761). As Clare walks along the beach she sees “three-coloured flags” flapping in the breeze (86). These flags are German, but being termed “three-coloured” they evoke the French *tricolore*, the ubiquitous emblem of revolutionary France in the Scarlet Pimpernel novels. Clare’s experience in the beech-wood evokes a similar emblem: the “red-capped German gnome” which she expects to find recalls the red cap of liberty, the headgear of French citizens in the world of the Scarlet Pimpernel. Indeed, if Clare imagines the red-capped gnome peeping at her from a hollow, it evokes the revolutionary spies who constantly dog Sir Percy Blakeney and on occasion his wife. The coastal setting of the resort scene; the three-coloured flags; the red-capped gnome; and Clare’s reading Donne (who himself undertook secret missions on the Continent) thus evoke the world of Baroness Orczy’s novels, as though the Weimar Republic blurs with the nascent French Republic as the territory for a latter-day Scarlet Pimpernel, Sebastian Knight. It all goes to further suggest that if in *Success* the Pimpernel-esque Percival Q meets a person in a car, the meeting with a man in a car which Sebastian describes to Clare during a break in the writing of that novel is indeed the business he was engaged in.

### VII

In June 1929 Sebastian visits a health resort called Blauberg (119). Sebastian goes to Blauberg ostensibly to receive treatment for a rare heart condition known as “Lehmann’s disease” (87, 104). However, Sebastian’s story in the German beech-wood about having heart-disease is almost certainly a fabrication. And indeed, there are signs that the real reason for Sebastian’s visit to Blauberg has nothing to do with his heart.

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For a health resort Blauberg presents a rather uninviting image. When V arrives there in March 1936, on the trail of Sebastian’s biography, he observes:

I looked at wet fields with long trails of white mist where upright poplar trees dimly floated. A small red-tiled town crouched at the foot of a soft grey mountain. I left my bag in the cloakroom of a forlorn little station where invisible cattle lowed sadly in some shunted truck, and went up a gentle slope towards a cluster of hotels and sanitariums beyond a damp-smelling park (119).

With its wet fields, forlorn station, sad cattle, and damp-smelling park, Blauberg exudes an atmosphere which is far from salubrious; indeed, towards the end of his visit V goes so far as to call the place “a huge refuse heap” (122). Moreover, there is an eerie literary echo in V’s first impressions of the town. In H. G. Wells’s The Island of Doctor Moreau the shipwrecked Edward Prendick is picked up at sea by Doctor Moreau and his assistant Montgomery, and from his dinghy, which is towed behind Moreau’s launch, Prendick gets his first view of the island:

It was low, and covered with thick vegetation, chiefly a kind of palm that was new to me. From one point a thin white thread of vapour rose slantingly to an immense height, and then frayed out like a down feather. We were now within the embrace of a broad bay flanked on either hand by a low promontory. The beach was of dull grey sand, and sloped steeply up to a ridge, perhaps sixty or seventy feet above the sea-level, and irregularly set with trees and undergrowth. Half-way up was a square piebald stone enclosure that I found subsequently was built partly of coral and partly of pumiceous lava. Two thatched roofs peeped from within this enclosure (Wells, Moreau 25).

Prendick’s first glimpse of Moreau’s island seems to be mirrored in many respects in V’s first sight of Blauberg. Where Prendick notices that Moreau’s island is chiefly vegetated with “a kind of palm,” V at Blauberg sees “upright poplars”; where Moreau’s island displays a long “white thread of vapour,” Blauberg is blanketed in “long trails of white mist”; and where on Moreau’s island the beach “sloped steeply” up to a ridge, halfway up which is an enclosure of buildings, at Blauberg “a gentle slope” leads up to “a cluster of hotels and sanitariums.” Moreover, when Prendick arrives on Moreau’s island he does so in the company of an assortment of the doctor’s caged animals, and on disembarking at the Blauberg station V hears the lowing of cattle confined in a railway truck. Indeed, the parallel with Wells’s novel extends. On landing upon the island Prendick exchanges his first proper words with Moreau, but the doctor’s name being unknown to him at this stage, Prendick describes Moreau
simply as “the white-haired man” and “the grey-haired man” (Wells, Moreau 21, 29, 30); Prendick, in addition, notes Moreau’s “brilliant black” eyes, and in response to a remark of Prendick’s, the doctor “raised his eyebrows slightly” (Wells, Moreau 27). In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, by comparison, V, after arriving at Blauberg, goes straight to the Beaumont Hotel where he speaks to the manager who is “a grey-haired man” with “velvet black eyes,” and who, when V admits he is trying to track down a woman, “lifted his eyebrows slightly” (120). The parallel with Wells’s novel—in which Doctor Moreau conducts a series of gruesome biological experiments in a bid to transform beasts into humans—casts a curious light over the medical world of the Blauberg health resort. And that light is intensified by certain other details. V states that Blauberg is situated in a valley (123), and that the town “crouched at the foot of a soft grey mountain” (119). These images recall the opening of the Inferno, where Dante arrives “at the foot of a hill / Which formed the far end of that menacing valley / Where fear had already entered into my heart” (Sisson). Moreover, if V says Blauberg “crouched” at the foot of the mountain, “crouched” is a word which evokes an image of an animal, and Dante, at the foot of the hill, encounters a leopard, a lion, and a wolf, which drive him back into the valley of shadows. And this evocation of the infernal at Blauberg finds an echo in the names of certain visitors to the town. The manager of the Beaumont Hotel informs V that in July 1935 a “Professor Ott” and a “Colonel Samain” stayed at his hotel (122). In Nabokov’s story, “Skazka” (1926), “Ott” is the name given to an incarnation of the Devil (SSRP 2.471), while “Samain” (also spelled “Samhain”) is the name of an ancient Celtic festival held on 1 November, when it was believed that the way to the “other world” lay open, and that men might be visited by the dead or by supernatural powers. If the names of these visitors to Blauberg raise sinister intimations about the town, the same can be said of the town’s name itself. Shortly after arriving on Moreau’s island Prendick is informed by the doctor: “Our little establishment here contains a secret or so, is a kind of Bluebeard’s Chamber, in fact” (Wells, Moreau 29-30). “Bluebeard” in German is Blaubart, a name which is eerily evocative of “Blauberg.”

If Sebastian goes to Blauberg in 1929, the evocation of the world of Doctor Moreau at the health resort is suggestive in relation to the science of the time. Moreau’s bid to turn beasts into humans is a case of Darwinist principles applied in excess, and, while Wells’s novel is a nightmarish fantasy, the idea of using evolutionary theory as a means of moulding the biological shape of society was a topic of great interest within

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5 In The Waltz Invention Nabokov includes a character called “Old Perrault” (“Starik Perro”) (Waltz 19; SSRP 5.529). Charles Perrault (1628-1703) is the author of the “Blue Beard” tale, and immediately prior to the mention of “Old Perrault” in Nabokov’s play the topic of discussion is a “blue mountain” (“golubuiu goru” or “Blauberg”) (Waltz 18; SSRP 5.529).
a certain scientific community in the 1920s. In Germany in the late nineteenth century concern arose over the biological condition of German society; the natural process of the “survival of the fittest,” it was argued, was being undermined by medical support of the “unfit” - the physically and mentally handicapped and the chronically sick (Proctor 15). Proposed remedies of this situation were not only the removal of such medical support, but also a programme of sterilization, whereby the “weak” elements of society would be prevented from reproducing (Proctor 15, 46, 96). This theory of population control was called “racial hygiene” (Rassenhygiene), and by the 1920s the movement had become dominated by right-wing forces which advocated the principles of racial hygiene as a means of protecting the purity of the so-called supreme “Nordic” race (Proctor 26-27). This school of scientific thought in the 1920s led directly to Hitler’s authorizing secret euthanasia operations on mental patients shortly after the Nazi rise to power (Proctor 181). It led also to the passing of the Sterilization Law (or the Law for the Prevention of Genetically Diseased Offspring) in 1933 (Proctor 96); and to the passing of the Nuremberg Laws in 1935, which defined Jews as a biologically inferior race, and prevented their breeding with people of “German” blood (Proctor 131-32). A crucial figure in the crystallization of racist science in the 1920s was one of Germany’s leading medical publishers, a man who published prominent journals such as the Archiv für Rassen- und Gesellschaftsbiologie, and later the official commentaries to the Sterilization Law and the Nuremberg Laws; a man who was one of the first members of the Nazi Party, a member of the antisemitic Thule Society, the first recipient of the Nazi Gold Medal of Honour, and a personal friend of Adolf Hitler’s: Julius Friedrich Lehmann (Proctor 26-27; Kershaw 138, 188). With Lehmann the publisher of probably more works in the field of racial hygiene than all other private publishers combined (Proctor 26), it might be said that in the 1920s right-wing racial science spread in Germany like “Lehmann’s disease.” Blauberg - a centre for “Lehmann’s disease” - is a town with a German name; it is situated in Alsace, the region of France which borders Germany (and which was part of that country from 1871 to 1919); and the German-named Professor Ott visits the town. Doctor Moreau carries out his grisly biological experiments on a fictional island in a real world, and Blauberg similarly is a fictional town in a real world, a blind spot on the map of reality. If the trails of white mist hanging over Blauberg recall the white vapour rising from Moreau’s island, perhaps the mist-enshrouded sanatoria at Blauberg contain - to quote Moreau - “a secret or so,” where “Lehmann’s disease” ceases to be a medical condition, a disease of the heart, and becomes a medical practice - the experimental side of a racist science which aims to gain Moreau-like control over the biological shape of society.
Sebastian is scheduled to stay at Blauberg for a month (104), but he cuts his stay short and travels to Paris. Here he has dinner with V who finds him looking “worn and ill” and “a bit seedy” (105-106). After dinner Sebastian suddenly makes a telephone call; outside the restaurant he carefully reads a small piece of paper handed to him by a beggar, and then immediately rushes off in a taxi, telling the driver to “go fast” (106-07). The telephone call, the carefully read note, the hasty departure in a taxi form a suggestive sequence, particularly given that in Orczy’s novels the favoured mode of disguise of the League of the Scarlet Pimpernel in Paris is beggars’ rags (e.g., IWR 172-73; Omnibus 656). There is a suggestion that Sebastian is in the midst of a Pimpernel-esque mission, and one of some urgency. Indeed, if Sir Percy Blakeney is famous for his hair-breadth escapes, there is an intimation that Sebastian himself is in the process of taking evasive action. V notices that the back of Sebastian’s neck is “patched up with pink plaster” (105). One of the creatures Moreau tries to surgically transform into human shape is a puma, and one fateful day the tortured beast escapes from Moreau’s laboratory and makes for the forest, “swathed in lint and with red-stained bandages fluttering about it” (Wells, Moreau 96). The puma’s escape is evoked in Look at the Harlequins! where Nabokov aligns it with Osip Oksman’s attempted flight, “barefoot, in bloodstained underwear, from the ‘experimental hospital’ of a Nazi concentration camp” (LATH 81; cf. LATH 75). If Sebastian goes to Blauberg ostensibly for his heart, there is a suggestion that his real business in the town is a Pimpernel-esque mission into a Moreau-like biological Bluebeard’s chamber, and that, like the puma, he is lucky to get away.

However, if Sebastian goes on such a mission in 1929, there is a suggestion that this is not his first visit to the town. In The Island of Doctor Moreau Prendick, shortly after arriving on the island, decides to explore, and in the forest he has his first lone encounter with the Beast People. His experience in many respects resembles Clare’s experience in the beech-wood at the German seaside resort. The forest on Moreau’s island begins above the beach and is characterized by “straight-stemmed trees” and undergrowth (Wells, Moreau 37, 38). Similarly, the beech-wood at the German seaside resort is situated on the coast and features “straight smooth tree-trunks” and undergrowth in the form of bindwood (86). Prendick is shocked to come upon a half-bestial creature drinking from a stream; the creature has “a copper-coloured hue,” and after it has moved away a nervous Prendick feels that the eerie apparition has “populated the stillness” of the afternoon (Wells, Moreau 37-38). Clare, by comparison, finds herself in an eerie beech-wood where “a strange brown stillness stood waiting” among the trees (86). Prendick discovers that he is being stalked by the beast-man: “His eyes shone brightly out of the dusk under the trees” (Wells,
Moreau 41). The image is evocative of Clare’s expecting to find a German gnome “peeping bright-eyed at her from among the dead leaves of a hollow” (86). Prendick, thoroughly unnerved, finally makes a run for the beach, and Clare, after her eerie experience in the beech-wood, unpacks her bathing things and spends time lying on the sand. The evocation of the nightmarish world of Doctor Moreau in the beech-wood at the German seaside resort casts a sinister light over the whole episode. And this is enhanced by a hint of the Inferno. The creature which stalks Prendick in the forest is a “Leopard Man” (Wells, Moreau 79), and Clare’s experience in the beech-wood evokes also the tale of Little Red Riding Hood who is stalked by the Wolf, and it is a leopard and a wolf which stalk Dante in the dark wood. Moreover, there is a further eerie aspect to Clare’s experience in the beech-wood. The beech-wood is situated in Germany, and the German for “beech-wood” is Buchenwald, the name given to a Nazi concentration camp which opened in July 1937, a year before Nabokov began writing The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (Epstein and Rosen 43).

Suddenly, looming over Clare’s walk in the beech-wood is the sinister spectre of Blauberg, with its intimations of Moreau-like, infernal, racist science. And this casts a lurid light over Sebastian’s trip away from the resort to “an unknown destination,” whence he returns with “something not quite natural in his demeanour,” looking “nervous and troubled” (86), and tells Clare of his meeting a man and driving with him in his car, before telling a second, apparently fabricated story in the beech-wood of his having been to Berlin to see a doctor about his heart. There is a suggestion that Sebastian first goes to Blauberg not in 1929, but three years earlier, in secret. Or to put it another way, it seems likely that in the summer of 1926 Sebastian does not discover that he has “Lehmann’s disease” as a medical condition (as V suggests [87]), but learns of “Lehmann’s disease” as a dubious medical practice - and from that time onwards fakes the former to provide cover for future investigations into the latter.

VIII

Following his return from the German seaside resort in 1926 a radical change takes place in Sebastian’s life. By the middle of 1927 Sebastian is in a strange and gloomy mood: “He was not feeling too well. He slept badly. He had dreadful fits of temper” (100). Sebastian’s novel Success is a commercial and critical success, but he is not interested in his new-found fame. He withdraws into a troubled solitude. Supposedly, Sebastian has been diagnosed with heart-disease and his mood is the result, but there are intimations that the source of his disquiet lies in a different direction. When
Prendick returns to England from the island of Doctor Moreau, he retreats into self-imposed isolation, haunted so much by the horror of his experience that his fellow-men seem to him merely another form of Beast People. One thing Prendick does, however, is to write an account of his terrifying adventure, and Sebastian now begins a writing project which is eerily evocative.

In the autumn of 1927 Sebastian begins work on the story, “The Funny Mountain” (79, 101). “The Funny Mountain” is the only Knight work not explicitly quoted in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, yet there are suggestive points relating to it. The story’s title recalls The Magic Mountain (1924), Thomas Mann’s novel set in a sanatorium at a health resort in the Swiss mountains. The evocation of Mann’s novel highlights the similarity between the title of Sebastian’s story and the name of the health resort of “Blauberg,” or “Blue Mountain.” Indeed, a link between “The Funny Mountain” and Blauberg becomes more palpable when one considers that Mann’s The Magic Mountain is Der Zauberberg in the original German. Sebastian’s experience of writing the story is suggestive too. At work in his study Sebastian tries “to keep to a steep slippery track among the dark crags of neuralgia” (100-01), an image of a mountain of pain which ties in with the health resort of Blauberg where the sick come to take the cure. The meaning of the story’s title is another suggestive point. The first time “The Funny Mountain” is mentioned V associates it with some of his father’s “favourite quips” and says the story makes him think of “a child laughing in its sleep” (5-6). These remarks suggest that Sebastian’s “Funny Mountain” is “funny” in the sense of “humorous,” but “funny” can also mean: “Not quite in good health or good order; slightly unwell, nauseous, deranged, disordered,” a sense which is in line with Sebastian’s “dark crags of neuralgia” - and with the unhealthy world of Blauberg. “Funny” has the further meaning of “queer, odd,” and the word is used repeatedly in this sense in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight: “Funny, nobody knew,” says a woman to Sebastian’s father (9); “Funny, you don’t seem to have -” says Sebastian’s Cambridge acquaintance to V (49); “What a funny quiet place. Eerie, isn’t it?” observes Sebastian of the beech-wood at the German seaside resort (87). One notes, in this connection, that while V associates “The Funny Mountain” with his father’s quips and a laughing child, he also remarks that the story is “beautifully queer” (6).

Perhaps on the surface “The Funny Mountain” appears to be giving a “humorous” laugh, but beneath the surface is gasping at a nightmarish world that is “queer,” “nauseous,” and “deranged,” a world which is not that of Sebastian’s supposed heart-disease, but that of a “diseased” health resort, after the manner of Mann’s The Magic Mountain.

After completing “The Funny Mountain” Sebastian - probably sometime in 1928 - begins another story, “Albinos in Black” (101). V quotes an extract from “Albinos in Black” describing a certain hotel room:

“that special kind of hotel room which is so perfectly fit for the staging of the worst tragedies: a dead burnished clock (the waxed moustache of ten minutes to two) under its glass dome on an evil mantelpiece, the French window with its fuddled fly between muslin and pane, and a sample of the hotel’s letter paper on the well-used blotting-pad” (7).

The image of “the hotel’s letter paper on the well-used blotting-pad” is reflected in something which happens during V’s visit to Blauberg in 1936. The manager of the Beaumont Hotel returns to his desk and folds “a letter that was lying on the blotting-pad” (122). The manager’s folding of the letter is a curiously isolated act, having no apparent bearing on the action, and, as such, takes on the appearance of a signpost, inviting the reader to make a connection between the Beaumont Hotel at Blauberg and the hotel described in “Albinos in Black.” Certainly, the features of Sebastian’s story are in keeping with the sinister intimations of Blauberg. The personified clock on the mantelpiece - with its “waxed moustache” - is dead. Moreover, the hotel room is described as perfectly fit for “the staging of the worst tragedies,” which calls to mind Nabokov’s theories on drama, his view that the worst, or poorest, stage-tragedies are those which are bound by the logic of dramatic determinism, a convention which, he believed, forced plays towards a finale of “backstage pistol-shot suicide” (USSR 332). The sample of hotel letter paper in the extract hints fleetingly at a suicide note, while the sense of entrapment - figured in the fuddled fly’s being caught between the muslin curtain and the window-pane - supplies a motive for suicide. Yet there are also darker intimations here. The presence of the fuddled fly recalls the nursery rhyme, “Who Killed Cock Robin?” where the fly is the witness of Cock Robin’s death: “Who saw him die? / I, said the Fly, / With my little eye, / I saw him die.” Cock Robin is, as it were, murdered, killed by the sparrow with his bow and arrow; and the idea of murder, as opposed to suicide, makes better sense both of the description of the mantelpiece in Sebastian’s story as “evil,” and of the panic suggested by the trapped and fuddled fly; while the idea of the “staging” of the worst tragedies suddenly takes on new meaning. In short, what appears to be intimated in the extract from “Albinos in Black” is murder that has been made to look like suicide. Shortly after folding the letter on the blotting-pad, the manager of the Beaumont Hotel informs V: “In the hotel round the corner a Swiss couple committed suicide in 1929” (122). This incident presumably occurs in June 1929 when Sebastian is in Blauberg, as it seems to find its way into his
final novel, The Doubtful Asphodel, where "Professor Nussbaum, a Swiss scientist, shoots his young mistress and himself dead in a hotel-room at half-past three in the morning" (173). An eerie suggestion emerges: "Professor Nussbaum, a Swiss scientist, shoots his young mistress and himself dead in a hotel-room at half-past three in the morning." The sinister alliteration puts a different complexion on the "suicide" of the Swiss pair (particularly as the professor's name is Jewish), and reflects suggestively on Sebastian's story: the SS, founded in 1925, distinguished by a black uniform and known as the "Black Order," might be described as "Albinos in Black." If in "The Funny Mountain" the surface of the story appears innocuous, even humorous, while beneath the surface a nightmarish world lurks, there are intimations of a similar dichotomy in "Albinos in Black." Superficially, the scene in the hotel room hints at a case of suicide, but beneath the surface the shady world of Blauberg is evoked, with suggestions of trained assassins carrying out their grisly work.

After "Albinos in Black" Sebastian writes "The Back of the Moon," his "third and last short story" (101), which he completes in the summer of 1929 (79). The central character, Mr Siller, appears to be modelled on Mr Silbermann, the "meek little man" who calls on Sebastian around 1927 (101). Silbermann is closely associated with Blauberg. When V meets Silbermann they are on a train that has just left the town, and Silbermann informs V he has all of Blauberg's hoteliers in the palm of his hand (128). Silbermann's connection with the shady Blauberg and its hotels does not reflect well on him, but then, the portrait of Siller in Sebastian's story is not an attractive one. Siller helps "three miserable travellers in three different ways" (101-02). Threefold events are a common element of fairy tales, and this highlights certain features of Siller's character. As a little man with bushy eyebrows and a big nose, "whose form made one wonder whether he had not lost his hump somewhere" (102), Siller evokes an image of the manikin or dwarf, a stock figure in fairy tales, with a mischievous or villainous nature. The classic example is the hunchbacked Rumpelstiltskin who helps the miller's daughter spin straw into gold three times on three different nights only to demand at last the woman's first-born child in return. The suggestion of a link between Siller and the traditional image of the manikin also raises the suggestion of a further "fairy-tale" aspect to his character. Appearing in a story called "The Back of the Moon," having a name which is a variant of the word "silver," and revealing, when he removes his hat, the "shiny perfection" of his bald head, Siller seems to be associated with the silvery moon itself; takes on, as it were, the aspect of the man in the moon. The connection, however, is not favourable. One tradition has it that the man in the moon is Cain, carrying a bush of thorns and accompanied by a dog which is an embodiment of the Devil (Evans 727). Siller's
Adam’s apple evokes the original sin of Cain’s father; he has “bushy” eyebrows and “dark thickets” in his nostrils; and he is a representation of Silbermann, who, moon-like, is depicted “beaming” at V at sunset (123), and sells “hound-muzzles and fings like dat” (125). Silbermann also illuminates a further aspect of the portrait of Siller. Silbermann tells V he “was in de police - no, no, not once, not quite... Plain-clotheses. Understand me?” (125). Silbermann’s remark evokes the secret police, and in Sebastian’s story Siller’s Adam’s apple, “moving like the bulging shape of an arrased eavesdropper,” evokes Polonius in spying mode. Thus Sebastian’s “The Back of the Moon” begins to suggest a story beyond the pages of the story itself. For if the “meek little man” who calls at Sebastian’s flat is Silbermann, the portrait of Siller casts a suggestive light on the motive of his visit. If “The Funny Mountain” and “Albinos in Black” suggest an innocuous surface narrative concealing hidden horrors, “The Back of the Moon” likewise presents a superficial image of Siller as a benevolent figure offering help, but beneath the surface hints at an agent of Blauberg, an envoy of the darkness hidden at the back of the moon.

There are suggestions, then, that Sebastian’s three short stories deal with the world of Blauberg, and that they do so cryptically, giving the superficial impression of being harmless tales, while containing a covert dimension of nightmarish horror. Sebastian’s acquaintance, P. G. Sheldon, refers to the stories as “bright masks” (102), and the observation is a telling one. If Prendick sets down his account of Moreau’s island after returning to England, there is a suggestion that Sebastian himself depicts a world of Moreau-like horrors in his “Funny Mountain” trilogy. It reinforces the intimation that Sebastian makes his first visit to Blauberg in 1926 from the German seaside resort, where the sinister atmosphere of Blauberg looms over the scene. And if Sebastian visits Blauberg in 1926 and subsequently comes under surveillance from the bald-headed little Silbermann, his trip to Blauberg in 1929, after completing his three short stories - a trip from which he returns early, looking “worn and ill” and with the back of his neck patched up with pink plaster - thus appears as the action of a bold and brave man, a man deliberately revisiting a world of danger and terror. One recalls the Scarlet Pimpernel who returns time and again on secret missions across the English Channel, even though his real identity is known to the wily little Chauvelin (whose name means “bald man” [Hanks and Hodges 102]) and the whole of revolutionary France is baying for his blood.
In the early 1930s, Sebastian goes abroad about twice a year on "mysterious" trips (114), and it is thought he is pursuing a Russian woman he supposedly met at Blauberg in 1929 (109, 113-14). However, there are suggestions that Sebastian is preoccupied at this time by something far removed from a love affair.

In 1933 Roy Carswell paints Sebastian's portrait, depicting Sebastian's face as if reflected in a pool (116-17). On the surface of the pool appears a "water-spider" (117), casting a "club-footed shadow" on the bottom (118). Compare *Bend Sinister*, where Krug is picked up by an official car to be taken to an emergency meeting of University staff: "One could distinguish in the dubious light the emblem (bearing a remarkable resemblance to a crushed dislocated but still writhing spider) of the new government upon a red flaglet affixed to the bonnet" (BS 35). The arachnoid Ekwilist emblem is clearly a rendering of the Nazi swastika. Carswell's portrait of Sebastian is painted in the year of the Nazi seizure of power, and there is a suggestion that Sebastian is looking not at his reflection in the surface of the pool, but at the water-spider's shadow in the depths, a replica of the "club-footed" swastika. The background of Carswell's portrait is a "mysterious blueness" (117), evoking the world of Blauberg, while Sebastian's bloodshot eyes, "peering intently" (117), hint at his staring into the bloody depths of a Bluebeard's chamber.

Roy Carswell tells V he was "afraid of story-telling" in his portrait of Sebastian (118), but his painting appears to tell a story of Sebastian's life at this time. And the essence of that story is that Sebastian is not chasing a mistress on his mysterious trips to the Continent in the early thirties, but pursuing his secret work into a world of Blaubergian horror.

Around the time that Carswell paints Sebastian's portrait, Sebastian begins work on his final novel, *The Doubtful Asphodel*, which, according to V, is "unquestionably his masterpiece" (172). Ostensibly, the novel presents a philosophy of life, where life and death are implied to be part of a continuous process of metamorphosis, of creation and recreation. However, beneath the surface shadows lurk which issue an intensely sinister warning regarding a darker side of reality.
The title of Sebastian’s first novel, *The Prismatic Bezel*, evokes the Scarlet Pimpernel, and the same can be said of the title of his final novel. Indeed, in the case of the latter the evocation is stronger, since “The Doubtful Asphodel” represents an image of a flower, and corresponds word for word with “The Scarlet Pimpernel” in terms of both number of syllables and position of stress. The hero of Sebastian’s novel is a “dying man” who possesses a vital secret, a word encapsulating the answer to life and death, a word which the author of the novel is as it were eager to learn from his hero (178), and in *Eldorado* Sir Percy Blakeney is a “dying man” who possesses the vital secret of the Dauphin’s whereabouts, a secret which Chauvelin is desperate to prise from Sir Percy’s lips (Omnibus 859-65). Indeed, just as the hero’s secret in Sebastian’s novel is not divulged, so in *Eldorado* Sir Percy refuses to reveal where the Dauphin is. The evocation of the Scarlet Pimpernel in Sebastian’s novel seems to project the hero as a Pimpernel-esque figure, “The Doubtful Asphodel,” a figure whom one in turn associates with Sebastian himself. In *Eldorado* the Pimpernel resumes his fight against French revolutionary terror, and in *The Doubtful Asphodel* Sebastian shadows forth the evils of contemporary tyranny.

V sums up the second part of Sebastian’s novel in this way:

> Then, little by little, the demons of physical sickness smother with mountains of pain all kinds of thought, philosophy, surmise, memories, hope, regret. We stumble and crawl through hideous landscapes, nor do we mind where we go - because it is all anguish and nothing but anguish. The method is now reversed. Instead of those thought-images which radiated fainter and fainter, as we followed them down blind alleys, it is now the slow assault of horrible uncouth visions drawing upon us and hemming us in: the story of a tortured child; an exile’s account of life in the cruel country whence he fled; a meek lunatic with a black eye; a farmer kicking his dog - lustily, wickedly (175).

Here, the dying man’s physical pain rises to the surface; however, beneath the surface the shadows intimate still more terrifying things. If all kinds of thought become smothered with “mountains of pain,” the image of a mountain of pain recalls Sebastian’s story “The Funny Mountain,” which evokes the sinister world of Blauberg, with its intimations of ghastly and painful biological experimentation. Moreover, if V states that we “stumble and crawl through hideous landscapes,” that we are hemmed in by “uncouth visions” so horrible and unrelenting that ultimately “the pain fades too,” and that the hero at this point is “left so exhausted that he failed to be interested in death” (175), one is reminded of Prendick, throwing open the door
of Moreau's laboratory and being confronted with a hideous vision of bloody vivisection, causing him to flee in terror and stumble across the island, till at last he collapses into a tangle of ferns, feeling "no longer very terrified or very miserable. For I had, as it were, passed the limit of terror and despair" (Wells, Moreau 48-52). Indeed, if these "mountains of pain" and "hideous landscapes" evoke the Moreau-like world of Blauberg, the "horrible uncouth visions" appearing in this part of The Doubtful Asphodel evoke a Blaubergian chamber of horrors. First, the story of a child who is "tortured," an image which recalls Eldorado and Sir Percy's quest to rescue the young Dauphin from the hands of "human fiends" (Omnibus 646); then "an exile's account of life in the cruel country whence he fled," an image which evokes an episodical character in The Doubtful Asphodel who escapes from an "unnamed country of terror and misery" where "the infliction of physical pain came to be considered as sufficient to govern and guide human nature" (23-24); then "a meek lunatic with a black eye," who evokes the Nazi attitude to the so-called "unfit" members of society; and finally "a farmer kicking his dog - lustily, wickedly," an instance of brutality which recalls a passage in The Gift where Fyodor notes a German proclivity for sadism: a peasant torturing his horse "in a cosy nook, with red-hot iron" (Gift 319). In this second part of The Doubtful Asphodel the anguish the dying man feels over his physical sickness seems to mask a deeper trepidation beneath the surface where tyrannical terror and Blaubergian biological horrors cast a shadow over the whole world.

In the final part of The Doubtful Asphodel a wave of light floods the book. V writes: "We feel that we are on the brink of some absolute truth" (176), something that has been staring us in the face. This moment of revelation arises in the book, to quote the novel itself, "as if somebody had flung open the door and people in the room have started up, blinking, feverishly picking up parcels" (176). This image of people "blinking" and "picking up parcels" when a door is flung open is suggestive of incarceration and transportation, and it appears the more threatening as Sebastian's term for the momentous truth which is on the point of being unveiled is "the absolute solution" (176), a term which, in the context of tyrannical terror, has an ominous ring. Only months after the publication of The Doubtful Asphodel V sees on a café wall in Paris: "Death to the Jews" and "Vive le front populaire" (195). "Death to the Jews" evokes Nazism, while the reference to the Popular Front - an international alliance of communists and socialists formed in the 1930s - evokes, by association, Stalinism. The slogans, as it were, conjure up a nexus of totalitarian tyranny, and their message is bleak: death to an unwanted group, long life to the regime. Indeed, the message is symbolically bleaker still, since the slogans are written on the café wall: the message,
so to speak, is the writing on the wall, an ominous warning of the direction of totalitarian tyranny.

Sebastian’s “absolute solution” seems to hint at a terrifyingly conclusive means of disposing of tyranny’s victims. Both the phrasing and the means, in fact, were already in the air by the time of the composition of *The Doubtful Asphodel*. Hitler in 1920 had demanded a “thorough solution” of the Jewish Question: namely, “the removal of the Jews from the midst of our people” (Gilbert, *Holocaust* 24); in 1923 the Nazi press hinted darkly at a “Final Goal,” the ruthless elimination of Jews from German life (Weiss 234-35); by 1930 “Death to the Jews” was a common chant at Nazi rallies (Weiss 286); in 1935, the year of the Nuremberg Laws, the British Passport Control Officer in Berlin wrote that the Nazi government’s declared object was to “destroy the Jews body and soul” (Andrew, *Secret Service* 379); and in the same city, long before the Nazi seizure of power, one Fyodor Vinberg, in the Russian newspaper *Prizyv*, advocated as “the final solution” to the Jewish Question the extermination of all Jews (Fischer 121). With such ideas in the air, and with Hitler and Stalin already transporting hosts of people to camps in the early 1930s, Sebastian’s “absolute solution” acquires a frightening edge. On the philosophical surface of *The Doubtful Asphodel* “the absolute solution” is death, the “watery” dissolution of oneself into the divine to be metamorphosed, and on the deeper level of the novel likewise there is a suggestion that “the absolute solution” is death - a different kind of death, however: death meted out by tyranny, death which is “liquidation.” In the final part of Sebastian’s novel the “dying man” seems to have a terrible realization: namely, the possibility of a horrifying and all-consuming outcome, of tyranny casting a pall over the whole of existence, and simply dispensing death to all those it deems unfit to live.

If the Scarlet Pimpernel signs his secret messages with a little flower drawn in red ink, he also frequently leaves as a calling card a verse of his own invention:

> We seek him here, we seek him there,
> Those Frenchies seek him everywhere.
> Is he in heaven? - Is he in hell?
> That demmed, elusive Pimpernel (*SP* 100).

The identity and whereabouts of the hero of *The Doubtful Asphodel* are never divulged. V writes: “the reader is kept ignorant as to who the dying man is, and

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7 Compare this Fyodor Vinberg with the Colonel Vinberg thought to have been behind the assassination attempt on Paul Miliukov in Berlin on 28 March 1922, which resulted in the death of V. D. Nabokov (*RY* 190).
where his deathbed stands or floats, or whether it is a bed at all” (173). True to the evocation of the Scarlet Pimpernel in Sebastian’s novel, Sebastian’s hero is an elusive character. But he - or rather Sebastian himself with whom the hero appears to be associated - is also something else. “Is he in heaven? - Is he in hell?” goes the verse concerning the Pimpernel, as if Sir Percy has the power even to cross the boundary of death; and in a sense this is what Sebastian, as “The Doubtful Asphodel,” does in his final novel. The asphodel is the flower which the ancients believed grew in the underworld, and Sebastian in The Doubtful Asphodel seems to have passed into that land of the dead, as magically as the Pimpernel spirits himself from location to location, and to have returned with a horrifying truth, the “truth about death” (176), a vision of mass execution, such as Sir Percy encounters in the Reign of Terror. It is as if Sebastian has looked into the depths of the pool and seen the ominous shadows.

XI

Following the publication of The Doubtful Asphodel Sebastian’s life reaches a crisis. Ostensibly, the love affair he is supposedly conducting and the heart-disease from which he is supposedly suffering take a turn for the worse. However, there are signs that the real crisis Sebastian faces is of quite a different nature.

The Doubtful Asphodel is published in the spring of 1935, and Sebastian at this time once again goes abroad (181). V states that Sebastian’s intention is to see his mistress and that things go awry:

When he was told by one of her sleek-haired young ruffians that she wished to be rid of him for ever, he returned to London and stayed there for a couple of months, making a pitiful effort to deceive solitude by appearing in public as much as he could (181).

Given the intimations, however, that it is not romance that Sebastian pursues on his frequent trips to the Continent, but business of a Pimpernel-esque nature, his being scared off by a “sleek-haired young ruffian” suggests not that Sebastian has fallen out of favour with a mistress, but that he has had a dangerous encounter with his enemies; and, moreover, that his subsequent return to London and his appearing in public as much as possible is not a means of avoiding loneliness, but of seeking the safety of the crowd. In other words, Sebastian returns to England not as a disappointed lover, but as a man on the run.
Sebastian at this time "would be seen in this place or that, wearing a scarf round his neck even in the warmest dining-room, exasperating hostesses by his absent-mindedness and his gentle refusal to be drawn out" (181). This recalls *The Invisible Man* where Griffin arrives at a country inn "wrapped up from head to foot" and, although the fire burns in the parlour where the landlady serves his lunch, "never loosened the silk muffler he had wrapped round the lower part of his face" (Wells, *Invisible Man* 3, 6). Griffin keeps his scarf on in order to hide his invisibility - in short, as a means of disguise, and on the very next page of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* V points out the effectiveness of simple disguises: "sun-oil and sun tan, and an eye-shade," he states, "are much too good at disguising a passing face" (182).

Sebastian also goes to concerts and plays, and drinks "hot milk in the middle of the night at coffee stalls with taxi drivers" (182). Again, these seem to be the actions of a man who wishes to appear in public as much as possible. In addition, taxi drivers would be a good source of information for a man who might wish he had eyes in the back of his head. In "A Scandal in Bohemia" Sherlock Holmes seeks out a group of London cabmen, and over a drink obtains as much information on a certain person as he could desire: "See the advantages of a cabman as a confidant," he tells Watson (Adventures 16-17). In August Sebastian is "very ill for a week" (182); "ill" is espionage jargon for "being watched by the enemy" (Tremayne 58). In September Sebastian goes to stay with some people in the country, but brings his visit to an abrupt end: "For a whole week he wandered about a coldish house where all the other guests knew one another intimately, and then one morning he walked ten miles to the station and quietly travelled back to town, leaving dinner jacket and sponge-bag behind" (183). Sebastian's experience recalls *The Prismatic Bezel* where Abeson stays at a boarding-house in which "all the lodgers are in various ways connected with one another," giving the boarding-house the atmosphere of a "country-house" (91). Indeed, if Sebastian travels to London, leaving dinner jacket and sponge-bag behind, an action which creates the illusion of his being in one place while being in another, it recalls what Abeson does, creating the impression that his dead body is lying in his bedroom while he is elsewhere, masquerading as the passerby "Nosebag." The connection is suggestive, as Abeson carries out his deception after discovering that he is in danger of being murdered. In November Sebastian has lunch with P. G. Sheldon during which he says very little; then he disappears (183).

In the middle of January 1936 something curious happens. V receives a letter from Sebastian saying he is at the St Damiers sanatorium in France, and asking V to come and see him (183-84). Ostensibly, Sebastian is languishing in the final stages of heart-disease, but there are signs that his reasons for being at the sanatorium are quite
different. The last time Sebastian was at a sanatorium was on the occasion of his visit to Blauberg in June 1929. The depiction of the St Damier sanatorium contains similar eerie intimations. In his letter Sebastian refers to the hospital as “a kind of” sanatorium (184). There is something creepy in this note of vagueness, especially given that Doctor Moreau calls his laboratory “a kind of” Bluebeard’s Chamber and a biological station “of a sort” (Wells, Moreau 30, 27). In addition, Sebastian’s closing observation about the “bare branches and twigs” he sees from the hospital window (184) recalls Roy Carswell’s portrait, shadowing forth the Blauberg horrors, with its fallen leaves and “delicate trellis of twigs” in one corner (117). Moreover, when V finally arrives at the sanatorium to visit Sebastian, he is told by the night-porter: “Foreign names ought to be always replaced by numbers” (198), a remark which conjures up an image of the numbers given to concentration camp prisoners. And the note of fanatical racism resonates as the night-porter searches for Sebastian’s name in the ledger: “K, K, K,” he growls (199), letters which evoke the initials of the Ku Klux Klan. The night-porter tells V to go to room 36, and V is taken down one long passage and then another, coming at last to the door of a tiny room, which is all in darkness: “At first I could only hear my heart thumping,” V recounts, “but then I discerned a quick soft breathing. I strained my eyes; there was a screen or something half round the bed, and anyway it would have been too dark to distinguish Sebastian” (200). Compare Bluebeard’s wife’s discovery of the gory chamber, a small dark room at the end of a long passage: “At first she saw nothing, for the windows were closed, but after a few moments she perceived dimly that the floor was entirely covered with clotted blood, and that in this were reflected the dead bodies of several women that hung along the walls” (Perrault 73). The St Damier nurse lights a lamp which gives a glow of “blue” light to V’s room, enhancing the parallel (200, 201). V’s journey to St Damier hospital culminates in his being shown to a place which might be termed - to borrow the words of Doctor Moreau - “a kind of Bluebeard’s Chamber.”

In The Doubtful Asphodel Sebastian speaks of a world of horror, of “mountains of pain,” a world which evokes the biological atrocities intimated at Blauberg. “We stumble and crawl through hideous landscapes,” writes V in his summary of this aspect of the novel (175), and it is a quarter of an hour’s “stumble through dark lanes” and a pine-wood which takes V from the station to St Damier hospital (198). The suggestion is that St Damier hospital, a fictional place in France like Blauberg, is situated in that landscape of horror mentioned in The Doubtful Asphodel. The climax of Sebastian’s masterpiece, the realization of “the absolute solution,” is the recognition that the landscape of the world can be spelled, that the apparent wild country is not a meaningless jumble, but that these “mountains and forests” form a

157
coherent sentence (176); and there is a suggestion that the mountain of Blauberg and the pine forest of St Damier are linked in a coherent sentence of horrifying medical experimentation, which makes up the writing on the wall - the vision of “the absolute solution.” If Sebastian goes to Blauberg to investigate a world of Moreau-like science, there is a suggestion that in January 1936 he is at St Damier sanatorium likewise not because of heart-disease but in connection with its darker shadows.

However, Sebastian’s present visit to St Damier seems to be undertaken in a mood of resignation. Sebastian in his letter to V gives the impression of being seriously ill, but this can be taken as a veiled reference to something more sinister. Sebastian writes that when he was sorting through his private papers he felt “particularly mortal” (184); at that time, when he is in England, there is a suggestion that Sebastian is on the run from the enemy who wish “to be rid of him for ever,” and intimations in Sebastian’s letter that he feels his life is at an end seem to suggest he is still in mortal peril from his pursuers. Indeed, the letter closes on a note of fear: Sebastian says he does not like the bare branches and twigs he sees from his window. Yet if Sebastian senses the approach of the enemy, there is a suggestion that he no longer wants to run, that he has simply had enough: “I am fed up [osskomin] with a number of tortuous things,” he says, “and especially with the patterns of my shed snake-skins” (183). There is an intimation that the “tortuous” Blauberg horrors have finally taken their toll, and that Sebastian is fed up with the “snake-skin” disguises of a spy, which have not afforded him any new camouflage with which to elude his enemies. Sebastian says he now finds solace in “the obvious and the ordinary” (183); the intimation is that he is giving up his secret work, that he is bidding farewell to his decidedly unobvious and extraordinary life in intelligence. His letter, in short, reads like the letter of a burnt out spy, who knows the end is near.

Yet if Sebastian is a hunted man, exhausted by the chase, why would he come to St Damier, which appears to be one of the centres of the horror? And, more to the point, why would he ask V to see him here? The answer perhaps is that Sebastian means to make one last thrust at the enemy. Under a Dr Starov, to whom, he says, he does not give a true account of his life, he gets himself admitted to the sanatorium. “I should like . . . to tell you about myself,” he writes to V (183). There is a suggestion in this that Sebastian means to tell V what he does not tell Dr Starov: namely, the “complicated” story of his “emigré existence” (184); that is, his life as a secret agent, and the horrors he has discovered. In The Doubtful Asphodel Sebastian does not let the terrible secret out - not overtly, at least - but now perhaps, sensing that his time is
running out, he decides to reveal the terrible truth to the civilian world; to show V that it is in this very sanatorium that the horrors are being carried out.

However, V arrives too late; he does not hear Sebastian’s secret. Sebastian is already dead when V reaches St Damier, dead supposedly from heart-disease. Yet if Sebastian has no heart-disease, how does he die? Recall the fate of Lev Sedov, Trotsky’s son. In February 1938 Sedov was admitted to a small Paris clinic with acute appendicitis, but died unexpectedly shortly afterwards, supposedly of post-operational complications and heart failure (Andrew, KGB 128-29). Suspicion falls on an NKVD assassin, and this fact casts an eerie light over the death of Sebastian Knight, raising a sinister possibility: namely, that the enemy do catch up with Sebastian in the end, in that sinister Bluebeard’s chamber of a sanatorium; that he is “medically” murdered, his death made to look like the heart-disease he fakes, in the manner of the deaths of the Swiss couple at Blauberg, where there are signs of murder made to look like suicide.

However, a question remains. If Sebastian calls V to St Damier in order to tell him the great secret of The Doubtful Asphodel, the dark and horrifying side of “the absolute solution” cryptically concealed in the novel, how is it that V already knows Sebastian’s secret? The night after receiving Sebastian’s letter, V has a disturbing dream (185). He dreams that he is waiting for Sebastian to return from a long journey. When Sebastian appears V is struck by the fact there is something wrong with his hand. This hand, which seems to have an existence of its own - a sham thing attached to Sebastian’s wrist - becomes the focus of V’s attention, and also of Sebastian’s, who is waiting for a manicurist to arrive, as he is anxious “to get ready for the banquet” (187). The association of hand and banquet calls to mind Belshazzar’s feast where the disembodied hand sets the writing on the wall (Daniel 5). Indeed, the connection becomes stronger when one considers that in the dream V’s mother holds “a silver cup” (186), recalling the gold and silver vessels at the biblical banquet. The evocation of the biblical imagery sets the tone for V’s dream. For the writing which Sebastian cryptically sets on the wall in The Doubtful Asphodel - the hideous landscape of the mountains of pain, the Blauberg medical horrors, which lead to the vision of “the absolute solution” - seems to be evident in the dream, which is full of “obscure forebodings” (185). The hand which so disturbs V is Sebastian’s left, the sinister side; it is held inside a black glove, and repels V with the idea of some kind of drastic medical measure, of Sebastian’s having been “operated upon” (186).

Moreover, Sebastian’s hand makes its own weird revelation: his glove is pulled off to reveal “a number of tiny hands, like the front paws of a mouse” (187), an image
which evokes at the same time the disembodied hand which sets the writing on the wall, an impression of dismembered body parts, and also, given that the tiny human hands are like mouse paws, a hint of Moreau’s Beast People. Sebastian calls to V in the dream, a phrase filled with “absolute” moment, which seems able to “solve” a monstrous riddle (188). The phrase is surely “the absolute solution.” V wakes from his dream with Sebastian’s phrase ringing in his head. He says it makes no sense to him in the light of day (188), yet his dream hits at the central secret of Sebastian’s life in an uncanny manner. A mere eerie coincidence? Or is there some other explanation?

In addition to its dark theme of “the absolute solution,” The Doubtful Asphodel contains a shipwreck theme which is related to The Tempest and the sea-change idea. Shakespeare’s play contains a character called Sebastian who is shipwrecked and thought to be dead, but in fact remains alive. Consider also two significant dates. Sebastian Knight is born on 31 December 1899 (3). Assuming that V uses New Style dating throughout The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, and applying the formula by which Nabokov calculated his own birth date - where 10 April 1899, Old Style, converts to 23 April 1899, New Style (SM 10) - Sebastian is born on 18 December 1899, Old Style, which is St Sebastian’s Day in the East (Farmer 353). From the first date in the novel consider the last. V arrives at St Damier on the night of 18 January 1936, which by Old Style dating is the night of 5 January; that is Twelfth Night, the occasion of a Shakespeare play featuring a character called Sebastian. The associations of these two dates, which as it were frame Sebastian’s life, are suggestive. St Sebastian is shot by archers and left for dead, but in fact lives on; and if in The Tempest Sebastian is shipwrecked but survives, in Twelfth Night, also, Sebastian, brother of Viola, is lost in a shipwreck and thought to be dead, but in fact survives. And there is another suggestive point. Sebastian, as “The Doubtful Asphodel,” is aligned with Sir Percy Blakeney as the “dying man” in Eldorado. Sir Percy, as it turns out, only pretends to be dying as a means of escaping his enemies; the whole thing in fact is an elaborate deception which Sir Percy ultimately effects by means of a brilliant disguise.

A startling possibility opens up before us. With V showing an uncanny contact with Sebastian’s inner life, with the intimations of undead Sebastians and the example of the ingenious Sir Percy, are we sure that Sebastian really dies? “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I,” says V at the end of the book (203). Could that be true in the most literal and concrete way? Does Sebastian Knight perish in a hospital bed at St Damier, or does the elusive Pimpernel figure elude once again?
The first thing V does after leaving St. Damier hospital is to pay a visit to Sebastian's London flat (34). Supposedly, V arrives to sort through his dead brother's effects, but there is a different explanation for his actions.

On entering the flat, V does something peculiar. He gropes around inside a "white-robed" armchair, apparently for no other reason than that he "wondered what it had stolen"; and from the folds of this chair he pulls out a Brazil nut (35). In reply to a letter of 1944 Nabokov wrote: "I loved that bit about your having certain little sigils to check pilfering - like Sherlock Holmes upsetting the ashtray" (SL 47). Nabokov seems to be referring to "The Golden Pince-Nez" where Holmes's discovery of footprints in the ash he had earlier strewn, proves that the murderer has entered the room in his absence. The idea of "sigils to check pilfering," of creating certain conditions one later inspects for signs of an intruder, casts an interesting light on V's rummaging in the white-robed armchair and pulling out a Brazil nut. One might cover a chair in loose fabric and secrete in its folds a nut; if, in a check on one's return, the nut were missing, it would indicate that the chair had been stripped, one's home searched; conversely, if the nut were still where one had placed it, it would give at least some degree of assurance that no intruder had entered in one's absence. In other words, where V's rummaging in the armchair makes little sense if he is coming to the flat for the first time, it does make sense as the action of a man who is returning to his own home.

After completing an inspection of the flat, V unlocks the drawers of Sebastian's desk and takes out two bundles of what he implies to be love letters (36). V apparently scruples to examine the letters more closely, and burns them in the grate. This is curious behaviour for a man who professes to have a keen interest in Sebastian's life. It is not curious, however, if he already knows what is in the letters. And what is in the letters is intimated by certain literary parallels. As the papers burn in the grate, a single sheet comes lose, "curving backwards under the torturing flame, and before the crumpling blackness had crept over it, a few words appeared in full radiance, then swooned and all was over" (36). The "few words" form part of a Russian sentence, which translated give: "thy manner always to find" (36). Compare The Scarlet Pimpernel. Marguerite Blakeney surprises Sir Andrew Ffoulkes in the act of burning a private note. Faking a swoon, she contrives to glimpse a "few words" on the slip of paper before Sir Andrew resumes its destruction:
“Start myself to-morrow....” This she had read quite distinctly, then came a blur caused by the smoke of the candle, which obliterated the next few words; but, right at the bottom, there was another sentence, which was now standing clearly and distinctly, like letters of fire, before her mental vision. “If you wish to speak to me again, I shall be in the supper-room at one o’clock precisely” (SP 108).

Marguerite tries to put Sir Andrew at his ease by pretending she believes his note to be a love letter (SP 106); in fact, as she has divined, it is a secret communication from the Scarlet Pimpernel. Compare also the second Scarlet Pimpernel novel, I Will Repay (1906). Searching the home of Paul Déroulède, the revolutionary authorities discover the charred remains of papers in the stove. Juliette Marny, who has burned the papers, claims they were love letters; in fact, they were secret documents containing plans for the rescue of Marie Antoinette (IWR 111-13). These literary echoes intimate that the two bundles of letters V takes out of Sebastian’s desk are not love letters, but papers of a secret nature; and, moreover, that V now burns them in order to ensure - like Sir Andrew Ffoulkes and Juliette Marny - that they do not fall into the wrong hands.

Consider a further literary parallel. The single sheet which comes loose as it burns, revealing a few Russian words, belongs to the second bundle of letters, consisting of notepaper of an “egg-shell blue” colour (36). In the Sherlock Holmes story, “The Five Orange Pips,” Elias Openshaw, a former member of the Ku Klux Klan, absconds with some of the Klan’s secret documents. Fearing the vengeance of his former associates, Openshaw hastily burns the papers. In the process a single sheet comes loose and flutters to the floor, and on it are some words cryptically referring to the Klan’s activities. The papers are “blue-tinted” (Adventures 112). What prompts Openshaw to destroy the papers is his receiving the Klan’s warning sign, an envelope containing five orange pips and inscribed with the letters “K. K. K.” (Adventures 106-07). As we have seen, these are the letters the night-porter utters as he searches through the St Damier register (199). There is, in fact, a direct echo of the Holmes story at St Damier. When the night-porter has finished scanning the register, V restlessly awaits developments: “I paced up and down the room in a tremor of uncontrollable impatience” (199). Compare Holmes’s manner after receiving some bad news during the case: “He sprang from his chair, and paced about the room in uncontrollable agitation” (Adventures 119). The echo of the Holmes story evokes a sense of threat over V at St Damier, and that dark shadow is again evident as he burns the blue papers in Sebastian’s flat. For the armchair in which V rumbles for a Brazil nut is not only “white-robed,” but clearly personified. After V has retrieved
the nut, "the armchair again folding its arms resumed its inscrutable expression (which might have been one of contemptuous dignity)" (35). The image evokes a white-robed member of the Ku Klux Klan; indeed, once again with overtones of the Holmes story: a Brazil nut is an American fruit seed which grows in clusters segmented like oranges. The Brazil nut concealed in the white-robed armchair evokes the orange pips of the Klan. Thus, as V burns the blue papers in Sebastian’s flat he appears to be aligned with Elias Openshaw, disposing of incriminating documents while the threat of the Klan looms over him.

V’s visit to Sebastian’s flat raises the suggestion that he has not come to sort out his dead brother’s effects. While his groping in the recesses of an armchair and pulling out a Brazil nut hints at a “sigil to check pilfering,” his burning bundles of letters suggests the disposal of sensitive documents. In other words, there is an intimation that V is Sebastian Knight in disguise, returning to his flat to tie up loose ends. However, if the Brazil nut V retrieves from the armchair evokes the orange pips of the Klan, there is at the same time a suggestion that if Sebastian has metamorphosed into V in order to elude his enemies, the ominous shadows of St Damier and its world continue to threaten.

XIII

Following his visit to Sebastian’s flat, V embarks on a major undertaking. He begins a biography of Sebastian Knight. However, the intimation that V is Sebastian himself calls into question the whole basis of this biography and the interviews V carries out. The possibility arises that the motive for V’s investigations is not biographical at all. Whatever that motive is, however, V runs into difficulty early on.

After talking to Sebastian’s old Cambridge acquaintance and his former secretary Mr Goodman, V is approached in Goodman’s offices by a woman called Helen Pratt. Miss Pratt says she is a good friend of Clare Bishop’s, and that there is something Clare wants to find out (58). Clare had drifted away from Sebastian following his return from Blauberg in 1929, and Miss Pratt tells V that Clare has been married now for three or four years and wants to know if Sebastian kept her letters. In fact, Helen Pratt believes that Clare would like the letters destroyed. In spite of this, Miss Pratt says it will not be possible for V to talk to Clare in person (73). V nevertheless calls at Clare’s house. Here he meets the dressing-gowned Mr Bishop (75), and Mr Bishop likewise tells V, in no uncertain terms, that he cannot speak to Clare: “You are not
going to see her in any case” (76). Two days later, however, V returns to Clare’s street with the aim of approaching Clare as she leaves the house. On arriving, V discovers that Clare, heavily pregnant, is already outside, but when he makes his way over to her, he finds that her manner is strangely cold. Her face has a “solemn expression,” and V has the distinct feeling he is “forbidden” even to make himself known to her (77). Awkwardly, he inquires if she has dropped a key, which in fact he has drawn from his own pocket (77-78). The whole encounter, according to V, is “strange” (99).

However, light is shed on the scene by certain literary parallels. At the start of chapter 9 of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight V summarizes Clare’s relationship with Sebastian:

Their relationship lasted six years. During that period Sebastian produced his two first novels: The Prismatic Bezel and Success. . . . Between autumn, 1927, and summer, 1929, he wrote the three stories which later (1932) were re-published together under the title The Funny Mountain . . . and as in the intervals between the above-mentioned books Sebastian kept twisting and laying aside and re-twisting this or that imaginative scheme it may be safely assumed that during those six years he was continuously occupied (79).

Compare the start of the Sherlock Holmes story, “The Solitary Cyclist”:

From the years 1894 to 1901 inclusive, Mr Sherlock Holmes was a very busy man. It is safe to say that there was no public case of any difficulty in which he was not consulted during those eight years, and there were hundreds of private cases, some of them of the most intricate and extraordinary character, in which he played a prominent part. Many startling successes and a few unavoidable failures were the outcome of this long period of continuous work (Return 52).

In the Holmes story Violet Smith is tailed by a sinister-looking male cyclist, and her experience is suggestive in relation to Clare. The Holmes story begins with Miss Smith’s relating her encounter with the cyclist, and ends with her being abducted and forced into a marriage with a villain; and chapter 8 of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight begins with the episode in Paris in which Clare comes under threat from a cyclist, and ends with her appearing solemn and strained in a marriage to the hostile Mr Bishop. Consider also the Father Brown story, “The Dagger with Wings.” Father Brown calls at a house and is met by a man wearing a dressing-gown. During a talk with this man, Father Brown has a realization, that the dressing-gown is a disguise: “It
was the only really good disguise I’ve ever known,” he later explains. “When you meet a man in a house with a dressing-gown on, you assume quite automatically that he’s in his own house” (Chesterton 202). In fact, the man in the dressing-gown - as Father Brown deduces - is the murderer, John Strake. A similar idea occurs in the long Holmes story *The Valley of Fear* where Birdy Edwards takes his own dressing-gown and dresses in it the corpse of Ted Baldwin, again to create the illusion that the villainous murderer is the man of the house (*Valley* 80). Mr Bishop, with his hair brushed back with an “angry brush” (76), appears before V with his “hands thrust into his dressing-gown pockets” (76). This recalls “The Final Problem” where Moriarty admonishes Holmes: “It is a dangerous habit to finger loaded firearms in the pocket of one’s dressing-gown” (*Memoirs* 254). V remarks about Mr Bishop that it is “queer” that Clare should have married a man with the same name: “no relation either, just pure coincidence” (75). However, perhaps the similarity in names is not a coincidence, but a mistake - a slip-up in inventing a fake. V is told about Mr Bishop by Helen Pratt (75) whose own surname denotes a “clever trickster,” deriving from an Old English word meaning “trick” (Hanks and Hodges 430), and the first time Miss Pratt appears she has just eavesdropped on V’s conversation with Mr Goodman (58). There is a suggestion that a certain trick has been played on V: that the enemy are holding Clare at her house behind the mask of a mock marriage.

But why would the enemy hold Clare? There are two suggestive points. Helen Pratt has just been working with Mr Goodman on the proofs of his biography of Sebastian Knight (58). In that book there is no mention of Sebastian’s having a half-brother V. V himself states that to readers of Goodman’s book he is bound to appear “non-existent - a bogus relative, a garrulous impostor” (4). And if the dubious Helen Pratt is one of the first readers of that book, she also overhears Goodman express surprise at V’s existence (55). And consider another point. If in late 1929 Clare drifts away from Sebastian, the ostensible reason for their parting is Sebastian’s beginning an affair with a Russian woman. However, we have seen the intimations that Sebastian has no affair. In Sebastian’s book *Lost Property*, begun at the time of Clare’s parting from Sebastian, the hero writes a letter to his girlfriend, which V says might be “a kind of code” in which Sebastian “expressed a few truths about his relations with Clare” (112). The hero tells his girlfriend: “you must be brave. But then, anything I might tell you in the way of support or consolation is sure to be milk-puddingy, - you know what I mean. You always knew what I meant” (110). Later, V mentally makes the following remark to Madame Lecerf: “you’ve spilled the curds and whey” (171), alluding to the nursery rhyme “Little Miss Muffet”; and the image of Miss Muffet’s curds and whey reflects suggestively on the reference to milk-pudding in the letter in
Lost Property, particularly in the context of the hero’s telling his girlfriend to “be brave.” That is to say, if the letter is “a kind of code” from Sebastian to Clare, there is a suggestion that Sebastian is telling Clare to be brave not in the face of a separation, but in the face of a “Miss Muffet”-like spider which might sit down beside her, while he leaves her to embark on his lengthy and intensifying secret trips, a spider which resolves into an image of the enemy in relation to Roy Carswell’s portrait, a spider which in 1936 at Clare’s house appears to have descended upon her. In other words, there is a suggestion that Sebastian and Clare never really separate, that they only ostensibly part for Clare’s protection while Sebastian’s secret work intensifies. And this suggestion implies something else: that the child Clare is carrying is Sebastian’s own. In late 1935, when there are intimations that Sebastian is on the run from the enemy, a blushing Sebastian runs into Helen Pratt in London, and Miss Pratt, who has just seen Clare into a bookshop, is thankful he had not appeared moments earlier (182). Yet perhaps meeting Clare was precisely Sebastian’s intention, a clandestine meeting in a bookshop which Helen Pratt’s unexpected presence foils. The point is suggestive, for the same Helen Pratt who witnesses this near meeting works on Goodman’s book which raises a question-mark over the identity of V.

In Eldorado the revolutionary authorities hold hostage Armand St Just, Sir Percy Blakeney’s brother-in-law, and send him out onto the street as bait to trap Sir Percy. The scene bears a striking resemblance to V’s strange encounter with Clare. Waiting opposite his brother-in-law’s lodgings disguised as a French labourer, Sir Percy “suddenly saw Armand walking slowly up the street”:

The young man did not look either to right or left; he held his head forward on his chest, and his hands were hidden underneath his cloak. When he passed immediately under one of the street lamps Blakeney caught sight of his face; it was pale and drawn. Then he turned his head, and for the space of two seconds his eyes across the narrow street encountered those of his chief. He had the presence of mind not to make a sign or to utter a sound; he was obviously being followed, but in that brief moment Sir Percy had seen in the young man’s eyes a look that reminded him of a hunted creature (Omnibus 747).

Compare The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. V says that on the other side of the street “suddenly Clare Bishop appeared,” walking “slowly and heavily.” Clare does not turn to V but maintains a “stately concentration.” V observes that Clare’s face is “pinched” and as “pale” as sawdust; and as V’s impetus carries him “across the street,” he comes face to face with Clare who “lifted her near-sighted eyes. No, thank God, she did not recognise me.” V gives Clare a smile of welcome, “but in those few
instants” realizes he must not greet her in any way, and with “ridiculous presence of mind,” he takes a key out of his pocket and holds it up to her (77).

The parallel between the episode in Eldorado and the scene on the street involving V and Clare suggests that the enemy are holding Clare hostage as a way of putting V’s identity to the test. And indeed, V’s actions are suggestive. He offers Clare a key. Supposedly, V is inventing a pretext for awkwardly running into her, but the “presence of mind” with which he offers the key echoes Armand’s “presence of mind” on the street, where his actions are guided by the danger of the situation. Moreover, the key V offers is suggestive: the key to Sebastian’s flat. V’s action has the hallmarks of a Pimpernel-esque rescue attempt: Clare could take the key, continue down the street, and make her way to Sebastian’s flat. However, Clare declines the key. On the face of it, Clare does not recognize V, but the parallel with Eldorado, where Armand recognizes the disguised Sir Percy, intimates that she does, and that she, like Armand, decides not to acknowledge V for fear of compromising him. In the beech-wood at the German seaside resort in 1926 there is a suggestion that Clare orchestrates a charade in view of enemy observers, and there are similar intimations here. Clare appears to take the lead in a little performance, deciding that the best thing to do is to pretend not to recognize V and not to take the key. The intimation casts an intensely poignant light over the scene. For this is the last time V and Clare meet. Clare walks away down the street, taking with her perhaps Sebastian’s unborn child.

The poignancy is intensified by a final literary parallel. Clare’s holding a key close to her near-sighted eyes, a key which has supposedly dropped to the floor, evokes the story of “Bluebeard,” in which, upon peering into the grisly chamber, Bluebeard’s wife fatefuly lets slip the key, and after retrieving it from the blood-soaked floor, is unable to remove the stain. The Bluebeard theme ties in with the sinister intimations regarding Clare’s “husband,” and eerily illuminates her fate: “how was it,” V asks “that she bled to death next to an empty cradle?” (99). The suggestion is that Clare, held by the enemy in March 1936, ends up a little later as one of Bluebeard’s victims inside the bloody chamber.

XIV

Shortly after his encounter with Clare, V leaves England and travels to Blauberg (119). Ostensibly, his purpose is to track down Sebastian’s supposed Russian mistress, but
the intimation that V is Sebastian himself suggests otherwise. If V is indeed Sebastian, just what is the motive behind his investigations may not be as yet clear, but if there are intimations that Clare is being held by the enemy, V may be partly motivated in travelling to Blauberg by a desire to create the impression that he does not realize Clare’s danger and is no longer interested in speaking to her; that is, he may hope by so doing to suggest that he is not Sebastian Knight and thereby relieve Clare. In any event, if V is Sebastian, his returning to Blauberg, the centre of the darkness, is a bold move; and indeed, here shadows appear to close in.

V’s arrival at Blauberg echoes the arrival of John McMurdo at the town of Vermissa in the long Sherlock Holmes story, The Valley of Fear. V travels to Blauberg, a town situated in a valley, by a “slow local train” (123); McMurdo travels to Vermissa, a mining town situated “at the head of the Vermissa Valley,” by a “slowly crawling” local train (Valley 85). V finds that the Blauberg area is blanketed in “long trails of white mist where upright poplar trees dimly floated” (119); McMurdo finds that the Vermissa Valley is covered in “clouds of drifting smoke” (Valley 91), encircling the “high shafts” and chimneys of the collieries (Valley 86). Blauberg is a “red-tiled town” crouching at the foot of a mountain (119); the Vermissa Valley is characterized by the “red glow” of furnaces “on the sides of the hills” (Valley 86). V describes Blauberg as having “wet fields,” a “forlorn little station,” a “damp-smelling park” (119), and the atmosphere of “a huge refuse heap” (122); McMurdo arrives at a Vermissa which is described as “depressing,” displaying “a dead level of mean ugliness and squalor” (Valley 91), and as being surrounded by great “heaps of slag and dumps of cinders” which have been thrown up near the mines (Valley 86). V leaves his bag at the Blauberg station and makes his way towards “a cluster of hotels and sanitariums,” as he seeks out the Beaumont Hotel (119); McMurdo picks up his grip-sack at the Vermissa station and passes “a cluster of liquor saloons and gaming-houses,” as he makes his way to his lodgings (Valley 90-92). The parallel between V’s arrival at Blauberg and McMurdo’s arrival at Vermissa underlines the dark intimations surrounding Blauberg. For Vermissa is the headquarters of a secret society called “The Scowrers,” which is terrorizing the region with intimidation and murder. Indeed, there is a sinister echo. At one point during his visit to Blauberg, V says his biography is “enshrouded in pale mist; like the valley I was contemplating” (123). V’s observation echoes something that a man called Morris tells McMurdo: “Look down the valley! See the cloud of a hundred chimneys that over-shadowes it. I tell you that the cloud of murder hangs thicker and lower than that over the heads of the people. It is the Valley of Fear - the Valley of Death” (Valley 130). That final
image is suggestive, for V’s description of the Blauberg valley as “enshrouded”
evokes an image of a valley of death.

And the idea of a valley of death casts an eerie light over certain things appearing in
the Blauberg valley. One of the things McMurdo notices on his journey up the
Vermissa Valley is the “long lines of trucks piled with coal and with iron ore” which
appear “at every siding” (Valley 85), and something V notices on his arrival at
Blauberg is “invisible cattle” lowing “sadly in some shunted truck” (119). This cattle
truck is aligned with the cages of animals on Doctor Moreau’s island, animals which
are to be used in Moreau’s experiments, and that point casts an eerie light over the
cattle truck at Blauberg, where there are intimations of Nazi-like biological
experiments being carried out. In the Scarlet Pimpernel novels the victims of the
revolution are frequently likened to cattle. In I Will Repay, for example, they are
“that immense flock of cattle, sent in ever-increasing numbers to the slaughter-house”
(IWR 139), while in Sir Percy Hits Back they are “driven like a herd to the
slaughter. . . . Like cattle, with ne’er a grave nor a prayer” (Omnibus 1178). In
Nabokov’s The Gift Fyodor notes “the cattle-like crowding of standing passengers” in
a Berlin tram (“skotskoi tesnoty stoiaschikh”) (Gift 79; SSRP 4.264), and later tries
to decipher the capitalized abbreviations in Soviet magazines, “carried like doomed
cattle all over Russia and horribly recalling the lettering on freight cars” (“cherez vsiu
Rossiiu vozimykh na uboi, - ikh strashnaia sviaz’ napominala iazyk tovarnychk
wagonov”) (Gift 158; SSRP 4.350-51), where - given that this passage was written in
late 1937 when Stalin’s purge was reaching its peak - the “doomed cattle” carried to
the slaughter (“na uboi”) evoke an image of political prisoners transported to remote
labour camps by cattle truck (see Conquest 455). In short, if Doctor Moreau aims to
turn beasts into people, there is a suggestion of a similar blurring of animals and men
at Blauberg: an intimation that the “invisible cattle” in the truck are not cattle at all,
but human victims brought into Blauberg’s “Valley of Death.”

And that intimation in turn casts an eerie light over another thing appearing in
Blauberg’s valley, something V sees from the train: “The low sun had set aflame the
numerous windows of a large building which turned slowly, demonstrating one huge
chimney, then another, as the train clattered by” (124). V’s view of this building
again evokes The Valley of Fear. On his journey to Vermissa, past the long lines of
trucks, the high shafts of the collieries, and the chimneys belching smoke, McMurdo
notices “the flames of the frequent furnaces” which are “roaring and leaping in the
darkness” (Valley 89). Just as V sees through the train-window the windows of a
large building set “aflame” next to two huge chimneys, so McMurdo sees through the
train-window the flames of furnaces amidst a scene of collieries and chimneys. The link between the building with two huge chimneys near Blauberg and the furnaces in the Vermissa Valley is eerily suggestive. And this is enhanced by the sinister symbolism of what McMurdo sees as he gazes out upon the flames:

Against their lurid background dark figures were bending and straining, twisting, and turning, with the motion of winch or of windlass, to the rhythm of an eternal clank and roar.

"I guess hell must look something like that," said a voice.

The voice belongs to a policeman who, like McMurdo, is staring out into "the fiery waste" (Valley 89). The policeman's remark is apt, as the image of figures "twisting, and turning" against the flames, to the rhythm of an "eternal" clank and roar evokes an image of people engulfed and writhing in the flames of hell-fire. If Vermissa Valley is the "Valley of Death," its inhabitants exist in a world resembling Dante's Inferno. Indeed, the very title of Doyle's story - The Valley of Fear - echoes the opening of Dante's work: Dante speaks of arriving "at the foot of a hill! Which formed the far end of that menacing valley! Where fear had already entered into my heart" (my italics). The echo is particularly suggestive, as Nabokov himself echoes this passage of the Inferno in describing Blauberg as a town in a valley which crouches "at the foot of a soft grey mountain" (I 19). And if both Blauberg and Vermissa are associated with a Dantesque hell, the infernal symbolism of the furnaces and chimneys McMurdo sees through the train-window, with the figures as if writhing in flame, casts a lurid light over the large building V sees near Blauberg with windows "afame" and two huge chimneys. One is reminded of Glory, where in Zoorland - Martin and Sonia's imaginary totalitarian state - "a smell of burning and of putrefaction permeates the air" ("paknet gar'tu i tlenom") (Glory 141; SSRP 3.208).

The parallel between The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and The Valley of Fear raises a dark suggestion about Blauberg in 1936, an intimation of intensifying horror. If at the time of Sebastian's first visit to Blauberg in the 1920s what is implied to be taking place is gruesome biological experimentation based on the racial hygiene ideas of the day, a decade later there are intimations that that experimental activity has stepped up in scale and scope; in short, that Sebastian's "absolute solution" is beginning to take shape.

After inquiring at the Beaumont Hotel for the names of Russian women who might have stayed there in June 1929, and being rebuffed by the manager, V makes his way back to the train, feeling disheartened. At the next stop Mr Silbermann gets in (123).
One of the first things Silbermann does is to follow V’s gaze out the window to the building with two huge chimneys. “Dat,” he tells V, “is ‘Flambaum and Roth,’ great fabric, factory. Paper” (124). A closer look at the names of Silbermann’s factory owners reveals something curious. “Flambaum” derives from the German Pflaumenbaum, “plumtree,” while “Roth” comes from the German rot, “red” (Hanks and Hodges 424, 459). In Nabokov’s story, “The Passenger” (“Passazhir”) (1927), the writer looks out the train-window at the passing scene in the early morning light: “a huge purple-red factory strode by flashing its windowpanes” (“proshagala, blistaia steklami, ogromnaia bagrovaia fabrika”) (Stories 186; SSRP 2.484). The “purple-red” appearance of the factory in the sunrise seems to be mirrored in the names Flambaum and Roth - “plumtree” and “red” - which Silbermann gives as the names of factory owners, as he looks out the train-window at the large building lit by the sunset. Indeed, if “Flambaum” etymologically evokes a purple plumtree, it phonetically evokes the German word Flamme, meaning “flame,” an image which corresponds with the windows of the large building which the low sun has set “aflame” (124). In other words, the names of Silbermann’s supposed factory owners are remarkably evocative of the sunset colours of the building itself. And if the spuriousness of Silbermann’s names adds to the veil of suspicion surrounding the building, the names are suggestive in another way. They are Jewish, and given the intimations of a link between Sebastian’s “absolute solution” and the slogan “Death to the Jews,” they reinforce the idea that what takes place inside the building with huge chimneys and windows “aflame” is something far more sinister than the manufacture of paper.

If there is a suggestion that Silbermann lies to V about the building near Blauberg, that deception itself takes on a far more sinister edge in view of a certain detail as Silbermann introduces himself. V states:

He took his bowler which lay on the seat near him, put it on carefully (his Adam’s apple rolling up and down), and then, with a shiny smile, briskly took it off to me.

“My name is Silbermann,” he said, and stretched out his hand. I shook it and named myself too (125).

In Sebastian’s story “The Back of the Moon” Mr Siller - who appears to be modelled on Silbermann - has an Adam’s apple which moves “like the bulging shape of an arrased eavesdropper,” evoking Polonius in spying mode (102). Silbermann’s Adam’s apple evokes something similar here. It is described as “rolling.” In Bend Sinister Krug is questioned by an Ekwilist soldier: “Yablochko, kuda-zh ty tak
*kotishsa* [little apple, whither are you rolling?]’’ (*BS* 225). The soldier’s words are a quotation (somewhat ungrammatical) from a Bolshevik song: “Hey, little apple, / Where are you rolling? / Bump into the Cheka, / And you won’t come back!” (*NM* 695 n.). The Cheka was the Soviet secret police, and Silbermann has just mentioned that he used to be in the “Plain-clotheses” (125). Indeed, there is a further connection here. At the time Nabokov was preparing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* - and also at the time V is on the train - the head of the NKVD’s Special Tasks, the Soviet secret police organization responsible for abduction and assassination abroad, was a man called Serebryansky, a name which derives from the Russian *serebrianyi*, “silver” - the meaning of Siller-Silbermann’s name (Andrew, *Mitrokhin* 54, 100, 112).

Silbermann prompts V to ask him for help, although V has not said he is in any difficulty (125). And after offering this unsolicited help, Silbermann tells V he knows some Russian words:

“Cookolkah - de little doll.” . . .
“Rebaht” he cried. “Der’s anodder. Fish, so? and . . . Yes. *Braht*,
milleebraht - dear brodder” (125-26).

The words make up a suggestive triptych. “Doll” is a word one might apply to a woman, while a fish is a slippery creature one tries to catch; and these two images in conjunction with the word “brother” - plus the fact that the words are Russian - evoke precisely V’s professed quest for his brother Sebastian’s elusive Russian mistress. Yet V at this stage has mentioned nothing to Silbermann of his search for this woman. It is as if Silbermann knows of V’s quest before he gets onto the train.

Having demonstrated his evocative knowledge of Russian, Silbermann offers “suggestions” (126), and V now tells Silbermann of his bid to track down Sebastian’s supposed mistress. True to his word of offering help, Silbermann agrees to obtain for V a list of all the people who stayed at the Beaumont Hotel in June 1929 (127-28), and at the end of the week - where V could not even bribe the Beaumont hotelier for a glimpse of his books (120) - Silbermann “magically,” as V puts it (132), produces a complete list of forty-two names with all their addresses, plus a description of each of the guests. Silbermann then proceeds to whittle this list down to the four names he deems to be the likeliest candidates for Sebastian’s Russian mistress: Lydia Bohemsky, Madame de Rechnoy, Helene Grinstein, and Helene von Graun (129-130). However, there is something curious about these names. In the Sherlock Holmes story, “A Scandal in Bohemia,” the King of Bohemia enlists Holmes’s aid in resolving a delicate affair involving one Irene Adler, whom Holmes ever after refers
to as “the woman” (Adventures 5). The four names Silbermann comes up with curiously evoke the Holmes story. “Bohensky” evokes the title of the story. “Rechnoy,” a Russian adjective meaning “river” or “riverine,” evokes the story’s heroine, whose name is taken from the River Adler in Bohemia (Adventures 299 n.); moreover, Madame de Rechnoy, V states, “might have been an adventuress” (130), and an “adventuress” is how the King describes Irene Adler (Adventures 12).

“Grinstein” means “green stone,” and at the end of the Holmes story, in appreciation of his services, the King offers Holmes “an emerald snake ring” (Adventures 28).

And finally, where Helene von Graun is said to have “a splendid contralto” (130), Irene Adler is herself a contralto who has performed at no less a place than La Scala, Milan (Adventures 12). To Holmes, as Watson explains, there was only ever “one woman,” Irene (Adventures 5), but with the evocation of the Holmes story in Silbermann’s list it is as if that one woman has become four. Or to put it another way, it is as if each of the four women on Silbermann’s list represents one quarter of a whole: the image of Holmes’s “woman.” It is a suggestive point, as Irene Adler is one of the few of Holmes’s adversaries who defeats him. Silbermann, in other words, gives V a list of four names which collectively evoke a woman whom Holmes remembers chiefly for the cunning with which she outwits him. Silbermann’s list, as a consequence, looks somewhat suspicious.

And that suspiciousness intensifies around a certain image. After giving V the list, Silbermann prepares to leave, when V calls him back, saying they have not settled his fee (131). Silbermann charges V a ludicrously small amount which, after a little thought, he reduces even further, only to return the very twenty-franc coin with which V pays him. In 1936 the twenty-franc coin was silver, a metal appropriate to Silbermann’s name (Reinfeld and Hobson 170); and Silbermann’s return of this coin evokes a sinister image: Judas (mentioned later by V [136]) returning the thirty pieces of silver after betraying Christ into a trap - a trap which leads to his execution (Matthew 27:3-5).

And that deathly image is emphasized in a further symbolic association with Silbermann. If Silbermann, like a moon, “beams” at V at sunset (123), he is also a little man, a “little moon,” so to speak; and when Silbermann gets into V’s train-compartment he addresses V in “thick guttural French” (123). The French for “little moon” is lunette, and if the word “guttural” denotes the throat, the word lunette denotes the circular aperture in the guillotine which secured the victim’s throat. Silbermann says to V: “I see, saw, you read English djornal” (124). Silbermann’s uncertainty over the English tense system evokes an image of a see-saw, and the
French for “see-saw,” *bascule*, denotes the movable wooden board of the guillotine to which the victim was attached prior to being secured within the *lunette*. To put the head of Sir Percy Blakeney into the guillotine is the sole object of the endlessly scheming Chauvelin. Perhaps, then, the enemy still suspect that V is the Pimpernel-esque Sebastian Knight, or perhaps they are simply wary of anyone retracing Sebastian’s footsteps in Blauberg. Whatever the case, if Silbermann’s Adam’s apple evokes the Bolshevik song which states that if you bump into the Cheka you won’t come back, there is a suggestion that Silbermann’s sole object, even before getting onto the train, is to direct V’s supposed search for the supposed Russian mistress down a particularly dark road.

Yet one important consideration remains. If V is Sebastian Knight, he would naturally be suspicious of Silbermann, whom he encounters in 1927, and whom he appears to satirize in “The Back of the Moon.” Yet V seems to be very happy with Silbermann’s list of names. Indeed, V himself asks Silbermann to obtain the list in the first place (127-28), volunteering at the same time the information that if he does not know the name of Sebastian’s supposed Russian mistress, he also has not “the vaguest idea what she is like” at all (127). In other words, if V is Sebastian and knows Silbermann to be a villain, Sebastian actually facilitates Silbermann’s ploy. That is to say, if V is Sebastian, Sebastian is deliberately allowing himself to be manipulated into a highly dangerous position. One is reminded of *The Valley of Fear*, where John McMurdo - alias Birdy Edwards, an undercover private detective - goes hand in glove with the enemy, even to the point of getting himself initiated into “The Scowrers,” in order to bring them down.

**XV**

After studying Silbermann’s four names and addresses, V decides to travel first to Berlin to call on Helene Grinstein (132).

V approaches an ugly old house with “its face half-hidden in a mask of scaffolding” (132). Having a “face” which is half-concealed in a “mask,” the house evokes a sense of concealment and deception. In addition, the juxtaposed images of a masked face and a scaffold evoke the figure of an executioner at the guillotine. Indeed, when V enters the house, he speaks to the woman in the porter’s lodge through “a small window” (132), which recalls the saying that a victim whose neck is held inside the *lunette* of the guillotine is forced to “look through the little window” (Abbott 184).
The sense of a threat looming over V is enhanced by a literary parallel. Inside the Grinstein flat, finding himself alone in the hall, V pushes open a door, but then notices another ajar farther down the passage. This door also he pushes open, and discovers a room full of people (132-33). Compare *Eldorado*. Sir Percy Blakeney arrives at a lodging house in Paris, having been led there by a letter from his brother-in-law Armand St Just:

At half-past ten that same evening, Blakeney, still clad in a workman’s tattered clothes, his feet bare so that he could tread the streets unheard, turned into the Rue de la Croix Blanche.

The *porte-cochère* of the house where Armand lodged had been left on the latch; not a soul was in sight. Peering cautiously round, he slipped into the house. On the ledge of the window, immediately on his left when he entered, a candle was left burning, and beside it there was a scrap of paper with the initials S. P. roughly traced in pencil. No one challenged him as he noiselessly glided past it, and up the narrow stairs that led to the upper floor. Here, too, on the second landing the door on the right had been left on the latch. He pushed it open and entered.

As is usual even in the meanest lodgings in Paris houses, a small antechamber lay between the front door and the main room. When Percy entered, the antechamber was unlighted, but the door into the inner room beyond was ajar. Blakeney approached it with noiseless tread, and gently pushed it open.

That very instant he knew that the game was up; he heard the footsteps closing up behind him, saw Armand, deathly pale, leaning against the wall in the room in front of him, and Chauvelin and Héron standing guard over him.

The next moment the room and the antechamber were literally alive with soldiers - twenty of them to arrest one man (Omnibus 754-55).

The whole business, including the letter of summons from Armand - who, after being sent out onto the street as bait for Sir Percy, remains in Chauvelin’s power - is a trap. And the episode bears a number of similarities to V’s arrival at the Grinstein flat: the written note leading to a lodging house; a window inside the doorway; the ascent of a flight of stairs; the pushing open of two doors, the second standing ajar; and the entry into a room to be surrounded by people. And while V, in contrast to Sir Percy, walks freely through the main room of the Grinstein flat, the similarity between the two scenes lends an ominousness to V’s position.
The eerie atmosphere intensifies when V finally meets Helene Grinstein. V states: “She came up to me and invited me to walk into a small parlour” (133). Compare the famous line by Mary Howitt: “Will you walk into my parlour?” said a spider to a fly.” The motif of the sinister spider is prominent in Roy Carswell’s portrait, while the idea of a trapped fly is foreshadowed in the “muslin curtain” over the porter’s window (132), recalling “Albinos in Black” in which a fly is caught “between muslin and pane” (7). V says Helene has “long soft eyes which appeared to be pulled up towards the temples” (133). This evokes a form of disguise employed by secret agents. Jock Haswell writes: “If skin over the temples is drawn back slightly, and held by sticking plaster concealed under long hair or a wig, round eyes can become almond-shaped” (Haswell 98). The idea of a disguise is suggested likewise by Helene’s “powdered face” (133), and also by something else. V says Helene peered at him with “dim soft eyes which somehow reminded me of Clare” (134), and if Clare Bishop, with her peering “dim eyes” (105), has to wear glasses (69), it raises the possibility that Helene Grinstein has removed a pair of her own.

V tells Helene that he wants to talk to her about a relation of his called Sebastian Knight, whom he thinks she knew at Blauberg. Helene replies that she has never heard that name, and then adds: “In fact I did not know any one at the hotel” (134). V, however, had not mentioned that Sebastian was staying at her hotel. For all Helene should know - if, as she claims, she was not acquainted with Sebastian - Sebastian might have been staying at a different hotel, a sanatorium, or even a private residence at Blauberg. And yet in responding to V’s inquiry, Helene automatically links Sebastian with the Beaumont Hotel where she was staying. The implication is that Helene knows Sebastian was staying at the Beaumont Hotel, that she was acquainted with him at Blauberg, and is now - rather clumsily - denying it.

There are suggestions that Helene Grinstein is operating within a trap for V, though the precise nature of that trap may not be clear, as V walks freely away from the flat. However, a final literary parallel suggests that V’s ordeal has only just begun. When V arrives at the flat he comes to a door displaying a brass plate marked “Grinstein” (132). In 1935, the year before his supposed death, Sebastian Knight goes three times to see a film called *The Enchanted Garden* (182). The film evokes H. G. Wells’s story, “The Door in the Wall,” in which Lionel Wallace discovers an “enchanted garden” behind a green door, a door he glimpses again three times in the year before his death (Wells, *Short Stories* 148, 158). V’s coming to a door marked “Grinstein” - “green stone” - evokes the central image of Wells’s story. In a sense, Wells’s door in the wall is the door into death, a portal into a world beyond mortal existence; and
when V passes through the door of the Grinstein flat, he enters a world of death, a funeral gathering. Indeed, where Lionel Wallace, passing through the door in the wall, encounters “many people,” a pair of tame panthers which he strokes, an “old man musing among laurels,” and a “girl in green” (Wells, *Short Stories* 148-49, 155), V encounters in the Grinstein flat “many people,” a girl “stroking an old dog,” an “old man hunched up in an armchair,” and Helene Grinstein, a young woman whose name denotes “green” (132-33). V’s experience in the Grinstein flat is a lugubrious counterpart of Lionel Wallace’s enchanted vision, and thus evokes the “darkness, danger, and death” that Wallace ultimately goes to, when, lured by the vision of his enchanted garden, he passes through a door at a building-site and falls to his death in a deep excavation (Wells, *Short Stories* 160-61). If V walks safely away from the Grinstein flat, there is a suggestion that in making this first call in pursuit of Silbermann’s list of names, he has - in eerie counterpoint to the theme of Bluebeard’s chamber - opened the door on something which exposes him to deadly danger.

XVI

The next name on Silbermann’s list that V looks into is Madame de Rechnoy, with an address in Paris (139-40).

When V arrives at the Rechnoy flat, he is met at the door by a man who invites him in without even asking his name or the reason for his call. This man, Pahl Rechnoy, directs V to a table where he is playing chess with his cousin; whereupon Rechnoy calmly proceeds to finish his game before turning his attention to V (140-41). Rechnoy’s manner towards V, a stranger, is extremely odd, and V notes that Rechnoy invites him into the flat “as if he had been expecting me” (140). V is shown to “the third (and last) chair” at the table (140), reminding one of *Through the Looking-Glass*, where Alice, having become a queen in the chess game, arrives at the banquet held in her honour to find a third chair at the table already prepared for her (Carroll 229).

The eerie intimations surrounding V’s entry into the Rechnoy flat are enhanced by the character of the other man present, Rechnoy’s cousin:

A heavily built man was sitting sideways at a table on which an oilcloth chessboard was spread, with pieces too large for the squares. He looked at them askance while the empty cigarette-holder in the corner of his mouth looked the other way (140).
Compare *The Valley of Fear* where John McMurdo, after arriving in Vermissa, presents himself at the saloon of Boss McGinty:

> At the far end, with his body resting upon the bar, and a cigar stuck at an acute angle from the corner of his mouth, there stood a tall, strong, heavily built man, who could be none other than the famous McGinty himself (*Valley* 103).

Rechnoy’s cousin is playing on the black side in the chess-game, prompting V to refer to him as “Black” (140) and “Uncle Black” (142), and McGinty is described as “black-maned” and “swarthy,” with “dead black” eyes (*Valley* 103), and bears the nickname of “Black Jack McGinty” (*Valley* 89). The parallel with the Holmes story extends. Pahl Rechnoy is dressed “in his shirtsleeves” with a “brass” stud at his neck (140), and he later brings out glasses and brandy (142), and when McMurdo enters McGinty’s saloon he notices “several bar-tenders in their shirt-sleeves hard at work, mixing drinks for the loungers who fringed the broad, brass-trimmed counter” (*Valley* 103). Boss McGinty is the head of “The Scowrers,” the man behind the horror in Vermissa and the valley at large; and if this casts a sinister light over “Uncle Black,” it is enhanced by another connection. Rechnoy describes “Uncle Black” as “an all round genius,” who “can multiply one telephone number by another in three seconds” (142), which brings to mind Sherlock Holmes’s arch-rival, Professor Moriarty, “a genius” and mathematics prodigy (*Memoirs* 252), and the evil force looming in the background of *The Valley of Fear*.

If McGinty and Moriarty are no strangers to murder - or the organization of it - there are suggestions of similar shadows lurking behind “Uncle Black.” At one point during V’s visit, Rechnoy refers to a person called Anatole, and goes on to explain that Anatole is “the executioner. The man with the guillotine here” (144). Rechnoy appears to be alluding to Anatole Deibler, national executioner of France from 1899 to 1939 (Dolinin 453 n.), and he may be using Deibler’s name as a euphemistic appellation for “Uncle Black” who has just beaten him in the chess game by defeating - or executing - his king. The idea is suggestive, as the image of the executioner takes on eerie significance in relation to “Uncle Black.” In *The Gift* Fyodor observes that everything is “reversed for the executioner”:

> the horse-collar is put on upside down when the robber Razin is taken to the scaffold; wine is poured for the headsman not with a natural turn of the wrist but backhandedly; and if, according to the Swabian code, an insulted actor was permitted to seek satisfaction by striking the shadow of the offender, in China, it was precisely an actor - a shadow -
who fulfilled the duties of the executioner, all responsibility being as it were lifted from the world of men and transformed into the inside-out one of mirrors (Gift 187).

If everything is “reversed for the executioner,” one notes that “Uncle Black” is able to “write his name upside down in his ordinary hand” and can “play the violin standing upon his head” (142). Moreover, while “Uncle Black” looks askance at the chessboard, his cigarette-holder - in another instance of mirror reversal - looks the other way. “Uncle Black” is very attentive to the little boy who is present at the flat, seating him on his knee to draw him a picture, and taking him out for a walk (142), and in a letter to Edmund Wilson from 1940 Nabokov wrote that a German friend once told him of an execution where the headsman was “positively paternal” (NWL 38). Returning from his walk with the little boy, “Uncle Black” begins to tell the child a story: “Once upon a time . . . there was a racing motorist who had a little squirrel!” (146); in “Tyrants Destroyed” the narrator observes: “Those who are fond of cheap paradoxes took note long ago of the sentimentality of executioners” (“Liubitel' deshevikh paradoxov davno ometili sentimental'nost' palachei”) (Stories 446; SSRP 5.360). “Uncle Black’s” quasi-paternal relationship with the little boy recalls another Nabokov work. In the one-act play, The Grand-dad (Dedushka) (1923), an old man strikes up a friendship with a young girl who regards him as “gentle” (“laskovyi”), and calls him “Grand-dad” (“dedushka”), little suspecting that the old man is a former executioner in the French Revolution (USSR 291-92; SSRP 1.696-97). There is in addition a rather graphic image connected with “Uncle Black.” As Rechnoy shows V into the room, he throws a chess-knight onto the table “and its head came off,” whereupon “Uncle Black” carefully screws the head back on (140). If everything is “reversed for the executioner,” it seems symbolic that “Uncle Black” puts the head back on. In short, if “Uncle Black” is an “executioner” in the sense that he wins the chess game, there are suggestions that he is also an executioner in a chillingly literal sense which extends beyond the board.

These sinister suggestions about “Uncle Black” cast an eerie light over V’s arrival at the flat where a certain pattern of imagery is discernible. V is met at the door by Pahl Rechnoy, dressed “in his shirtsleeves with a brass stud at his collarless throat” (140). During the French Revolution, when a victim was to be taken to the guillotine, he first underwent what was called the toilette du condamné, where one of the requirements was that his shirt-collar be cut away (Opie 79); indeed, Nabokov alludes to this in The Grand-dad where De Mérival recounts how the executioner’s assistants “slashed my shirt / down to my scapulae” (“vorot do lopatok / razrezali”) (USSR 297; SSRP 1.701). After being greeted at the door by the collarless Rechnoy, V is “ushered into a modest
room" (140), and when the victim, having undergone the *toilette du condamné*, arrived at the scaffold, he was met by the executioner’s assistants who, in the words of Geoffrey Abbott, had the task of the “ushering of the next victim up the steps” (Abbott 183). Inside the modest room, V notices “a sewing machine standing in one corner” (140), a device whereby a sharp metal point is brought rapidly down out of a surrounding frame to pierce an object placed upon the machine’s flat base. V also notices “a faint smell of ribbon-and-linen in the air” (140), and if the sewing-machine evokes the guillotine, the smell of fabric evokes the smell of the blood that soaked the boards of the scaffold (Abbott 183). On the table V sees “an oilecloth chessboard” (140), and oilecloth was used to line the basket which received the victim’s head at the guillotine (Abbott 426); indeed, Nabokov alludes to this in *The Grand-dad* where the old executioner is disturbed by a basket stained with the juice of cherries which has an “oilecloth lining” (“*obituui kleenkoi*”) (USSR 301-02; SSRP 1.705). In short, V’s arrival at the Rechnoy flat is surrounded by imagery suggestive of a victim’s arrival - and death - at the guillotine. And if there are intimations that Rechnoy and “Uncle Black” have been “expecting” V, this parallel casts a shadow over V’s visit, a shadow which appears the more eerie in view of the fact that the piece which Rechnoy throws onto the oilecloth chessboard, causing its head to come off, is a black knight, the piece Sebastian uses as a Pimpernel-esque signature beneath his youthful poems (15).

The sense of a threat to V is enhanced by another detail. On the wall of the flat is a portrait: “the moustache of a famous general, moscowed a few years ago” (141). The portrait is presumably of General Aleksandr Kutepov, head of the White Russian Combined Services Union (ROVS), who was kidnapped and killed by the Soviet secret police in 1930 (Andrew, Mitrokhin 53-54). The operation against Kutepov was carried out in Paris, and organized by the head of Special Tasks, Yakov Serebryansky (Andrew, Mitrokhin 54), and V has been led to the Rechnoy flat in Paris by a list of names from Silbermann, the man who evokes Serebryansky. The famous general in the portrait may additionally evoke the conspicuously moustached General Evgenii Miller, Kutepov’s successor as head of ROVS, who in turn was abducted by Special Tasks in Paris in 1937, transported to Moscow, and executed (Andrew, Mitrokhin 98). Indeed, the trial of Nadezhda Plevitskaia for complicity in the Miller abduction was running in Paris at the time Nabokov was writing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. The details of the trap for Miller are particularly suggestive. Again organized by Serebryansky, the operation involved luring the general to a meeting with two men in an apartment in Paris (Andrew, Mitrokhin 98; Andrew, KGB

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8 For a portrait of Kutepov: see Grey 96-97.
9 For a portrait of Miller: see Grey 96-97.
Indeed, the connection extends. The men Miller met were impostors, NKVD agents posing as German diplomatic officials (Andrew, *KGB* 126; Sudoplatov 91), and when Rechnoy tells V his name is Pahl Pahlich Rechnoy, he “guffawed heartily as if it were a good joke” (140). As for the other man in the flat, he is given no name: “Rechnoy” introduces him simply as “my cousin” (140), and V calls him “Uncle Black” retrospectively. If a question-mark is thus raised over the identity of the two men at the Rechnoy flat, consider the chess-set they use. One of the pawns is replaced by a thimble, and at the end of the game “Uncle Black” puts the pieces back into an old cardboard box, “all except the thimble” (141). The leaving aside of this thimble is curious. Ordinarily, when one is faced with an incomplete set of pieces, one finds a dispensable object to replace the missing piece, thereafter keeping it permanently with the set. Consider, for example, *The Defence*, where young Luzhin plays a game of chess with his father, and watches as the pieces are removed from the box:

One of the Pawns was replaced by an absurd purple-colored affair in the shape of a tiny bottle; in place of one Rook there was a checker; the Knights were headless and the one horse’s head that remained after the box had been emptied (leaving a small die and a red counter) turned out not to fit any of them (Def 63-64).

“Uncle Black” and “Rechnoy,” by contrast, faced with a missing pawn, replace it temporarily with an object to hand (the thimble belongs with the sewing-machine), which they return once they have finished their game. This would be an unusual thing to do, if the men and the chess-set belonged with the flat. The board, moreover, is made from oil-cloth, suggesting that it is a portable set, and the pieces are “too large for the squares” (140). This incompatibility is perhaps symbolic, suggesting that just as the pieces do not belong with the board, so the players do not belong with the flat; in other words, that “Rechnoy” and “Uncle Black” are impostors, posing as the real Pahl Rechnoy and his cousin.

Yet if there are intimations of a deadly Kutepov-and-Miller-like plot looming over V, V - as was the case with his visit to Helene Grinstein - walks freely away from the flat.

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10 Note that “Rechnoy” explicitly invokes the world of espionage, remarking that his first wife might have been “an international spy. Mata Hari! That’s her type” (143).
However, there are signs that this is all part of the plan. Consider the chess game the two men play:

“I could take your rook now if I wished,” said Black darkly, “but I have a much better move.”

He lifted his queen and delicately crammed it into a cluster of yellowish pawns - one of which was represented by a thimble.

Pahl Pahlich made a lightning swoop and took the queen with his bishop. Then he roared with laughter.

“And now,” said Black calmly, when White had stopped roaring, “now you are in the soup. Check, my dove” (140-41).

V’s arrival at the table where this game is being played evokes Alice’s arrival at the banquet in *Through the Looking-Glass*, but there is an additional allusion to Carroll’s story here. At the end of the banquet, with the White King in check, the White Queen falls into the soup-tureen (Carroll 232-33; Gardner 335 n.), and this appears to be echoed in “Uncle Black’s” putting White into check and remarking: “now you are in the soup.” In Carroll’s chess game the pieces are at the same time people, and at the conclusion of the chess game in the Rechnoy flat a suggestive pattern emerges.

“Uncle Black’s” final moves are designed as a trap, a trap which involves employing a female piece - a “woman” - as bait to lure his opponent into checkmate. And the nature of this trap recalls the eerie intimations surrounding Silbermann’s list of names, which supposedly aids V in the search for a Russian woman. This in turn reflects suggestively on “Uncle Black’s” closing manoeuvres in the game: “I could take your rook now if I wished,” he says darkly, “but I have a much better move.” There is a suggestion that this man, the “executioner” in terms of both the chess game and an implicit dimension beyond it, in saying “darkly” he could “take” the rook, is hinting that he could execute not only a certain piece but also a certain person. Consequently his forgoing the option of taking the rook and employing instead his queen, his female piece, sheds light on V’s safe exit from the Rechnoy flat. There is a suggestion, in other words, that as V walks away, he has narrowly escaped death, but that as he continues to pursue the supposed Russian woman a chess-trap looms over him. Indeed, the scene ends on an eerie note. As V descends the stairs he meets “Uncle Black” returning from his walk with the little boy to whom he is telling the story of the racing motorist and the little squirrel (146). The images of a racing motorist and a squirrel make up a suggestive juxtaposition. That is to say, the words that “Uncle Black” leaves ringing in V’s mind as he departs the flat evoke a grisly end for the little squirrel.11

11 Compare *Pnin*, where the image of the little squirrel is associated with Pnin’s early love, Mira Belochkin, who perishes in a Nazi death camp (*Pnin* 135).
With two of the names on Silbermann’s list checked, V proceeds immediately to a third, Helene von Graun, who also has an address in Paris (147-48).

When V arrives at the Von Graun flat the maid tells him that Madame von Graun is not in, but, on seeing his disappointment, asks him to wait a moment, and then returns with the suggestion that if he likes he can talk to Madame von Graun’s friend (148). V is shown into the drawing room and there meets a woman called Madame Lecerf:

She turned out to be a small, slight, pale faced young woman with smooth black hair. I thought I had never seen a skin so evenly pale; her black dress was high at the neck, and she used a long black cigarette holder (148).

V’s first sight of Madame Lecerf with her cigarette-holder recalls his first sight of “Uncle Black,” sitting at a table with a cigarette-holder in the corner of his mouth (140). The connection is suggestive. For if “Uncle Black” employs a chess-trap which implies a parallel with a plot being woven round V, that trap centres around a black queen, a black female piece, and Madame Lecerf has black hair, wears a black dress, and uses a black cigarette-holder.

After V has explained that he is trying to trace a woman whom his relative Sebastian Knight met at Blauberg in 1929, Madame Lecerf says it is quite possible that Helene von Graun is the person he is looking for, and tells V a little about Helene: “She is quite a good singer, tzigan songs, you know, that kind” (150). Madame Lecerf also shows V a photograph of Helene, and V thinks Helene’s features are “very Russian,” and notes that her expression conveys “a strange mixture of dreaminess and cunning” (150). Helene von Graun, the “splendid contralto” (130), evokes the cunning Irene Adler in “A Scandal in Bohemia,” but she also evokes another singer. For if the photograph of the “famous general” at the Rechnoy flat evokes General Miller (141), the photograph of the “very Russian” contralto Helene von Graun, singer of “tzigan” songs, with a “cunning” look in her eye, evokes Nadezhda Plevitskaia, the Russian contralto and NKVD agent, whom Nabokov portrays in “The Assistant Producer” as “La Slavska,” with a style which is “one-tenth tzigane, one-seventh Russian peasant girl (she had been that herself originally), and five-ninths popular” (Stories 546). Indeed, the photograph of Helene von Graun shows a gleam on the “full dark lips” (150), and in “The Assistant Producer” Nabokov describes a photograph of La Slavska, showing dazzling teeth between “fleshy lips” (Stories 546), a photograph
which in turn reflects a popular image of Plevitskaia herself (see Grey 96-97). However, if Nadezhda Plevitskaia is evoked through a picture of the absent Helene von Graun, the image of the Russian singer reflects more suggestively on someone else. For if the photograph of the famous general at the Rechnoy flat casts a suggestive light over the two men present - evoking the two impostors Miller met at the phoney rendezvous - the evocation of Plevitskaia through the photograph of Helene von Graun illuminates Madame Lecerf herself. Later, at Lescaux - the fictional place outside Paris where Madame Lecerf's country house is situated - the sun gives “a blueish sheen” to Madame Lecerf’s black hair (163), and in “The Assistant Producer” La Slavskia has “blue-black hair” (Stories 553). Also at Lescaux, V observes Madame Lecerf’s “small hard bosom” (166), and it is said of La Slavskia that the “small, hard thing that was her soul stuck out of her song” (Stories 552). Again during V’s visit to Lescaux, Madame Lecerf remarks: “There used to be a Persian princess like me” (164), and in “The Assistant Producer” La Slavskia sings the popular folk song of Stenka Razin and his ill-fated “lovely Persian princess” (Stories 552), with whom La Slavskia is identified as she sings the song: “she drowns and his painted boats sail away” (Stories 553). Indeed, Madame Lecerf’s country house is itself evocative, for La Slavskia has a “suburban summer house” near Paris (Stories 554), and this recalls Plevitskaia’s own country house at Ozoir la Ferriere outside the French capital, where the garden was filled with roses (Grey 179), a flower prominent in season at Lescaux (168). Moreover, at Lescaux the ostensibly French Madame Lecerf is revealed to be as Russian as Plevitskaia, and to have been concealing her nationality in an act of deception worthy of Plevitskaia herself (171). In short, if Nadezhda Plevitskaia is evoked through the absent Helene von Graun, Madame Lecerf reveals a closer link with the infamous Russian contralto. And if Plevitskaia, behind her seductive music, conspired to entrap and murder General Miller, Madame Lecerf’s association with the Russian singer-spy heightens the sense of threat looming over V at the Von Graun flat.

Madame Lecerf arranges for V to call again the following day to see if Helene has returned (150). In the meantime V takes the opportunity to check the fourth and final name on Silbermann’s list, Lydia Bohemsky, who also has an address in Paris (151). V discovers that Lydia Bohemsky is no longer living at the address he has, and he is directed across the street to a small hotel. Here a gentleman tells him that the lady is now living at the other end of town. V asks this man if Lydia Bohemsky is Russian, and after learning that she is, makes a further discreet inquiry:
“A handsome dark woman?” I suggested, using an old Sherlock Holmes stratagem. “Exactly,” he replied rather putting me off (the right answer would have been: Oh, no, she is an ugly blond) (151).

The Holmes story in question is “The Greek Interpreter.” On calling at the lodgings of a Mr Melas, Holmes, Watson, and Holmes’s brother Mycroft learn from the woman who answers the door that Melas has gone out with a gentleman; whereupon Mycroft probes for a description of Melas’s visitor:

“He wasn’t a tall, handsome, dark young man?”
“Oh, no, sir; he was a little gentleman, with glasses, thin in the face, but very pleasant in his ways, for he was laughing all the time that he was talking” (Memoirs 208).

The man Mycroft is obliquely inquiring about is a member of a dangerous gang who have abducted Melas in order to force him to co-operate in an evil plot, after which they attempt to murder him with poisonous gas. If the evocation of the Holmes story casts an eerie light over Lydia Bohemsky, the fate of the unfortunate Melas at the hands of a dangerous gang reflects suggestively on the idea that a trap is being woven round V via Silbermann’s list of names. Moreover, the allusion to the Holmes story is lent a further eerie edge by the form in which it appears, since the Holmes source has, as it were, been turned inside out in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. For it is not Sherlock Holmes who uses the stratagem—as V suggests—but his brother Mycroft; it is not a man whom Mycroft questions—as V does—but a woman; and it is not about a handsome dark woman that Mycroft inquires—as V does—but a man. Indeed, this inversion of the source is intimated in the text, where V, after receiving the reply “Exactly,” says “the right answer” would have been: “Oh, no, she is an ugly blond”; for it is that “right answer,” so to speak, which appears in the Holmes story. Indeed, the inversion extends. If Mycroft’s inquiry about a handsome dark man relates to a villain, that villain has just called on Melas who then—thoroughly intimidated—instantly hurries away with him and is held in his power. V, by contrast, after inquiring about a handsome dark woman in relation to Lydia Bohemsky, makes his way to the other end of town, where Bohemsky does not make a call, but is the person called upon, and where V then instantly hurries away, but alone, unlike Melas. The inversion of the Holmes source recalls the idea that everything is “reversed for the executioner.” And that idea is pertinent here. Lydia Bohemsky lives “not far from the Santé prison” (151), and outside the wall of La Santé prison at this time the executioner, Anatole Deibler, plied his grisly profession at the guillotine (Opie 185). V’s encounter with Lydia Bohemsky may be only fleeting, but there are just the same
sinister intimations surrounding it as there are at his other visits in pursuit of Silbermann’s list of names.

When V returns to pay his second visit to the Von Graun flat the following day (151), Madame Lecerf says she is sorry, but Helene has not returned after all. She says Helene rang up from Dijon and said she would not be back till Saturday. Madame Lecerf, however, is happy to tell V more about Helene in the meantime, but first insists they have tea. V finds he is unable to refuse, as “the maid had already wheeled in a movable table with glittering tea things” (153). There is a hint of the sinister about this table, a suggestion of the bascule in the modern guillotine which was attached to rollers, allowing the board, once in the horizontal position, to be wheeled into place at the base of the uprights (Opie 104, 149). In *The Grand-dad* the table in the peasant family’s living-room becomes a symbolic bascule in the mad mind of the old executioner, who attempts to get De Mérival to lie face down upon it and look through the keyhole of the wardrobe (*USSR* 305; *SSRP* 1.707-08). Indeed, the link between the movable tea table at the Von Graun flat and the bascule is enhanced by the fact that when Madame Lecerf proposes tea, she lifts “a sharp-nailed finger” (152), an action which evokes the raising of the guillotine blade prior to the victim’s being wheeled into place on the bascule. Shortly before proposing tea, Madame Lecerf sits looking at V with her “sharp elbows” propped on her knees (152); and when V takes his leave after their first meeting, he notices a “big sharp ring” that she wears on her middle finger (150). There is thus a sharpness about Madame Lecerf in general. The name “Lecerf” comes from the French cerf, meaning “stag,” and was given with reference either to the lustiness with which the stag is associated, or to the horns supposed to be a sign of a cuckold (Hanks and Hodges 101). However, while both these meanings seem apt in relation to the seductive Madame Lecerf, her name evokes a further association. At one point in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* V describes a scene from Sebastian’s youth, and pictures a felled tree where a butterfly has settled on the “kerf” (137). The word “kerf” in this context denotes the cut end of the tree, and the word in general has a sense of cutting and carving. Given the sharpness associated with Madame Lecerf, one detects an echo of the word “kerf” in her name, so that she grades, as it were, from Madame Le-cerf to Madame Le-“kerf,” or Madame Le-“cut.” In the Scarlet Pimpernel novels the deadly machine at the centre of the Reign of Terror is frequently referred to as “Madame la Guillotine.” Thus, Madame Lecerf, presiding over tea with sharp-nailed finger, sharp elbows, and sharp ring, takes on the symbolic appearance of the deadly machine itself, while the maid, wheeling in the tea table, evokes an executioner’s assistant, making the final adjustments to the positioning of the victim on the bascule.
The intimations of the guillotine surrounding the serving of tea at the Von Graun flat cast an eerie light over the tea itself. Cyanide in a teacup is one of the methods of dispatching her husband that Martha considers in King, Queen, Knave (KQK 164; SSRP 2.238), and as Madame Lecerf sits next to V on the sofa, “pulling at the hem of her skirt, as she curled one leg under her” (156), she resembles Martha, sitting next to Franz on the sofa, “folding one leg under her and adjusting the pleats of her skirt” (“podzhav nogu i popraviv skladki iubki”) (KQK 86; SSRP 2.186). Moreover, V’s own attitude to the tea is suggestive. When the movable table is wheeled in, he regrets being unable to “avoid the farce of tea this time” (152), and while there is reference to Madame Lecerf’s “sipping her cold tea” (159), there is no mention of V’s even lifting his cup; indeed, after tea is served, V gets up and walks around the room (153). The suggestion of an attempt at poisoning at the Von Graun flat recalls the allusion to “The Greek Interpreter,” where the villainous gang subject Melas to deadly fumes. It also recalls the cases of Generals Kutepov and Miller. Kutepov died from an overdose of chloroform (as is suggested in “The Assistant Producer” [Stories 549]), while Miller was heavily drugged and placed inside a trunk to be transported to a grim fate in Moscow (Andrew, Mitrokhin 54, 98).

Following the serving of tea, Madame Lecerf talks about Helene. She tells V a story which she says Helene told her about a lover she once had (155). The story is a curious one. After V has expressed keen interest in the beginning of Madame Lecerf’s account - suggesting he believes it probable the story is about Sebastian (157) - Madame Lecerf goes on to relate that Helene began to tire of her lover and became friendly with another man who, Madame Lecerf tells V, was much more kind and thoughtful “than the man you wrongly suppose to have been your brother” (158). Madame Lecerf’s remark is revealing, as V never said he and Sebastian were brothers, he merely said they were “related” (149). V refers to Sebastian as his brother only after Madame Lecerf has told her story (159). Madame Lecerf must have got this piece of information from somewhere else; and one notes that while V does not refer to Sebastian as his brother either at the Grinstein or Rechnoy flats, he does during his talk with Silbermann (127). If Madame Lecerf’s little slip underlines the intimation that she is connected with the enemy, consider another detail of her story. She says Helene ended her affair with her lover by getting a young man to tell him “that she did not want to see him ever again, and that if he attempted to see her, he would be regarded by her friends as a troublesome stranger and dealt with accordingly” (159). This point corresponds with Sebastian’s supposed last attempt to see his mistress in the spring of 1935, when, V states, Sebastian “was told by one of her sleek-haired
young ruffians that she wished to be rid of him for ever” (181). Sebastian’s encounter with the young ruffian is almost certainly a dangerous brush with his adversaries, and the fact that this crisis in Sebastian’s career is reflected in Madame Lecerf’s story suggests that she herself is involved with the people with whom Sebastian clashes. Indeed, consider Madame Lecerf’s story as a whole. She describes Helene’s lover as “a difficult sort of man” (156) who “got positively wicked” and “did not turn into a sentimental pup, as she had expected” (157); he would come “à l’improviste,” and eventually “became quite a pest” (158). Madame Lecerf’s whole description of Helene’s supposed affair might be read as a veiled account of the enemy’s relationship with Sebastian. And if this suggestion enhances the suspect appearance of Madame Lecerf, it also casts the close of her story in a rather threatening light. For her stating that Helene’s lover was warned that if he made any further approaches he would be “dealt with accordingly” reflects ominously on V’s position.

Indeed, this point is illuminated by a literary parallel. In H. G. Wells’s “The Door in the Wall” Lionel Wallace, after meeting the many people, the panthers, the old man, and the girl in green, joins in games with “two dear playfellows,” before being beckoned aside by “a sombre dark woman, with a grave, pale face,” who shows him the story of his life, which comes to an end when she bends down upon him “like a shadow,” prefiguring Wallace’s death (Wells, Short Stories 149-150). V, by comparison, after his Wallace-like experience at the Grinstein flat, encounters the two chess-players, “Rechnoy” and “Uncle Black,” before meeting Madame Lecerf, a dark-haired woman with a pale face, who tells him a story which ends with the warning to Helene’s lover that he would be “dealt with accordingly.” Madame Lecerf’s remark sounds eerily like a prefiguration of death.

In “The Assistant Producer” Nabokov alludes to “The Door in the Wall” again. General Fedchenko, the General Miller figure, is lured to a quiet Paris street under the pretence of meeting a certain person, and is suddenly hauled to his doom through “a little green door” in a long wall (Stories 555). In like manner, Madame Lecerf brings her talk with V to a close by inviting him to her country house to meet Helene von Graun (160), luring him to a lonely spot for a rendezvous with a Russian who has “a real German name” (130), recalling the two “Germans,” who could both speak Russian well, whom Miller met when he was abducted to his death (Grey 127-28, 214).
Having now checked all four of the names on Silbermann’s list, and having remained unharmed, V - if he is Sebastian - will naturally suspect imminent danger in the invitation to Lescaux. And indeed, during his visit to Madame Lecerf’s country house, V reaches the end of the road.

A sense of deadly danger looming over V at Lescaux is brought out by the continuation of Lionel Wallace’s experience in “The Door in the Wall.” Wallace’s death comes when, lured by the vision of his enchanted garden, he passes through a door in a wall at a building-site and falls into a deep excavation; and the idea of a re-entry into the enchanted garden coupled with a dark death finds a counterpart in V’s experience at Lescaux. When V arrives at Madame Lecerf’s country house, he is greeted in the garden by a man who says: “Enchanté de vous connaître,” meaning “Enchanted to meet you” (163). Thus, the first word V hears in the garden at Lescaux is “enchanted.” Yet if this evokes Lionel Wallace’s enchanted garden, the idea of Lescaux as an immortal paradise is immediately undercut by the fact that the man who utters the word “Enchanté” sums V up with an ominously “melancholy glance.” After lunch, Madame Lecerf leads V into the garden, and here the atmosphere becomes intensely eerie. Sensing that something “dreary and dull hung over the place,” V notes:

Earth had been dug out and heaped against a brick wall by a mysterious gardener who had gone and forgotten his rusty spade. For some odd reason I recalled a murder that had happened lately, a murderer who had buried his victim in just such a garden as this (167).

V’s recollection of a murder is eerie in itself, but that eeriness is enhanced by a further association. The wall, the excavation, the image of a workman who has accidentally left his spade, and the reference to a person’s death form a cluster of images that evoke Lionel Wallace’s fate: his passing through a door in a wall at a building-site and falling down a deep excavation after a workman accidentally leaves the door unlocked. Indeed, this connection is corroborated by a further detail. Overhanging the hole in the ground are black branches “studded with green” (167), recalling Wallace’s green door. Yet if the green buds “studding” these branches point towards Lionel Wallace’s death, they also evoke an image of green gems, recalling Helene Grinstein whose name means “green stone.” And if Wallace’s passage through the door at the building-site represents a recapitulation of his initial entry through the green door as a child, the evocation of green gems over the hole in the ground at
Lescaux recapitulates V’s entry through the “Grinstein” door when he first sets out in pursuit of Silberrmann’s list of names. A further echo adds to this sense of recapitulation. Shortly before V leaves the Grinstein flat, Helene Grinstein is reminded of a man who was “killed in a duel” in St Petersburg: “Somebody . . . just the other day . . . somebody had been recalling the case. How funny . . . It always happens like that, in heaps” (134). Just as Helene refers to the “recalling” of a killing, and observes that coincidences happen in “heaps,” so V, passing near the hole in the ground at Lescaux, “recalled a murder that had happened lately,” and notes that earth has been “heaped” against the wall. These hints of recapitulation at Lescaux regarding V’s visit to the Grinstein flat suggest that Silberrmann’s list of names, right from the start, has led V deliberately to this spot, just as Wallace, after passing through the green door for the first time, is inexorably drawn to it once again at the time of his death. One recalls the scene in “The Assistant Producer” where General Fedchenko, the General Miller figure, is hauled to his death through “a little green door” (Stories 555). Indeed, that idea suggests an eerie association here, for if General Miller is evoked through the portrait of General Kutepov at the Rechnoy flat, Pavel Sudoplatov - Serebryansky’s successor as head of Special Tasks - believes that Kutepov was brought to an agent’s Lescaux-like home on the outskirts of Paris to be buried (Sudoplatov 91). In short, the parallel with “The Door in the Wall” - the idea that after passing through the “Grinstein” door V undergoes an eerie counterpart of Lionel Wallace’s blissful experience - leads to an irresistible inference: namely, that as V skirts the pit at Lescaux, he is walking past his own grave.

However, this begs a question. Some time after walking past the pit, V bows himself out of the garden and walks away from Lescaux unscathed. If the enemy mean to murder V and bury him in the pit, why do they not do so, when they have ample opportunity? There is a reason. During lunch at Lescaux V mentions to Madame Lecerf that he has written a letter to Helene von Graun, “warning her I would be down here and . . . sort of reminding her to come” (165). Madame Lecerf’s response to this piece of news is dramatic: “You haven’t!” she exclaims (165); and after lunch in the green room she says: “I am furious with you . . . I think you have spoiled it all” (166), at which point she leaves the room to make a telephone call, and then returns to reproach V once again for sending his letter. How could V’s letter to Helene von Graun so drastically upset Madame Lecerf’s plans? Consider a point about Helene von Graun. Madame Lecerf claims that Helene is her friend, but is there any evidence to prove it? Helene is never seen with her at the flat, and Madame Lecerf is very evasive about Helene’s turning up; she constantly puts V off. Indeed, consider another point here: why V would send such a letter in the first place. If V comes to
Lescaux suspecting a trap, his sending a note to Helene von Graun, “reminding her to come,” would seem rather odd - unless he had a reason for doing so. Before General Miller went to the rendezvous which he suspected was a trap, he wrote a note in which he stated the circumstances of the meeting and who had arranged it, and left it behind with one General Kusonsky, to be opened if he failed to return, so as to afford him at least some means of security (Andrew, KGB 126; Grey 214). V’s note contains precisely the same information as Miller’s: namely, the circumstances of the planned “rendezvous” (162), and who has arranged it. V describes his letter to Helene: “It was quite short: I merely informed her that I was her friend’s guest at Lescaux and had accepted this invitation with the sole object of meeting her; I added that there was an important piece of literary business which I wished to discuss with her” (161-62). When Miller went to his meeting, he did not tell the treacherous Skoblin of his note, and went to his death. V, by contrast, makes a point of mentioning his note in front of the other guests at lunch, including a suspiciously silent blond fellow - and V, unlike Miller, leaves his rendezvous alive. There is, in short, a suggestion that V, suspecting or knowing that Helene von Graun is not an enemy agent, sends his note as a security measure, and that it is that - or rather his mentioning it at lunch - which keeps him out of the pit.

If V eludes a murderous plot at Lescaux, there is a further dramatic development during his visit. With Madame Lecerf saying they shall just have to wait and see what the upshot of V’s letter will be, V, walking in the garden after lunch, observes:

suddenly a smart-looking though rather mud-bespattered car stopped at the gate. . . . A woman had scrambled out of the car right into a puddle (168).

At the appearance of this car, Madame Lecerf runs down the path, waving her hand, and vanishes with the newcomer inside the house. Supposedly, this newcomer is Helene von Graun, arriving after having received V’s letter. However, V’s reaction to this person’s arrival is curious: “I was excited and rather pleased with myself for having captured my prey at last. . . . I had succeeded!” (168). What can V mean by saying he had “captured my prey at last”? If V is Sebastian Knight, he cannot mean he has caught Sebastian’s supposed mistress; so what does he mean? Consider the person who gets out of the car. After this person has disappeared inside the house, V notes: “I had really seen nothing of Helene von Graun except her unfastened fur coat and bright-coloured scarf” (168). All V sees, that is, is the person’s clothes: the scarf is presumably worn up over the head, meaning the person’s face cannot be seen. There is thus a possibility that the “woman” who gets out of the car is a person in
disguise, and this makes V’s comment about capturing his prey most pertinent. Indeed, if the person at Lescaux were a man, V’s comment would become particularly suggestive. For the juxtaposition of a man and a “smart-looking” car recalls a certain image. V finds in Sebastian’s flat a series of photographs of one “Mr H,” and the very last photograph in the series shows Mr H “standing happily near a brand-new car” in March 1935 (39). The photographs of Mr H hint at a man Sebastian was trying to track down, and that point sheds suggestive light on V’s saying he had “captured my prey at last.” Yet the person who gets out of the car at Lescaux is hidden beneath a fur coat and scarf, so that V can see nothing of the face. If that “woman” were the Mr H in Sebastian’s photographs, how could V tell? The obvious suggestion is: by identifying the “smart-looking” car which arrives at Lescaux with the “brand-new” one in the 1935 photograph. While most cars are mass produced, so that two may look alike in terms of make and colour, each car has its own unique identification code: the number plate. Indeed, a car’s registration number identifies a car more conclusively than a viewing of facial features identifies a person. If V were able to see that the car at Lescaux had the same registration number as the one in the photograph; if he could also see that the “woman’s” being masked by a coat and scarf intimated a rudimentary disguise; and if he could see a similarity in physical build between the “woman” at Lescaux and Mr H, he would have identified the person emerging from the car at Lescaux as the Mr H of the photograph. And the possibility of making an identification by means of a car number plate is particularly suggestive. If Sebastian had a photograph of Mr H in which the car number plate was visible, he could, by means of that registration number, discover the man’s name and address. It would follow, however, that if Sebastian had such a photograph of a person he was trying to track down, the knowledge of that person’s name and address was insufficient to capture that person. In other words, it would suggest that the photographed man was only a suspect, a man who had not yet been conclusively linked with criminal activity. If V, then, were able to identify the car that arrives at Lescaux - the lair of the enemy - with the car in the photograph of Mr H; and if he were consequently able to deduce - through manner of clothing and physical build - that the “woman” at Lescaux was Mr H in disguise, he would have linked Mr H with crime and with the enemy. He would, in other words, simply by seeing the car and driver arrive at Lescaux, have “captured his prey.” The business of secret agents giving themselves away by means of car number plates has historical basis. Alexander Orlov - a senior NKVD officer who defected to the West in 1938 - writes that following one particular incident, in which a Soviet intelligence officer was tracked down through his registration number and arrested by the Gestapo, the head of the NKVD “warned the underground residents that for them to drive a car in a foreign
country was tantamount to inscribing their names and addresses on their foreheads for everyone to see” (Orlov 159-60). Orlov states that Soviet intelligence officers working abroad were guilty of “impermissible lightmindedness” in purchasing cars for themselves, and one notes that the person scrambling out of the car at Lescaux steps right into a puddle: there is a possibility that this person, by arriving in a private car, has given himself away; has, as it were, “put his foot in it.”

V finds Sebastian’s photographs of Mr H in a locked drawer of Sebastian’s desk:

The two dozen or so of photographs I shook out of a large envelope with the laconic Mr. H. written on top in Sebastian’s hand, all featured one and the same person at different stages of his life (38).

Compare The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Utterson, the lawyer, examining Jekyll’s study, finds a certain packet:

On the desk among the neat array of papers, a large envelope was uppermost, and bore, in the doctor’s hand, the name of Mr Utterton. The lawyer unsealed it, and several enclosures fell to the floor (Stevenson 50-51).

Just as V, examining Sebastian’s study, finds in the desk a large envelope with “Mr H” written on top in Sebastian’s handwriting, and shakes out of the envelope a number of photographs, so Utterson, examining Jekyll’s study, finds on the desk a large envelope with the name of Mr Utterton written on top in Jekyll’s handwriting, and a number of enclosures fall to the floor. This echo of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde - a copy of which V finds on Sebastian’s shelf shortly after discovering the photographs (39) - intimates a certain significance in Sebastian’s labelling his envelope “Mr H.” Jekyll is a physician and a distinguished member of society, who pursues a criminal existence in the completely different shape of his alter ego Hyde; and Jekyll’s personal duality reflects suggestively on the intimated link between Sebastian’s photograph of a man standing happily near his car in 1935, and a figure dressed in women’s clothes, arriving at the enemy’s lair of Lescaux. Indeed, there is a further suggestive point. When at Lescaux V says he has captured his prey, he discovers a cane lying on a bench (168), and in Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde the discovery of Hyde’s cane - or rather a piece of it, corresponding with another piece already discovered - enables the police inspector to identify Hyde as the murderer of Sir Danvers Carew (Stevenson 28). These links with Stevenson’s story further intimate that V at Lescaux, in saying he has “captured my prey at last,” links a photographed suspect, an
everyday “Jekyll,” with a disguised and criminal “Hyde,” identifying Mr H by matching the two images of his car, just as the inspector identifies Mr Hyde by matching the two pieces of his cane.

One dramatic development is followed by another. Flushed with his success, V sits on the bench, drawing in the earth with the cane, when Madame Lecerf returns and, remarking on V’s scrawlings, says: “Once upon a time... I kissed a man just because he could write his name upside down” (169). The cane drops from V’s hand. He gets up and walks along the path, thinking about something that “had to be solved, at once” (170). With Madame Lecerf following, V goes up to the terrace, and finding there the silent blond fellow he had seen at lunch, says to him in Russian: “Ah, she has a spider on her neck” (“Ah-oo-neigh na-sheiky pah-ook”), whereupon Madame Lecerf’s hand flies to her neck, thus proving that this ostensible Frenchwoman is actually Russian (171). V has had a sudden realization. Madame Lecerf’s saying she once kissed a man who could write his name upside down indicates that she knows Uncle Black who was at the Rechnoy flat, and when V’s little test proves she is as Russian as Uncle Black, it confirms the connection. Supposedly, V has realized that Madame Lecerf is “Pahl Rechnoy’s” first wife, and that it is she who was Sebastian’s mistress. Yet if V is Sebastian that cannot be the case. So what is the significance of V’s realizing that Madame Lecerf knows Uncle Black? Consider V’s experience of Silbermann’s list of names. After visiting the Grinstein, Rechnoy, and Bohemsky residences V remains unscathed; and following his trip to Berlin he says “one name was erased” (139), and later: “I could now drop the Rechnoy clue altogether” (161). There is a suggestion, in other words, that by the time he gets the strong lead from Madame Lecerf, V - if he is Sebastian - has dismissed the other names on the list as uninvolved in the enemy trap. That being the case, Madame Lecerf’s indicating that she knows Uncle Black would suddenly reveal to V that Uncle Black had been involved in the trap too. And if it were only at that point that V realized Uncle Black was an enemy agent, that insight in turn might usher in a more startling level of realization. Look again at Uncle Black: he is a “heavily built” man (140) who draws and tells stories about racing cars (142, 146). Compare Mr H: he is a man who gets “steadily fatter” in Sebastian’s photographs (38), and is pictured in the last standing proudly near a new car (39). In addition, at the Rechnoy flat Uncle Black does not drink the brandy, and appears to have a surrogate paternal relationship with the little boy (142). Compare Sebastian’s advertisement for the photographs of Mr H: “teetotaller, bachelors preferred” (38). Moreover, if Uncle Black is an executioner, who is associated with the imagery of the guillotine, the letter “H” of “Mr H” is the very shape of that deadly machine with two uprights supported by a central crosspiece.
And if Uncle Black - the "executioner" for whom "everything is reversed" - writes his name upside down, "H" is an invertible letter. Furthermore, Uncle Black bears suggestive similarities to the person who drives up at Lescaux. For if Uncle Black has a taste for racing cars, the person who arrives at Lescaux has driven fast enough to splash his car with mud, while the appearance of that "mud-bespattered" car evokes a blood-bespattered *fourgon*, the French executioner's wagon which transported the guillotine. And if there are intimations that Uncle Black is an executioner for whom everything is reversed, the idea that the "woman" who arrives at Lescaux is a man in disguise represents a case of reverse dressing. If, then, V is surprised to discover that Madame Lecerf knows Uncle Black, revealing to him for the first time that Uncle Black is an enemy agent, what perhaps redoubles that shock, causing the cane to fall from V's hand, is a simultaneous realization that Uncle Black is Mr H; that he, V, has crossed the path of his wanted man already, without realizing it; that after finally capturing his "prey" by identifying the suspect with his car, he and his prey have earlier been *face to face* - a retrospective shock that would send a shiver down the spine.

If V, in the very moment of his success, has a chilling realization that Uncle Black is Mr H, the connection between these two figures helps the reader put into perspective the nature of the "prey" V has caught. For Uncle Black has been linked with Boss McGinty, the head of "The Scowrers" in *The Valley of Fear*, the man behind the horror in the Vermissa Valley, a place which is associated with Blaberg. He has also been linked with Sherlock Holmes's arch-rival Professor Moriarty, the evil genius looming in the background of *The Valley of Fear*. Indeed, if Uncle Black grades into Mr H, there is a suggestive link between Mr H and Moriarty. In "The Final Problem" Holmes places papers concerning his arch-rival in an envelope marked "Moriarty" in a pigeon-hole labelled "M" in his flat (*Memoirs* 267), and there is an echo of this in Sebastian's placing photographs in an envelope marked "Mr H" in a drawer in his flat. The papers Holmes places in the envelope represent evidence which will convict Moriarty, a man Holmes has been pursuing for years, and one of the photographs in Sebastian's envelope is the key to the capture of Mr H. Indeed, the parallel extends further. For if Holmes in "The Final Problem" gathers enough information for the police to convict Moriarty, he also provides damning evidence against Moriarty's international gang; and if V at Lescaux finally captures Mr H, in the process of his reaching this point: an international group of agents is exposed in their attempt to counter and entrap him: from Helen Pratt and "Mr Bishop" in England to Silbermann, "Pahl Rechnoy," Madame Lecerf, and her entourage at Lescaux, in France. Indeed, if it is only when Madame Lecerf indicates that she knows Uncle Black that V realizes
there has been more to the enemy's trap than Madame Lecerf herself, it is perhaps at this point that he realizes the whole list has been in on it, since when V comes to write *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the sinister descriptions of each of his visits have been included by V himself. In short, the connection between Uncle Black and Mr H helps the reader to understand that V has caught a ringleader behind Blauberg, plus a network of agents involved in his ring. V's achievement recalls not only Holmes's defeat of Moriarty and his organization in "The Final Problem," but also Birdy Edwards's defeat of McGinty and "The Scourers" in *The Valley of Fear*, where, through his lengthy undercover work in the guise of John McMurdo, Edwards gathers enough evidence to allow police to arrest the entire gang.

"*Mais vous êtes fou...* you are mad," cries Madame Lecerf as V, to her surprise, leaves the garden (171). Her remark has a double significance. For if *fou* means "mad," it is also the French word for the chess-bishop, the piece lured into taking the queen in Uncle Black’s chess-trap. However, V proves to be neither mad nor a fatally trapped chess-bishop, for at Lescaux the chess game turns around. Just when the enemy think they are about to capture V and throw his body into the pit, V, with his letter to Helene von Graun, prevents their move and clinches a victory of his own. For one can deduce that it is in response to V’s sending the letter that Mr H races down to Lescaux, disguised as Helene von Graun, in order to give the enemy time to reconsider their plans - a move which thus brings the enemy “king” into the open, exposing him to V’s checkmate. It is a feat that represents the culmination of Sebastian Knight’s secret career; and indeed, is the point which finally clinches that V is Sebastian. For when V identifies Sebastian’s “Mr H” as a person in disguise at Lescaux, it affirms that V himself is Sebastian in disguise - that V’s victory is checkmate by *knight*.

**XIX**

However, there is more to it than that. Sebastian has not just succeeded in rounding up a “Moriarty” and his gang. There is another dimension to his work against the Blauberg horrors and the people involved with them. Sebastian has no heart-disease; “Lehmann’s disease” is a term cryptically alluding to a racist scientific ideology. This idea reflects suggestively on another aspect of the novel. For Sebastian’s mother, Virginia, is said to die of “Lehmann’s disease” (9). And here the plot thickens.
Consider the circumstances of Virginia Knight’s death. V states:

It is known from a cousin of hers, H. F. Stainton, that during the last months of her life she roamed all over the South of France, staying for a day or two at small hot provincial towns, rarely visited by tourists - feverish, alone (she had abandoned her lover) and probably very unhappy. One might think she was fleeing from someone or something, as she doubled and re-crossed her tracks; on the other hand, to any one who knew her moods, that hectic dashing might seem but a final exaggeration of her usual restlessness. She died of heart-failure (Lehmann’s disease) at the little town of Roquebrune, in the summer of 1909 (9).

Supposedly, a frenetic, wayward life finally takes its toll on Virginia, and her hectic dashing in the heat proves too much for a weak heart. However, Virginia’s final movements can be seen in a quite different light. Consider the place of her death: Roquebrune. In this novel with its pervasive chess theme, the town’s name evokes an image from chess: *roque* is an old word for the rook (Golombek 411), while *brune* means “brown” or “dark”; thus together the words *roque* and *brune* evoke an image of the dark or black rook. And in this way, Roquebrune becomes symbolically “the place of the black rook,” or the black rook’s square, as it were, an idea which is enhanced by the town’s being situated on the French Riviera in the bottom right-hand corner of France, corresponding with the bottom right-hand corner of a chessboard where the rook begins the game. Nabokov denied any chess allusion in the name “Roquebrune” (SL 394), but other details in the same paragraph of the text suggest that his denial is a case of deliberate mystification. The name “Virginia Knight,” for instance, evokes a chess knight, while the name of her cousin, H. F. Stainton, recalls the grandmaster Howard Staunton (1810-74), who gave his name to a famous chess set owned by Nabokov at this time (SM 224). The evocation of chess in connection with the circumstances of Virginia’s death casts a certain light over her final movements, as her hectic dashing across the south of France, doubling and re-crossing her tracks, might be likened to a chess knight zigzagging across the board. Moreover, such a parallel between a person’s movements and those of a chess piece puts one in mind of *Through the Looking-Glass*, and at one point in that book Alice remarks: “Look, look! ... There’s the White Queen running across the country! She came flying out of the wood over yonder - How fast those Queens can run!” To which the King responds: “There’s some enemy after her, no doubt. ... That wood’s full of them” (Carroll 200). The idea of the White Queen’s running from an enemy reflects suggestively on Virginia Knight’s hectic dashing, which V says might give one the impression she was “fleeing from someone or something.” Indeed, the idea can be
taken further. If Virginia ends up dying in Roquebrune, “the place of the black rook,” or the black rook’s square, it is in the corners of the board that a knight is weakest, since the knight’s possible moves are restricted to two: “Thus,” as Edward Brace explains, “a Knight on the edge of the board is always in danger of being hemmed in and captured” (Brace 155). Seen in terms of chess, Virginia Knight’s final movements thus appear not as those of a restless and unfulfilled woman aimlessly roaming and finally succumbing to the heat and her heart-disease, but as those of a knight twisting and turning across the board to evade some threat, and finally being cornered on the black rook’s square and taken.

Indeed, there are other sinister intimations surrounding Virginia Knight’s death. In “The Five Orange Pips” Holmes considers the case of Elias Openshaw: “His extreme love of solitude in England,” Holmes explains to Watson, “suggests the idea that he was in fear of someone or something, which drove him from America” (Adventures 115). Heightening Holmes’s sense that Openshaw was on the run is the fact of his having abandoned the warm climate of Florida for a lonely life in “an English provincial town” (Adventures 115). If Holmes believes that Openshaw was in fear of “someone or something” which drove him to lead a solitary existence in an English “provincial town,” compare Virginia Knight who one might think was “fleeing from someone or something,” and who ends up leading a lonely life, flitting between “small hot provincial towns” (9). Elias Openshaw is ultimately found dead in a pool of water; the official cause of death is given as suicide, but Openshaw was pursued and murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. And if Virginia’s final movements echo those of Elias Openshaw, the connection casts a suggestive light over the official cause of her own death, hinting at a fate more sinister. Moreover, note the eerie intonation of the final sentence of this paragraph of the novel: “There was some difficulty in getting the body dispatched to England” (9). Use of the word “dispatched” in connection with a corpse evokes the word’s darker meaning. And there is also an eerie echo here of Hamlet. Claudius outlines to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern his plans for dealing with the troublesome prince: “I your commission will forthwith dispatch, / And he to England shall along with you” (3.3.3-4; my italics). Rosencrantz’s and Guildenstern’s “commission” involves handing Hamlet over to the English with instructions that he be promptly executed.

If Virginia Knight dies of “Lehmann’s disease,” the evidence suggests that her death is not due to heart-failure. There are intimations that Virginia is pursued across the south of France - like a chess knight and Elias Openshaw - and murdered.
But who would want to murder Virginia Knight? The search for an answer to that question takes one back to an earlier event in her life. In 1903 Virginia suddenly abandons her family, leaving her husband and the four-year-old Sebastian in a Paris hotel in order supposedly to take off with a lover (7). If there are intimations that Virginia is pursued in 1909, one is prompted to look again at this precipitate departure.

V states that Virginia left her family “as suddenly as a rain-drop starts to slide tipwards down a syringa leaf” (7). *Syringa vulgaris*, as Nabokov explains in his *Eugene Onegin* commentary, is the botanical name for the lilac (*EO* 2.406), and the linking of Virginia’s departure with a purple flower foreshadows her death in Roquebrune at a pension called Les Violettes. However, there is a flipside to this image. *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines “syringa” principally as “a mock orange,” and the image of an orange (albeit a mock one) recalls “The Five Orange Pips” and the more sinister intimations surrounding Virginia’s death. Indeed, there are further suggestions of a connection with the Holmes story here. V links the syringa with rain, and the Holmes story is set against a backdrop of rain, as young John Openshaw unfolds his macabre tale while an equinoctial storm lashes Holmes’s windowpanes. Indeed, the outside elements seem to meld into the very telling of Openshaw’s tale. Openshaw describes how the five orange pips - the KKK’s cryptic warning of death - “pattered down” onto his uncle Elias’s breakfast plate (*Adventures* 106), and when Openshaw finally leaves Holmes’s flat the storm continues to rage: the rain splashed and “pattered against the windows” (*Adventures* 113). This merging of “pattering” pips and rain is suggestive, for just as Elias Openshaw’s ominous pips fall from the envelope and patter onto his plate, so the single pip-like raindrop in V’s image of Virginia’s departure falls from the syringa leaf. And the connection with the Holmes story extends. After receiving the pips, Elias Openshaw, fearing for his life, locks himself up in his room, emerging sporadically in drunken fits to exclaim that he will not be cooped up, “like a sheep in a pen” (*Adventures* 108); and in the episode in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, a few lines after the raindrop and syringa leaf image, Virginia’s husband is locked up in a Paris hotel room, a room which is likened to one containing a “fuddled fly,” trapped between the muslin curtain and the windowpane (7). If Virginia Knight’s death is linked with the death of Elias Openshaw, these intimations of the Holmes story at the time of her departure from her family are particularly suggestive. For if Openshaw receives in the pattering pips a sign of his imminent death, and becomes so terrified that he feels like a “sheep” cooped up in a pen, it raises the possibility that Virginia’s sudden departure, imaged
as the pip-like raindrop falling from the syringa leaf, is likewise triggered by some ominous sign, which causes her to panic and take flight, like a “fuddled fly” caught between muslin and pane.

But where would such an ominous sign come from? One thing that is immediately noticeable about this episode is that it is partly illustrated by an extract from “Albinos in Black,” the eerie story which appears to be connected with the sinister goings-on at Blauberg. V quotes Sebastian’s description of a certain hotel room:

“that special kind of hotel room which is so perfectly fit for the staging of the worst tragedies: a dead burnished clock (the waxed moustache of ten minutes to two) under its glass dome on an evil mantelpiece, the French window with its fuddled fly between muslin and pane, and a sample of the hotel’s letter paper on the well-used blotting-pad” (7).

As noted earlier, this extract hints at suicide, with intimations beneath the surface of murder made to look like suicide. However, there is something else here, too. The extract, featuring a clock with a “waxed moustache” under a glass dome on a mantelpiece, calls to mind Through the Looking-Glass where Tenniel’s illustration of Alice passing through the mirror shows Alice stepping onto the mantelpiece where a personified clock sits under a glass dome (Carroll 126). Alice finds, when she passes through the looking-glass, a world of animated chess pieces, and on the deeper, more sinister level of the extract, where suicide grades into murder, the Albinos in Black might be likened to black and white chess pieces engaged in a deadly game. And this evocation of deadly chess pieces in an extract illustrating Virginia Knight’s departure from her family is suggestive, given that Virginia’s death is paralleled with chess. Indeed, this idea relates suggestively to another point. For if Virginia Knight’s death and her sudden departure intimate a connection with the fate of Elias Openshaw, Openshaw perishes at the hands of a racist secret society one might call “Albinos in White.” Indeed, if the “Albinos in Black” extract hints at murder made to look like suicide, this, as noted above, is precisely the illusion created by the KKK in their disposal of Openshaw. The Albinos in Black evoke Hitler’s SS, but in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, where the nature of tyranny does not correspond with any single historical reality, the Albinos encompass more than the Nazis. And if the Ku Klux Klan is a modern racist society with its origins in the nineteenth century, the Albinos in Black evoke, in addition to Hitler’s SS, such groups as Tsarist Russia’s Black Hundreds, a racist organization active at the time of Virginia’s departure. Indeed, it was as a member of the Black Hundreds (“chernosotenets”) that Nabokov described his own father’s murderer (SSRP 5.636).
V prefaces Virginia’s flight from Paris in 1903 by pointing out that she was given to “swerving wide off the mark” (6). The image evokes a knight’s move, and it is perhaps with just such a wildly veering knight-move that Virginia Knight departs from her family - not to run into the arms of a lover, but to flee, as a result of a sudden threat from the deadly personified chessmen, the KKK-like Albinos in Black.

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But why would Virginia Knight be in danger from a sinister racist society? To begin to answer that question one needs to look into Virginia’s past and find out something about her origins.

V’s family disapproves of Virginia. V’s grandmother in fact is so “emphatically opposed” to her son’s marriage that she continues to harp on it even after he has married again (6). V is “inclined to deduce that the Knight family (whatever it was) did not quite reach the standard (whatever that standard might have been) which was required by the redheels of the old regime in Russia” (6). V also suggests that the marriage may have jeopardized his father’s military career (6). So what is it about the Knights that is so objectionable?

Virginia’s father, Edward Knight, is “a gentleman of means” (6); he and his wife lived for some time in Melbourne, and Virginia was born in Kent (10). Virginia meets her future husband in the early 1890s (6), which puts her date of birth probably somewhere in the early 1870s, meaning that her parents are likely to have been in Melbourne around the 1860s. Melbourne in the 1860s was a booming gold town, after gold had been discovered in nearby Ballarat in 1851. Note that Virginia leaves Sebastian a “comfortable income,” dispelling money worries for the rest of his life (25); and consider the “gold coins” in Sebastian’s drawer (15). It is not difficult to imagine that Edward Knight made his considerable “means” out of the Victoria gold rush and then set himself up in England as a gentleman. Indeed, this is just what John Turner does in the Holmes story, “The Boscombe Valley Mystery,” while in “The ‘Gloria Scott’” old Trevor returns to England in similar style, having prospered at the goldfields in New South Wales. There is an intimation, then, that Edward Knight is a self-made man. Yet it seems unlikely that his “new money” would be the reason for the grave aversion of V’s grandmother, and for the jeopardizing of V’s father’s military career. It also seems unlikely that it would be Edward Knight’s Englishness which causes such offence, notwithstanding Russia’s and Britain’s imperial rivalry in

201
the East, where the Great Game was being played out on India’s frontiers. So what is
the reason for the objection?

There was historically an actual Edward Knight residing as a wealthy gentleman in
Kent in the nineteenth century. Indeed, if there is a suggestion that our Edward
Knight made his money in Australian gold, his historical namesake likewise came into
his wealth later in life, for he was born a humble parson’s son. In fact, “Knight” was
not his real name, it was “Austen”; and he was the brother of the author of Pride and
Prejudice. Adopted by the rich Kent Knights, Edward Austen (1767-1852) took their
name when he came into his inheritance (Tomalin 37, 236-37). In “The ‘Gloria
Scott’” old Trevor likewise takes up life as a wealthy English squire under an
assumed name. His real name is Armitage, and he takes the name “Trevor” when he
arrives in Australia in search of gold. What if, in the case of our Edward Knight, it is
not only his wealth which belies his origins but also his name, as with Jane Austen’s
brother and old Trevor? If Edward Knight was in Melbourne in the mid-nineteenth
century, it is not said where he came to Australia from. Melbourne was a melting-pot
of immigrants from all over the world; indeed, a Nabokov family legend has it that
Nabokov’s own great-uncle left Russia for the gold in Victoria (Field, Life in Part 49-
50). Immigrants often change their names in order to blend into their new
surroundings, and some immigrants have more motive than others to try and
assimilate: the name “Knight,” for instance, would be the Anglicized version of the
Jewish name “Knacht” (Hanks and Hodges 301), and it would not be difficult to
imagine a Jewish exile from Europe drawn to the Melbourne gold market, and from
there to Britain, a country relatively hospitable to Jews.12

If Edward Knight and his wife were Jews, the reason for V’s grandmother’s emphatic
opposition to her son’s marriage would become patently clear: a case of pride and
prejudice of the ugliest kind. While Britain was a relatively safe haven for Jews,
Russia was rife with antisemitism, indeed the Tsar encouraged it (Hingley 92).
Pogroms had started up in 1881, and ten years later thirty thousand Jews were herded
out of Moscow by police and Cossacks (Riasanovsky 395; Hingley 92). Virginia’s
being a Jew would also account for the disapproval of her husband’s regiment: Tsarist
troops, present at the pogroms, did nothing to stop the violence (Hingley 93).
Nabokov had just dealt with the business of mixed marriage in The Gift. Oscar Mertz,
a Jew, meets his future wife, a gentile, in Nice, and they elope to Rome; on returning
to St Petersburg they have one child, a daughter, Zinaida; and later Mertz dies of
angina pectoris (Gift 171, 173). And perhaps the same thing, with genders reversed,

12 For the appeal of Britain to European Jewish migrants at this time: see Gartner.

202
is seen in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Virginia Knight meets her future husband in Rome (6); they return together to St Petersburg, where they have one child, a son, Sebastian; and Virginia supposedly dies of angina pectoris (87, 191). Such a family set-up would also correspond with Nabokov's own at the time of writing *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*: he a Russian aristocrat, married to a Jewish woman, with one son.

Virginia Knight as a Jew begins to make sense of the dark racist image of the Albinos in Black at the time of her departure from her family in 1903, the year of the Kishinev pogrom. Indeed, if Nabokov aligns Virginia's pursuers with the KKK in the Holmes story, in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov points out a family likeness between “the lean American lyncher” and “the good old churchgoing Russian or Polish pogromshchik” (*SM* 204). However, if Virginia Knight is a Jew, her Jewishness alone cannot explain her fate. It cannot be simply her “race” which causes her to be on the run for six years and ultimately murdered. There must be some other telling factor, some additional significant point in her past.

*The only thing known about Virginia Knight’s movements before she leaves her family in 1903 is how she and her husband first meet.*

“It was abroad, in Italy as far as I know,” states V, “that my father, then a young guardsman on leave, met Virginia Knight. Their first meeting was connected with a fox-hunt in Rome, in the early nineties” (6). Later V’s father hunts bears (8), and fox-hunting is the kind of thing one can imagine a wealthy Englishwoman like Virginia Knight being involved in. However, there are two points about this first meeting of Sebastian’s parents which seem strange. The first is there is something incongruous about the idea of a fox-hunt in Rome. True, Nabokov states that his Uncle Ruka, who worked at the Russian embassy in Rome, “rode to hounds” in Italy (*SM* 57; *SSRP* 5.180), and yet one thinks of fox-hunting as a peculiarly English activity, so that the idea of a fox-hunt in Rome seems strangely out of place. Moreover, it seems strangely out of place for another reason: the hunt is said to take place “in Rome,” as though it occurs in the city itself. Indeed, the oddness of this fact has been sufficiently felt by Sergei Il’in to prompt him to change “in Rome” to “in the environs of Rome” (“в окрестностях Рима”) in his Russian translation of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (*SSAP* 1.29). And yet “in the environs of Rome” is not what Nabokov writes. The second curious point about this fox-hunt is that Sebastian’s
parents' meeting is said to be “connected” with it - an odd turn of phrase. One would expect two people to meet “at” or “after” a fox-hunt, but not “connected” with one.

However, there is another observation to be made about this fox-hunt. Virginia Knight is aligned with a chess knight, and a chess knight is a horseman, a figure well suited to a fox-hunt. Yet Virginia is only metaphorically a chess knight; that is, she is only a metaphorical horseman - and, as such, more suited to a metaphorical fox-hunt. The idea is suggestive, as metaphorical hunting is a theme in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. On the very first page of the novel V states that Olga Orlova’s diary is something he might never have “hunted down had it been a chosen quarry”; on finding the letters of Sebastian’s Cambridge acquaintance V realizes what his next “hunting-ground” ought to be (40); after his interview with Goodman V believes he has followed “a false scent” (57); and at Lescaux, when the furred and scarved figure emerges from the car, V says he has captured his “prey” (168). Such use of hunting imagery, in addition, is a pervasive theme in both the Sherlock Holmes and the Scarlet Pimpernel books. In “The Empty House,” for instance, Holmes has to cast far afield into the city streets for a trace of his prey: “I knew not what wild beast we were about to hunt down in the dark jungle of criminal London,” narrates Watson, “but I was well assured from the bearing of this master huntsman that the adventure was a most grave one” (Return 13). Chauvelin, for his part, is perpetually tracking his elusive prey, Sir Percy Blakeney, through the streets of Paris; and on one occasion a group of henchmen believe they finally have the Pimpernel within their reach: “That,” says one of the men, pointing to a nearby house, “is the quarry where our fox has run to earth” (LSP 122). If Virginia Knight is a metaphorical horseman, and thus better suited to a metaphorical fox-hunt, that fact, coupled with these themes of metaphorical hunting, where the prey is not a beast but a man, reflects suggestively on the fox-hunt in Rome. Viewed as a metaphor for the pursuit of a person, the fox-hunt “in Rome,” with which Sebastian’s parents’ meeting is “connected,” begins to look less incongruous.

And in this connection consider the nature of our two “fox-hunters.” The name “Virginia Knight” evokes an image of the virgin knight, Joan of Arc, who is alluded to in Sebastian’s letter to V, where Sebastian refers to papers of his which have “heard voices” in Domremy (Joan of Arc’s birthplace), and which now must “suffer the stake” (184). The idea of a connection between Virginia Knight and Joan of Arc is particularly suggestive, as Joan crusaded to free her people from their English oppressors, and there are intimations that Virginia Knight is a Jew, a member of a

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13 V misreads Sebastian’s “Domremy” as Cyrillic script, giving the nonsensical “Dot chetu” (184). Nabokov’s sister, Elena, appears to have been the first to note this (Perepiska 33).
people who are the archetypal oppressed. Joan of Arc, moreover, went into battle with her knights at her side, and it is a “young guardsman,” a soldier, whom Virginia Knight meets in Sebastian’s father at the time of the fox-hunt in Rome. For his part, Sebastian’s father, in marrying a woman who may be a Jew, and thus flying in the face of both his social set and his regiment, gives the impression of being a liberal, and a bold one; and it is not difficult to see in him shades of V. D. Nabokov, who famously fought for racial equality and liberal reform in Tsarist Russia. Indeed, if Sebastian’s father is a guardsman, Nabokov’s father was a member of the Horse Guards (SM 19). Virginia Knight’s evoking the figure of a crusading Joan of Arc, and Sebastian’s father’s suggesting a soldier championing liberal reform, casts a suggestive light on the idea of the fox-hunt as a metaphor for the pursuit of a person. Indeed, consider the setting of the hunt. Rome in the 1890s was the scene of political intrigue. Here, as in other European cities, Russian revolutionaries in exile plotted the downfall of the Tsarist regime; and these men in turn were hounded by agents of the foreign department of the Tsarist secret police (McCormick 128; Hingley 79). In such an atmosphere it would not be difficult to imagine a number of unsavoury characters haunting the streets of the Italian capital - antisemites, extremists of one political shade or another - characters whom a Jewish “Joan of Arc” and a Russian liberal soldier might find a common cause in pursuing.

If there is a suggestion that the “fox” which is hunted in Rome is a villain, compare the Sherlock Holmes story, “Wisteria Lodge.” A group of patriots from the country of San Pedro hunt down across the world their former dictator, a man who is likened to a predatory beast: the “Tiger of San Pedro” (HLB 30). The tyrant’s monstrous crimes draw together an unlikely band of people bent on revenge. The group includes an Englishwoman, who meets her husband at the San Pedro embassy in London and becomes drawn into his political world. The avengers hunt the “Tiger” across European cities, including Rome, but he repeatedly slips their grasp; and only after two failed attempts on his life is the “Tiger” finally destroyed.14 And compare also Agatha Christie’s Murder on the Orient Express (1934). A group of people of diverse nationalities are drawn together to wreak revenge on a murderous villain, a man Poirot calls “a wild animal - an animal savage, but savage! you understand” (Christie, Orient 22). The villain, one Cassetti, flees his pursuers across the world, but is finally cornered by the group on the Orient Express. Two members of this group are a 14 “Wisteria Lodge” throws an interesting side-light onto another Nabokov work, composed while The Real Life of Sebastian Knight was in preparation. Where Doyle’s story is about the destruction of a tyrant referred to as the “Tiger of San Pedro,” Nabokov’s own story, “Tyrants Destroyed,” closes by referring to tyrants as “tigroid monsters” (“tigroidov”) (Stories 460; SSRP 5.376). Moreover, if Doyle’s story is entitled “Wisteria Lodge,” Nabokov dreamed up “Tyrants Destroyed” amid the wisteria outside Menton (RY 486).
couple engaged to be married: one a young Englishwoman, the other a British army officer on leave (Christie, *Orient* 114), and if Virginia Knight is a young Englishwoman, the future husband she meets in connection with the fox-hunt in Rome is a Russian army officer "on leave" (6).

If Virginia Knight is a metaphorical horseman, it is because she is a metaphorical chess knight; and if the Great Game was being played out in Central Asia at this time, one can see the "fox-hunt" in Rome similarly as a covert manoeuvre in the manner of chess-play, where Virginia Knight takes the part of one knight and Sebastian's father - an army officer, possibly a member of the Horse Guards - takes the part of another. This recalls the world of deadly chess inhabited by the sinister chessmen, the Albinos in Black. And this raises a certain possibility. For if in 1903 Virginia Knight is forced to make a wildly veering knight-move as a result of a sudden threat from the Albinos in Black, one can see that that threat to Virginia might be an act of vengeance for an aggressive knight-move made by her at the "fox-hunt" in Rome; that the "fox" might be one of the racist Albinos in Black. In other words, one senses the possibility that both events are part of the same "Great Game" with the same players. Indeed, while it is not known what happens at the "fox-hunt" in Rome, there are two points which suggest that the "fox" is not destroyed: the first is that in "Wisteria Lodge" the group of patriots fail to destroy the "Tiger" in Rome; and the second is that it is a fact of chess that two knights cannot checkmate a lone king (Golombek 131).

*The idea that it is a man-hunt in Rome that lies at the root of Virginia Knight’s departure from her family is suggestive for another reason. For if Virginia’s departure is linked with Elias Openshaw’s receipt of the five orange pips, it is over ten years after betraying the Klan that Openshaw receives the pips, is pursued and murdered in revenge; and it is likewise some ten years after the “fox-hunt” in Rome that Virginia takes flight from Paris. At the time of Virginia’s departure from her family V says time had “gone astray, asprawl” (7), and Virginia’s movements following her flight intimate that the past has caught up with her; that a vengeful “fox” is on the heels of the “horseman” from Rome; that the hunter has become the hunted.

After leaving her family in Paris Virginia becomes: “an inveterate traveller, always on the move” (7-8). The phrase echoes “Wisteria Lodge” where the “Tiger of San Pedro,” in fear of the group of avengers who are hunting him, becomes “a great traveller, always on the move” (*HLB* 26). And if one Holmes allusion points to
Virginia’s being on the run, another hints at what she is fleeing. Virginia is said to be “alike at home in any small pension or expensive hotel” (8), and in “The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax” Holmes considers the dangerous position of the lone woman travelling abroad: “She is helpless. She is migratory. She has sufficient means to take her from country to country and from hotel to hotel. She is lost, as often as not, in a maze of obscure pensions and boarding-houses. She is a stray chicken in a world of foxes” (HLB 117).

The idea that Virginia is on the run is suggested by another point. After noting that Virginia has a passion for “sleeping-cars and Great European Express Trains,” V quotes an extract from a Sebastian Knight work featuring a “lone woman” on a train (8), and the juxtaposition invites the reader to make a connection with Virginia Knight. The extract provides a “passing glimpse” of the woman “touching silver-bright things in her travelling-case” (8). At first glance one imagines the woman to be handling the kind of “receptacles of crystal and silver” that Nabokov describes in his mother’s travelling-case (SM 112), but on second glance these unspecified silvery “things” evoke a quite different image. While the woman in the extract deals with the contents of her case the clank of an “invisible hammer” can be heard testing wheels (8), and in The Invisible Man Dr Kemp, hearing the clatter of broken windowpanes in his upstairs rooms, prepares to defend himself against an enraged and invisible foe: Adye, the local police-chief, has “a silvery glimpse of a little revolver half out of Kemp’s pocket” (Wells, Invisible Man 125). The idea that there is a gun in the lone woman’s luggage is suggested by another point. For if V prefaces the quoted extract with mention of “sleeping-cars and Great European Express Trains,” the jewel in the crown of the Compagnie Internationale des Wagons-Lits et des Grands Express Européens was the Orient Express, and on that train Cassetti, fleeing the group of avengers, sleeps with a loaded revolver under his pillow. If the juxtaposition of V’s reference to Virginia Knight and this extract from one of Sebastian’s works reflects darkly on Virginia’s position following her departure from her family, the Knight extract contains a further suggestive point. For if the clank of the “invisible hammer” evokes the Invisible Man, the Invisible Man is an albino, who in a chapter entitled “The Hunter Hunted” pursues Kemp in revenge for his attempt to entrap him; and there are intimations that it is an Albino in Black who pursues Virginia after having been targeted at the “fox-hunt” in Rome.

The intimations of Virginia’s being on the run continue. In 1908, after five years on the move, Virginia makes a flying visit to see her son (8). She arrives in St Petersburg by train, and that same day appears before Sebastian in black hat and veil, with “a
small quivering face" (8). Compare the Holmes story, "The Speckled Band," where Helen Stoner travels to London by train and arrives later that day at Baker St wearing black hat and veil. As she raises her veil Holmes and Watson see that she is in "a piti able state of agitation, her face all drawn and grey, with restless, frightened eyes, like those of some hunted animal" (Adventures 172). Helen Stoner's life is in danger from a mysterious killer who leaves no trace either of himself or of his crime, an assassin Holmes identifies as a deadly snake with untraceable venom. And if Helen Stoner, the "hunted animal," is thus threatened by an invisible predator, Virginia Knight likewise appears to be on the run from an unseen foe. Another literary echo brings home the idea of a predator on Virginia's tail in a particularly vivid manner. Virginia arrives in St Petersburg on "a winter day" to bid a final farewell to her son, and before parting from him forever leaves in his hand "a small parcel of sugar-coated violets" (8). Her ex-husband is away on a bear-hunt, and with a nervous smile to V's mother, Virginia hastily exits to her imminent death. Compare The Winter's Tale, where, in the famous scene on Bohemia's non-existent sea-coast, Antigonus arrives ashore in wintry weather, charged with the task of abandoning the baby Perdita to her fate. Leaving her with a parcel of gold, he finds himself caught in the midst of a bear-hunt, and exits to his death pursued by a bear (3.3). The tragi-comic nature of Antigonus's fate turns to sinister suggestiveness in relation to Virginia Knight, the more so when one considers that her ex-husband's bear-hunt recalls the "fox-hunt" in Rome.

Indeed, Virginia's life now enters its final phase. After leaving St Petersburg Virginia begins her travels across the south of France, like a chess-knight zigzagging across the board (9). Compare the movements of the "Tiger of San Pedro": "We zigzagged swiftly here and there over Europe, to throw off the pursuers," says the Englishwoman, who inveigles her way into the tyrant's household as governess, "and finally returned to this house, which he had taken upon his first arrival in England" (HLB 32). The house in question is near Wisteria Lodge where the group of avengers lie in wait for the tyrant. However, if Virginia likewise zigzags her way across the south of France to a house named after purple flowers, at this point the lines of comparison become crossed, or rather, revert to the original alignment intimated in Rome. For it is not the "Tiger" with whom Virginia shares her fate. On his way from Wisteria Lodge to destroy the tyrant, Garcia, a member of the group of avengers, is met and killed by the tyrant himself. The hunted "Tiger" thus turns on his hunter. And if Virginia meets her end while lodging at Les Violettes, there are intimations that she is finally cornered by the very "fox" she had hunted in Rome.
Virginia's fate also evokes that of another figure: Joan of Arc. If Joan of Arc's death at the stake is referred to in Sebastian's letter to V (184), it appears also to be alluded to on V's train journey to St Damier, where V searches for a "wooden something," a leg-rest, with his "burning toes," but the night is "all bone and flesh" (191); and Joan's death again comes to mind with regard to Virginia's frantic dashing across the south of France, which is described in images suggestive of her being consumed by heat: it is summer-time; she stays in "small hot provincial towns"; she is "feverish"; and her dashing is "hectic" (9). Joan was executed by the English, in revenge for her victories at Orleans and other fields of battle, and - as noted above - at the time of Virginia's death there is an echo of Hamlet, where Claudius dispatches the prince to be executed by the English. Joan, the virgin knight, was burned in Rouen in the town square, and the letters R, o, u, e, n appear in sequence in the word "Roquebrune," the town where Virginia Knight dies like a chess knight taken on a chess square. It is emblematic that Virginia, who evokes the image of a freedom-fighter for the Jews, should meet an end which recalls the execution of Joan of Arc: the death by burning of the girl from Domremy recalls the "flames" of Blauberg, and Virginia Knight dies of "Lehmann's disease."

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After Virginia Knight's death in 1909 the next event that is heard about is V's father being fatally shot in a duel by a certain Palchin who boasts that he was Virginia's lover (9-11). However, if there are intimations that Virginia does not leave her husband for another man, it follows that Palchin cannot have been her lover, a point which casts this duel in a curious light.

And that light turns rapidly to the sinister in view of a literary parallel. If Virginia's raindrop-like departure from her family and her subsequent death evoke the unhappy plight of Elias Openshaw at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, Openshaw's fate is only part of the story. Two years after disposing of Openshaw, the Klan pursue and murder another member of his family - his brother Joseph - and it is three years after the death of Virginia Knight that her husband's fateful duel takes place. Indeed, the parallel with the Holmes story extends. On a January day, Joseph Openshaw sits at the breakfast-table with his son, John, when he receives an envelope out of which tumble five orange pips into the palm of his hand (Adventures 109), and in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, on a January day on the eve of the duel, V's father sits at the dinner-table with his son, Sebastian, handling pip-like bread-pellets, which he throws at Sebastian across the table (11). Joseph Openshaw, three days after receiving the
pips, goes out of town to visit an old friend in the army, but never comes back: his body is found in a chalk-pit, the cause of death pronounced as an accidental fall (*Adventures* 110), and in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, a day after throwing bread-pellets across the dinner-table, V's father, in the company of an army friend, Captain Belov, goes out to a duel where he falls on an army-cloak spread on the chalk-white snow (11).

If there are intimations of a similar shadow looming over V's father's duel as is intimated in connection with Virginia Knight's murder, consider V's thoughts on the reasons behind the affair. V wonders if his father was defending Virginia's honour, or satisfying his own desire of revenge:

> Or was it merely the naming of a name, the seeing of a face, the sudden grotesque sight of an individual stamp upon what had been a tame faceless ghost? And taken all in all was it, this echo of a distant past (and echoes are seldom more than a bark, no matter how pure-voiced the caller), was it worth the ruin of our home and the grief of my mother? (11).

If V is uncertain as to the precise reasons for the duel, his words are nevertheless suggestive. V's reference to a "ghost" from his father's past whose echo is "taken all in all" recalls *Hamlet*, where the Ghost appears at Elsinore while Hamlet is still remembering his father: "A was a man, take him for all in all" (1.2.87). This evocation of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, returning on a mission of revenge, reflects suggestively on another image evoked in V's thoughts. For V refers to the ghost from his father's past as "tame," and says echoes are "seldom more than a bark," and if the word "tame" suggests a beast that is naturally wild, a "bark" is the sound made by not only a dog, but also a fox. If V is unsure as to what causes his father's duel, there is a suggestion that what looms over the affair is the "fox," returning for revenge - like the ghost of old Hamlet - from the distant past; that the "fox," after murdering Virginia Knight, comes for revenge on the second "horseman" who hunted him in Rome.

Indeed, this idea is underlined by a further literary parallel. The image of the villain who returns years later for revenge is a recurrent one in the Holmes stories. A classic example is in *The Valley of Fear*, where Ted Baldwin, one of "The Scowrers," pursues Birdy Edwards for breaking up his gang. After serving a ten-year prison sentence Baldwin finally tracks Edwards down, some twenty years after the time of his arrest. Edwards, however, is alerted to danger when he catches sight of Baldwin in town. He tells Holmes later:
"I got a glimpse of a man in the street. It was only a glimpse, but I have a quick eye for these things, and I never doubted who it was. It was the worst enemy I had among them all - one who has been after me like a hungry wolf after a caribou all these years" (Valley 79).

If Edwards is tracked down by a villain with whom he crossed swords some twenty years earlier, and is alerted to the villain's return by catching a "glimpse" of his face in the street, compare The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, where some twenty years after the events of Rome V connects his father with "the seeing of a face, the sudden grotesque sight of an individual stamp upon what had been a tame faceless ghost," a ghost which evokes the villainous "fox," just as Edwards is pursued by a "wolf." Indeed, there are further echoes here. In his final confrontation with Baldwin, Edwards manages to turn Baldwin's gun upon the gunman himself, leaving Edwards "sick at the sight" of Baldwin's mutilated body, which bears the "branded mark" of his secret society, but which, taking the blast of the gun full in the face, lies effectively faceless (Valley 80); and in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight it is the "grotesque sight" of an "individual stamp" upon what had been a tame "faceless" ghost which rears up to haunt V's father from the distant past. These echoes of The Valley of Fear reinforce the suggestion that it is the "fox" returning for revenge who looms over V's father's duel.

However, this raises a question. For if there are suggestions that the "fox" looms over V's father's duel, Palchin, with whom V's father fights the duel, makes an unlikely "fox." For one thing, Palchin ultimately dies facing a Bolshevik firing-squad, which suggests that he has no links with tyranny (23); and for another, it is difficult to imagine a villain first going to the trouble of boasting he has been Virginia Knight's lover and then submitting to the hit-and-miss manner of a duel as a means of settling a twenty-year-old vendetta. However, if this gives the duel a contradictory appearance, consider again The Valley of Fear, for Birdy Edwards's shooting of Baldwin has an interesting sequel. With the aid of his friend, Edwards puts his own dressing-gown and slippers on the faceless Baldwin, and generally makes it appear that the dead man is he, Edwards, himself. And afterwards Edwards brings his wife into the deception (Valley 80-81). Edwards, that is, realizes he can escape his pursuers once and for all - for Baldwin is not alone in wanting his blood - by means of staging his death. And the idea of a man staging his death with the help of his friends, in order to escape his foes, reflects suggestively on V's father's duel.15

15 Note the parallel between The Valley of Fear and "Lik." Lik, like Birdy Edwards, is hounded by a thug, Koldunov, who turns up unexpectedly to haunt him twenty years after their first acquaintance. Koldunov - who refers to a "secret society" in America (Stories 471), a point which recalls "The Scowrers" - is found finally with his face blasted off and wearing Lik's shoes.
Consider the men who take part in it. If Palchin cannot have been Virginia Knight’s lover, and makes an unlikely “fox,” his name contains the word “pal,” while Captain Belov’s name comes close to the word “beloved”; and thus the two men who join V’s father in the duel recall the two people who help to stage Birdy Edwards’s death: a friend and a beloved wife. There is no obvious link between the three men at the duel, and yet in the story that V’s mother retails about a meeting between V’s father and Palchin some interesting words are put into Palchin’s mouth: “It is nobody’s fault,” he tells V’s father, “that you and I were in the same boat once” (10). Since Palchin cannot have been Virginia Knight’s lover, the sexual innuendo here falls away to leave something interesting. V’s father’s duel evokes Pushkin’s final duel on a January day in the snow-bound outskirts of St Petersburg (EO 3.46-50), and Pushkin wrote a famous poem called Arion about the Decembrists, a secret society of Russian army officers, whom he depicts as being all in the same boat (EO 3.350). It is likely that V’s father is a liberal in the Russian army, who in Rome is engaged in secret activity, and it would not be difficult to imagine his close friend Belov being involved in the same thing. Thus the evocation of the liberal Decembrists in Palchin’s comment about being in the same boat is suggestive, the more so as Palchin’s own name comes close to that of Ivan Pushchin, prominent Decembrist, close friend of Pushkin himself, and brother-in-law of Nabokov’s own great-grand-uncle (EO 3.348; SM 43; RY 18). Indeed, the idea of a group of three friends corresponds with another point. On the eve of the duel Sebastian reads Chums in which there is a serial featuring three friends: one who is a contortionist, another who is a conjuror, and a third who is a ventriloquist (12); three chums or pals, in other words, who perform tricks and illusions. And there is a further suggestive point. Virginia Knight, pursued by the “fox,” is at times aligned with the villainous literary figures who are ordinarily aligned with her adversary: the “Tiger of San Pedro” and Cassetti; and this reflects suggestively on V’s father’s duel. For if that duel, at which three men are present, recalls Joseph Openshaw’s death in a chalk-pit, the KKK members who kill Openshaw are three men travelling in a boat, ex-army men belonging to a secret society, who, in making Openshaw’s death seem like an accidental fall, are also three friends who perform an illusion.

Consider the description of the duel:

The duel was fought in a snow-storm on the bank of a frozen brook. Two shots were exchanged before my father fell face downwards on a blue-gray army-cloak spread on the snow. Palchin, his hands trembling, lit a cigarette. Captain Belov hailed the coachmen who
were humbly waiting some distance away on the snow-swept road.
The whole beastly affair had lasted three minutes (11).

The critical moment is suggestive: “Two shots were exchanged before my father fell face downwards on a blue-gray army-cloak spread on the snow.” One automatically sees a causal relationship between the shots and the fall, but there is no explicit link. Two shots are fired, a man falls, but there is no conclusive evidence that the man has been shot. If Palchin refers to being “in the same boat,” consider Death on the Nile (1937), Agatha Christie’s famous novel in which everyone is in the same boat. At one point a shooting is staged in which Jacqueline de Bellefort fires wide, and Simon Doyle, her lover, falls clutching his knee in front of witnesses. Doyle later scurries away to murder his wife, before inflicting a plausible and safe wound at close range (Christie, Nile chs. 12 and 29). If at the duel in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight there is no explicit statement that either bullet hits home, one observes also that the coachmen, waiting some distance away in the driving snow, can hardly be close witnesses of the scene. Moreover, if V’s father’s duel recalls Pushkin’s, the latter’s fatal encounter with D’Anthes took place neither in early January, as V’s father’s appears to do, nor in a snowstorm; yet, some years earlier, in the first week of January 1822, in the midst of a raging snowstorm, Pushkin, according to Nabokov, fought a duel with a Colonel Starov, in which neither man was hurt (EO 3.45).

In addition to the three trick-performing friends, the pages of Chums reveal other interesting things: “Express-trains roaring through the night” (12). The image recalls Murder on the Orient Express, where one of the passengers on the great express-train is the “wild animal” Cassetti who is evoked in the figure of the “fox” from Rome. Indeed, the express-train in Chums “roars” like a beast threatening its prey, a roar which is echoed in the “uproarious” serial featuring the three boys. And if the roar of the train evokes the “fox” from Rome, the “horseman leaping over a racing-car,” who also appears in Chums, evokes our horseman from Rome evading an imminent threat (12). And a very tangible threat features in another Chums story, where a cricketer stops “the knife thrown by a vicious Malay” at his friend (12). If V’s father, Belov, and Palchin evoke Pushkin’s poem Arion, suggesting a bond between soldiers, Arion is a figure in mythology who takes evasive action to avoid being murdered, and there are intimations that V’s father - alerted to the return of the “fox,” as Birdy Edwards is alerted to the return of Baldwin - likewise takes evasive action with the help of his friends to stave off a similar threat.

On the day of his father’s duel Sebastian returns home from school at half-past three (12), and at that time the hands of the clock form the shape of a knight’s move. And
if the image of that deviating move is suggestive in relation to what takes place at V’s father’s duel, the hands on the clock also point to something else that is suggestive: the numbers 3 and 6. For it is in 1936 at the age of thirty-six that Sebastian himself, in order to avoid being murdered, stages his death at St Damier on a January day which evokes Twelfth Night, a play in which a character called Sebastian cheats the waves in a shipwreck, in a manner which, according to the Captain, recalls Arion (1.2.15). Sebastian’s deception evokes a ruse of the Scarlet Pimpernel’s which leaves Chauvelin high and dry, and no doubt our “fox” in 1913 would be left fuming like Chauvelin as the target of his revenge - V’s father - is denied him by an unexpected death following a duel. However, if Chauvelin - who is himself constantly likened to a fox - has the consolation of living to fight another day, there is something else to be said about our “fox.” If our villain is associated with a bark-like echo from the past, is embodied in a racing-car which the horseman evades, and figures principally in the form of a fox, the images of a dog, a racing-car, and a predatory animal come together in a person who appears some years later. Moreover, if our villain has been linked with the “Tiger of San Pedro,” the former tyrant in the Holmes story lives later under the name of “Mr Henderson,” and the person who is described as a “bulldog” type of man (38), who races his car and steps into a puddle dressed in the fur of a predatory animal, is known as “Mr H.”

In the Scarlet Pimpernel novels Baroness Orczy characteristically begins by setting the revolutionary scene, but sometimes she employs another device. I Will Repay (1906) and Lord Tony’s Wife (1917) open with a pre-revolutionary prologue in which critical events take place that drive the ensuing action. In the former, Juliette Marny’s brother is killed and the girl takes a solemn vow of revenge; while in the latter, old man Adet is unjustly hanged, and his son Pierre then devotes his life to exacting retribution for his parent’s death. In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, similarly, chapter I evokes a pre-revolutionary period - the years leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917 - and contains critical events which bear on the future action. One event in particular. For if Virginia Knight is murdered by a villainous “fox,” it is this same man - “Mr H” - whom Sebastian (in the guise of V) tracks down at Lescaux when he finally captures his “prey.” At the end of chapter 1, on the eve of his father’s duel, Sebastian reads the following line in Chums: “Look out for the next instalment of this rattling yarn” (11). The line applies equally to The Real Life of Sebastian Knight itself, for the “real” story of the novel is how a son comes to avenge the murder of his mother.
When Sebastian, as V, returns to his London flat in February 1936 after staging his death, he burns two bundles of letters (36). V implies that the letters are from Clare Bishop and a Russian woman. One bundle, “criss-crossed in a bold feminine scrawl” (36), does indeed suggest Clare, being evocative of the “criss-cross” movements of a chess-bishop. However, given that Sebastian never had a Russian mistress, the identity of the second correspondent becomes something of a mystery.

That mystery clears if one looks at the clues. In his letter to V Sebastian states that the papers have “heard voices” in Domremy and “must suffer the stake” (184). This recalls the execution of Joan of Arc, and Joan’s death is evoked again in the burning of the second bundle of letters. V describes how one sheet of this bundle became loose, “curving backwards under the torturing flame, and before the crumpling blackness had crept over it, a few words appeared in full radiance, then swooned and all was over” (36). This page, which twists in the “torturing” flame and “swoons,” is clearly personified, and if it reveals a “few words” before burning out, Joan of Arc cried: “Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Blessed be God” before being overcome by the flames (Evans 356). Moreover, there may be a play on words here: the page is described as “curving” backwards, and another word for a curve is an arc. After burning the letters V raises his eyes to the desk, where he seems to see a transparent Sebastian, and thinks of Sebastian’s visit to Roquebrune (36-37), a town which is associated with a certain person. Furthermore, as V sits back in his chair, he feels perplexed by the identity of the woman whose letters Sebastian had “kept in close proximity to those of Clare Bishop” (36), and if the criss-cross scrawl of Clare’s letters evokes the angular move of the chess-bishop, a piece which is kept in close proximity to the bishop in a chess-set, and at the start of each game, is the knight. The intimations are unmistakable. In the burning of the second bundle of letters from the mystery correspondent, the person evoked is the woman who suffers a death which recalls the execution of Joan of Arc, when she is trapped in Roquebrune like a chess-knight: Sebastian’s mother, Virginia Knight.

Indeed, a literary echo seems to confirm this. V burns the letters by the light of the “magic moon” of Sebastian’s lamp (35), and through the “torturing flame” a “few words” are seen. In Hamlet the Ghost revisits the “glimpses of the moon” (1.4.53) in momentary respite from the “tormenting flames” (1.5.3), and unfolds his brief tale to his son. The evocation of the Ghost’s words to Hamlet reinforces the idea that the letters are from Sebastian’s dead parent. Indeed, if V thinks of Roquebrune after
burning the papers, he does so in connection with a passage in *Lost Property* where Sebastian describes seeing his mother’s ghost (17-18).

Supposedly, V assumes that the letter-writer is Russian, jumping to the conclusion that a person who writes in Russian must be Russian themselves, but Russian is the language Virginia Knight would naturally use to write to her son. Virginia lives in St Petersburg for ten years, ample time to become fluent in Russian; while Sebastian does not learn English until shortly before his father’s death, that is, well after the death of his mother (15).

If there are intimations that the letter-writer is Virginia Knight, certain literary echoes - as noted in an earlier section of this essay - suggest that the papers are of a secret nature. And there are further intimations which support this. Virginia’s bundle of letters is “egg-shell blue with a dark-blue rim” (36), and that colour evokes the violet colour which is associated not only with Virginia herself but also with the secret world in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. When Clare Bishop types to Sebastian’s dictation she produces pages which are “alive with black and violet words” (81); that is, she produces an upper, overt text of black, and a lower, as it were, covert text of violet beneath, a pairing which is symbolic of the dual life that Clare and Sebastian share. The idea of a covert violet text is suggestive. The words which appear when V burns Virginia’s violet-coloured letters are “thy manner always to find,” a phrase which implies that something lies hidden; and indeed, these very words and all the others in the bundle are initially hidden from V. The packet is folded in such a way that V “could not get a glimpse of the writing” (36); or to put it another way, to V the writing is invisible. After burning the papers V ponders the identity of the mystery correspondent: “I had not the vaguest inkling as to who she might be” (36). If there is a pun on the “curving” of the paper, suggesting Joan of Arc, there may be further wordplay here: for the phrase “the vaguest inkling” contains the words “the vaguest ink,” and when V burns this bundle the emerging phrase appears in radiant letters of fire, which, in the context of papers that are intimated to be secret, suggests invisible ink.

The idea that Virginia Knight would communicate with her son using invisible ink seems strange. However, consider that at their final meeting Virginia gives Sebastian “a small parcel of sugar-coated violets” (8). This is an odd gift from a mother who has not seen her son for five years, and who makes a special trip to see him. Odder still when one considers the time of the visit. It is a winter day in 1908, and later V says Sebastian was “a boy of nine” (16). There is only one day in 1908 when
Sebastian is nine: 31 December, his ninth birthday. Virginia, in other words, hunted by a vengeful villain, and in peril of her life, makes a dangerous trip to St Petersburg to see her son on his birthday, having not seen him for five years, and, in a meeting which is exceedingly brief, supposedly gives him merely a small bag of violet sweets. Several years later, however, V discovers the violet sweets uneaten (15). Does Sebastian carefully preserve this memento of his mother, or is there some other reason for his not eating the sweets?

Consider an episode which takes place after Sebastian receives his mother’s gift. Around 1910 or 1911 Sebastian is seen “messing about with water-colours” while V looks on. V states:

I see myself, a child of four or five, on tiptoe, straining and fidgeting, trying to get a better glimpse of the paintbox beyond my half-brother’s moving elbow; sticky reds and blues, so well-licked and worn that the enamel gleams in their cavities. There is a slight clatter every time Sebastian mixes his colours on the inside of the tin lid, and the water in the glass before him is clouded with magic hues. His dark hair, closely cropped, renders a small birthmark visible above his rose-red diaphanous ear, - I have clambered onto a chair by now - but he continues to pay no attention to me, until with a precarious lunge, I try to dab the bluest cake in the box, and then, with a shove of his shoulder he pushes me away, still not turning, still as silent and distant, as always in regard to me (14).

Sebastian’s water-colours are described in an evocative way: “sticky reds and blues, so well-licked and worn that the enamel gleams in their cavities.” These “sticky,” “well-licked” paints are clearly figured as sweets which decay dental “enamel” to cause “cavities.” And if these “sticky reds and blues” meld in the mind into an image of purple confectionery, that image reflects suggestively on the “bluest cake” in the box. For the “bluest” colour, as it were, lies at the edge of the blue end of the spectrum - namely, violet - while another word for a cake is a sweet.

If there is a suggestion that the “bluest cake” in Sebastian’s paintbox is a “violet sweet,” a literary echo hints at what Sebastian is doing in the water-colouring scene. In The Invisible Man Griffin arrives at the inn in the village of Iping, bringing with him a vast array of glass bottles in straw-filled crates:

And directly the crates were unpacked, the stranger went to the window and set to work, not troubling in the least about the litter of
straw, the fire which had gone out, the box of books outside, nor for the trunks and other luggage that had gone upstairs.

When Mrs Hall took his dinner in to him, he was already so absorbed in his work, pouring little drops out of the bottles into test-tubes, that he did not hear her until she had swept away the bulk of the straw and put the tray on the table, with some little emphasis perhaps, seeing the state that the floor was in. Then he half turned his head and immediately turned it away again. . . . “I wish you wouldn’t come in without knocking,” he said in the tone of abnormal exasperation that seemed so characteristic of him (Wells, *Invisible Man* 15-16).

Just as Sebastian sits at a table with a glass of water clouded with “magic hues,” and is described as mixing paints and being irritated by V’s presence, so Griffin sits at a table surrounded by glass bottles, and is described as mixing chemicals and being irritated by the presence of the landlady. Indeed, there is a further link between Sebastian and Griffin here. All that is visible of Sebastian in this scene is his “dark hair,” a “small birthmark,” and the “rose-red” blood in his “diaphanous” ear, and Griffin states that except for his pigmentation - “the red of his blood and the black pigment of hair,” for instance - a man is made up of transparent, or diaphanous, tissue (Wells, *Invisible Man* 83). However, if Sebastian’s appearance in the water-colouring scene underlines a link between him and Griffin, the suggestive point about the parallel is the reason for Griffin’s experiments. Griffin is trying to create a compound which will turn him back to his original state; that is, he is trying to make the invisible visible.

If Sebastian is supposed to be painting in the water-colouring scene, it is only V who tells us so, and he - like the landlady in *The Invisible Man* - is hardly a reliable witness of the scene. For while V can see the paintbox and glass, he cannot see what Sebastian is doing. However, look again at Virginia Knight’s letters. There is something curious about them. While Clare’s letters consist of a “medley” of different note-paper (36), Virginia’s are on paper which is all one colour: “egg-shell blue with a dark-blue rim.” It is remarkable that a woman who travels from country to country for years should send letters which are all on the same colour paper. It is not so remarkable, however, if a certain process has been applied to the paper by the recipient, turning each page egg-shell blue and leaving a dark-blue rim. One method of using invisible ink is to use specific chemicals: one chemical to write the message, and another, a reagent, to develop it. The developer makes a solution of the reagent and brushes it over the paper to develop the hidden message. Secret agents carried these chemicals in powder form, often disguised as tablets (Grant 20), and these tablets to the untrained eye might appear to be sweets. When Virginia gives her
present to her son it is described as a parcel of "sugar-coated violets," a description which evokes the sugar-coating on certain pills and tablets, a superficial sweetness which disguises the chemical beneath.

The suggestion that Sebastian, in 1910 or 1911, uses the "violet sweets" to develop secret messages in his mother's letters, raises the question of why Virginia would use invisible ink to write to her son. Consider some other points about the "violet sweets." In the preceding section of this essay a link was noted between the "violet sweets" and the parcel of gold left with Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*. There are other Shakespearean intimations too. *Twelfth Night* begins with the love-sick Orsino listening to music: "That strain again! It had a dying fall. / O, it came o'er my ear like the sweet sound / That breathes upon a bank of violets" (1.1.4-6). The "sweet" sound that breathes upon a bank of "violets" is echoed in the "violet sweets." And the connection with *Twelfth Night* extends. Orsino refers to the sweet sound that breathes over the violets as "Stealing and giving odour" (1.1.7), and at her final meeting with Sebastian Virginia tells a story of how a Polish woman attempted to steal her vanity-bag, before she gives Sebastian the violet sweets (8). Moreover, Orsino is in love with Olivia, but one of Orsino's attendants reports, in this brief opening scene of the play, that the lady has abjured romance, vowing that "like a cloistress she will veiled walk, / And water once a day her chamber round / With eye-offending brine; all this to season / A brother's dead love, which she would keep fresh / And lasting, in her sad remembrance" (1.1.29-33). If the black-veiled and tearful Olivia grieves the loss of her brother, it is a black-veiled and weeping Virginia Knight who presents the violet sweets to a son from whom she has just as surely been parted. The echoes of *Twelfth Night* seem clear, but there are also echoes of another Shakespeare play. In *Hamlet*, at Ophelia's burial, Laertes says: "Lay her i' th' earth, / And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring," after which Gertrude strews flowers in Ophelia's grave, saying: "Sweets to the sweet. Farewell" (5.1.231-36). The juxtaposition of the words "violets" and "sweets," coupled with the image of a parting gift from, as it were, parent to child (Gertrude says she had hoped Ophelia would become her daughter-in-law [5.1.237]), seems to parallel Virginia's present of the "violet sweets" to her son. Like the two Shakespearean "pale fires" - one from *Timon of Athens* (4.3.440), the other from *Hamlet* (1.5.90) - there seems to be two Shakespearean "violet sweets." And the two sources concur. In *Twelfth Night* the "sweet" sound that breathes upon a bank of "violets" is like music, the food of love; and if Orsino is barred from Olivia because of her mourning, Olivia's grief for her brother is the sign of her faithful love. Likewise in *Hamlet* it is a grieving sibling who imagines violets on his beloved Ophelia's grave, while Gertrude's gift of flowers is an expression of her love. Indeed,
the scene recalls Ophelia’s own floral gifts at an earlier point in the play, where she would give violets (had they not withered), since they are the emblem of faithful love (4.5.181-83). If Virginia’s “violet sweets” evoke these Shakespearean scenes, the intimation is that her gift to Sebastian is a symbol of her faithful love.

And this symbolic nature of the “violet sweets” suggests the reason why Virginia would use invisible ink to write to her son. Virginia would know that Sebastian is living in a St Petersburg where her departure and subsequent absence are regarded as the behaviour of a promiscuous woman. Thus her long journey to see Sebastian, in peril of her life, with a gift which connotes faithful love, suggests she has an urgent desire, before she dies, to assure her son of her devotion. Yet at their meeting Virginia says nothing to Sebastian, so where would her assurance lie? Virginia’s burning letters evoke the Ghost in Hamlet who comes to unfold a tale to his son; and if Virginia were really to assure her son of her love, it would mean giving proof of the real motive of her departure and her absence. It would require, that is to say, the unfolding of a tale, the setting straight of the record, like the Ghost exposing the “forged process” of his death (1.5.37). However, such a sensitive tale could not be unfolded in a fleeting visit to St Petersburg; neither could it be told in front of others like V’s mother, nor in the overt text of a posted letter. But it could be told through the ghostly medium of invisible ink, in messages concealed within letters. And thus the mystery clears. For the simple fact is that if Virginia’s giving Sebastian the “violet sweets” symbolizes her making a gift of her faithful love, the only way she could fully and effectively do that is by making a gift of her secret.

XXI

In 1922, after completing his Cambridge degree, Sebastian travels to Monte Carlo, and from there takes a long walk to Roquebrune. After asking the way to Les Violettes, he sits for a while in a boarding-house garden with a bag of oranges in his lap (16-18).

In chapter 1 of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight Virginia Knight is linked with Elias Openshaw in “The Five Orange Pips,” and her husband with Openshaw’s brother, Joseph. The final person in the Holmes story to fall under the curse of the Klan is Joseph’s son, John, who, at the age of “two-and-twenty at the outside” (Adventures 103), receives the KKK’s familiar warning in the shape of an envelope containing five orange pips. At Roquebrune Sebastian Knight, the son of Virginia and her husband,
at the age of twenty-two, appears with a paper bag of oranges in his hand. John Openshaw receives the Klan's warning after inheriting a set of blue papers (or rather their remains) which contain the key to his uncle's secret life, and these papers - as noted earlier - are linked with the blue papers V burns in Sebastian's flat, papers which are letters to Sebastian from his mother. On receiving the pips, Openshaw goes to Holmes, seeking an explanation of the secret blue papers and the mysterious deaths of his uncle and father, and there are intimations that Sebastian Knight comes to Roquebrune likewise to find answers regarding a set of secret blue papers and his mother's untimely death.

In the garden of the pension Sebastian has a vision of his mother walking up the steps (17-18). She appears as he last saw her in 1908 at the Hotel d'Europe in St Petersburg, walking away from him in a big black hat (8). However, there seems to be more to this vision than a recollection of the past. In his hand at the time of his mother's departure Sebastian held a bag of "sugar-coated violets," just as he now holds a bag of oranges. And if those "violet sweets" are the key to concealed words in Virginia's letters, which are unlocked by means of a magical process of aquarelle, there are intimations that Sebastian, by a similar process, is trying to will from the scene at the pension a further glimpse of his mother's secret life, a clue to her curious fate after she left him that final time. Seated in a garden where a bunch of violets is "clumsily painted" on the gate, and a bed of purple pansies lies before him, Sebastian works himself into a state where the scene appears to "shimmer and float" and finally "dissolve into water" (17-18). However, before this watery dissolution leads to the revelation of hidden secrets - to the solution of the mystery - an orange rolls from Sebastian's lap and wakes him from his trance (18). Sebastian's vision of his mother is as tantalizingly brief as their final meeting.

When Sebastian returns to London, however, he is told a curious thing. A cousin of Virginia's informs him he has been to the wrong Roquebrune. Sebastian, on his walk from Monte Carlo, visits Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, but the cousin says Virginia died at "the other Roquebrune" on the Riviera: Roquebrune-sur-Argens in the Var (18). Sebastian's delicate vision appears to be totally undercut. However, there are intimations that it is the cousin who is mistaken about the place of Virginia's death. If Sebastian's bag of oranges evokes the "violet sweets," this recalls Twelfth Night and the "sweet sound / That breathes upon a bank of violets." That "bank of violets" seems to find an echo in the "bed of purple pansies" in the garden of the pension (17). Orsino compares the sweet sound that breathes upon the bank of violets with a musical phrase which has "a dying fall," and at the end of the scene he returns to the
violets in another image: “Away before me to sweet beds of flowers! / Love thoughts
lie rich when canopied with bowers” (1.1.41-42), where a flower-bed becomes
figuratively a bed in which a person lies. These points coincide with the passage in
Hamlet which is linked with the “violet sweets,” where Laertes says: “Lay her i’
th’earth, / And from her fair and unpolluted flesh / May violets spring.” Here again
the image of a bed of violets is evoked as a place where a person lies, while if Orsino
refers to a “dying fall,” death in the Hamlet extract is quite literal. Just as they
coincide to intimate the loving nature of Virginia’s gift of the “violet sweets,” so the
two Shakespearean scenes overlap once again here in a suggestive way. And there is
a further literary connection to be made. If Hamlet is one of the books on Sebastian’s
shelf, another is an Anglo-Persian dictionary (39). Sebastian studies English literature
at Cambridge University, and the classic work of Anglo-Persian literature is Edward
Fitzgerald’s translation of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, a work which Nabokov
praised highly (SSRP 2.657-60). Stanza 18 of the first edition reads:

I sometimes think that never blows so red
The Rose as where some buried Caesar bled;
That every Hyacinth the Garden wears
Dropt in its Lap from some once lovely Head.

The second image, of a young woman’s spirit being reborn in purplish flowers over
her grave, is the same idea as is seen in Laertes’s words regarding Ophelia and the
violets. Moreover, if Fitzgerald imagines that the hyacinths have “dropt” into the
“lap” of the “garden” from the head of a young woman, as Sebastian has the vision of
his mother an orange drops from his lap into a garden where there are purplish
flowers. This image, furthermore, relates suggestively to the other image in the stanza.
For if Fitzgerald pairs the purplish flowers over a young woman’s grave with the
roses over a man’s, there are intimations that V is intended for the sinister pit among
the rosebeds in the garden at Lescaux.

If this sheds a curious light over the bed of purple pansies in the pension garden,
consider another point. At the time of Virginia Knight’s death there is “some
difficulty in getting the body dispatched to England” (9). Not only is this “difficulty”
significant enough to rate a mention in V’s book, but the corpse which returns to
England is referred to as “the body,” not “her body.” In Wilkie Collins’s The Woman
in White - a film version of which is mentioned in Sebastian’s novel Success (97) -
Laura Glyde is hidden away in an asylum as part of a conspiracy, while the body of
Anne Catherick, who has died of heart-disease, is sent home to Laura’s family as
Laura, and buried under Laura’s name. And in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight the
cousin, H. F. Stainton, the only surviving member of Virginia’s family in England, receives “the body” in London with the news that Virginia has died of heart-disease at the town of Roquebrune in the Var. If Stainton is confident of the circumstances of Virginia’s death, his name - which recalls the chessmaster Howard Staunton - evokes a suggestive theme. In an earlier section of this essay an echo of chess was discerned in the name “Roquebrune,” where roque is an old word for the rook; in modern French, however, roque means “castling,” a move where two pieces switch places.

The idea that Virginia Knight is buried in the garden of the pension at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, and another body buried in London, carries with it certain implications. For if a murderer were to send back a different body in place of his victim’s, it would suggest that the victim’s body bore undisguisable and unequivocal signs of the crime. And indeed, if Sebastian tries to will from the scene at the pension a clue to his mother’s fate, there are intimations that a sinister image is trying cryptically to shimmer through. If the apparition of Virginia walking up the steps of the pension is abruptly curtailed by the fall of an orange, these very images make up a suggestive juxtaposition. In *I Will Repay* Baroess Orczy describes a common sight during the days of the Terror: an aristocrat “mounting the steps of the ... scaffold” (*IWR* 115), an image which recurs in *The Elusive Pimpernel* (1908), where hundreds of noblemen and women walk “up the few wooden steps which lead to the guillotine” (*EP* 8). The image casts an eerie light over Virginia Knight’s ascent of the boarding-house steps, an ascent which is followed by the thudding fall of an orange. The eeriness intensifies via a further literary parallel. In *Eldorado* Armand St Just waits for the Scarlet Pimpernel in Paris and, as darkness closes in, has a vision of his beloved, Jeanne Lange, being transported in a tumbril to the guillotine:

Men and women sat huddled up in the cart; but in the midst of them a woman stood, and her eyes were fixed upon Armand. She wore her pale-grey satin gown, and a white kerchief was folded across her bosom. ... Her hands were tied with cords behind her back, but between her fingers she held a small bunch of violets (Omnibus 685).

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, similarly, Sebastian’s mother appears to her son in a vision, going up the steps of the pension, in a manner which recalls her visit to him when she brought “a small parcel of sugar-coated violets.” Armand’s vision of Jeanne Lange, holding the bunch of violets as she goes to her execution, occurs at a place in Paris called the Gate of La Villette, and Virginia Knight appears to Sebastian at a pension where a bunch of violets is painted on the gate, a gate which - if Sebastian has indeed come to the right Roquebrune - is the *gate of Les Violettes*. If
Virginia Knight’s appearance at Roquebrune evokes the guillotine in the world of the Scarlet Pimpernel, the difficulty in getting the body “dispatched to England” after Virginia’s death echoes Hamlet, where - as noted earlier - Claudius outlines his plans to be rid of the prince; and what awaits Hamlet in England is beheading without even pausing for “the grinding of the axe” (5.2.24). In chapter I of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight Virginia’s death is linked with Joan of Arc’s, and here again there are intimations of an execution-style death connected with Virginia, but one of a bloodier nature than Joan’s. This brings to mind an eerie point. For if Virginia is murdered by Mr H, that man - also known as “Uncle Black” - evokes an image of an executioner or headsman. Indeed, one image with which he is associated appears in a particularly sinister light. For if his replacing the head of the chess-knight at the Rechnoy flat suggests an inverse image of decapitation, it is this man who dispatches Virginia, the “chess-knight,” on the “corner square” of Roquebrune. In his description of Sebastian’s flat V refers to a manuscript “flaunting its imperfections like a revengeful ghost carrying its own head under its arm” (34). The image recalls the Ghost in Hamlet who is sent to his account with all his “imperfections” on his head (1.5.79), and it foreshadows the Ghost’s association with Virginia in the burning of her letters - or manuscripts. When the Ghost appears to Hamlet, he comes to the very castle where he was murdered to reveal to his son the true manner of his death: murder “most foul, strange and unnatural” (1.5.28). And the ghostly image of Virginia Knight appears at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin - a town whose name evokes the castle in chess, and which features the oldest feudal castle in France - in a manner which hints at a murder similarly foul, strange, and unnatural.

However, where Hamlet learns from the Ghost the hideous truth, Sebastian appears to come no closer to unravelling his parent’s mystery at Roquebrune. For the fall of the orange which supplies the key to a ghastly image, is the very thing which breaks the spell of his vision. If Sebastian is possessed of a secret hidden in his mother’s letters, it is possible that he comes to Roquebrune like Hamlet arriving at the battlements of Elsinore, suspecting “foul play” in his parent’s untimely death (1.2.256). Yet Sebastian seems more in line with another young fictional figure. When John Openshaw comes to Baker St, he suspects that murder lies behind his uncle’s and father’s mysterious deaths, but after telling Holmes his story, and shaking the orange pips onto the table, he is urged by Holmes to take immediate action to save himself, and consequently leaves the flat (in fact, goes to his death) without hearing Holmes’s conclusions on the case. Likewise Sebastian, with the fall of the orange, appears to leave the garden at Roquebrune without perceiving the sinister image which shimmers through.

224
XXII

In the summer of 1926 Sebastian travels to a German seaside resort where he makes a mysterious excursion and returns to inform Clare that he had “come across a man he had known ages ago, in Russia” (85-86). It seems likely that Sebastian does have such a meeting. Yet if Sebastian in 1926 meets a man he had known ages ago in Russia, all the men in Sebastian’s Russian past are apparently dead at this time: Alexis Pan (28), Captain Belov, Palchin (23), and Sebastian’s father (4-5). However, in the case of one of these men there are suggestions – as noted earlier - that death is just an illusion.

Sebastian travels in the man’s car to a town “on the coast” (86), and on the coast perhaps the most famous re-encounter in the whole of literature takes place: Hamlet’s meeting with the ghost of his father. The intimation of Hamlet in relation to Sebastian’s meeting evokes a further Shakespearean connection. In The Doubtful Asphodel the hero’s thought-images are drawn back into grey seas to be “strangely transfigured” (173), recalling Ariel’s song in The Tempest:

Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange (1.2.397-402).

The subject of Ariel’s song - a father’s immortality - reflects suggestively on Sebastian’s meeting with the man from Russia. Moreover, if Sebastian re-encounters the man on the sea-coast, Ferdinand, to whom Ariel sings the song, is presently reunited with the father he thought to be dead on the coast of Prospero’s island.

In his discussion of Success, the novel which Sebastian completes following his trip to the German seaside resort (87-88), V quotes a passage that is “strangely connected with Sebastian’s inner life at the time of the completing of the last chapters” (96). The passage contains an exchange between William and a curious character:

Before going to bed he knocked at the conjuror’s door and found the old man standing in his underwear and inspecting a pair of black trousers. “Well?” said William . . . “They don’t kinda like my accent,” he replied, “but I guess I’m going to get that turn all the same.” . . . He folded his trousers with care and told William to quit
the bed, so that he might put them under the mattress. William sat down on a chair and the conjuror went on with his business; the hairs bristled on his calves, his lips were pursed, his soft hands moved tenderly.... “May I buy you a rabbit?” asked William. “I’ll hire one when necessary,” the conjuror replied drawing out the “necessary” as if it were an endless ribbon. “A ridiculous profession,” said William, “a pick-pocket gone mad, a matter of patter. The pennies in a beggar’s cap and the omelette in your top hat. Absurdly the same.” “We are used to insult,” said the conjuror. He calmly put out the light and William groped his way out (97-98).

The passage bears a striking resemblance to an event in Nabokov’s life. Compare Nabokov’s diary for 28 March 1922:

Then everyone went off to bed, Father began to undress in his room and I did the same in mine next door. We chatted through the open door.... Then Father helped me put my trousers under the press, and drew them out, turning the screws, and said, laughing: “That must hurt them.” Dressed in pyjamas I sat on the arm of the leather chair, and Father, squatting, cleaned the shoes he had taken off.... At last I went to bed and hearing Father also going off asked him to give me the newspapers, he passed them through the slit of the parted doors - I didn’t even see his hands (RY 192).

The pairing of an old and a young man; the undressing for bed; the friendly banter; the pressing of trousers - these details which the passage in Success has in common with Nabokov’s diary entry suggest a direct link between the two. Nabokov’s diary entry records the last moments he spent with his father on the eve of his father’s murder. And if that casts a certain light on the conjuror in Success, the conjuror, who has an accent and draws out the word “necessary” as if it were “an endless ribbon,” sounds like a Russian misplacing the stress in English words; while he is referred to as “the old man,” an expression which colloquially means “father.”

At the completion of Success a mysterious person is present:

The door opens. Sebastian Knight is disclosed lying spread-eagled on the floor of his study. Clare is making a neat bundle of the typed sheets on the desk. The person who entered stops short.
“No, Leslie,” says Sebastian from the floor, “I’m not dead. I have finished building a world, and this is my Sabbath rest” (88).
V refers to Leslie as “another friend of Sebastian’s,” and says he obtains from him some of the information for his book (88). But V reveals no more about Leslie than that, and he is never seen again. However, consider an earlier scene in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, where V comments on the vigour of Sebastian’s literary style:

> Every time I open one of his books, I seem to see my father dashing into the room, - that special way he had of flinging open the door and immediately pouncing upon a thing he wanted or a creature he loved. My first impression of him is always a breathless one of suddenly soaring up from the floor (5).

V’s recollection of his (and Sebastian’s) father resembles the scene at the completion of *Success*. In both cases a door opens, a man enters the room, and a breathless person (the infant V, and Sebastian exhausted after his literary labours) appears on the floor. Moreover, if V recalls his father’s bursting into the room in connection with Sebastian’s books, it is at the completion of one of Sebastian’s books that Leslie bursts into Sebastian’s study. Consider also what Sebastian says to Leslie: “I’m not dead” - words which resonate suggestively in relation to Leslie himself. If the conjuror who appears in the latter part of *Success* displays characteristics evocative of Sebastian’s father, Leslie, who is present at the completion of that novel, may be his real-life model. In 1936 V suggests to the manager of the Beaumont Hotel that Sebastian spent his visit to Blauberg in 1929 alone; to which the manager replies: “Oh, I think he was here with his father” (120). V assumes that the manager is mistaken, but there are intimations that he is not mistaken at all.

However, if in 1926 Sebastian is reunited with his father, the occasion would not be one of unmixed joy, for it is in the company of the man he meets in Germany in 1926 that Sebastian learns of the horrors of Blauberg. Indeed, if the man Sebastian meets is his father, it is possible that he learns from him of other horrors, closer to home.

During his visit to Sebastian’s flat in February 1936 V finds two framed photographs above the bookshelves:

> One was an enlarged snapshot of a Chinese stripped to the waist, in the act of being vigourously beheaded, the other was a banal photographic study of a curly child playing with a pup. The taste of their juxtaposition seemed to me questionable, but probably Sebastian had his own reasons for keeping and hanging them so (39).
The next object V finds in Sebastian’s flat is a copy of *Hamlet* on the bookshelves below, and that play features two juxtaposed pictures. *Hamlet* shows his mother a pair of miniature portraits, the “counterfeit presentment of two brothers” (3.4.54): namely, Hamlet’s father and his uncle Claudius. Note that the only described characteristic of the child in Sebastian’s photograph is its “curly” hair, and that Hamlet points out to his mother his father’s “Hyperion’s curls” (3.4.56). Hamlet’s portraits depict his parent and his parent’s murderer; and this reflects suggestively on Sebastian’s photographs of an innocent child and a beheading, given the intimations of Virginia Knight’s fate at Roquebrune. And consider another literary connection. In *The Scarlet Pimpernel* Marguerite Blakeney enters her husband’s study for the first time and makes a curious discovery:

> On the wall to the left of the desk, reaching almost from floor to ceiling, was a large full-length portrait of a woman, magnificently framed, exquisitely painted, and signed with the name of Boucher. It was Percy’s mother (*SP* 147).

V likewise enters the study of the Pimpernel-esque Sebastian Knight for the first time and finds on the wall a framed picture of a child playing with a puppy. Marguerite regards Sir Percy’s study as a kind of “Blue Beard’s chamber” (*SP* 148). The explicit reason for this is her feeling “like Blue Beard’s wife” when curiosity prompts her to cross the threshold (*SP* 146). However, the implicit reason is that Sir Percy’s study, like Bluebeard’s chamber, contains a dead woman hanging on the wall, in the shape of a portrait by an artist called “Butcher.” V, by comparison, finds Sebastian’s photograph of the curly-headed child juxtaposed with an image of a beheading, recalling the manner in which Bluebeard attempts to dispatch his final wife, while the paired photographs are found “hanging” in the “dim shadows” (39), evoking the chamber where Bluebeard’s wives hang in the darkness with their throats cut. The evocation of the paired portraits in *Hamlet* and the painting of Sir Percy’s mother hanging in a “Bluebeard’s chamber” suggests that Sebastian’s photographs of a child and a beheading represent - symbolically - an image of his mother’s death.

In 1922 at Roquebrune Sebastian seems not to perceive the intimations of beheading surrounding the vision of his mother. However, the photographs V finds in Sebastian’s flat in 1936 not only appear to confirm those intimations, but also suggest that by late 1935, the last time he leaves his flat, Sebastian is well aware of his mother’s fate. It follows that Sebastian discovers the gruesome truth in the interim, and the obvious source of this information is his father. If Sebastian’s father reappears on the coast like the Ghost in *Hamlet*, the Ghost reveals to his son the foul
manner of his murder and the identity of the person who committed it, and if the
Ghost thus reveals a parent's killing and killer, it is possible that Sebastian's father in
1926 reveals to Sebastian the true nature of his mother's death and the man
responsible. Or to put it another way, if Sebastian's father reveals the horrors of the
"Bluebeard's chamber" of Blauberg, he may also reveal the existence of a
"Bluebeard" - Mr H - looming behind those horrors; a villain and executioner who
murders Virginia Knight and then years later becomes associated with the racist
developments unfolding at Blauberg, just as Sergey Taboritsky, V. D. Nabokov's
murderer, later became an official in Hitler's regime (RY 427-28).

If Sebastian does not capture Mr H until 1936, there is a suggestion that in the
meantime he hangs the photographs of the child and the beheading as a spur to his
revenge. After Hamlet has spoken to the Ghost he vows that his father's vengeful
commandment "all alone shall live / Within the book and volume of my brain"
(1.5.102-03), and Sebastian places his curious diptych all alone above the books and
volumes of his shelves.

XXIII

When Hamlet hears from the Ghost about the murder of his father his first thought is
to sweep to his revenge (1.5.29-31), but the task proves not to be so simple. Hamlet
decides he must first establish Claudius's guilt, and is drawn into a difficult and
protracted revenge. Likewise if Sebastian in 1926 hears from his father about the
murder of his mother, achieving revenge is no simple matter. Sebastian has the task
of identifying the right man and tracking him down, a task which takes some ten years.
Sebastian in 1926 may wish to sweep to his revenge, but in the next decade he follows
in Hamlet's footsteps on the long and difficult road to that goal.

After meeting at the German seaside resort with the man who is intimated to be his
father, Sebastian returns to Clare at the hotel and they walk to the beech-wood where
Sebastian tells a story of having been to Berlin to see a doctor, and hints he is
suffering from heart-disease (86-87). When Hamlet returns to his friends on the
battlements at Elsinore after seeing the ghost of his father, he tells them he intends to
"put an antic disposition on"; that is, to fake madness (1.5.180). And if Hamlet
announces to his friends his intention to fake a certain mental condition, it reinforces
the idea that in his talk with Clare in the beech-wood, Sebastian is making his first
move in faking a certain heart condition. Hamlet's purpose in putting on an antic
disposition is to don a mask behind which he can work out his revenge, and likewise Sebastian’s supposed heart-disease gives him a mask, a pretext, to enter the world of Blauberg, the world he must penetrate in order to track down Mr H.

The parallel with *Hamlet* continues on Sebastian’s return to England. While writing the story “The Funny Mountain” Sebastian is visited by Silbermann, the “meek little man” (101), the model for Mr Siller in “The Back of the Moon” who has an Adam’s apple which moves “like the bulging shape of an arrased eavesdropper” (102). Silbermann snoops round Sebastian at a time when the latter is supposedly perturbed about having heart-disease, and thus corresponds with Polonius who pries into Hamlet’s affairs after Hamlet’s strange behaviour - his “madness” - makes the king uneasy. Sebastian from time to time is overcome by “a wild frolicsome mood” (101), which recalls Hamlet’s “antic disposition.” He is also seen in the company of “a couple of friends” (101). These two friends are mentioned immediately after the scene in which Sebastian is visited by the “meek little man,” the Polonius-like Silbermann, and in *Hamlet*, immediately after the prince has been accosted by Polonius, Hamlet’s two friends, the treacherous Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, appear (2.2.220). We are not told who Sebastian’s couple of friends are, but a little later Helen Pratt is at Sebastian’s flat (104).

Following his trip to Blauberg in 1929, during which he appears to come under threat, Sebastian distances himself from Clare, and Clare moves to lodgings farther away from Sebastian’s flat (109). While Sebastian’s and Clare’s parting is only superficial and the couple maintain covert contact, there are signs that Sebastian’s great burden of revenge creates a division between himself and Clare which is evocative of the gulf that opens up between Hamlet and Ophelia. Clare tells Sheldon after Sebastian’s return from Blauberg in 1929: “Sebastian has gone mad. Quite mad... He has stopped talking to me” (108), which recalls Ophelia’s reporting to Polonius that Hamlet approached her with “his stockings fou’ld,/ Ungarter’d and down-gyved to his ankle,” apparently distraught, yet saying nothing (2.1.77-100). Moreover, even before Sebastian’s trip to Blauberg in 1929 Clare finds that Sebastian has “dreadful fits of temper” (100), a fact which recalls Hamlet’s tirade against Ophelia in the “nunnery scene” (3.1). Tension is also thought to arise between Sebastian and Clare as a result of Sebastian’s “acute sense of mortality” (102), a point which evokes Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy, which ponders man’s mortal condition and immediately precedes the “nunnery scene.” Clare at this period seems to exist on the outskirts of Sebastian’s inner life, and if she and Sebastian do not really part in 1929, there is a suggestion that in Sebastian’s attempt to shield Clare from the horror he is
involved in, an imaginative and emotional gap does develop between them which is reminiscent of the rift dividing Hamlet and Ophelia.

With Sebastian thus in Hamlet-like isolation, matters move towards a Hamlet-like crisis. If Sebastian’s trip to Blauberg in 1929 does not result in the capture of Mr H, in 1935 Sebastian gets a breakthrough. He obtains the photograph of Mr H standing near his car, dated “March 1935” (39). This photograph provides the key to the capture of the villain at Lescaux in 1936. However, it seems likely that Sebastian uses the picture in an earlier attempt to get at Mr H, for Sebastian’s trip to the Continent on secret work in 1935 coincides with the date of the photograph (181). There is a suggestion, in other words, that Sebastian obtains the photograph in the spring of 1935 and then goes abroad to use it to identify the villain, but gets into difficulty and returns to England in grave danger. It is a sequence of events which recalls Hamlet. Hamlet gains a breakthrough in his quest for revenge when the play he presents, depicting the manner of his father’s murder, proves Claudius’ guilt, giving Hamlet, as it were, a clear image of the face of the murderer (3.2). Hamlet then acts upon this breakthrough, thrusting his rapier through the arras in his mother’s closet, hoping to kill the king, but discovering he has slain Polonius (3.4.23-26). If Sebastian fails to get at Mr H in the spring of 1935 and clashes with his enemies who wish “to be rid of him for ever” (181), resulting in his returning to England in deadly danger, Hamlet’s botched attempt to kill the king likewise results in Claudius’s wishing to be rid of the prince for ever, and in his being dispatched immediately to England for execution (4.3.40-71). Both Sebastian and Hamlet, however, make ingenious escapes from the danger which faces them. Sebastian in November 1935 disappears abroad, and at St Damier effects a brilliant switch, staging his death and returning under the identity of V. Hamlet likewise disappears temporarily from the stage in act 4, effecting a brilliant switch en route to England, by substituting the letter of his execution with a letter of his own composition, and boarding a pirate ship which carries him back to Denmark (4.6.12-20).

Following the staging of his death, Sebastian resumes his efforts to get at Mr H, beginning a biography of his former self as a means of providing cover for a new round of investigations. When Sebastian’s “researches” take him to Blauberg, Silbermann approaches him on the train, supplying him with a list of names that ultimately leads him to Lescaux on a supposedly friendly invitation, which is actually a plot to murder him. Likewise Hamlet returns to Denmark with new conviction to carry out his revenge on Claudius: “is’t not perfect conscience / To quit him with this arm?” he asks Horatio (5.2.67-68). As in Sebastian’s case, Hamlet receives an
ominous invitation: Claudius invites him to a supposedly friendly fencing-match with Laertes, with the intention of finishing off the troublesome prince who has miraculously returned.

Sebastian arrives at Lescaux where the enemy believe they have manipulated him - or V - into a position in which he can be murdered. However, the enemy's plan backfires and Sebastian triumphs, when he identifies the person who arrives in the car as the Mr H in the 1935 photograph. Hamlet likewise appears at the fencing-match where Claudius believes he has the prince in his grasp. But Claudius's plan goes awry, resulting in his own death at the hands of Hamlet. Just as Sebastian "checkmates" the enemy "king" or "Uncle Black," so Hamlet kills his adversary, the king, his "black uncle." And in this way, both men end their long quests to capture their parents' killers.

However, if at Lescaux Sebastian tracks down Mr H, his revenge, in truth, is not yet complete. When Hamlet gets revenge on Claudius he stabs the king and damn's him to his face for his crime, leaving no doubt as to who has caught him and why (5.2.330-32). Sebastian, by contrast, does not confront Mr H at all, merely bowing himself out of the garden at Lescaux once he has identified the villain (171). If there are intimations that Sebastian is a British agent, one imagines that after leaving Lescaux he gives the fruits of his private vendetta to his employers, placing in their hands evidence identifying a ringleader behind Blaubeur, along with members of his gang, some of whom are resident in Britain. Yet if Sebastian causes the arrest of the villains, even here his revenge would not be complete, as they would not know for certain who was responsible for their capture, how it was achieved, and why.

However, after leaving Lescaux, Sebastian carries out a further task. He writes *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, a book in which he traces the story of his life, concealing cryptically within it an account of his mother's murder, his quest to avenge her death, and how he succeeds in identifying her killer, revealing at the end - after deceptively providing his V persona with a separate existence throughout the book - his true identity: "I am Sebastian Knight" (203), recalling *The Valley of Fear*, where the hero finally drops his mask before the defeated gang, with the words: "I am Birdy Edwards!" *(Valley 164).* In concluding his description of events at Lescaux V states that Madame Lecerf "will be sent a copy of this book and will understand" (171). If as V bows himself out of the garden the enemy are ignorant of his true identity, his motive, and his achievement, it seems he intends to bring it dramatically home to them by sending them copies of his book. In other words, Sebastian finally achieves his revenge in the pages of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. 

232
Yet if Sebastian’s book sets the seal on his quest, there is a further way in which he and Hamlet are aligned - a darker and more disturbing way. Sheldon informs V - when V had “already begun upon this book” - that Clare Bishop is dead (99). V wonders: “how was it that she bled to death next to an empty cradle?” (99). If Clare in early March 1936 is being held by the enemy at her house, it would seem that her death is the work of the same villains. Sebastian in 1929 takes steps to distance Clare from the Blaubergian horrors he is involved in, and at their final meeting on the street appears to offer her a key as a means of escaping her captors, before directing his attention to Blauberg. Perhaps Sebastian believed he could be reunited with Clare once his mission was complete. However, it seems he makes a fatal miscalculation - in more ways than one. The news of Clare’s death is chronologically the last event that Sebastian records in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; or to put it another way, it is the last thing that occurs in his “Life,” a point which is poignantly suggestive, and once again recalls *Hamlet*. For Hamlet, after distancing himself from Ophelia, and becoming consumed with his pursuit of revenge, returns to Denmark to discover Ophelia has died, a death which only shortly precedes his own.

In the final sentence of his book Sebastian reiterates his true identity: “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I,” he declares, before appending the observation, “or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows” (203). Sebastian, at the last, seems to lift his eyes to a higher power, as if his final thought is of the “divinity that shapes our ends,” which Hamlet acknowledges as he reconciles himself to the extremity of his situation and the imminence of his death (5.2.10). Sebastian, that is to say, seems to anticipate his death, a death which will see him metamorphose once again, shuffling off his adopted V persona to fold into a new identity, becoming one with the divine author, the unknown “someone” - a death which will free him from the loss of his “wife” and the unborn child she was carrying.

Goodman entitles his biography of Sebastian *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight* (59), concluding that the real cause of Sebastian’s death (which Goodman, of course, believes takes place at St Damier in January 1936) is the final realization that he had been a human and artistic failure (117). Goodman uses the word “tragedy” in a vulgarized or glib sense, and hopelessly misreads Sebastian’s life, but the real story of Sebastian Knight, as told by Sebastian himself in the book he leaves behind, emerges as tragic in the proper, Hamletian sense. For Sebastian’s story is that of a man who is burdened with the legacy of his parents’ past, who does his utmost to pursue an honourable revenge and to combat the evil of “Lehmann’s disease,” but who, through
an error of judgement regarding Clare, takes a devastating and implicitly fatal blow in the process. Yet if the story Sebastian leaves behind is one of Hamletian tragedy, it is something else besides. For being enshrined within a book, the story of Sebastian’s personal quest to avenge his mother’s murder remains as an immortal indictment not only of Mr H and his cohorts, who destroy Sebastian’s entire family, but also - to borrow the words of another Nabokovian hero of 1938 - of all such “future tyrants, tigroid monsters, half-witted torturers of man” (Stories 460).
3

SYNTHESIS

I

In the first essay of this part of the thesis I suggested that *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is an elaborate metaphor for the construction of the artistic self, and ultimately for the construction of the novel itself. It now appears that the novel can be read equally as the story of a man’s quest to avenge his mother’s murder. What is to be made of this curious duality?

In his discussion of *The Prismatic Bezel* V refers to that novel’s “habit of metamorphosis” (93), and that observation might be applied to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* itself where, on a second reading, the novel undergoes a complete transformation. V goes on to say about *The Prismatic Bezel* that it is as if a painter were painting not simply a landscape but different ways of painting a certain landscape, in the hope that their “harmonious fusion” will disclose the landscape as he intends it to be seen (93). Perhaps the two levels of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* harmoniously fuse in some way, disclosing the “landscape” of the novel as Nabokov intends it to be seen. But how could the two levels, so differently themed, relate to one another?

II

One thing that is noticeable about the second level of the novel - which, since it is cryptically concealed, one might call the covert level - is that it seems conspicuously artificial, being a world of invisible inks and staged duels, of Scarlet Pimpernel-like adventures and Bluebeard-like horrors. It is a kind of monstrous fairy tale, a nightmare. And herein lies a suggestion as to how the two levels of the novel relate to one another. On the first or overt level of the novel V searches for Sebastian Knight, his subconscious self, in a world of dreams. On the covert level Sebastian inhabits a more vividly realized dream world, a nightmarish world of dream-logic. Could it not be, then, that Sebastian Knight has the same significance on the covert level as he has on the overt level; that is, that he remains the embodiment of the subconscious self searched for by V on the surface of the novel; and that what the dream-like covert
level constitutes is the subconscious realm itself, appropriately looming in the lower regions of the text? In other words, might the covert level be a continuation of the overt level?

If on the overt level Sebastian Knight, as V’s subconscious self, inhabits a world of dreams, he is also the man in V’s mirror; and if the covert level is a dream world, it is also a kind of mirror world, a reverse reflection of the overt level, shimmering beyond the surface of the text. Where on the overt level V is prominent and Sebastian dead, on the covert level Sebastian is prominent and very much alive; where the overt level depicts an innocuous world of biographical research, the covert level reveals a world of totalitarian terror and personal revenge; and where in the former V creates Sebastian Knight, in the latter Sebastian Knight creates “V,” his new identity.

If these reverse reflections further intimate that the dream-like covert level is the world of V’s subconscious self, the man in V’s mirror, they also point to a way in which the covert level complements the overt. On the overt level V tries to unite with Sebastian Knight, his subconscious self, in order to attain his complete self, his artistic self; but he appears not to bring Sebastian vividly to the surface, and does not convincingly unite with him, leaving Sebastian’s life strangely remote. However, if the dream-like mirror world of the covert level represents the subconscious realm glimpsed on the surface of the novel, V’s quest is seen to be achieved more richly. For if V’s act of creating Sebastian on the overt level is mirrored in Sebastian’s act of creating “V” on the covert level, it is as if V, in the process, steps through the looking-glass into the world of his subconscious, by becoming “V,” the invention of his own invention, thereby fully and vividly merging with Sebastian Knight, his subconscious self, and attaining his complete self, his artistic self, his self in art.

If Sebastian Knight, while retaining his significance as V’s subconscious self, appears so differently on overt and covert levels of the novel, it is because things look different on either side of the mirror. Or one might repeat an earlier analogy: V’s search for his subconscious self on the overt level recalls his metaphor about holding a pebble which gleamed like a jewel beneath the water (188). On the overt level V reaches into the waters of his subconscious for a jewel, but seems to be left with a mere pebble drying in his hand. On the covert level, however, what can be seen as V’s continued quest for his subconscious self is - in addition to a journey into the mirror world and the world of dreams - a complete descent into the watery depths where that same pebble-like Sebastian Knight, seen in his element, gleams like a jewel.
As V rattles towards Sebastian at St Damier on the overt level, the shapeless words floating through his mind echo his quest: “Mar... Matamar... Mar” (191). V heads for the “sea” (“Mar”) of his unconscious in order to undergo the “sea-death” (“Matamar”), merge with Sebastian in the “absolute solution,” and metamorphose (“Matamar”) into a new form, his artistic self. This formula now appears to be realized more emphatically. In passing through the mirror into the covert level, V enters the “sea” of his subconscious, where he undergoes a “sea-death” of self-negation - an “absolute solution” or dissolution of his personality, as Sebastian Knight comes to the fore - before emerging metamorphosed as “V,” the invented Sebastian’s adopted persona. The construction of the artistic self as a process of conscious-subconscious fusion and personal transfiguration, which is merely implicit on the overt level, is now as it were enacted.

Seeing the two levels of the novel operating in this complementary way, one can also make richer sense of the novel’s final line, spoken by V: “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows” (203). The chiastic construction of “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I” corresponds with the idea of a mirror arrangement of the overt and covert levels: V invents Sebastian, Sebastian invents “V,” and by means of this personal chiasmus, in which he completely blends with his subconscious self, V attains his self in art, his artistic self - a personage who is ultimately the unknown “someone” who he and Sebastian both are.

Thus, the novel effectively passes into an implicit third level, where overt and covert levels function in a complementary way. It is a case of thesis, antithesis, synthesis. The overt level is the thesis: V invents Sebastian Knight, the embodiment of his subconscious, in a quest for his artistic self. The covert level is the antithesis: V and his quest seem to disappear, as Sebastian Knight prevails in a world of totalitarian terror, in the midst of which he adopts the invented persona of “V.” And the realization that overt and covert levels function in a complementary way is the synthesis: one realizes that the Sebastian Knight of the covert level remains the embodiment of V’s subconscious self, and that V has invented Sebastian in order that Sebastian in turn can invent him, thus projecting V through the looking-glass, and causing V’s quest for his artistic self to be achieved more richly than it originally was.

In Speak, Memory Nabokov likens Hegel’s triadic series to an unwinding spiral, circling round upon itself in widening arcs (SM 211), and in a letter to Edmund Wilson of 1940 he explained: “you come back (synthesis) to your starting point
(thesis) after visiting the antipodes (antithesis) with the accumulated impressions of the globe enlarging your initial conception of your home town” (NWL 36). This is precisely what happens in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. One returns to the starting point to see it in a richer way. Having been puzzled by a thetical level which seems inadequate, one uncovers an antithetical level which seems artificial; and then one moves to a synthesis where the two levels of the novel function satisfyingly in tandem, so that the quest for the artistic self seen on the thetical level operates more emphatically.

However, a question remains. If the triadic structure of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight shows V’s quest for his artistic self tangibly enacted, why does V make the antithetical realm a world of tyrannical terror? How do such horrors relate to the construction of the artistic self?

V, on the thetical level, is a curiously undefined figure, a man over whom vague “business difficulties” loom (139), and whose real life is not clearly visible. On the antithetical level, however, a window opens onto V’s inner world. For if Sebastian Knight is V’s counterpart in the construction of his artistic self, he is also V’s antithetical self, and while not reflecting the actual reality of V’s existence, presumably reveals a glimpse of his darkest fears. There is an intimation that through Sebastian Knight, his antithetical self, V confronts the shadows lurking in his life, the nightmare beneath the surface of prewar Europe. Thus, as V ascends from the watery subconscious depths of the antithetical realm to attain his artistic self, he at the same time rises above all the dark fears in those lower regions. In other words, it is as if V’s quest for his artistic self is carried out expressly in order to transcend the horrors of the antithetical realm, as if to show that in art one attains a higher immaterial refuge from the atrocities of the material world.

V demonstrates this higher immaterial refuge in another way. In becoming “V,” the invention of his own invention, V enters the novel’s world of art, enters the book. It is an analogy of the condition of the creating artist, since the artistic self exists only in creative mode, and is therefore enshrined only within the work of art itself. The author’s creative spirit is distilled into the pages of the novel: the “man is the book,” to borrow V’s words on The Doubtful Asphodel (173). V, in attaining his artistic self by passing through the nightmarish world of his antithetical self and entering the world of the novel as “V,” shows that the creating artist transcends the horrors of the material world ultimately by dissolving into his art.
This idea anticipates “Vasiliy Shishkov,” a story Nabokov wrote not long after *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (RY 509). Arriving in Paris from Austria in 1938, Shishkov, a poet desperate to escape a world of “suffering, imbecility, and filth,” vanishes without a trace in the spring of 1939. Nabokov, who appears in the story as the narrator, wonders if Shishkov’s disappearance is a case of his “disappearing in his art, dissolving in his verse” (*Stories* 499). V likewise appears to be haunted by the nightmare of the contemporary world, which he overcomes by attaining his artistic self and dissolving into his art.

But then, is it really V’s art? Vasiliy Shishkov dissolves not so much into his own verse, as into that of Nabokov himself, who published a poem under the name “Vasiliy Shishkov” to deceive an emigré critic (*Stories* 656-57). And just so, V grades into V. Nabokov, who shimmers behind the unknown “someone,” the artistic self, the author of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. For V, as noted in the first essay, is ultimately inseparable from the fictitious Sebastian Knight; the threads of their lives cannot be disentangled on any level. V too, in the end, appears as a fictional creation. V’s journey through the mirror to merge with Sebastian Knight, his subconscious self, and attain his artistic self is ultimately a metaphor for the construction of the artistic self devised by the unknown “someone,” the invisible artist, whose self is enshrined within the pages of the book, Vladimir Nabokov.

Thus, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* remains, as on the theatrical level, an elaborate metaphor for its own construction. Now, however, both book and metaphor appear in a richer way. Nabokov’s bid to create a plausible artistic self who could write his first English novel is represented on the theatrical level as the Russian V’s quest to merge with the English author, Sebastian Knight; but the metaphor is not worked out in a satisfactory way. Not only does V not convincingly unite with Sebastian, but Sebastian himself appears to discard his English identity before his death. On the antithetical level, by contrast, Sebastian Knight does not resume his Russian identity, but remains the English author he always was; while, on the synthetical level, V fully merges with that English author. Where formerly a discrepancy existed between the English novel and the sense of inadequacy surrounding the metaphor for its construction, now book and metaphor converge at a point of resounding success: a brilliant English novel which figuratively renders its construction in a compelling way.

However, if the metaphorical quest for the English artistic self is achieved more convincingly, the very nature of the quest appears in a new way. Instead of V’s
moving towards the mirror to blend with his subconscious self, as occurs on the theoretical level, a whole journey through the mirror is now seen, an almost physical process of personal metamorphosis. V’s passage through the antithetical realm, his descent into the lower regions to find the English writer, his subconscious self, provides a sense of the traumatic and arduous ordeal Nabokov was undergoing: a journey into the depths, a terrifying reversal of the soul, resulting in the emergence of the self in a new and unfamiliar way, as V becomes the “V” of the mirror world.

Yet, more significantly, this journey reveals a new dimension to the metaphor for the novel’s construction. For if the English author resides in the antithetical realm, Nabokov also locates in this region his personal nightmares: the threat of Nazi racial policy to his Jewish wife and son, and his father’s murder at the hands of fascist thugs. If V’s emergence as “V” shows V. Nabokov attaining his English self, it also shows Nabokov rising out of all his nightmares to attain his self in art, as though art - which transcends language differences and all other material considerations - remains an inviolable sanctuary. Having passed through the triad of the novel - the elaborate metaphor for its own construction - one sees the writing of the book not just as Nabokov’s rising to the challenge of creating his first English novel, but also as a response to the nightmares of his life, an artistic triumph over personal horrors, a refuge in the artistic self. Nabokov writes a book which is about the writing of that book: it is as if Nabokov himself had the intention, in constructing The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, of transcending the ordeals of the material world by disappearing into his art.

III

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is an elaborate puzzle, which requires the reader to unravel a multi-layered structure in order to understand its true meaning. Nabokov’s novel may owe something to another aspect of his art.

In Speak, Memory Nabokov describes a chess problem he composed which gave him a particular sense of satisfaction. The problem’s ingenuity lay in its containing two levels of play: the first, stemming from the key move, and delivering the desired mate in straightforward fashion; the second, stemming from a false key move, or “try,” and leading into an elaborate, though ultimately fruitless sequence of moves, or “virtual play,” as it is termed - a device which became familiar only later (Lipton 261). Nabokov explains:
The unsophisticated might miss the point of the problem entirely, and
discover its fairly simple, ‘thetic’ solution without having passed
through the pleasurable torments prepared for the sophisticated one.
The latter would start by falling for an illusory pattern of play based on
a fashionable avant-garde theme (exposing White’s King to checks),
which the composer had taken the greatest pains to ‘plant’ (with only
one obscure little move by an inconspicuous pawn to upset it). Having
passed through this ‘antithetic’ inferno the by now ultrasonopisticated
solver would reach the simple key move (bishop to c2) as someboby
on a wild goose chase might go from Albany to New York by way of
Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores. The pleasant experience of the
roundabout route (strange landscapes, gongs, tigers, exotic customs,
the thrice-repeated circuit of a newly married couple around the sacred
fire of an earthen brazier) would amply reward him for the misery of
the deceit, and after that, his arrival at the simple key move would
provide him with a synthesis of poignant artistic delight (SM 223-24).

Nabokov dates the problem mid-May 1940 (SM 224; PP 182), but it was actually
composed in November 1939, less than a year after the completion of The Real Life of
Sebastian Knight (RY 514-15) - and Nabokov had been trying to compose the problem
“for months” (SM 223).

There are clear parallels between problem and novel. 1 As in the problem, The Real
Life of Sebastian Knight contains two levels: an obvious overt level, and a not so
obvious covert level. And again as in the problem, the novel’s twin-levelled structure
yields a triadic solution: the overt level provides the novel’s simple “thetic” solution,
the construction of the artistic self; the covert level introduces a totally different set of
themes - themes of totalitarian terror - and constitutes the “antithetic inferno”; while
the complementary fusion of the two levels of the novel provides the synthesis: the
covert level, with its wild and fantastical events, its “strange landscapes” and “exotic
customs,” emerges not as the novel’s solution, but as a dream, a nightmare, a
horrifying mirror world of virtual reality, or virtual play, leading one back to the
simple key move of the overt level - the construction of the artistic self - which is seen
in a richer way; one attains a “synthesis of poignant artistic delight.”

These broad structural parallels are not the only point of comparison between the
Speak, Memory chess problem and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. A closer look
at the problem’s moves yields other similarities to the novel. The problem requires
White to mate Black in two moves. “The false scent,” Nabokov explains, “the

1 Chris Ackerley explores a parallel between the same chess problem and Pale Fire.
irresistible ‘try’ is: Pawn to b8, becoming a knight, with three beautiful mates following in answer to disclosed checks by Black” (SM 225). This “false scent,” this “try,” is the virtual play of the problem. After White has made its first move, promoting its pawn to a knight, Black responds by moving its pawn at d7 in one of three ways, each disclosing check on the White king from the Black rook. White, on its second move, replies to any of these checks with a blocking move (one of these being made by the newly promoted knight) which delivers checkmate on the Black king. Compare the antithetical level of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, the level which corresponds with the virtual play of the problem. Sebastian Knight pursues a man referred to as “Uncle Black,” and tracks him down in two broad moves. Sebastian’s first move against “Black” results ultimately in the staging of his death at St Damier and his becoming “V” - a case of “promotion” involving a knight (note that damier is French for “chessboard” [195-96]). “Black” then responds by threatening “V,” ultimately luring him to Lescaux to kill him. “V,” however, foils this intended murder by sending a letter to Helene von Graun to ensure his safety, an action which prompts “Black” to drive to Lescaux in his car, enabling “V” to capture his “prey” (168). Thus, “V” blocks the check of “Black” with a mating move of his own.

If there is a similarity between the virtual play of the Speak, Memory chess problem and the antithetical level of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, that similarity extends between the actual play of the problem and the thetical level of the novel. In the actual play White makes the key move: bishop to c2. This puts Black into “zugzwang,” where Black is compelled to make a weak responding move, which cannot prevent checkmate by White. On the thetical level of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight there is a comparable two-move design. V moves towards the surface of the mirror on the conscious side of the personality; Sebastian Knight, the man in the mirror, is thus compelled to move towards the mirror from the subconscious side of the personality; and V makes his second and triumphant move by merging with Sebastian to become the complete self, the artistic self.

Note, furthermore, that in the actual play of the Speak, Memory problem White is never under threat from Black, whereas in the virtual play Black threatens White with a series of checks. Compare The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, where V on the thetical level is in no danger - indeed, there is no reason why he should be - while on the antithetical level “V” is in constant mortal peril. There is one final point of comparison. The highlight of the Speak, Memory problem is the virtual play, the actual play has none of its intricacy and subtlety; similarly, the drama and excitement of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight lies in the antithetical level - the thetical level,
with its movement and counter-movement towards the mirror, is essentially as straightforward and mechanical as the actual play in the problem.

Nabokov told Edmund Wilson, after the latter had read The Real Life of Sebastian Knight: “there is no ‘chess-idea’ in the development of the whole book. Sounds attractive, but it is not there” (NWL 58). However, Nabokov explicitly linked The Real Life of Sebastian Knight with chess problems, referring to the novel’s “self-mate combinations” (SM 198). “Self-mate” (or “sui-mate”) is a chess problem term denoting checkmate which is deliberately brought upon itself by White. Nabokov called Luzhin’s suicide in The Defence a “sui-mate” (Def 8), and his reference to self-mate in relation to The Real Life of Sebastian Knight may allude to Sebastian’s intimated fate on the antithetical level, or in general to the pursuit of self-dissolution in the artistic self. In addition to this explicit link between The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and chess problems, Nabokov’s puzzle-like novel contains a pervasive chess theme, mentions an “absolute solution,” and was begun following a period in Nabokov’s life of prolific chess problem composition (see part I of this thesis). What seems likely, given these considerations and the points of comparison with the Speak, Memory chess problem, is that if there is no “chess idea,” as such, in the development of the whole book - that is, on a scene by scene basis - The Real Life of Sebastian Knight was conceived artistically in the manner of a chess problem, perhaps a two-move problem, involving virtual play.

IV

If The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is shaped like a twin-levelled chess problem, what, then, is its “absolute solution”? The novel, as noted above, falls into a triadic pattern based on a metaphor for the construction of the creating artist and the novel itself. Yet if the novel reflects on its own construction, this metaphor accounts for only part of the equation. For in the very uncovering of this triadic structure the reader finds there is more to the construction of the novel than the creating artist himself. This is a novel which metamorphoses, a novel which recreates itself in the reading process. That is to say, the reader, as it were, also helps to create the novel.

Nabokov explains, in his illustration of the spirality of Hegel’s triad, that “every synthesis is the thesis of the next series” (SM 211). And this is what happens in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. The synthesis - the author - becomes a new thesis, whose antithesis is the reader, and the synthesis a kind of creative collaboration, as the
reader uncovers the covert level which has been “planted” by the author. One might call this new synthesis the artistic effect of the novel. In Nabokov’s idea of the triadic spiral each new swirl follows the path of the previous one in a widening concentric pattern, and one can see how the new triad in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* follows the first in an ampler way. The author corresponds with the thetical level of the novel, where the metaphor for the construction of the artistic self is revealed; the reader corresponds with the antithetical level, since it is there, on the concealed level, that the reader’s creative participation is most prominent; and the artistic effect, brought about by the creative collaboration of author and reader, corresponds with the synthetical level of the novel, which itself represents an artistic effect, so to speak - V’s entry into the world of art beyond the mirror, the attainment of the artistic self. If the first triad encompasses the creation of the novel, the second triad, following the course of the first in an ampler swirl, encompasses the recreation of the novel.

Yet there is something more to the new synthesis than that; something more profound taking place in the artistic effect of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* than the uncovering of the concealed story and the recreation of the novel; something which relates to the reader’s creative experience itself. Nabokov felt one should read for the spinal tingle of artistic delight (*LL* 4, 6, 382; *SO* 41). A good reader, he told his students, “is one who has . . . some artistic sense”; a good reader is “an active and creative reader” (*LL* 3); great literature, Nabokov said, can only be fully appreciated once it has been broken to bits and reconstituted in the reader’s mind to form a new unity “to which you have contributed something of your own blood” (*LRL* 105).

Nabokov demanded this kind of artistry from his own readers perhaps more than any other author, and he takes this to the limit in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, weaving into the novel an authentic artistic experience for the reader: inspiration - the sudden discovery of a concealed level of the text - followed by the creative difficulty of piecing together the hidden story.

If Nabokov said the reward of reading is the spinal tingle of artistic satisfaction, he also said that tingle is the sign that the reader has felt “what the author felt” (*SO* 41). Nabokov said we should read a book “to share . . . the emotions of its author,” the joys and difficulties of creation (*LL* 382). This idea, also, is taken to the limit in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. For if the reader is prompted to go on a creative journey with the novel, it is a path that has already been trodden by the author himself. Nabokov said he writes for “follow-artists” (*SO* 41), and the creative reader of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* follows artistically in the footsteps of the author. The concealed level of the text which the reader discovers and creates has already
been “discovered” and created by the author in a similar manner of artistic creation: inspiration followed by creative construction.

Nabokov said of the writer-reader relationship: “Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top, on a windy ridge, whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader, and there they spontaneously embrace” (LL 2). In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight this idea is put into remarkable effect. The novel emphasizes the inescapability of subjective reality: the “oneness of human perception” (103). Sebastian Knight imagines each of us confined within the iron ring of the personality which, if we could only shake it off, would grant us the absolute solution (177). In “Tyrants Destroyed” the narrator strains his mind to duplicate exactly one of the tyrant’s thoughts in order to make the latter’s existence “yield and come crashing down, like a suspension bridge whose own oscillations have coincided with the cadenced step of a detachment of soldiers crossing it”; but he fails (Stories 455). In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight Nabokov, with more pacific intentions, succeeds in extending a bridge between author and reader. He sets up the text as a kind of mirror, drawing the reader into reflecting the author’s process of creation. In a sense subjective reality is broken down. Two people remote in space and time experience a reflection of the same creative emotion. Author (thesis) touches reader (antithesis), and in that moment of shared inspiration a synthesis is attained which transcends the boundaries of space, time, and thought.

This synthesis, this creative conjunction of author and reader, is the central objective of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. In a sense, Nabokov’s search for the English author in one dimension of the text is reflected in his search for the reader in another. Just as V draws Sebastian Knight towards him from the other side of the mirror, so Nabokov draws the reader towards himself, the author. The whole chess-problem-like nature of the novel is designed to lure the reader into a creative process which overlaps with the author’s, so that at the moment of shared inspiration not only is the solution of the problem glimpsed, but also an “absolute solution” of subjective reality. Something timeless is intimated, something, in a word, divine. And it is that sense of the divinity of art - rather than the actual uncovering of the covert level - which is the true artistic effect of the novel.

The novel suggests a framing of this idea in more concrete terms. If the convergence of V and Sebastian Knight, as conscious and subconscious counterparts, is ultimately explained by their having been created by a single author, the analogous convergence of thought between author and reader - however fleeting - by extension implies a
common creator. That is to say, if the first triad of thesis-antithesis-synthesis is: \( V + \) Sebastian Knight = the author of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the true shape of the second triad is: the author of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* + the reader implies the existence of the divine author. In the most superficial reading of the novel the “someone” at the end clearly connotes the divine author; the point is that what may seem a trite intimation on the surface is intended to gain revelatory force once one has passed through the book’s deeper levels; once, that is, one has engaged artistically with the text.

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V
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However, even the intimation of the divine is not the novel’s ultimate point. For the triadic spiral structure has one final, but all-important turn to make.

The novel is called *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and ultimately at issue in its pages is the nature of reality. By now, the novel’s title appears hazy. On one level (the thetical level) Sebastian Knight is an English author, who is the embodiment of V’s subconscious in a metaphor for the construction of the artistic self. On another level (the antithetical level) he is an author-secret agent, engaged in a struggle with dark totalitarian forces. And on a further level (the synthetical level) he is an author-secret agent who is V’s subconscious stepping-stone through a nightmarish antithetical world to the refuge of his artistic self. Sebastian Knight’s “real life” - the book’s “reality” - depends on how one looks. Different levels emerge according to the reader’s perspective. Reality, the novel shows, is subjective, and depends on the level of imaginative engagement with the world.

Yet this demonstration of what reality is - or how it is perceived - is equally motivated by a desire to show what reality is not. The world of art and the imagination in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* - the true reality - is juxtaposed to the world of tyranny. Tyranny lurks in the novel’s covert regions because that is what Nabokov is ultimately addressing. When the reader breaks through to the covert level of the novel, the spinal shiver of artistic delight he feels is enhanced by a tingle of terror at the world which is revealed. Yet through that very disclosure, the novel confounds the world which is disclosed, demonstrating the existence of a multi-layered reality which contradicts the totalitarian view of a single, objective reality.
However, Nabokov's objection to the totalitarian view of reality goes further than subjective versus objective. It goes to the inner mechanism of reality, or of life as a whole. The "real" life of Sebastian Knight is the secret agent who tracks down his mother's murderer. Yet this reality is merely a transitional stage in the development of V, a phase of V's journey towards his artistic self. If the life of Sebastian Knight shows that reality depends on how one imaginatively looks, the life of V shows that reality develops, or evolves. V passes from thesis, through antithesis, to a synthesis which is a higher self; his self evolves. And this process of evolution continues into the second triad, where V's artistic self - the author of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight - becomes a new thesis whose antithesis is the reader and the synthesis a divine artistic effect. The book's apparent reality metamorphoses and evolves, is recreated as it were, and, as a result, the artist's spirit, evolved in the first triad, is resurrected in a new form, re-evolves. In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight Nabokov presents a formula not only of a subjective reality, but also of an evolving reality - an idea which is embodied in the unfolding triadic spiral: "evolution" means an unfolding.

The central horror on the antithetical level of the novel is Nazi eugenics - "Lehmann's disease" - a form of racial theory which is based on the Darwinian view of evolution: the struggle for life and the survival of the fittest. Nabokov accepted evolution as "a modal formula" (LL 378), but disagreed with Darwin's view of its inner mechanism. To Nabokov, the idea of a struggle for life implied destructive forces which were incompatible with a process of evolution; indeed, could lead only to regression: "'Struggle for life' indeed! The curse of battle and toil leads man back to the boar" (SM 228), an idea which Nabokov reiterates in Charles Kinbote's "anti-Darwinian aphorism: The one who kills is always his victim's inferior" (PF 185). However, it is not only the destructiveness implicit in the Darwinian plan which Nabokov could not accept. At one point in his search for Sebastian Knight's mistress, V says: "She is the missing link in his evolution, and I must obtain her - it's a scientific necessity" (118). Darwinism, in Nabokov's view, like all scientific materialism, made the fundamental mistake of assuming that nature operates on logical lines. At a certain stage in his development, Nabokov observed, man invented arithmetic simply as a means of bringing some practical order to his world; but, as the centuries rolled by and man's calculations grew ever more sophisticated, "mathematics transcended their initial condition and became as it were a natural part of the world to which they had been merely applied" (LL 374). Nature, that is to say, as a result of a fatal warp in man's perspective, came to be seen as inherently logical. Thus, Darwin came to propose a theory of evolution which is a chain of logical development: all forms of life,
according to him, being driven solely by the purely materialistic need of adapting to their environment to survive. Darwinian evolution is biological determinism: an inevitable struggle for life, resulting in the inevitable survival of the “fittest.” Nabokov subverts the idea of evolution as a logical chain of “scientific necessity” when, on the covert level of the novel, V’s Darwinian assertion regarding Sebastian Knight’s “missing link” is undercut by the revelation that Sebastian has no mistress at all, her existence being an illusion based purely on logical assumptions. V’s mock search on the covert level for Sebastian’s non-existent mistress spoofs the methods of scientific materialism. In proposing a logical chain of evolution, logic dictates that any gaps in the chain must exist as “missing links” - it is a “scientific necessity.” Moreover, one is obliged to search for them - again, a “scientific necessity.” Thus, science becomes bound to the logical pursuit of a logical mirage, chasing the tail of its own system. The deterministic struggle for survival Darwin saw at the heart of life was, in Nabokov’s view, an illusion projected into nature by his own logical methods. Nabokov believed that the fundamental logical error was made by Marxism, too, with its system of dialectical materialism, a programme of social change - or evolution - determined by an endless series of clashes between classes of society. Like Darwinism, Marxism placed man inside a strait-jacket of logically unfolding destructive forces (USSR 340). This view is refuted in the covert level of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Sebastian declines the opportunity to kill Mr H when he finally flushes him out at Lescaux. Sebastian will not stoop to the level of the man who brutally murdered his mother; he simply bows himself out of the garden (171). The idea that deterministic conflict - or logical destructiveness - underlay life was, in Nabokov’s view, a fallacy.

At the heart of life, Nabokov believed, lay a creative force (RY 280, 294), an inner creative impulse which triggered evolutionary change. Nabokov saw evolution as a progression into higher states of freedom and creative capability, as in an egg’s becoming a caterpillar, and a caterpillar’s becoming a butterfly (RY 294). It is the Bergsonian idea of the creative urge behind evolution, the élán vital. How, Nabokov argued, could a butterfly’s elaborate mimicry - too elaborate for a predator’s limited perception - be accounted for by the Darwinian idea of the struggle for life? Such subtlety in nature clearly evinced an inner artistry in life (SM 98; Gift 105). And this artistry, this creative force, ran through all of nature, Nabokov believed, including mankind - its most forceful manifestation from a human point of view being the sunburst of inspiration. Nabokov regarded that creative spark as a facet of the divine creative principle underlying life, a principle which was inherently illogical and magical: “it is one thing to try and find the links and steps of life,” he said, “and it is
It is this creative spark - inspiration - not a deterministic struggle for survival, which Nabokov saw as the inner mechanism of evolution. Obeying one's inner creativity was therefore the individual's natural and proper condition. True reality, Nabokov said, is "the act of individual creation" animating "a subjectively perceived texture" (SO 118). This is what reality meant for Nabokov: one created it.

The whole structure of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is designed to demonstrate Nabokov's view of reality and evolution. There is no existing link between the two levels of the novel, overt and covert; no logical connection. The key to the evolution of the novel's reality is the reader's imagination. A spark of inspiration in the reader sets in motion an act of creation which not only uncovers Sebastian Knight's "real" life, but transforms the reality of the book, so that it evolves through the antithetical level to a synthesis, a new level of the book's initial reality. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight demonstrates evolution in action; it embodies the process by which reality is created and evolution proceeds. The divine creative spark unlocks a force which drives creative change. In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight it is only through creativity that reality emerges. The only links in the evolutionary chain are not missing material ones, but magical immaterial ones supplied by the creative imagination. There is no missing link, just a leap of the imagination. When V tells Roy Carswell he must find the missing link in Sebastian's evolution, Carswell says: "I'll bet you this picture that you won't find her" (118); and indeed, it is Carswell's picture, not V's scientific approach, that holds the truth. In Carswell's creative work of art Sebastian Knight's "real" life is figured. Carswell does not paint the shadow of a woman's hand, but a water-spider which resembles a swastika (117-18). Only when one frees oneself from the scientific approach adopted by V does one touch the reality of the book. This idea is embodied in the double-edged meaning of the phrase "thy manner always to find." Via one mode of perception one is doomed always to find one's own manner, one's own method of measurement; one stares at oneself in the mirror, chases one's tail in a vicious circle. Via the other mode of perception one always finds, searches with an open mind, discovers - allowing the vicious circle to be freed into a spiral.

In his final novel Look at the Harlequins! Nabokov parodies The Real Life of Sebastian Knight as See under Real (LATH 100). Not only is this title a valedictory clue to what still lay hidden in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, but it also restates one of the latter's main themes: that reality is multi-layered, and that true reality does not lie on the outer surface of things - the measurable materiality of things - but
beneath, in their inner life, in an immaterial dimension inaccessible to yardsticks and weighing scales, and answering only to an inner spirit in oneself; so that one must look through the outer shell of artificial scientific logic which man has imposed on reality, and view things with one’s innate creativity, if reality’s true magic is to be disclosed. One must look past logical assumptions of what one expects to see, and allow nature’s magic to reveal itself - so that what appears to be a mere tangle of twigs and leaves can emerge as “a marvelously disguised insect or bird” (SM 228), an effect seemingly invented by “some waggish artist precisely for the intelligent eyes of man” (Gift 105).

_The Real Life of Sebastian Knight_, then, puts forward a view of creative evolution and reality; but this is done deliberately in opposition to the totalitarianism which lurks in the novel’s covert regions. If Nabokov objected to Darwin, to Marx, and the idea of deterministic conflict, he loathed totalitarianism for turning a fallacious theory into a justification for tyranny; for taking the idea of the struggle for life and the survival of the fittest as the sanction to impose, by any means, the supremacy of the so-called “master race”; and for taking the prediction of the public usurpation of the means of production as a cue for violent revolution. In a world where, Nabokov believed, it was every individual’s right to create his own reality, the idea that others could impose their reality on individuals was anathema; an imposed reality, moreover, of average and common nature, a supposed objective and logical reality. Totalitarianism was evil because it subjugated the individual to a bogus world view; it crushed the environment in which the individual imagination could exist freely, smothered the creative impulse, the divine creative spark, that fundamental force behind life which is the key artistic effect of Nabokov’s novel - a divine spark which Nabokov meant not only to cause a sunburst in the reader’s mind, but also to explode the fallacious view of reality and evolution of totalitarianism.

In effect, the spiral structure of _The Real Life of Sebastian Knight_ unfolds once more. The new synthesis - the divinity, the timeless force of creativity inherent in the reader’s moment of inspiration, which reflects the author’s own - becomes a new thesis, whose antithesis is tyranny, and the implied synthesis - the implied return from the “antipodes” to our “home town,” as Nabokov puts it - a re-emergence of the divine. And this new triad once again follows the course of the previous ones: the novel’s artistic effect, implying the existence of the divine author, corresponds with the theological level where the metaphor for the construction of the artist, or author, is revealed; the world of totalitarian tyranny corresponds with the antithetical level where the novel’s themes of tyranny are located; and the unknown but believed-in
future, when the divine artistry will resurface in a richer and stronger way, corresponds with the synthetical level, where V’s quest for his artistic self is achieved more richly, as he becomes “V” and enters the world of art. And herein lies Nabokov’s ultimate opposition to tyranny. In locating the horrors of totalitarianism on the antithetical level of the novel, Nabokov shows that tyranny will be merely a transitional stage on an evolution to a higher state of reality. As the antithesis of the divine creative force which operates in the world, tyranny cannot last. As the antithesis of truth, it will inevitably be defeated, superseded by a new synthesis. As tyranny slouches towards its finite materialistic “absolute solution,” it is unaware that it will inevitably be circumvented by an infinite immaterial “absolute solution.” The infinite good will finally prevail.

Nabokov said that “badness” is a “lack of something,” and therefore “occupies no real space in our inner world” (LL 375-76); and this is what he demonstrates in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. Nabokov locates tyranny in the antithetical world of the text, and as the antithesis of the truth, the good, it is an essentially negative entity - a lack of something. And indeed, it occupies “no real space” in the world of the novel. Tyranny is, so to speak, “absent,” appearing neither on the visible surface of the novel, nor in the richer return in the synthesis. As the antithetical negative of truth, tyranny is merely a transitional element through which truth evolves. Next to the infinite good it is a void. And so, in this highly elaborate novel, it is only when one has passed through the dark regions of the antithetical level and moved through to the richer understanding of the synthesis, or syntheses, that one finally understands why tyranny, as it were, is “not there.” In the world of artistic creative reality which The Real Life of Sebastian Knight enshrines, tyranny is the quintessentially unreal, occupying “no real space in our inner world.” In The Real Life of Sebastian Knight Nabokov, summoning all the power of his art, writes tyranny out of existence.
BIBLIOGRAPHY
The bibliography is divided into two sections: 1. Works by Vladimir Nabokov; 2. Works by Others.

1. WORKS BY VLADIMIR NABOKOV


### 2. WORKS BY OTHERS


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256


258


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