Thinking Russian/Writing English:
Textual Traces of an Émigré’s Conflict

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ABSTRACT
Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (1899-1977) is considered a bilingual writer because, after having published in Russian for the first twenty years of his career, he switched to English to write his first English-language novel The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941). On the basis of a twofold analysis of (a) the reasons — emigration and exile — which made this radical change necessary and (b) the consequences transculturization brought to Nabokov’s life and art, my paper explores the interdependence between language and creativity, between identity and culture and, finally, between history and fiction. In dealing with Nabokov’s individual biography it is possible to trace the conflicts and changes in cultural dominance that characterise the twentieth century and, more specifically, the relations between Europe and the USA. It is also possible to understand better those facts and factors which, being historical, penetrate fiction and develop it into a fiction of double identities and postmodern ethics and aesthetics.

KEYWORDS: language and communication, migration and exile, bilingualism: code switching vs. identity switching, location/dissemination of culture, semiotics of culture and art.

RESUMEN
Este trabajo muestra las relaciones de estrecha dependencia entre lengua y creatividad por una parte, entre identidad y cultura por otra, y finalmente entre historia y ficción. He tomado como base de mi análisis una obra de ficción, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, la primera novela que el autor ruso Vladimir Nabokov escribió en inglés tras muchos años de haber escrito en ruso, para mostrar las huellas que la transculturización deja en el personaje histórico tanto como en su contrapunto ficcional. Señalo los diversos motivos que condujeron a Nabokov al bilingüismo literario, entre ellos destaco la primera emigración impuesta por la Revolución Bolchevique y la segunda provocada por el auge del Nazismo en la década de los treinta en Alemania. También señalo las consecuencias que del cambiodynamicapadalempopronhanenderevivserendadosámbitosa culturales relevantes; el cotidiano y el literario.
este recorrido queda recogida una trayectoria biográfica, la de Nabokov, que coincide con, y es representativa de, la trayectoria de los cambios culturales europeos más importantes de nuestro siglo veinte: la americanización de la vieja Europa, su postmodernización y la colonización lingüística que el Inglés ha ejercido sobre el mundo editorial en detrimento de las otras lenguas europeas de prestigio.

More sonorous than sobbing, sweeter than any earthly songs, and more profound than any prayer: That name is his father’s.
(Andrew Field, 1987: 81)

0. Introduction

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov (1899-1977) is considered a bilingual writer because, after having published in Russian for the first twenty years of his career, he switched to English to become an English-language novelist. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941), Nabokov’s first English-language novel, is a liminal text in two different senses: on the one hand it opens up the second phase of the author’s literary production and, on the other, it deals with the change, death, transformation and renewal. As Michael Wood (1994: 29) puts it, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (RLSK from now onwards) “is a work about authorship and loss”. More specifically, the novel is about the devastating effects brought on an author by the loss of a most dearly cherished property: his mother tongue. This fundamental loss, caused by a previous one: the émigré’s loss of a mother land, deprives the author from the very soul and heart of his art. English is a substitute for the lost language, Russian. Sirin, a mythological bird which represents the soul and essence of Russian art, was Nabokov’s pseudonym for the work he wrote in Russian. Nabokov’s decision to give up the pseudonym and use his own name to sign his English-language work seems to be coherent even if a bit paradoxical. The gesture can be interpreted as ritual, a mark of Nabokov’s passage from the realm of the mother culture/language to the realm of a non-native language/culture, a step forward which allowed him to regain the name of the father’. His transformation is comparable to the shirt-shedding of snakes or the metamorphosis undergone by the pupa which grows into a butterfly. It is also comparable to the reincarnation of souls after death. All these analogies are presented in RLSK by means of a pattern of inversions by means of which Nabokov allegorizes that parting with one’s own language, like losing one’s home, is the same as being emptied of one’s heart and deprived of the very soul of art, the most tragic thing that can happen to a writer. In the wake of such an identity crisis, the writer develops self-generating strategies which include the figure of the ‘double’ as The Real Life of Sebastian Knight perfectly shows.
1. The émigré's conflict: Continuity/discontinuity in its relation to language, self, time and place.

Not only in his prose but also in his poetry, Nabokov elaborates the theme that uprooting, culture shock, and adjustment to a new language and a new world feature the émigré's experience. In his poetry Nabokov states it more briefly and not less poignantly:

But now thou too must go, just here we part,
softest of tongues, my true one, all my own ...
And I am left to grope for heart and art
And start anew with clumsy tools of stone.
(Vladimir Nabokov, "Softest of Tongues", Poems and Problems)

In RLSK Nabokov develops the manifold conflict of the émigré writer by centering around a particular experience, acculturation brought about by the loss of native language. For the sociology of knowledge this is an experience which entails a breakdown in reality which must be followed by a process of transformation and renewal based on a partial reconstruction of reality and a partial redefinition of the self. Berger and Luckmann (1967: 163) classify these kind of transformations along a continuum which goes from a moderate secondary socialization to radical re-socialization or alternation:

In re-socialization the past is reinterpreted to conform to the present reality, with the tendency to retroject into the past various elements that were subjectively unavailable at the time. In secondary socialization the present is interpreted so as to stand on a continuous relationship with the past, with the tendency to minimize such transformations as have actually taken place. Put differently, the reality-base for re-socialization is the present, for secondary socialization the past.

In this respect Nabokov's situation as an émigré is complex: in Berlin his reality-base for socialization was the past, we shall see how his points of reference were his old country, his native language, and his father's editorial connexions which offered a continuity solution to his life. Later, in the process of emigrating to the US and once there, Nabokov's reality-base for socialization was the present and, as we shall see, switching languages will be the tip of an iceberg of adjustments leading to a re-interpretation of his Russian past so as to conform to his present American reality. In this respect Nabokov's dropping of Russian and selection of English as a means for his literary narrative expression can be seen as symptomatic of a crisis of identity for whose resolution literature was functional as the stage onto which the conflicts of the émigré author can be represented as they are transformed into literary matter.

Nabokov's social self before the Bolshevik revolution was that of a well-educated upper class young man who knew French, English, German and Russian and, was therefore well equipped and prepared to travel and adjust to changes since birth. Although his native language was Russian, Nabokov had learned to write in English before he did in Russian. The privileged

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situation of his family allowed an English governess in the household since very early in Nabokov's childhood, Miss Rachel Home started teaching him English when he was three years old. French and English governesses were in charge of the education of the household children much before they were introduced to formal Russian tutoring. Quite naturally, Nabokov chose to write and publish his early work in his native tongue, Russian. He did so in Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution and in exile in Berlin where the family moved in 1919 after the revolution. Exile after 1919 turned the Nabokovs into a family of politically and editorially active Russian émigrés senled in Berlin, a situation which lasted for the long period of time extending between 1920 and 1935. In 1937, with Hitler's use to power, Vladimir Nabokov, already married to Vera and father of a son, Dmitri, had to leave Germany.

Before Hitler, Berlin meant continuity to the Russian émigré. The cultural background of white Russian aristocracy was western European: especially French, but also English and German were the languages of high culture in the court of the tsars especially after Catherine the Great. And it was common for the Russian high classes to own land and spend holidays both in France and in Germany. Also, marriage between members of aristocratic families across national boundaries was the rule rather than the exception. Therefore, were it not for the all-changing fact that a revolution had taken place which had made it impossible for the Nabokovs to return home, leaving Russia for Cambridge and London and then Berlin would not disrupt a familiar scheme of long trips and extended stays abroad. In exile, the family remained within the borders of an imaginary Russia, a territory which was delimited by their past holiday travelling. At least emigration did not create for the Nabokovs a situation comparable to that of the lower-class uneducated emigrants. Vladimir Nabokov's experience as an exile in Europe extends through three very well differentiated periods: 1. his years in Cambridge (where he passes his exams for Part I of the Cambridge Tripos with first-class honours and distinction in Russian) still under his parents' tutelage exercised from London; 2. his years in Berlin (because of the low cost of living Berlin had become a center of emigration) where his father helped to set up a Russian daily liberal newspaper (Rul) and a Russian publishing firm (Slovo) to which Nabokov soon contributed some of his early Russian work. Soon after moving to Berlin, Nabokov's father is assassinated (1922) by Russian ultra-rightists, 3. after his father's death, Nabokov starts searching for some paid occupation which allows him to settle down now that his mother has gone to Nabokov's sister in Prague and left Nabokov to his own resources. Vladimir and Véra Nabokov get married in 1925. 4. between 1933 and 1937, which is the year Vladimir and Véra Nabokov leave Nazi Germany, the couple grow increasingly aware that the political situation is rapidly deteriorating in Berlin. Meanwhile Nabokov's Russian texts are well received in Paris where the major émigré writers gathered.

It is essential to understand that during the time his European exile lasted Vladimir Nabokov was able to keep writing in Russian for a Russian readership who treasured the belief that they could eventually return to their homeland. It was a testimonial use of a language which perpetuated national identity. In 1924, the emigration shift from Berlin to Paris had converted the latter capital into the Russian emigration centre in Europe but at that time Nabokov had not moved to Paris with the current partly out of fear that his Russian [would] atrophy in a country where he knows the local language well (Alexandrov, 1995: xxxvi). Nabokov's use of Russian during
the Berlin years was facilitated by the particular status of the language; Russian was the prestige language of a prestigious minority in exile. It offered the Russian émigrés an adequate means of aesthetic expression as well as of interpersonal communication at a time when they still maintained the hope that they would soon regain paradise. Russian was a sign of aristocratic distinction, both the remainder of a great social and economic past and the reminder that a better future could be expected. In the meantime, Berlin and Paris as centres of emigration, provided émigré writers with a present populated by an avant-garde artistic scene and a net of familiar and social relations which allowed them to preserve their identity and language.

These hopes and expectations were not to last; by the second half of the thirties it became clear that the Soviet states were there to last and this national group of exiles would have to find accommodation in countries which would eventually assimilate them. The glaunorous phase of European exile was to come to an end. The rich, and still more the impoverished, exile ceased to be a welcome presence in Berlin, the capital then of a country plagued with unemployment, desperately trying to redefine its national identity, and therefore prone to xenophobia. The wind of change could be felt by the Nabokovs as early as 1935. It is then that “[unreadable] a reliable English translator, and beginning to sense that Hitler’s plans would put an end to the Russian emigration and might force him to switch languages, [Vladimir Nabokov] translates Orchaianie himself, as Despair (Alexandrov, 1995: xxxix).

The necessity to leave Berlin was the factor that altered Nabokov’s relation with Russian and prompted his writing in English. Nazism, rather than the Bolshevik revolution, forced Nabokov to reexamine the past and see that what had been a plausible way of living between 1919 and 1937 had become impossible in Hitler’s Berlin. The continuity with the past which Nabokov had cherished all through his Berlin years was disrupted by the emergent fascist ideologies. Emigration per se cannot be isolated as the factor that triggered Nabokov’s abandonment of his native language for the simple reason that for years he was simultaneously an émigré and a Russian-language author. It was rather another factor, nazism, that, for two different reasons, placed Nabokov (and his Jewish wife, Véra) in the position of rethinking their roles now that they were occupying the margins of society.

a. On the margins of German society.

Nazism justified itself on the basis of a nationalist ideology which victimized difference and the stranger and therefore endangered the Nabokov’s existence. Nabokov and his family must leave Berlin and also the editorial enterprise his father had helped to build a decade earlier - the Russian daily liberal newspaper Rul’ - and the Russian publishing firm Slovo. These Russian-language media had been addressed to a specific émigré readership guided by a clear nationalist anti-communist ideology. Having lost the hope that the émigré group could ever return to old Russia, publishing in Russian lost an essential part of its social projection. Sacrificing Russian in 1937 was Nabokov’s answer to the new historical moment but this move meant personal tragedy (giving up out of hopelessness) rather than a change regarding his own sociopoitical stance and ideology.

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b. On the margins of Russian society.

Nabokov’s awareness of the emergence and quick strengthening of fascist ideas in Europe was accompanied by a reinterpretation of the exiled condition he shared with the group of Russian émigrés. Sharing a condition does not entail sharing one ideological model. It is necessary to remember that there were different ideologies within the group with which he could not identify. One was for example that of the ultra-rightist who had caused the death of Nabokov’s father. In 1936, the same man, the assassin of Nabokov’s father, was appointed second-in-command to Hitler’s head of Russian émigré affairs, thus proving that extreme ideologies meet beyond nationality.

We can get a glimpse of what were Nabokov’s thoughts on exiles and their sentimental nationalism about 1937, the time when he was writing RLSK, where we read:

There existed, as I discovered, a union of old Swiss women who had been governesses in Russia before the Revolution. They ‘lived in their past’ … spending their last years - and most of these ladies were decrepit and dotty - comparing notes, having petty feuds with one another and reviling the state of affairs in the Switzerland they had discovered after their many years of life in Russia. Their tragedy lay in the fact that during all those years spent in a foreign country they had kept absolutely immune to its influence (even to the extent of not learning the simplest Russian words); somewhat hostile to their surroundings - how often have I heard Mademoiselle bemoan her exile, complain of being slighted and misunderstood, and yearn for her fair native land; but when these poor wandering souls came home, they found themselves complete strangers in a changed country, so that by a queer trick of sentiment - Russia (which to them had really been an unknown abyss, remotely rumbling beyond a lamplit comer of a stuffy back room with family photographs in mother-of-pearl frames and a water-color view of Chillon castle) unknown Russia now took on the aspect of lost paradise, a vast, vague but retrospectively friendly place, peopled with wistful fancies (RLSK: 18).

Nabokov uses two different strategies here: a man/woman inversion, and a geographical displacement, to disguise the Russian émigrés in Berlin/Paris under the persona of the old Swiss governesses in Russia. It is still easy to understand that the sentiment permeating the passage is the certainty that, in spite of nostalgia, for the émigré it was as impossible to go back to Russia now as to remain secluded where he was. Nothing remained for the émigré to do either for his old country or for himself. Inactivity and nostalgia were not a desirable state: it was necessary to change.

Nabokov saw that he could and should sever himself from the past and that the easiest way to achieve it would be to displace himself from an inherited social world, the European scenario. By emigrating to the US and by writing in English he managed 1. to detach himself physically as well as cognitively from his past and thus 2. to acquire the status of survivor and recorder of a dead past.
In moving to the USA Nabokov was stepping outside the family circle. His mother Helena had died in Prague in 1939 thus closing that part of his life which would now become ‘the stuff of dreams’. He was saying goodbye to a well-ordered world, the old world, Sirin’s world, and letting Vladimir Nabokov go to America to emerge transformed into a professional English-language novelist.

2. The role of language in the émigré’s conflict.

In substituting English for Russian and America for Europe as his anchoring points Nabokov was redefining himself as an individual and as a writer. It was only after 1937 that Nabokov started writing novels in English. He kept writing lyrical poetry in Russian but switched to English for his prose narrative. It was a curious case of specialization which was motivated by the different functions language fulfills within each of the two genres. Narrative diegesis necessarily incorporates multivoiced or polyphonic discourse and it cannot occur without a measure of complexity and perspectivization. The language employed by the different voices in the novel lends the voices characterological and/or narratival entity and perspective. Therefore Russian could not suffice to express experiences which went beyond the world and world-view connected to Nabokov’s Russian.

If we start from the premise that language is language in use, or performance rather than competence, Nabokov’s situation can be better explained. Being a doubly émigré writer, uprooted from the cultural context sustaining his language/text, he must eventually feel the soul of his linguistic creativity drain. After his Berlin emigration years, when the referents for the words the writer used to speak and write have disappeared, the émigré writer remembers a language whose meanings relate him to a lost world. It becomes a phantasmagorical language, a system of forms whose meanings are obsolete and hardly meaningful to anybody inside or outside the mother country. The exception would be represented by the dwindling émigré group he belongs to, which is a group of people who have survived a revolution and lost a land but not their language; for them Russian is the embodiment of a lost world. Then, switching to a new language becomes a disadvantage in more than one sense. Nabokov needs to come to terms not only with the fact that English is a new everyday language for him (new in the sense that it is disconcerted from his earlier everyday experience as an individual), but especially with the fact that English is a new literary language for him and that he wants to excel in the practice of becoming as good a novelist in the new language as he was in his native Russian. Both Nabokov and his fictional double, Sebastian Knight, the protagonist of RLSK, are Russian writers who have become English-language writers, like Conrad and others before and after. Theirs is not treason but adjustment to a situation to which he was uprooted and dispositioned.

By writing in another language they are breaking partially free from an obsolete mirror-image produced by obsolete demarcations of national identity and self-identity. The conflict these, the writer and his fictional double, are associated with is twofold: on the one hand “the double’ is the figure most frequently associated with the uncanny process of the doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self” (Bhabha, 1994: 143-144) resulting from emigration/disemnation. On the other hand, the writer and his double represent repetition versus transformation on two separate but interdependent
levels: the level of aesthetic representation and the level of self-representation within a transformed and widened world.

3. Textual traces of an émigré writer's conflict.

The idea of transformation is a source of powerful metaphors for Nabokov. Like a pupa becoming a butterfly, the transformation undergone by his country after the Revolution and his own shift needed to find adequate expression in his writings. The theme of the double, always present in Nabokov's mature work, is a basic literary strategy that introduces a new, more or less transformed and transformed version of the self within the story. As Field (1987: 86) says: "[the double] is also the self gone into emigration." The émigré's code is fictionally transferred to the theme of the double, which in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is a composite figure halfway between 1. a "child of memory"; that is, a psychological projection of the reminiscing narrator, and 2. a cinematic transparency or a ghost; in any of the two cases the principle of reality is violated.

3.1. The double as the narrator's ghostly projection.

The novel is plotted around two sibling writers, Sebastian and V., whose sense of identity and of reality itself depends on a void. Sebastian's sense of reality and identity is shakily founded on one vague memory of a dead mother, while V.'s identity rests on the existence of his brother. The circle is perfect: Sebastian's life lends substance and quality to V.'s memories and V. exists to let memory speak and to do his brother justice by correcting a third writer/narrator whose biography of Sebastian seems outrageously inaccurate to V.

V. is the primary narrator even if his authority, as well as his independent identity, is questionable. To V., Sebastian's existence gyrates around an essential drama. The following passage from RLSK shows the faded/ghostly quality of V.'s remembrance and frames Sebastian's drama:

Sebastian's image ... comes to me ... as if he were not a constant member of our family, but some erratic visitor passing across a lighted room and then for a long interval fading into the night ... I could perhaps describe the way he walked, or laughed or sneezed, but all this would be no more than sundry bits of cinema-film cut away by scissors and having nothing in common with the essential drama. And drama there was. Sebastian could not forget his mother, nor could he forget that his father had died for her. (RLSK: 15, emphasis added)

Sebastian's drama is that he cannot forget an absence, the absence of mother and father. His mother abandoned him and his father for a lover when Sebastian was too young to remember well. Sebastian saw his mother only once again when he was eight years old. The visit lasted for very few minutes and few substantial words were said. Some years later Sebastian's father dies in a duel against his former wife's lover, V., the narrator, presents the mother as the one to account for Sebastian's
losses: she indirectly causes the death of the father. We can transpose the mother's figure onto an allegorical plane. In a directly allegorical reading the mother's figure (she is Virginia Knight, an English lady) stands for English and the narrator betrays a love-hate relation towards her and towards English. In an inverted allegorical reading, the mother stands for a lost language, Russian, and a lost country, which has exiled her children and has caused the death of the father (Nabokov's father). The detectable feeling of love/hatred for the mother can find justification under the direct and the inverted readings. The narrator subjects the mother/woman (and the languages they represent) to a double binding: Using English means treason to Russian, while using Russian when Russia has ceased to exist is sentimentalism if not plain nonsense. In an analogous way, siding with the mother means treason to the father and siding with the father, when the father is dead, means nothing.

Nabokov needs to process the past, his materials are memories and language and he is to build his literature out of them. The question is, how can memory supply or be supplied with a soul and how can memory supply or be supplied with the real? His answer is that "imagination is the muscle of the soul" (RLSK, 1995: 69) and he is the master of the imagistic quality of memory. The content of our memory consists of detailed images perhaps more than propositions. Memory alters reality, like literature or the cinema, by focusing on details that acquire immense importance. For example, Sebastian's mother's visit fixes violets and English in his memory. Memory also provides the past with the quality of ghost-like transparency.

For instance, V. reminisces: "I could see the fair light of the lamp on the desk, the bright whiteness of paper brimming over the open drawer and one sheet of foolscap lying alone on the blue carpet, half in shade, cut diagonally by the limit of the light. For a moment I seemed to see a transparent Sebastian at his desk" (RLS: 32). Knowing that Nabokov said: "Ghosts see our world as transparent, everything sinks so fast" (Appel, 1974: 298), makes it possible for the reader to draw the implication that V., the primary narrator, may be just a ghost reminiscing of a ghost. Very probably V. is Sebastian's ghost as well as his double. In that case The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is told from the point of view of its dead narrator, Knight, once he has become a wandering soul, by the name of V. This is so to the point that, in reading The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, the existence of both narrators, Sebastian and his brother V., can be doubted. Sebastian may be V.'s projection: V. is born as a narrator only after Sebastian dies, V. comes to supplant Sebastian in the same way as V. Nabokov, the English-language writer supplants former V. Sirin!", Nabokov used this pseudonym only as a Russian-language writer. S(sebastian) and V.(ladimir Nabokov) actually exist in a historical sequence which is a mirror-like inversion of V. and S(sebastian)'s fictional sequence. This play of inverted doubles stages two modes of the writer's life, as V. says about Sebastian, in RLSK(113) "Two modes of his life question each other and the answer is his life itself, and that is the nearest one can approach a human truth".

Soul migration is an idea which Nabokov entertains not only in RLSK, but also in Transparent Things and in his short stories. It is an idea which so many cultures entertain as a belief and part of their rites of passage from life to death and rebirth. Soul migration is also connected to the idea of water crossing. This is a connection drawn by Nabokov in different passages of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. For example, Sisson (in Alexandrov, 1995: 642) sees the association between death and water in the following passage,
The year of Sebastian's death, 1936, seems to V. "the reflection of that name in a pool of rippling water".... Water imagery saturates V.'s journey to join the dying Sebastian, as the storm shifts from rain to snow and to rain again. During V.'s night on the train, "the rain spat and tinkled against the glass and a ghost-like snowflake settled in one comer and melted away. Somebody in front of me slowly came to life..." (Sisson quoting Nabokov (RLSK, 190-191), in Alexandrov, 1995: 641).

Crossing the Atlantic in the process of emigrating to the USA in the 1940s was a rebirth, a new and liberating experience for the European immigrant. In that precise decade, when immigration, imported difference, was not the exception but the rule in the American melting pot, the Nabokovs could retain their identity as minority émigrés and still become marginal but privileged centrally to American culture. Teaching Russian literature to American university students most of whom could not read it in its original language probably confirmed Nabokov in his idea to write his narrative work in English. In any case writing in English has the definite advantage of liberating Nabokov from the need to revise the work of his translator. Nabokov became his own translator into English of his early narrative work in Russian. The assumption at this point is that Nabokov could write in English as proficiently as in his native language, Russian, and therefore translate himself into English better than anyone else, but this does not mean that Nabokov considered himself to be bilingual. On the contrary there is plenty of textual evidence, which we shall discuss in brief, that writing his books in English, Nabokov was going through a process of converting, translating, all these code-linguistic and inferential rules into written English. We find a perfect fictional statement of this kind of conflict in RLSK:

Sebastian used to indulge in an orgy of corrections; and sometimes he would... recopy the typed sheet in his own slanting un-English hand and then dictate it anew. His struggle with words was unusually painful and this for two reasons. One was the common one with writers of his type: the bridging of the abyss lying between expression and thought [...]

This, however, was not all. I know, I know as definitely as I know we had the same father, I know Sebastian's Russian was better and more natural to him than his English.

(70-71, emphasis added)

The narrator is Sebastian's brother, V., who explicitly comments on Sebastian's double struggle, his struggle after adequate literary expression and his struggle after adequate English, a non-native language. The former he shares with all other writers of his kind, the latter is idiiosyncratic of the exile writer. The question remains who may all those writers of Sebastian's kind be. The narrator, V., has alluded to the group of writers characterized by their preoccupation with:

[T]he bridging of the abyss lying between expression and thought; the maddening feeling that the right words, the only words are awaiting you on the opposite bank in the misty distance, and the shudderings of the still unclothed thought clamouring for them on this side of the abyss. He had no use for ready-made phrases because the things he wanted to say were of an

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This was the conflict of the modemist writers, for whom "Writing becomes a reminder, a presenter of the absent, a making of the continuous of the discontinuous, a monument to ambivalence (...) Melancholia arises from presence which inhabits the subject when (s)he experiences power to conceive and powerlessness to present. (...) this is a typically modem and modemist ambivalent combination, a source of the sublime that would remain inexplicable without the incommensurability of reality to concept which is implied in the Kantian philosophy of the sublime" (Penas, 1996: 643-644). But, even more specifically, this was the conflict of the modemist Aesthetes. John Dos Passos, in his book of memoirs The Best Times (1966), reminds us of the existence of a modemist debate between "aesthetes and Realists". While the former defended experimental avant-garde art: of a highly elitist kind, the latter disregarded difficult forms of experimentalism in favour of an easy kind of literary "realism" open to the understanding of the popular masses, more useful from the point of view of the social requirements for didactic literature an art19.

According to the narrator's comments, Sebastian Knight is a modemist aesthete besides being an émigré and his conflict with literary expression is not reducible to the difficulty entailed by his writing in and translating into a non-native language, although the laiter is the kind of linguistic difficulty that the émigré writer is bound to suffer. Kiely expresses Nabokov's difficulty as follows: "for the exile. immigrant, or refugee, translation is a necessity that carries with it a permanent reminder of a partial gain that has been purchased by means of an irretrievable loss. Separation from language is not merely analogous to a separation from kin and environment but coincidental with it" (1993: 124). An example of the specifically linguistic conflict occurs when V. goes through his dead brother's effects and is surprised by the existence of a leiter of Sebastian's in Russian. V. regards Sebastian's Russian as "pure and richer than his English ever was". On a different occasion V. recalls that: "Sebastian's English, though fluent and idiomatic, was definitely that of a foreigner" (RLSK; 40). Regarding his opinion of Sebastian's grasp of English, V. agrees with the fictional critic who thought of Sebastian "Poor Knight! he really had two periods, the first - a dull man writing broken English, the second - a broken man writing dull English (RLSK; 6). The fictional critic, though ironically portrayed, accurately spotted the twofold dimension of the émigré writer's conflict: one linguistic-literary and the other experiential.

A combination of the need to overcome these difficulties and the need to recall the past, which came to the émigré mind in the shape of images rather than words, gave Nabokov's texts their image-word quailty. Nabokov's literary imagination relied heavily on the presentation strategies of visual sensualities, among which I count landscape as well as the written page and the texts of the cinema, among others:

The answers to all questions of life and death, "the absolute solution" was written all over the world he had known: it was like a traveller realizing that the wild country he surveys is not an accidental assembly of natural phenomena, but the page in a book where these mountains and forests, and fields, and rivers are disposed in such a way as to form a coherent sentence;

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the vowel of a lake fusing with the consonant of a sibilant slope; the windings of a road writing its message in a round hand, as clear as that of father; trees conversing in dumb-show, making sense to one who has learnt the gestures of their language. [...] Thus the traveller spells the landscape and its sense is disclosed, and likewise, the intricate pattern of human life turns out to be monogrammatic, now quite clear to the inner eye disentangling the interwoven letters (RLSK: 150, emphasis added).

Nabokov could insist on the themes of life and death by dwelling on a visual detail which he promoted from the level of descriptive curiosity to the level of essential metonymy, thus making it into a revisited image and a repetition pattern operating powerfully within his work. For example, in the previous quotation, Nabokov draws an analogy between two visual texts, one natural (landscape and the world) and the other cultural (the written text): Landscape is compared to a page in a book and human life to a letter in a written page. Within this scheme, the writer is compared to a traveller who spells the sense of human life and what seemed a difficult pattern becomes as simple as a monogram, a simple letter.

Nabokov was interested in the visual contour of the letters and other typographical symbols in the Roman and Cyrillic alphabets. For instance, in Lolita, Humbert compares sleeping Lolita to to a "Z" or an "M", and in the case that occupies us here, Nabokov uses the monogrammatic symbol "V" as the key to an essential riddle connected to the reader's task of understanding the meaning of life and death in RLSK. The answer to the riddle is dependent on the ability on the part of the reader to discover a key letter hidden in the text, the letter is monogram "V". In Russian, the sound /v/ is represented by means of the symbol "B", which is a kind of false friend of the English symbol "B" for the sound /b/. The narrator, also called V., makes the discovery that a "V" is hidden where it would be less expected, within the very name of Sebastian. This happens when V. becomes a reader: that is, when he receives a telegram and reads the misspelling it contains:

"Sebastian's state hopeless come immediately Starov," It was worded in French; the "v" in Sebastian's name was a transcription of its Russian spelling; for some reason unknown, I went to the bathroom and stood there for a moment in front of the looking-glass (RLSK: 160, emphasis added).

A double anagnorisis takes place at the end of the narrative when the narrator, V., discovers the "v" within his brother Sebastian, when V. recognizes himself in the slightly altered form of an alter ego and runs to the mirror. It is a recognition of Sebastian's Russianness, but also a recognition, forced on V. by accident, that V. is v, that they are both the same, that there may be a true Russian soul behind the façade of an English name, and a true core behind the literature written in a non-native language.

V.'s reluctance to acknowledge Sebastian's Russianness surfaces again when V. reaches the hospital Sebastian is dying in. Once there V. causes a misunderstanding by asking for Sebastian Knight, an English gentleman; the staff take him to the wrong room and he waits by the wrong patient. It is only later that V. realizes that, had he asked the right question, he would have met his
brother in time for a last embrace. V. should have asked for a Russian gentleman named like himself, and even better, he should have asked for himself for, as we see from the following quotation,

[The soul is but a manner of being - not a constant state - that any soul maybe yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter maybe 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 (RLSK: 172, emphasis added).

Here, V. affirms that he is Sebastian Knight and makes this affirmation depend on the idea that souls are interchangeable: It is the unexpected presence of 'V' in Sebastian's name that triggers V,'s recognition of his and Sebastian's sameness. Sebastian's Russian soul had remained veiled to V,'s eye by the English letter b.

The reader's recognition of Sebastian as a Russian gentleman takes place near the end of the novel but since the very beginning the fiction provides the reader with clues that 'V' is a letter essentially connected to Sebastian's identity: Sebastian's mother's name is Virginia, she abandoned him and the only thing Sebastian remembers of her is her brief visit when he was eight years old when she brought him a small muslin bag of violet sweets. The same muslin bag that years later V. discovers among the other small treasures that Sebastian keeps hidden from him: a photograph of his first love, and his first English poems. Mother (Virginia), Mother tongue (Russian "V" behind Roman "B") and first love are all treasured together with the violet sweet bag. In one of his writings, a fictitious letter from a man saying goodbye to his woman, Sebastian speaks of the sound "V" in the following, loving alliterative terms: "Life with you was lovely - and when I say lovely, I mean doves and lilies, and velvet, and that soft pink 'V' in the middle and the way your tongue curved up to the long, lingering l'" (RLSK: 93).

The letter v symbolizes all that is dear to Sebastian's soul which is at the same time all that he has to part with in migrating to a different country. To help the reader of RLSK to disentangle the niddle, the same monogram, "V", is explicitly connected to migration and the need to say goodbye to his loved ones: "Must you go?" asks his voice. A last change: a V-shaped flight of migrating cranes; their tender moan melting in a turquoise-blue sky high above a tawny birch-grove... Is this the end? (RLSK: 114).

The parallelism between geographical migration, and the migration of the soul, between death and rebirth on the one hand and loss of one's native language and tradition on the other, is very powerfully designed and defines RLSK's concern with liminality, with beginnings and endings. This is Nabokov's first novel in English, his burning of bridges with Russian shortly before he emigrates to America in 1940. The historically liminal character of Nabokov's first English novel is incorporated and reinforced within the fiction at different moments of the narrative, for example, at its very beginning, where the reader finds that the opening lines narrate Knight's birth on the last day of the last month of the last year in the last century: "Sebastian Knight was born on the thirty-first of December, 1899, in the former capital of my country".

This simple sentence manages to communicate on different levels: On the discourse level the sentence conveys that I, the reader is on the verge of a story which is only just starting to unravel before his/her eyes. The reader is placed at a borderline whose crossing will allow him/her to be born

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Sebastian's mask (his persona) is V.'s and because of the existence of the mask, V and Sebastian are both someone they don't know. Nabokov's text removes the self, or rather the knowledge of the self, from the realm of the graspable and decenters the knowing of the self to the marginal knowledge of the marginal mask. The self is displaced by its representations from the centre of epistemological enquiry. Thus, RLSK is a narrative which falls within the realm of the postmodem even if one of its protagonists (Sebastian) is a modernist and an aesthete.

There are aspects of RLSK that seem quite conventional, but they are inscribed in a wider and more innovative construction: for instance, the narration starts at the most natural point of departure, the birth of a central character, and thus the recit vs. diegesis chronological levels are matched at a point which marks the beginning of this parodic biographical fiction which eventually discloses itself as autobiographical fiction: when the reader discovers with V. that V. and Sebastian are one. V.'s biography of Sebastian becomes V.'s, the narrator's, fictional autobiography. There only remains a further boundary to trespass, it is the boundary between history and fiction. RLSK is informed by biographical materials extracted from Nabokov's life history.

Sebastian, like Nabokov, "was brought up in an atmosphere of intellectual refinement, blending the spiritual grace of a Russian household with the very treasures of European culture" (RLSK: 13). Sebastian writes his literature in English and uses his mother's English family name (Knight) as a kind of literary pseudonym that he transforms into the black chess knight with which he signed his early poems, just as Nabokov signed his Russian writings under the pseudonym Sirin. Later on Sebastian Knight, like Nabokov, studies in Cambridge, and leads an erratic life as a consequence of his own personal circumstances, which are coincident with Nabokov's. Sebastian Knight was born, also like Nabokov, in 1899, the last year of the century which brought an aristocratic and decadent world near the verge of extinction, in Saint Petersburg, "the former capital of my country" (as Nabokov says in the opening line of RLSK). The implicit reference to a change of capital which carried the Russian "v" in "Sebastian's name, was easily retrieved: History teaches that Saint Petersburg (later Leningrad) was discarded and the post revolutionary capital of the USSR was to be Moscow in an effort to erase even the most casual reference to a cultural past. Here again one name, Leningrad, veils another, St. Petersburg, (just like the "b" in Sebastian veils the Russian "v" in "Sebastian's name). This double change, change of capital from St. Petersburg to Moscow, and change of denomination of the former capital, from St. Petersburg to Leningrad, is a kind of surgical removal operation. The second case is especially relevant to this paper because it is an operation of linguistic removal of the past. It is not only a city's name that has been lost. With the name disappears a city landscape, once populated by a people who have deserted the city and emigrated.
The émigré inhabit a world marked by the absence of a world of origin but the absence of a world of origin in the case of the Russian émigré was radical, geographical as well as historical. After the Revolution, the old order of reality was gradually banished and the émigré writers, Nabokov himself, as well as his fictional counterparts (V. Sebastian in RLSK), were dispossessed of the their property, the most basic one being their own past: dissociated from their past selves and displaced in space and time from their worlds of origin, they must learn to belong to a different geography and a different history, they must cope with the loss of a landscape which has become forever somebody else’s. They must be reborn to the present and learn to inhabit it thus leaving the past to the past. It is a second kind of emigration, the migration of the soul from a past to a present self. It is a process of relearning, of self-translation and after all of self-duplication in an inverted form. Those who will not forget can only remember and become the gatekeepers of a world of reminiscence populated by lost souls, ghosts like V. and Sebastian, or Nabokov himself. The historcal and the fictional ends of this literary narrative become twin inverted worlds just as Russian and English are the twin linguistic models that both, V. Sebastian and V. Nabokov, must use in order to reconstruct their world and their own selves on the basis of continuity with their past. This process involves complex interactions of meaning and symbolic structurations that function without regard for a sharp distinction between literature and social life within a culture.

NOTES

1. See Klozy Beaulieu (1989: 90) on the topic of bilingualism and the creative mind: “Nabokov slowly moved toward a redefinition of himself which would recognize the centrality of the polylinguistic matrix of his creativity”.

2. Nabokov writes his poem “K Rossi” (To Russia) in Paris late in 1939, about the time he had finished writing The Real Life of Sebastian Bliss which was still unpublished. There is a strong intertextual current between both texts. They exploit the idea that the writer’s abandonment of Russian is the worst of amputations, a tragedy. Compare V’s dream of Sebastian’s maimed hand in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1995: 157-159) and the following verses from “K Rossi”: “To be drained of my blood, to be crippled, to have done with the books I most love, for the first available idiom to exchange all I have: my own tongue. […] do not grope for my life in this hole”.

3. This is not an exception with Nabokov, on the contrary, there is plenty of evidence, and Nabokov himself has commented on the fact, that much of his fiction is allegorical: for example, in his foreword to the English edition of The Gift (1963), Nabokov declares that Russian literature is his heroine (emphasis added). Again, Nabokov says, in “On a book entitled Lolita” (in Appel, ed. 1974: 318), “an American critic suggested that Lolita was the record of my love affair with the romantic novel. The substitution English language for romantic novel would make this elegant formula more correct” (emphasis added).

4. While Vladimir Nabokov was still a student at Cambridge, he started using the pseudonym Vladimir Sinir, which he kept through 1939, in order to eliminate the possibility that he could be mistaken for his illustrious father (V.D. Nabokov).

5. In Vyra, the Nabokov Summer home, in 1906 Nabokov’s father discovers that his son, who can read and write in Russian, cannot do so in Russian, then he hires the village schoolmaster (Vasily Zhemosekov) to teach him.

6. It is as late as 1907 that VN graduates from govemesses to the first of his Russian tutors, Ordintsev.

7. For instance, VN’s uncle Vasiliy Rukavishnikov had a castle in Pau (France) that Nabokov’s parents visited in 1901, when Nabokov was a two year old toddler. In 1903 the family travels to Paris and Nice where they visit grand father D. N. Nabokov. In 1904 the family travels to Rome and Naples. In 1905 they travel to Wiesbaden (Germany, where VN meets cousin Baron Fury Rausch von Trauenberg, who visits him back in Vyra in 1914). In 1907, 1909 the family travels to Biarritz for their summer vacation. In 1910, the family travels to Bad Kissingen and Berlin where Nabokov,

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his brother Sergei and tutor Zelenyky stay over the fail for orthodontic work. These data have been extracted from Alexandrov's (1995) chronology of Nabokov's life and works.

8. Andrew Field (1987: 5) also notes that "[Nabokov's] Russia was very much a private Russia, which may be properly termed the Kingdom of Nabokov".


10. This essential conflict cannot be simplified to a mere clothing of literary meaning in English wording as Nabokov explicitly states in RLSK (1995: 70): "no real idea can be said to exist without the words made to measure. So that (to use a closer simile) the thought which only seemed naked but was pleading for the clothes it wore to become visible, while the words looking afer were not empty shells as they seemed, but were only waiting for the thought they already conceded to set them aflame and in motion".

11. Klösy (1989: 214) notes down that "Nabokov frequently distinguished himself from Conrad; for Conrad had written in his fourth language, but never in his first".

12. Klösy (1989: 6) argues that "although the process of their linguistic metamorphosis was often exquisitely painful for Russian bilingual writers while they were undergoing it, many of them eventually came to realize that what at first seemed a sacrifice, a treason, often a self-murder, was in fact merely a step in a much more complex process that over the long run, was not destructive or subversive but, on the contrary, generative and positive."

13. The same author reports that in 1971, while discussing with Nabokov the émigré years, "Nabokov stopped short in his conversation and said quite simply about himself, 'The past is my double, Andrew'" (Field, 1987: 86).

14. Fading, a technique of filmic narrative used in order to provide continuity within an overall pattern of yuxtaposition, was typically employed by German expressionism. Nabokov confessed he adored the cinema and watched motion pictures with great keenness (Field, 1987: 122). Its influence can be perceived in passages like: "Let the beautiful olive house on the Novi embankment fade out gradually in the grey-blue frosty night, with gently falling snowflakes lingering in the moon-white blaze of the tall street lamp and powdering the mighty limbs of the two bearded corbel figures which supported with an Atlas-like effort the one of my father's room. My father is dead, Sebastian is asleep, or at least mouse-quiet, in the next room, and I am lying in bed, wide awake, staring into darkness" (RLSK: 18).

15. The Faustian theme of an evil pact causing the loss of the soul is a strong intertextual current underlying The Real Life of Sebastian Knight. The implicit idea behind that reading would be that Vladimir Nabokov feared he had sold his Russian soul to unspecified interests.

16. Sebastian's mother Virginia (nee Knight) elopes with another man and abandons husband and son when the latter is too young to remember her. Probably for this very reason, Sebastian, who has to make do with the lost love of his mother and the surrogate love of a step mother (whom he calls maman in French - thus isolating her from his father's Russian and his mother's English worlds) becomes fully aware of a deep lack. This existential blank he has to compensate for by appropriating all kind of things that connect him to his mother and differentiate him from V., his half-brother: the differential factor is his mother's language, English.

17. While Vladimir Nabokov was still at Cambridge, he switched to the pseudonym Vladimir Sirin, which he kept till 1939. The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is the first narrative Nabokov signs under his real name, Vladimir Nabokov. In Strong Opinions (1990: 161) Nabokov explains that he had chosen Sirin as the name to write under because the sirin is, like the Russian "siren", a multi-cultural mythical creature, a multicoloured bird with a woman's face and bust, a "transporter of souls and teaser of sailors" which made such an impression on the people's imagination that its golden flutter became the very soul of Russian art.

18. Klösy's (1987) thesis that Nabokov is a bilingual writer cannot be tested. A bilingual speaker is not the same as a writer in two languages. If we acknowledge Nabokov's words in Strong Opinions (1973: 5) "I was bilingual as a baby (Russian and English) and added French at five years of age", we could agree with Klösy. Nevertheless, there is plenty of evidence, also by Nabokov, that Nabokov did not handle the different languages with the same facility.

19. The decade of the 1930s had been a time of expansion for the ideas of Lenin and Trotsky (Literature and Revolution) on the social function of literature, which they thought should be a revolutionary art, an art of themes against technique.
20. In *Strong Opinions* (1973: 14), Nabokov says “I don’t *think in* any language. I think in images, and now and then a Russian phrase or an English phrase will form with the foam of the brain-wave, but that’s about all.”

21. V is an important letter in RLSK (a fiction) as well as in Nabokov’s world (history); his father’s name and his own is Vladimir, the family’s summer residence was Vyra: it is there that the family retreats for the 1905 winter to avoid turmoil in St. Petersburg and there Nabokov’s cousin von Rausch impresses VN (who is fifteen) with his sexual exploits, Vasily Zhemosekov teaches him to write in Russian for the first time at the age of seven, Poet Vasili Gippius teaches him Russian Literature at the age of seventeen, Uncle Vasily Rukavishnikov dies and leaves him an important legacy: the property of two-thousand-acre estate worth several million dollars (after the Revolution it becomes lost property). Vereteno (the Spindle) is the name of his literary group during émigré Berlin’s most volatile artistic period, finally, his wife’s name is Véra.

22. In more specific terms, these representations should be called representamens (Peirce, 1955) or supplements (Demda, 1974)

23. The postmodern *parodic* character of RLSK is worth another paper. Let it suffice to say that the novel parodies different narrative subgenres: biography, the detective story, the literature of psychoanalysis based on the Freudian interpretation of dreams, and existentialism.

24. In Greenblatt’s (1980: 9) terminology, the work of reconstruction of the self is considered as one of self-fashioning, and “Self-fashioning is always, though not exclusively, in language.” Although Greenblatt’s terminology is not so adequate to the description of 20th century culture, the concept it sustains is perfectly relevant to our discussion of the writer re-fashioning himself as the writer’s double.

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