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Author(s): David Shields

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# Autobiographic Rapture and Fictive Irony in *Speak, Memory* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* · David Shields

## AN INITIAL TITULAR ANTITHESIS

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE TITLE of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography and the title of his first English novel suggests a distinction between autobiography and fiction. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* is an excruciatingly self-conscious and self-directed appellation for a book, for "Speak, Memory" is a mock-classical address from the author to his own memory, as if his recollections had unto themselves not only personality but also language; "An Autobiography Revisited" is Nabokov's extremely arch way of saying that the present text is the revised edition of *Conclusive Evidence*. But the comedy, as always with Nabokov, cuts considerably deeper. If autobiography is a physical place to which one can return, and if memory has words with which to communicate, then consciousness is tangible and the imagination is real. Into one titular phrase Nabokov has compressed the central motif of his memoir. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is an equally "loaded" title, for "real life" implies that lived life, rather than remembered or imagined life, is real: that here—the naive novel-reader thinks—we're going to get the goods on a writer's "real life," as if the life of an artist were to be found anywhere except in his work. In a book about half-brothers, "Sebastian" must be taken as a reference to Viola's twin brother in *Twelfth Night*, and "Knight" is a triple pun on "night," "chess knight," and "dubbed knight." Note the differences: we interpret both titles, but the novel-title makes references to the world as well as to literature, whereas the autobiography-title is militantly hermetic. Furthermore, the novel-title assumes a sophistication beyond the reader and hence an implicit antagonism toward us, for certainly the reader is deceived who approaches *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* with the expectation that we're going to "get" the "real life" of Sebastian Knight. The autobiography-title, on the other hand, takes the reader into its confidence; explains the entire, ensuing book in its five-words-and-a-colon; acknowledges and reveals, via its

use of the imperative, the yearning of its own voice, the terror and ecstasy of its own creation, the rapid heart (“some forty-five hundred heartbeats an hour,” p. 19) of its creator.

## THE DICHOTOMY OF INTRODUCTION

The critical introduction to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is so inferior that the reader can only hope it’s a forgery, that “Conrad Brenner” is Nabokov’s impersonation of an idiot. It’s doubtful such a saving delight is the case. Virtually any sentence will succeed in condemning Mr. Brenner, but perhaps none would be quite so completely effective as the following:

The maelstrom-descenders of his books reflect not a freely metaphoric condition, but Nabokov’s dialogue of convoluted mistrust, the diabolic conscience in a death-lock with romance monocracy.  
(p. xii)

This is best received as a parody of critical jargon; unfortunately, it isn’t. When, however, in the Foreword to *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov engages in self-important pedantry, he is at least partially kidding. He writes:

By the Old Style I was born on April 10, at daybreak, in the last year of the last century, and that was (if I could have been whisked across the border at once) April 22 in, say, Germany; but since all my birthdays were celebrated, with diminishing pomp, in the twentieth century, everybody, including myself, upon being shifted by revolution and expatriation from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian, used to add thirteen, instead of twelve, days to the 10th of April. The error is serious. What is to be done? (p. 13)

The extremely long, intentionally tedious, first sentence is there only to set up the two, short, pseudo-solemn sentences that follow it. The effect, unlike that of Brenner’s introductions, is *purposefully* comic. Furthermore, Nabokov’s scholarly language in the above paragraph is meant to jar with the truly poetic language present elsewhere in the Foreword—e.g., “That order had been established in 1936, at the placing of the cornerstone which already held in its hidden hollow various maps, timetables, a collection of

matchboxes, and even—as I now realize—the view from my balcony of Geneva lake, of its ripples and glades of light, black-dotted today, at tea-time, with coots and tufted ducks” (pp. 10–11)—while Brenner’s absurd grandiloquence has nothing to bounce off except itself, and there it does. In front of fiction we encounter turgid interpretation, whereas before autobiography we read the autobiographer’s own self-conscious explanation, his last attempt at *apologia*. The fictionist seeks to create enough mystery that he needs to be studied; the memoirist attempts an act of self-study so profound that the puzzle of his life is at least partially solved.

### FIRST LINES

“The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness” (p. 19). The opening sentence of *Speak, Memory* is communal (“us,” “our”), contemplative, serious, indulgently alliterative. The identification between the author and all of humanity, and the attempt to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of one’s life, are signatures of autobiography. The essentially serious tone and the unblushing surrender to florid language contrast with the comedy and controlled language of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; it is as if only when finally writing about himself as subject that Nabokov could make completely manifest what so obviously informs, a level or six below the surface, his fiction: his love of sheer verbal sound and his tragic perceptions. The first line of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is probably a parody of the novelistic or biographic entrance; “Sebastian Knight was born on the thirty-first of December, 1899, in the former capital of my country” (p. 5). In direct contrast to the autobiographic beginning, this sentence is linguistically unremarkable, and concerned with the names, dates, and places of the world, rather than the movements of the human mind. After we have read in *Speak, Memory* of Nabokov’s nearly obsessive identification of his own age with the age of the twentieth century, we read Sebastian Knight’s birthdate, “the thirty-first of December, 1899,” with a bemused smile. So, too, when we know that Nabokov was born in St. Petersburg and how bitterly he views his expatriation, do we see the particular poignance of the phrase, “the former capital of my country,” for the former capital is Nabokov’s former capital and the lost country is Nabokov’s lost country. This is the way the

fabulator tends to work: satirizing in fiction what he swoons over in fact, displacing onto other people the details of his own identity.

### PHOTOGRAPHS OF A GENTLEMAN

It is only appropriate that one of the very few Nabokovian novels referred to in *Speak, Memory* is *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*:

For various reasons I find it inordinately hard to speak about my other brother. That twisted quest for Sebastian Knight (1940), with its glories and self-mate combinations, is really nothing in comparison to the task I balked in the first version of this memoir and am faced with now. (p. 257)

One of the principal strategies of autobiography is to insist upon its supremacy because it is more visceral, cutting closer to the human heart, so here we have Nabokov—the most radical defender of the inviolability of the imagination—stating that writing about his brother in fact is much more difficult than writing about a half-brother in fiction. Nabokov balks the task in this version as well. He writes two uninspired, painful pages about Sergey, then surrenders in despair, moving on to the more pleasant topic of his own education at Cambridge. Without imagination to blur the distance between himself and his subject, Nabokov seems unable to reconcile himself to the isolation which existed between himself and his brother. Sebastian Knight, on the other hand, places the following advertisement in the newspaper:

Author writing fictitious biography requires photos of gentleman, efficient appearance, plain, steady, teetotaler, bachelors preferred. Will pay for photos childhood, youth, manhood to appear in said work. (p. 40)

Sebastian does write *Lost Property*, an autobiography which is not dissimilar in its rapturousness to *Speak, Memory*, but *Lost Property* is an imaginary work—it is not listed in the card catalogue—in the same way that Sebastian's advertised biography is fictitious: it is a forged document pretending to be real. Thus, in Nabokov's autobiography he asserts the

primacy of autobiography, and in his first English-language novel he asserts the primacy of fiction. This is how it should be: each genre ruling out every other genre. In *Speak, Memory* fiction is made to seem less than life, whereas in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* non-fiction is made to seem limited *sans* any mediating and disruptive imagination.

### PARALLEL LINES CANNOT INTERSECT

In *Speak, Memory* Nabokov announces: “Toilers of the world, disband! Old books are wrong. The world was made on a Sunday,” (p. 298) whereas when essentially the same sentiment — “No, Leslie, I’m not dead. I have finished building a world, and this is my Sabbath rest” (p. 90) — appears in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, it is spoken not by the narrator but by Sebastian, and it is spoken in a dramatic rather than static context. We thrill to both statements, but to the former we simply assent, revelling in its rhythms and its affirmation of art, while we read ‘through’ the latter utterance, interpreting it, treating it as a revelation of personality. Similarly, Nabokov defines his first love affair in the alliterative terms of High Pastoral — “comely country,” “secret spots in the woods,” “mythological manifestation,” “sylvan security” (pp. 229–234) — whereas when Sebastian’s half-brother describes Sebastian’s first romance, extreme self-consciousness intrudes, the mock-pastoral predominates, and love lapses to farce: Sebastian says, “You’re a very poor cox,” as his love rows down the river (p. 138). Thus, in his novel Nabokov attempts to push art at least a little toward life in order to make the art convincing, i.e., life-like. The push toward art on the autobiographer’s part is a rage to order, toward the discovery of some semblance of a meaningful pattern; the push toward life on the novelist’s part is symptomatic of an effort to render a world beyond the typewriter. Fiction can come off ‘crueler’ than autobiography, since its subjects are subject to critical analysis. Autobiography appears to be more tolerant of sheer rapture.

### LIVES OF THE SAINTS

What is so surprising to the reader who comes from Nabokov’s novels to his autobiography is the quality and quantity of love in the latter. As a fictionist, Nabokov is at times compassionate, but basically he is witty,

droll, clever, exceedingly intelligent, icily cool. *Speak, Memory*, on the other hand, is suffused with pity for the whole human perplexity. *Speak, Memory* is populated by seraphical figures, while *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a collection of clowns. Nabokov says that, in moments of “intense tenderness,” his mother would address him in the second-person plural, “as if the singular were too thin to bear the load of her love” (p. 28). He freeze-frames his father:

. . . on his last and loftiest flight, reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiac personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church while below, one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist of incense, and the priest chants of eternal repose, and funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin. (p. 32)

This may be the most moving passage in the entire book, and its overflow of language and love is characteristic of *Speak, Memory*. Nabokov’s autobiographic impulse is to transform himself, his family, and his friends into medium-level angels. His mother and father, his grandparents, his tutors, his uncles and aunts and cousins, his governesses, his brothers and sisters, his lovers, his wife, all of these people Nabokov treats with exquisite sympathy. Of his French governess, Mademoiselle, he writes:

I catch myself wondering whether, during the years I knew her, I had not kept utterly missing something in her that was far more she than her chins or her ways or even her French: something perhaps akin to that last glimpse of her, to the radiant deceit she had used in order to have me depart pleased with my own kindness, or to that swan whose agony was so much closer to artistic truth than a drooping dancer’s pale arms; something, in short, that I could appreciate only after the things and beings that I had most loved in the security of my childhood had been turned to ashes or shot through the heart. (p. 117)

There is a tragic weight and tone to this sentence that Nabokov would not be capable of maintaining in his fiction. He loves the characters in his autobiography in a way that he refuses to love the characters in his fiction—without qualification or self-conscious qualm—because these people (Mother, Father, Mademoiselle, Colette, Vera) compose the population of his life. Nothing can “dim the purity of the pain” (p. 241) of the last time he saw Colette, Nabokov says, and he is not kidding. His love of Vera is so absolute that he refuses to refer to her other than as “you.” In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, on the other hand, only Sebastian and the narrator escape the author’s satirical glance. “Mr. Goodman’s large soft pinkish face was, and is, remarkably like a cow’s udder” (p. 60). Both Clare and the governess are likable characters, but neither one receives the love that her counterpart—Vera, Mademoiselle—receives in *Speak, Memory*. Mr. Sheldon, Roy Carswell, Mr. Silbermann, Helene Grinstein, Paul Pahlich, Uncle Black, Madame LaCerf: as suggested even by their names, these characters are figures of the author’s and reader’s fun rather than objects of admiration or concern. When Nabokov’s playful imagination completely dominates, he no longer loves his characters. All he can do is laugh.

### DESIGN UNDONE

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov writes: “The following of thematic designs through one’s life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography” (p. 27). Although his autobiography is chronological, it is in a sense unplotted; it moves from one section, one character, one city, to another not on the basis of narrative but according to the movements of memory, for only in following such free associations of the mind can thematic design be discovered. Thus, transition from section to section is triggered time after time by the very process of memory. “With a sharp and merry blast from the whistle that was part of my first sailor suit, my childhood calls me back into that distant past to have me shake hands again with my delightful teacher” (p. 28). “I next see my mother leading me bedward through the enormous hall” (p. 83). “A bewildering sequence of English nurses and governesses, some of them wringing their hands, others smiling at me enigmatically, come out to meet me as I re-enter my past” (p. 86). “Meanwhile the setting has changed” (p. 105). Memory is the ac-



tive agent, the principal protagonist. Nabokov is simply, he claims, the conduit of these recollections. “The next picture looks as if it had come on the screen upside down” (p. 157). Furthermore, virtually every chapter-opening sentence in *Speak, Memory* bears no necessary plot relation to the last sentence of the preceding chapter, but does bear an obvious and profound relation to the pattern which memory has created and which is the structure of the book. By contrast, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the movement from place to place and scene to scene is accomplished according to the strict demands of narrative, and particularly temporal, progression. Chapter after chapter opens with a plotted move forward in time. “In November of 1918 my mother resolved to flee with Sebastian and myself from the dangers of Russia” (p. 24). “Two months had elapsed after Sebastian’s death when this book was started” (p. 33). “Two years had elapsed after my mother’s death before I saw Sebastian again” (p. 71). “Their relationship lasted six years” (p. 81). *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* was published in 1941, and *Speak, Memory* in 1966, so in large measure the difference between the two books is the distance travelled between modernism and post-modernism, between art for art’s sake and art about art. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a model for self-reflexive but finally dramatic fiction, whereas *Speak, Memory* is something like Narcissus squared. Still, even if there is palpably more contemplation in *Under the Volcano* than in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, we do approach fiction with somewhat different expectations than we approach autobiography. No matter how anti-linear the novel, we are struck by and are meant to be struck by its relation to (fulfillment or frustration of) narrative, while the reader expects literary autobiography to be an examination of the process by which it, and its author, came to be.

### THE TENSE PRESENT, THE REMEMBERED PAST

Both books modulate between the present moment of composition and the remembered past of lived life, but in *Speak, Memory* that rupture is the book’s subject matter while in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* it seems to be little more than a fictive strategy. Some of the most powerful moments in *Speak, Memory* occur when Nabokov bumps up against the time-wall between the present and the past.

Very lovely, very lonesome. But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? How did I get here? Somehow, the two sleighs have slipped away, leaving behind a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snowboots and stormcoat. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy's rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers. (p. 100)

This passage is *about* memory, it is a wondrous demonstration of its processes. Memory is not merely being used here; it is under microscopic examination. So, too, when “the process of recreating that penholder and the microcosm in its eyelet stimulates my memory to a last effort. I try again to recall the name of Colette’s dog—and, triumphantly, along those remote beaches, over the glossy evening sands of the past, where each footprint slowly fills up with sunset water, here it comes, here it comes, echoing and vibrating: Floss, Floss, Floss!” (p. 152). Here the result is manifestly different from above: memory, through language, rediscovers language and succeeds in uniting the present moment of composition with the historical instant of “real life.” And yet, as poignant as these recreations of recollection are, Nabokov is Nabokov, and elsewhere in *Speak, Memory* he sees fit to parody the process by which his book has been organized. “Some more about that drawing room, please” (p. 100), he invokes Mnemosyne. Before he recreates Louise, he writes: “I am now going to do something quite difficult, a kind of double somersault with a Welsh waggle (old acrobats will know what I mean), and I want complete silence, please” (p. 204). In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, what few references there are to the current time of composition are all overtly comic. “We parted. It was raining hard and I felt ashamed and cross at having interrupted my second chapter to make this useless pilgrimage” (p. 23), the narrator remarks at the conclusion of the second chapter. Much later, he says: “As the reader may have noticed, I have tried to put into this book as little of my own self as possible” (p. 141). *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* juxtaposes—nearly chapter-for-chapter—Sebastian’s life in the past with Sebastian’s half-brother’s quest for an understanding of Sebastian’s life in the present, and surely this juxtaposition is meant as an emblem for the

relation between the artist recollecting life and the artist living life, but the novel does not explore the process of memory the way the autobiography does. The only book that studies nostalgic consciousness more acutely than *Speak, Memory* is Nabokov's third favorite work of the twentieth century, *A Remembrance of Things Past*, and surely Proust is as much autobiographer as novelist. It's easier for autobiography to be about itself than fiction is because, by the very definition of itself as a genre, autobiography is obsessed with the consciousness of its creator in the process of seizing the self. Much of the most interesting fiction of the last forty years has appropriated the techniques of autobiography to shift the focus from the garden to the window, the eye to the "I."

### LANGUAGE IS ALL

In *Speak, Memory* heavy alliteration is used for serious poetic effect while in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* the alliteration tends to appear at inappropriate times and thus is comic. In *Speak, Memory*, we get "my father's favorite flower" (p. 29), "fantastic flotilla of swans and skiffs" (p. 85), "delighting in every limb of every limpid letter" (p. 105), "a big black mare followed me for more than a mile" (p. 131), and "In one particular pine grove everything fell into place, I parted the fabric of fancy, I tasted reality" (p. 232). All of these alliterative phrases occur at emotional moments in the text. Alliteration tends to be the signature of lyrical expression, and *Speak, Memory* is the most consistently lyrical, most insistently alliterative book Vladimir Nabokov ever wrote. Triple alliteration is thus an appropriate emblem for autobiography in that it is indulgent, self-conscious, self-referential, serious, enraptured with both itself as expression and its material as subject. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* we get "a succession of funerals and fireworks" (p. 66), "a picture in *Punch* or a purple passage in *Hamlet*" (p. 68), and, especially, "the whole book being but a glorious gamble on causalities or, if you prefer, the probing of the aetiological secret of aleatory occurrences" (p. 96). This is bad, or at least limited, Nabokov: writing meant to point up the barriers, rather than writing meant to explore the resources of beautiful language. *Speak, Memory* was written twenty-five years after *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, so in some ways it is unfair to compare the two books. But the truly serious, truly poetic alliteration in *Speak, Memory*, as opposed to

comic and parodistic repetition in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, reveals the difference between Nabokov-the-autobiographer and Nabokov-the-fabulator. For if in fiction he can deflect through irony the fact that “our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness” (*Speak, Memory*, p. 19), in autobiography he is allowed and he allows himself to surrender completely to the lugubrious melodrama of his own existence.