

Nabokov's language of despair and the real life of sebastian knight

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



Vladimir Nabokov manipulates language's ambiguous properties in *Despair* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. By toying with words' sounds and meanings he creates an atmosphere of duplicitous layers that resonates with the novel's thematic overtones. Nabokov also peppers the two novels with what appear to be superfluous data and obscure allusions, then cohesively ties that information into an important plot point. *Despair* and *Sebastian Knight* should be read as a riddles one must decode; as Nabokov himself admits, "The attractively shaped Wiener-schnitzel dream that the eager Freudian may think he distinguishes in the remoteness of my wastes will turn out to be on closer inspection a derisive mirage organized by my agents" (xii). Nabokov clouds his clues with language and allusion so the reader, the hound, is forever thrown on and off the scent. The evidence that later incriminates the protagonist of *Despair*, Herrman, a stick, is introduced to the reader as a curious verbal tic of his wife. "She is little educated and observant. We discovered one day that to her the term 'mystic' was somehow dimly connected with 'mist' and 'mistake' and 'stick,' but that she had not the least idea what a mystic really was" (23). Subtext and foreshadowing abound in this seemingly innocuous sentence, disclosed long before any intention of murder has been confessed. First, Herrman has somewhat "mystical" powers; he has powers of bodily displacement: "The next phase came when I realized that the greater the interval between my two selves the more I was ecstasied; therefore I used to sit every night a few inches farther from the bed, and soon the back legs of my chair reaches the threshold of the open door. Eventually I found myself sitting in the parlor ~~and~~ while making love in the bedroom" (28). More important to Herrman

is that a “ missed stick” later becomes his fatal “ mistake.” As the exiled Herrman rereads his writing of the pre-murder’s scene, his narrative voice cuts in:” With his stick, reader, with his stick. S-T-I-C-K, gentle reader. A roughly hewn stick branded with the owner’s name: Felix Wohlfahrt from Zwickau. With his stick he pointed, gentle or lowly reader, with his stick!... the thought that the whole of my masterpiece, which I had devised and worked out with such minute care, was now destroyed intrinsically, was turned into a little heap of mold, by reason of the mistake I had committed” (203). Nabokov repeats the quasi-portmanteau “ mistake” here to tie in his wife’s language quirk to his error. Finally, the stick alludes to Robert Louis Stevenson’s Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, in which Jekyll is implicated in the murder of a respected gentleman. The weapon that Hyde, the murderer, uses is a stick once given to Jekyll as a gift. The duality (or the quartet of qualities) of the word reveals much about Herrman’s character: his superior attitude towards his wife; his imperfect crime; his desire for a detached body that manifests itself in the literary allusion and in switching identities with Felix the “ happy”; and appropriately leads to the title of his book on examining his mistake: ““ Despair”; no need to look for a better title” (204). To complement Despair, the “ mystic” motif is brought up again in Sebastian Knight by way of another portmanteau, “ optimystics” (175). As the novel ends on a somewhat up and spiritual tone, the “ optimistic” and “ mystic” segments shine through. In Sebastian Knight, Nabokov pushes the limits of wordplay even further. In his synopsis of his half-brother’s novel, “ The Prismatic Bezel,” a parodic roman policier, as Nabokov’s narrators, who frequently turn to French to complicate and duplicate matters might say, the

astute reader notices a name-shift:” One of the lodgers, a certain G. Abeson, art-dealer, is found murdered in his room...In the meantime the inhabitants of the boarding house plus a chance passer-by, old Nosebag, who happened to be in the lobby when the crime was discovered, are examined...It gradually transpires that all the lodgers are in various ways connected with one another...’I think,’ said old Nosebag quietly, ‘ that I can explain.’ Slowly and very carefully he removes his beard, his gray wig, his dark spectacles, and the face of G. Abeson is disclosed” (90-2).” The Prismatic Bezel” is itself a title that serves to parody; its prism absorbs the spectrum of art, then the bezel cuts and refracts the light with its many pointed sides. Though Knight’s novel parodies many a detective novel, Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None* comes to mind. Both are novels which allow the reader to think of himself as always on top of things only to reverse course at the last moment. Sebastian Knight is similarly parodic, teasing the reader with at times “ obvious” clues, only to have them later detonate in his face. G. Abeson, a man whose life is to acquire art, never to produce it, like V., is “ Nosebag” backwards (also “ backwards,” another Nabokovian wordplay implication). The name Sebastian, in native Russian, is spelled with a ‘ v’ instead of a ‘ b.’ Perhaps V. has been Nosebagging through the whole book. But Nabokov, unlike Knight, leaves his conclusion in doubt: “ Thus ~~I~~ I am Sebastian Knight. I feel as if I were impersonating him on a lighted stage...Sebastian’s mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows” (203). Though Nabokov sums up his story on a rather sentimental, even moral, note, the previous doubling of “ G. Abeson” leaves some room for

ambiguity in the final pages. To cloud matters even more, Nabokov inserts several coincidental numbers throughout *Sebastian Knight*. The first is Knight's date of birth, "the thirty-first of December, 1899," or, in other words, the dawn of the new century. The woman who told V. this information is called "Olga Olegovna Orlova" ~~an~~ an egg-like alliteration which it would have been a pity to withhold" (3). Her initials ~~'O. O. O.'~~ also coincide with Sebastian's historical birth. The number "36" recurs often in the text: "In Mr. Goodman's Tragedy of Sebastian Knight (which appeared in 1936 and to which I shall have occasion to refer more fully)" (4); "So I was not at all sure of finding her still alive, in 1936" (19); "In his last published book, *The Doubtful Asphodel* (1936)" (23); "Time for Sebastian was never 1914 or 1920 or 1936 ~~it~~ it was always year 1" (63); "In March, 1936, after a month's stay in England, I consulted a tourist office and set out for Blaubeurg" (119); "I got a list of some forty-two names among which Sebastian's (S. Knight, 36 Oak Parks Gdns., London S. W.) seemed strangely lovely and lost" (129); "In the middle of January, 1936, I got a letter from Sebastian" (183); "ah, there it was: Jasmin 61-93" (194) [turned upside down and read from right dash to left dash, 61-93 is 19-36]; "'No,' he growled, 'the English Monsieur is not dead...K, n, K, g...n...I'm not an idiot, you know. Number thirty-six'" (199). Thirty-six is a perfect square of six, which contributes to the doubling theme. It is also a number that can be turned upside down to reveal another number, as evidence by the "61-93" reversal. V. strings together these dates with a theory of the occult: "He died in the very beginning of 1936, and as I look at this figure I cannot help thinking that there is an occult resemblance between a man and the date of his death. Sebastian Knight d.

1936...This date to me seems the reflection of that name in a pool of rippling water. There is something about the curves of the last three numerals that recalls the sinuous outlines of Sebastian's personality" (181). The "reflective" qualities of the number contribute to the theme of doubling and Sebastian's narcissism. More importantly, the frequency of the number in Sebastian's life lends itself to an occult fate he has been prescribed.

Nabokov employs numbers as fate in *Lolita* as well, using "342" throughout to denote a series of checkpoints in Humbert's life through which he must pass. Nabokov had an intimate knowledge of both Russian and English (and French), and that translated into a preoccupation with wordplay that recognized the inherent boundlessness of language. His dissection of words such as "mystic" are inserted not only for cleverness but to play a major role in plot and theme. V. writes that what annoyed Sebastian "invariably was the second rate, not the third or N-th rate, because here, at the readable stage, the shamming began, and this was, in an artistic sense, immoral...it is not a parody of the Sherlock Holmes vogue but a parody of the modern reaction from it" (90, 92). Nabokov parodied the parody, and the idiosyncrasies he planted in his works leave the reader wondering whether they are real clues or deceptive ones. The reader must always question if Nabokov is feeding the double theme or in fact parodying the reader's preconceived notion of doubling. That final ambiguity is the ultimate doubling: not the doubling of character, but the doubling of the reader.