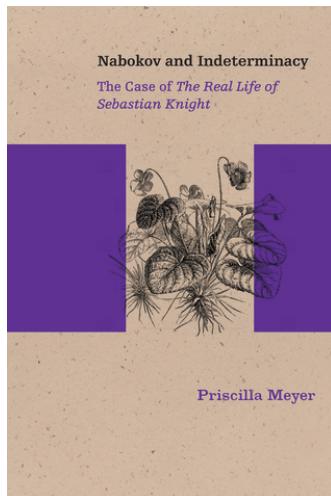


Nabokov and Indeterminacy: The Case of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, by Priscilla Meyer. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2018. ISBN 9780810137431. Notes. Bibliography. Index. 188 pp.



The indeterminacy of meaning has been a key notion for several schools of literary theory. From this point of view, the title of prominent Nabokov scholar Priscilla Meyer's new monograph is somewhat misleading, since her interests are not of a theoretical nature. Ambiguity's relevance to, for instance, Deconstruction is not mentioned in the book, and Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia* is only mentioned in passing. Meyer briefly discusses the inapplicability of the modern vs postmodern binary opposition to Nabokov's works at the beginning of the introduction, but her argument soon sets out in a different direction and only returns to this problem in a few short, scattered remarks.

Meyer's focus is on how Nabokov develops in his first English-language novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, a method to create ambiguity and how he utilizes this method in his later works, primarily in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. As Meyer shows, *Sebastian Knight* is structured around the following binary oppositions: art/reality; Russian/Anglophone; life/death. Nabokov creates ambiguity in order to subvert or merge these categories. (Meyer's monograph is divided into four parts – the first three are named after each of these binary oppositions, and the last one is called "Binaries Subverted.")

These concepts are interrelated. Nabokov's interest in whether there is life after death is influenced by his necessary switch to English from Russian: "His lifelong quest for the otherworld becomes in exile a counter to the irrevocability of his loss of Russia and all it represents" (149). Nabokov's efforts to bridge the gap between the Russian and the Anglophone cultures also serve as

a model for the attempt to bridge the gap between earthly existence and the supposed afterlife. Similarly, Nabokov's subversion of the difference between art and reality influences the notion of the otherworld. In his fiction, signs of the hereafter often appear in the form of a change in the autodiegetic narrator's style; in these instances, a deceased character sends clues and messages to the narrator or even shapes the way this narrator words certain parts of the text (for instance, the last paragraph of "The Vane Sisters" or the use of the term "elenctic" in *Sebastian Knight*). Thus, the problem of authorship is tied to the problem of the otherworld.

Using these three binaries (and placing the emphasis on the life/death opposition), Meyer contextualizes *Sebastian Knight* not only in Nabokov's œuvre but also in the Anglophone literary tradition. To my mind, this is the greatest achievement of her monograph. She analyzes how *Sebastian Knight* builds on an earlier novel of Nabokov's, *Despair*, and how *Lolita* and *Pale Fire* further develop the subversion of the three oppositions. Finding a common denominator between works as different as these ones is no simple task, and Meyer's discussion of Nabokov's ever-changing approach to the question of the otherworld is enjoyable and thought-provoking. She also traces a plethora of references to other writers, ranging from overt allusions (such as Lewis Carroll) to ones that are admittedly obscure to the point of being "near-invisible" (69). Meyer elegantly ties the obscurity of these references to the ambiguous nature of life after death: "The American tradition alluded to" in *Sebastian Knight* "is associated with ghosts, and therefore appropriately near-invisible" (69).

The first chapter examines how Nabokov sets *Sebastian Knight* into a dialogue with *Despair*. First, both novels play with the conventions of the doppelgänger genre. *Despair* subverts these conventions by featuring a double that the mad narrator believes to resemble him but the outside world finds completely unlike him. *Sebastian Knight*'s way of turning the traditional doppelgänger upside down is to have the doubles converge instead of diverge in the very last sentence of the novel (30). A more important parallel between the two books is that they represent opposing approaches to transcendence. Both Hermann (the narrator of *Despair*) and the eponymous character of *Sebastian Knight* playfully compare their creative talents to God's ability to create the world. *Despair* is a dark, scornful variant of the theme: Hermann does not actually believe in life after death, and confounds art and reality inasmuch as he tries to act like a quasi-God both in his life and in his writing. Sebastian, by contrast, is able to make a clear distinction between art and life, and successfully transcends the confines of mortal existence (33).

Naturally, this clear distinction between fiction and reality does not mean that *Sebastian Knight* promotes an uncomplicated understanding of the concept of reality. To reinforce this point,

Meyer compares the novel with Tom Stoppard's play *The Real Inspector Hound*, both of which employ the work-within-a-work technique. The comparative reading concludes that *Sebastian Knight* utilizes autobiographical references to Nabokov's own life in order to stress the unknowable nature of so-called reality (43).

Going back to *Despair*: Meyer argues that Nabokov invokes it in *Sebastian Knight* by reusing some of its motifs, namely: "the violet motif, the myth of Narcissus, portraits of the heroes (by Ardalion and Roy Carswell), leaves reflected in water, the stick and the cane, spiders, Hermann's and V's business failures, black and white, dogs, and hinds" (22). Meyer's claim that the presence of these motifs in *Sebastian Knight* specifically invoke *Despair* is sometimes debatable, like in the case of violets. According to the monograph, when these flowers appear in *Sebastian Knight*, they are associated with the opposite of what they are associated with in *Despair*. In the Russian novel, a dead violet dangling from Felix's button foreshadows his murder, whereas in the English novel violets remind Sebastian of his late mother. This is one of the reasons the novels can be read as conflicting takes on the question of the hereafter: "What represents murder and solipsism for Hermann, for Sebastian conveys immortality through love and literature" (24). However, Nabokov had already used violets as a symbol of death and immortality through love and literature before *Despair*. In "Spring in Fialta," before Nina suffers a fatal car accident, "a firm bouquet of small, dark, unselfishly smelling violets appeared in her hands...." In "The Return of Chorb," when the eponymous character reminisces about his deceased wife and recollects the stroll they had taken on the eve of their wedding, he recollects a violet-like smell: "How good was the earthy, damp, somewhat violety smell of the dead leaves strewing the sidewalk!"

Unlike *Despair* and *Sebastian Knight*, the short stories only mention violets in passing. They do not invalidate Meyer's point that the two novels can be read as contrasting reactions to the possibility of afterlife. Instead, they suggest that *Sebastian Knight* alludes to several works at once; that the interconnectedness of Nabokov's œuvre is even denser than Meyer indicates.

The monograph's second and third chapters focus on *Sebastian Knight*'s British and American subtexts, respectively. Meyer argues that the references to Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* "create an oscillation between ontological layers of the text" (53). On the one hand, the narrator of *Sebastian Knight*, V., makes the allusions under the influence of Sebastian's ghost; on the other hand, Silbermann, a character with Carrollian traits, can be seen as Nabokov's autobiographical reference to his Uncle Ruka.

In one of the most original and interesting parts of the monograph, Meyer interprets Virginia Woolf's novels as constituting another, hidden British subtext. *Sebastian Knight* employs

techniques found in *Jacob's Room*, a fragmented portrait of a young man who perished in World War I. Woolf's novel attests to the unrepresentability and unknowability of the casualties of war, and portrays a person by assembling other characters' fragmentary recollections of him and by describing Jacob's rooms and the books in them. *Sebastian Knight* also relies on the fragmentation of biography and characterizes Sebastian through descriptions of his bookshelf and his Cambridge surroundings. Moreover, the ending of the novel, where V. and Sebastian merge, deconstructs the concept of the self in a similar way as Woolf's *The Waves* does in Bernard's last soliloquy.

The American subtext comprises of overt references to Godfrey Goodman and Samuel Goodrich and covert links to Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry James. This subtext contributes primarily to the theme of the otherworld, but it is also relevant to *Sebastian Knight*'s autobiographical layer: Nabokov alludes to those works of Hawthorne that explore infidelity and "the mistreatment of a beloved woman" (81). Thus, these allusions can be read as Nabokov's coded apology to his wife for his extramarital affair with Irina Guadanini.

The next chapter discusses the origins of the spiritualist movement in America and its spread to Russia. Meyer demonstrates how Nabokov alludes to this tradition in "The Vane Sisters," *Sebastian Knight* and *Pale Fire*. Yet again, she suggests that the presence of this web of references has an autobiographical dimension: "The West-East geographic direction of the spiritualist craze is a mirror reversal of this theme in Nabokov's novel, which covertly describes the author's movement from Russia to the Anglophone world" (100).

The last section of the monograph examines *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*, arguing that they form a pair with opposing takes on whether there is an afterlife. As Nabokov wrote *Despair* as a negative variant and followed it with the affirmative *Sebastian Knight*, so does he first compose a pessimistic text in which fairies and spirits only exist in the solipsistic narrator's manipulative imagination (*Lolita*), then moves on to *Pale Fire*, a work in which spirits are active forces (110).

Meyer tackles a question popular in *Lolita* scholarship: "Does Quilty exist?" (123). She catalogs the contradictions surrounding the fictitious status of Humbert's rival, and concludes that the dilemma is intentionally unresolvable. The anagrammatic character Vivian Darkbloom, John Ray's foreword, and the embedded *Who's Who in the Limelight* create "wormholes" in the text that lead from one level of fictitiousness to the other. The result is that "Nabokov produces the experience of the 'unattainability' of reality in his novels" (131).

Pale Fire is examined not only in relation to *Lolita* but also in comparison with *Sebastian Knight*. Meyer calls attention to the similarities in how they experiment with structure and authorship. With regards to the belief in the afterlife, Meyer states: "The connected motifs,

references, characterizations, and story line show the American *Pale Fire* to be a mundane variant of the Anglo-Russian *Sebastian Knight*" (139). To further demonstrate *Pale Fire*'s ambiguity, Meyer contextualizes Kinbote's fear of Gradus in the real-life history of Soviet spies and assassins: Kinbote's anxiety may be comically exaggerated, but the background of these historical cases casts doubt on exactly how unfounded his paranoia is, which inspires sympathy for him (143).

Meyer's monograph offers a stimulating vision of the interconnectedness of Nabokov's works and the shifts in his authorial approach to the otherworld. Not all parts of the study are equally innovative: in the case of "The Vane Sisters" or *Lolita*, it might not venture too far from the traditional interpretations. Regardless, it successfully achieves the goal set in the introduction, namely, to explain how *Sebastian Knight*'s "methods and central themes illuminate Nabokov's later work" (3).

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