Disclosures under Seal: Nabokov, Secrecy and the Reader

Delage-Toriel Lara

Cycnos, études anglophones
revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice
ISSN 1765-3118 ISSN papier 0992-1893

Disclosures under Seal: Nabokov, Secrecy and the Reader

Lara Delage-Toriel

Université de Strasbourg

Secrecy is one of the staple ingredients of any good story. The very term for 'plot' in French is *"intrigue"*. Indeed, the fabric of a narrative is by essence a complex and dynamic interweaving of information disclosed and information withheld, which, when successful, will sufficiently intrigue the reader to draw him wholeheartedly into the world of fiction. One of the traditional roles of the critic is to 'explain', that is, unravel this complex interplay of warp and weft by observing the 'underside of the weave,' to borrow a Nabokovian phrase. Nabokov is one of those writers who is not only particularly aware of this underside, but is also particularly fond of making the reader aware of it too, and thus invites his readers to engage in the story from a critical stance which will bring them into close contact with creativity itself. Secrecy lies at the heart of this relationship between Nabokov and his reader: Humbert's journal is perhaps the most eloquent example of this process whereby the author seduces us into penetrating the heart of secrecy, where such intimacy would appear repugnant if viewed from a greater distance. Besides the moral issues raised by such a stance– complicity vs. detachment–, we may notice that secrecy hinges upon a dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, a dynamics which is not only very present in the reader/character relationship, as is here the case (we are included in a privileged circle, from which Charlotte Haze and her daughter are excluded), but also the reader/narrator relationship, as when Vadim claims he and his beloved, "You", share secrets nobody else will ever penetrate. In this case, the reader is most conspicuously excluded, the secret vibrantly flaunted in order to maintain its very existence, its "raison d'être," one

> might say. Once more, this might be interpreted as a basic narrative ploy. Yet Zembla's crown jewels or the shadow behind Pnin's heart are not merely riddles to which the reader may find 'elegant solutions' after a thorough study of the novel. Or so it may appear. How far, indeed, does the experience of reading Nabokov challenge the critic's position as riddle solver, or explainer? In other words, what limits to 'explanation' may such secrecy point to? What is the critic's legitimacy in such instances, whether he chooses to explain through annotation or interpretation (both attitudes denoting after all a faith in the critic's capacity to unravel fiction's mysteries)? Are some secrets best left undisturbed, while others seem suitable to decipherment? Would such typologies make any sense, considering Nabokov's aesthetic creeds? These are some of the many questions that shine through Nabokov's "translucent undertones".

In his famous essay entitled "Kafka's Precursors," Jorge Luis Borges propounds the idea that great readers create their own writers in a retroactive way.[1] We find no such latitude for the reader in Nabokov's own statements. In fact he makes quite the opposite claim in his biography of Gogol, declaring that it is the privilege of great writers to create their own readers, which then form together a closed family-circle.[2] The chicken-and-egg question of "who creates who?" may appear as a rather daunting point of departure, except that in many cases, the two positions are not mutually exclusive and may even be two sides of one same coin. Reading Nabokov's biography of Gogol, one cannot help noticing that as a great reader of Gogol, Nabokov has also created his own Gogol. My point here is not specifically to contradict Nabokov's statement, but rather to show that the relationship that exists between the writer and his readers involves a rather complex skein of desires which provoke a form of creativity on both parts, an impulse to invent. As the etymology of 'invent' reveals, the act of invention is closely linked to the discovery of something

[1] Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions: 1937-1952*, trans. Ruth L.C. Simms (Austin: U of Texas P, 1964) 47-65.
[2] Vladimir Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: Doubleday, 1944) 41.

that is already there, but awaiting disclosure; this may explain why both writers and readers love secrets, as though the existence of a secret were part and parcel of the pact that binds them together.

Nabokov's novels and stories are rife with secrets, but I have chosen to focus on two novels which generally lie in the shadow of his most acclaimed novels, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Pnin*.[3] In both novels, secrets play a fundamental role in striking a relationship with the reader: *Sebastian Knight* introduces within its second sentence "an old Russian lady who has for some obscure reason begged me not to divulge her name" (*SK* 3): the reason will remain obscure, but not the name itself, for at the end of this opening paragraph, after offering us a perfectly banal account of the weather on the day of Sebastian Knight's birth, the narrator yields the secret of her name, as if to patch up a rather bad start: "Her name was and is Olga Olegovna Orlova–an egg-like alliteration which it would have been a pity to withhold" (*SK* 3). To my mind, the most striking aspect of this initial, and initiating, disclosure is the fact that it is flaunted, exposed as *such*. The narrator could have yielded the secret without presenting it as such; but then, would it still be a secret? It would seem that a secret needs to be signalled in order to exist.

This observation also holds true for the secret which opens *Pnin*, that is, the fact that Pnin is on the wrong train. Instead of declaring, quite simply, that Pnin is on the wrong train, the narrator foregrounds the revelation: "Now a secret must be imparted" (*P* 8). Although the passive form is rather impersonal, the prefatory adverb 'now' clearly signals a desire on the narrator's part to draw attention to himself. This aspect of revelation is also very present in *Sebastian Knight*, where the concealing/revealing gesture emphasizes the narrator's power as story-teller and source of information we must depend on. In this particular case, such power stems from the triangular structure of the secret, which involves the narrator, the reader, and a third party who is excluded from the secret. Exclusion is one of the key features of a secret: the term *secret* comes from the Latin *secretus*, meaning "set apart, withdrawn, hidden," which is the past participle of *secernere*, "to set apart," where the suffix *se* means 'without, apart,'

[3] The following editions have been used: *Pnin* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997); *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: Vintage International, 1992). Subsequent citations will refer to these works as *P* and *SK*.

and the root verb *cernere* means "to separate." This motion of "setting apart" is quite obviously contrived at the beginning of *Pnin*. Indeed, as soon as he has imparted his secret, the narrator informs us that Pnin "was unaware of it" (p 8). So Pnin is set apart, or rather, we (the narrator and the reader) share a secret that sets us apart from the netherworld of the novel. Thus the narrator's gesture invites us to form a circle of initiates from which Pnin is excluded. In both novels, the narrator resorts to a secret as a means to achieve a privileged relationship with the reader. This strategy might be related to the author's desire to induce a link of complicity between his readership and himself, but my contention is that this is a sham secret, made to mask the real secrets underlying these novels. Indeed, a real secret is not so easily disclosed. The initial secrets make us aware of the narrators' potential power, but as we read on, we realise that the inclusion/exclusion dynamics are more complex than first appeared, and the real secrets are revealed for what they are: not a static, stable given that may be simply discovered (like a name or a wrong train), but something closer to Nabokov's definition of reality as a "gradual accumulation of information," and, much less reassuringly, as "an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable… So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects."[4]

In the case of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, we start off with the impression that the narrator is going to give us a faithful account of his half-brother's life, in keeping with the title of the novel. The most obvious secret the narrator has set out to discover for us is the typical enigma of detective stories: it is the identity of the last woman in Sebastian's life, swathed with the aura of a *femme fatale*. She is, we are told, the missing link, without which the portrait of Sebastian will remain incomplete (*SK* 118). The assumption is that the enigma surrounding Sebastian Knight's life, and especially the end of his life, will find its resolution in the discovery of the female "culprit." But as the story follows its meandering course, as the narrator's personal adventure is dovetailed with the writer's life and works, we begin to wonder, after all, whether greater secrets are not at hand. When for instance the narrator admits that "it had gradually grown into a dream,

[4] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York-: Vintage International, 1990) 10-11.

that quest, using the pattern of reality for the weaving of its own fancies," (*SK* 135) one cannot help agreeing that the real object of scrutiny, the real secret, is not so much linked to Sebastian Knight, as to the narrator himself. As in Poe's "Purloined Letter," this secret is so obtrusive that it goes easily unseen upon a first reading.[5] Thus we might not lend much importance to this early remark: "to readers of Goodman's book I am bound to appear non-existent–a bogus relative, a garrulous impostor"–belonging to the Kinbote genus, one may add. Our assumption here is that an impostor in an impostor's account cannot be an impostor himself. But what about this other hint, at the beginning of chapter 6:

> Beware of the most honest broker. Remember that what you are told is really threefold: shaped by the teller, reshaped by the listener, concealed from both by the dead man of the tale. Who is speaking of Sebastian Knight? Repeats that voice in my conscience. Who indeed? His best friend and his half-brother. A gentle scholar, remote from life, and an embarrassed traveller visiting a distant land. (*SK* 50)

Once more, the Nabokovian reader may recognize Kinbotian features in the narrator's claim that he is Sebastian's "best friend"–for the novel shows how little Sebastian confided in the narrator, who is forced to fill the huge blanks in his knowledge of his biographee by relying on closer friends. As in most of Nabokov's novels, many aspects of the narrator's discourse lead us to question his reliability: for instance his use of paralipsis, a rhetorical figure giving emphasis to a subject by professing to say little or nothing of it. I am thinking of the point in chapter 11 when he refuses to broach upon the subject of Sebastian's sexual relationship with Clare (*SK* 103), or those passages where he assures us that he does not wish to lapse into personal considerations about himself (*SK* 139, 166). Perhaps the most intriguing form of paralipsis occurs each time we expect the narrator's name will appear: the name itself is systematically omitted. Thus when the narrator meets Mr. Goodman:

> I suddenly realised that my name conveyed nothing to him. Sebastian had made his mother's name his own very completely.

[5] This is what French philosopher Pierre Boutang terms a "hyperobtrusive situation" in his *Ontologie du secret* (Paris: Quadrige, 1988).

> "I am," I answered, "Sebastian Knight's half-brother." (*SK* 55)

Then on the following page we learn that Mr. Goodman "tried to pronounce our simple Russian name" (*SK* 56); simple as it is, we are merely granted three dots in lieu of his name: "'a copy of my contract with Mr. Knight. Or should I call him Mr….' and smiling under his mask Mr. Goodman tried to pronounce our simple Russian name" (*SK* 56). The Russianness of the name is also the only clue we are afforded when the narrator encounters his future informer, Mr. Silbermann, in the train:

> "My name is Silbermann," he said, and stretched out his hand. I shook it and named myself too. "But dat is not English," he cried slapping his knee. "Dat is Russian!" (SK 125)

The narrator also resorts to the indirect mode when he meets Elena Grinstein:

> ""But what is *your* name," she asked peering at me with her dim soft eyes which somehow reminded me of Clare. "I think you mentioned it, but to-day my brain seems to be in a daze…Ach," she said when I had told her. "But that sounds familiar"'(*SK* 134).

But the narrator's most whimsical way of flouting our expectations is when he adopts the direct form: here the blank becomes even more visible. This device occurs in the last two instances. Thus, when he introduces himself to Mme. Lecerf's first husband:

> "My name is so-and-so," I said. "And mine," he cried, "is Pahl Pahlich Rechnoy." (*SK* 140)

And at the very end, when he presents himself to the nurse at St Damier, responding to the ritual question:

> "What is your name, please?" "Right," I said. "I haven't explained. We are half-brothers, really. My name is [I mentioned my name]." (*SK* 202)

Typographical details are significant here: the brackets suggest a greater hiatus than parentheses, as if this were an editorial insert, albeit set within the inverted commas of direct speech.[6]

---

[6] It must be noted that this hide-and-seek game also occurs in Pnin, but in a somewhat more perverse form, since the narrator also appears as a third-person

Such protruding discontinuities are obviously not innocent. Whereas the narrator had most often been exposed as the one who was excluded from a secret circle, we are made aware of the fact that he himself is a cryptic character, not to the other characters, who share in the secret, but to ourselves. One may therefore wonder what is the point behind such disclosures under seal, disclosures that never pierce through the surface of the narrative. Are they simple teasers? Are they meant to make the reader share in the frustrations of the characters, at being never quite able to catch the reality they were chasing (I am thinking of Sebastian Knight's confusion of the two Roquebrunes where his mother spent the end of her life; a confusion that is echoed in the final boner at St Damier, when the narrator makes a last-minute attempt too see his half-brother, only to discover he was given the wrong patient)? Nevertheless, I do not believe the notion of shared frustration can be an end in itself, for there is something rather sterile about a stalemate. It may be an incentive to reading the narrative in a novel way, which would give more onus to the identity of the narrator. But this is the reading I have just made and it does not allow me to fill the blanks. Perhaps *this* is precisely the secret which Nabokov wishes to impart to us: that we should not turn to fiction in order to discover any truths, save the truth of fiction itself.

In his essay "Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable," Nabokov attempts to offer us a faithful portrait of Pushkin, by visualising his life as it might have been. Yet, as he himself admits, these are but fanciful visions, for there is an unbridgeable abyss between what is likely (*le vraisemblable*) in fiction, and what is true (*le vrai*) in real life. However, these general considerations, which Nabokov's works often bring to mind, are not quite pertinent enough in relation to the issue of secrecy. I think that what the narrator's secrecy in *The Real Life of Sebastian* truly evidences is the right fiction has to keep certain

---

character within the narrator's own discourse. Thus when Pnin's colleague, Hagen, evokes the narrator-as-character, the narrator inserts within the dialogue the following piece of non-information: "Hagen named the fascinating lecturer" (pP 142). Within this same volume, Gennady Barabtarlo's insightful glosses on the narrator's name in The Real Life of Sebastian provide a valuable counterpoint in the musical sense to my own analysis.

things unsaid.[7] Not simply as a means to provoke the reader's desire, but also because such reserve is vital to fiction. One tends to forget that obscurity is at base a form of protection. Indeed the Latin *obscurus* is made of *ob*, 'over', and–*scurus*, from the Latin *scutum*, shield, and the Greek, *skeue*, 'dress.' The challenge, for a writer like Nabokov who so constantly probes and exhibits the human mind, is to maintain such obscurity at the moment of greatest exposure.

To *my* mind, one of the most interesting instances of this squaring of the circle occurs in *Pnin*. The novel opens on a striptease of sorts, at the expense of its main protagonist:

> Ideally bald, sun-tanned, and clean-shaven, he began rather impressively with that great brown dome of his, tortoise-shell glasses (masking an infantile absence of eyebrows), apish upper lip, thick neck, and strong-man torso in a tightish tweed coat, but ended, somewhat disappointingly, in a pair of spindly legs (now flannelled and crossed) and frail-looking, almost feminine feet.(p7)

Pnin has barely stepped into the novel, but he is already entirely exposed, even his glasses fail to shield him from the narrator's penetrating gaze. By itemizing his hero's aspect in the slightest detail, from head to feet, the narrator achieves something quite similar to Flaubert's description of Charles Bovary's cap in the incipit of *Madame Bovary*: Pnin is immediately marked as a comic character.[8] Besides, his baldness makes him ideal for the part. The deictic *that* which is used to introduce Pnin's dome–"that great brown dome of his"–also signals that the character is already known and defined. In grammatical terms, the presence of a deictic signals a consensus

---

7 In using the adjective "certain" I am also thinking of Emily Dickinson's poetic creed, such as it is voiced in one of her most renowned poems, "There's a certain Slant of light" (Selected Poems (London: Orion, 1997). Such a slant of light, she writes,

Heavenly Hurt, it gives us———–
We can find no scar,
But internal difference,
Where the Meanings, are———–
None may teach it – Any———–
-'Tis the Seal Despair——(12)

8 An English version of *Madame Bovary* is available on the World Wide Web on the Project Gutenberg site: http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/2413

between the enunciator (the narrator) and the co-enunciator (the implied reader). So Pnin's easily circumscribed roundedness is the perfect meeting point between the narrator and the reader.

In the second paragraph of the novel, the narrator dwells at some length on the evolution of Pnin's clothing habits:

> Prior to the 1940s, during the staid European era of his life, he had always worn long underwear, its terminals tucked into the tops of neat silk socks, which were clocked, soberly coloured, and held up on his cotton-clad calves by garters. In those days, to reveal a glimpse of that white underwear by pulling up a trouser leg too high would have seemed to Pnin as indecent as showing himself to ladies minus collar and tie. […] All this underwent a change in the heady atmosphere of the New World. Nowadays, at fifty-two, he was crazy about sunbathing, wore sport shirts and slacks, and when crossing his legs would carefully, deliberately, brazenly display a tremendous stretch of bare shin. (p 7)

All this dilly-dallying about underwear may appear rather trivial, but far from skirting his subject the narrator is already granting us a glimpse of what I consider the novel's most serious concern: the intimate self. The full significance of clothing and divestment may be grasped a few pages later, when Pnin has a seizure in Whitchurch park. At this point, the narrator lapses into a quasi-philosophical reflection:

> I do not know if it has ever been noted before that one of the main characteristics of life is discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a spacetraveller's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego. The sensation poor Pnin experienced was something very like that divestment, that communion. He felt porous and pregnable. He was sweating. He was terrified. (p 16)

The notion of discreteness is particularly germane to that of the secret: for both involve a movement of separation, tracing the boundary between self and other. Throughout the novel, Pnin frequently stresses the value of privacy, as when he tells his new lodger, Joan Clements, that "special privacy is now to me absolutely necessary" (p 28). Yet the emphasis on privacy is somewhat contradicted by the intruding

presence of the narrator. How can Pnin keep to himself when his whole being seems subjected to constant scrutiny, from the fabric of his underwear to the texture of his thoughts and dreams?

However, like Sebastian Knight, Pnin eventually evades the narrator's grasp. This escape is made very explicit in the novel's closing lines, when the character's blue sedan, "free at last," (p 160) vanishes into the misty horizon. Yet even before this final vanishing act, the narrator has lost some of his 'narrative grip' on Pnin. Indeed, his omniscience is brought into question in Chapter 7, when Pnin first contradicts his own version, then publicly attacks him, declaring he is a "dreadful inventor" (p 154). This is a classical instance of Nabokovian irony, in which we suddenly realise, despite the many hints dropped before our eyes until then, that everything we were seeing was screened by a narrator who is also a character, and whose knowledge is thus necessarily limited. Yet although Pnin contradicts the narrator's version, he does not grant us his own version and does not interfere in the development of the narrative, as Ada does through her annotations, for example. As a consequence, the entire narrative burden is born by the narrator, who could be considered a parasite in both novels, since his entire fictional existence derives from his object, and the knowledge of this object. Under such circumstances, it is highly unlikely that secrets concerning the main character will be disclosed as such.

A distinction must of course be drawn between the two narrators, since that of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is much more willing to acknowledge blindspots in his view of his character. For all we know, perhaps the whole narrative of *Pnin* is a mass of secrets, but if such is the case these have all been hatched and are never presented as such. We may thus ask the following question: is it possible to disclose a secret yet keep it alive beyond its exposure to the public? I think this is possibly the case in epistolary novels, where we are made to feel we are sharing the private life of characters because their thoughts are unmediated. Still, as previously noted, what is important in secrets is the fact that they are set apart, out of reach. And unlike mysteries, secrets are more personal, they involve an individual keeper, a guardian. Thus it is fairly common to pinpoint mysteries in Nabokov's novels, enigmas that elude our understanding, puzzles that make us scratch our heads as we embark upon one more voyage

through Nabokov's wildly whimsical world, but how often do we feel we are in presence of an actual secret? How often do we feel we are witnessing what I call a "disclosure under seal," in which the secret remains paradoxically intact, under seal, despite its disclosure? I have given one example so far, the omission of the narrator's name in *Sebastian Knight*. In this case, it is the reader who feels excluded. Now if we consider *Pnin* in the light of my introduction to the novel, we might anticipate the discovery of an altogether different type of secret. For as I said earlier, there is in *Pnin* an obvious desire on the narrator's part to include, rather than exclude, the novel's readers. Even if on a few occasions, Nabokov playfully withholds the actual name of the "fascinating lecturer" (p 142) who will take Pnin's job, the reader has no trouble relating the undisclosed name to other parts of the novel where the name is discreetly evoked (in fact only once, in Chapter 5, page 107).[9]

Still, I think there is one instance in the novel where we have a secret being shared and yet preserved, and this concerns the shadow behind Pnin's heart. In Chapter 5, Pnin laughingly tells his fellow émigré, Chateau, that "everytime *he* was X-rayed, doctors vainly tried to puzzle out what they termed a 'shadow behind the heart'" (p 105). It is a passing allusion, swiftly dismissed by Chateau as a "good title for a bad novel" but this shadow has more depth to it than may appear at first sight. One may notice that "shadow" is merely a term used by doctors to put a name onto a phenomenon that is nameless because unknown to them. On the other hand, for the seasoned reader and particularly the Nabokovian reader, the term "shadow" immediately triggers various associations of ideas, in particular those of death, spectrality and transcendence, reminiscent, for example, of the "shadows of other worlds" in the biography of Gogol, or the threatening agents of death in *Pale Fire*.[10] In the particular case of *Pnin*, I would conceive of it as also a kind of black hole, something inscrutable for the mind's eye, that is however central to Pnin's being. Something that might also help us to fathom the somewhat cryptic

---

[9] Nabokov revealed to his friend Edmund Wilson that the name flitting through the text at this point of the novel actually referred to himself (*The Nabokov-Wilson Letters: Correspondence between Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson, 1940-1971*, ed. and intro. Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper Colophon, 1980), 307).

[10] Nabokov, *Gogol* 149.

statement made earlier on, in Chapter 2: “there are human solids and there are human surds, and Clements and Pnin belonged to the latter variety” (p 34).

Although this shadow never reappears as such, it is exposed shortly after Pnin’s conversation with Chateau following one of those seizures, which had previously been related to a dysfunctioning of Pnin’s heart:

> What chatty Madam Shpolyanski mentioned had conjured up Mira’s image with unusual force. This was disturbing. Only in the detachment of an incurable complaint, in the sanity of near death, could *one* cope with this for a moment. In order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin–not because, in itself, the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his peace of mind... but because, if *one* were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira’s death were possible. *One* had to forget–because *one* could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart *one* had heard beating under one’s lips in the dusk of the past. And since the exact form of her death had not been recorded, Mira kept dying a great number of deaths in *one*’s mind, and undergoing a great number of resurrections, only to die again and again, led away by a trained nurse, inoculated with filth, tetanus bacilli, broken glass, gassed in a sham shower-bath with prussic acid, burned alive in a pit on a gasoline-soaked pile of beechwood…. (p 112-113; italics mine)

For me, this passage holds a very special position not only in *Pnin*, but in Nabokov’s literary production at large, and perhaps the whole of this article is nothing more than an excuse to be able to share it with you. For me, this is the throbbing heart of the novel, a privileged moment when we are allowed to venture into the sanctuary of Pnin’s most intimate self, that same *interior intimo meo* where Augustine

found God in Book 3 of his *Confessions*.[11] Although the passage is poignant, it has none of the pathetic –verging on the bathetic–quality of other poignant passages, such as the moment when he collapses in front of Joan after Liza's heartbreaking visit, yet manages to make us laugh, or at least smile, by mispronouncing "whisky and soda" ("viscous and sawdust" 50). In this brief moment of disclosure, an added dimension, barely sketched until then, transforms our view of Pnin from that of a rather farcical character, to something of a tragic figure, if not a tragic hero. This may be due to the fact that Pnin's shadowy secret retains much of its obscurity in spite of its revelation to the reader. The disclosure is a quiet one, displaying none of the facetious playfulness of the metatextual secret-sharing that opened the novel. Its power derives from the rather oblique quality of the focalisation, which does not confront Pnin through a classical third-person narrative, but draws us into a rather uncommon free indirect discourse, tinted by the eerie colouring, or shade, of the pronoun "one." Indeed, this impersonal form is normally associated with abstract, general statements, not with intimate, subjective matters – as though Pnin's traumatic experience no more belonged to his individual self, but must be included within the much vaster sphere of Human History, which, as Pnin reminds Hagen, is the History of Pain (p 141), a Pain that so closely echoes the hero's name. If such is the logic behind the use of "one," then we must assume that the narrator is still handling Pnin's secret. But we could also assume that this "one" is the result of Pnin's own desire to take distances from his own self, in an attempt to achieve a radical form of discreteness protecting him from invasions from the past. Boyd helpfully informs us in his biography that Nabokov himself was diagnosed with an unaccountable "Shadow behind the Heart," and he quotes what I can only guess to be either a piece of correspondence or a diary entry: "something that has been haunting me for more than ten years".[12] That same verb may be applied to this spectral secret that returns, intact, and uninvited, across the years. But reading on, a few lines later, we may become dissatisfied with this interpretation, according to which

[11] An English version of this work may be accessed on the World Wide Web on the Project Gutenberg site: http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/3296

[12] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (London: Vintage, 1993) 216.

Pnin is viewing himself as "one," a divided "one," detached from his own self: "The mosquitoes were getting bothersome. Time for tea. Time for a game of chess with Chateau. That strange spasm was over, one could breathe again." (p 113-114). Here, the narrative has conspicuously returned to its storyline, Pnin has emerged out of his seizure, the spell should be broken, and yet this strange "one" will not disappear. Noticing the persistence of this "one," I asked one of my Russian students whether this "one" could not be an instance of Russian contamination, since both Pnin and the narrator have Russian origins – or at least partly Russian, in the narrator's case.[13] She confirmed my suspicions, having also checked the two available translations of *Pnin* in Russian. The foreigness of the very writing would thus appear to seep through the texture of the narrative and lend an added shade of eeriness to a secret which is at once so openly articulated.

It is tempting to believe one may have finally hatched the secret of Pnin's "shadow" when considering the genesis of the novel. In point of fact, the presence of the shadow may be logically explained by the fact that Nabokov had originally intended to kill off his main protagonist; the looming shadow would have thus prepared his death and made it acceptable to the reader.[14] But this rational explanation fails to satisfy us entirely, for in the novel's final version, Pnin does not die, yet the shadow itself remains, somewhat absurdly, remarkable in its irreducible redundancy, as the virtual trace of a Pnin who could have been but was not, or rather could have *not* been, and finally *was*, and remains, an 'exempleerie survivor'. Sebastian Knight may also be considered such a survivor, sustaining his half-brother with "the secret knowledge that in some unobtrusive way [his own] shade is trying to be helpful" (*SK* 99). Both shadow and shade help the reader by revealing that there is not just one "one,' but various modes of "one(s)," or, to make an un-Kinbotian gesture and give the last word to the author of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, that "Whatever his secret was, I have learnt one secret too, and namely: that the soul is but a manner of being–not a constant state–that any soul may be

[13] I wish to thank Maria Podoprygolova for her generous help on this matter.

[14] The novel's initial plot may be found in a letter Nabokov wrote to his publisher, Pascal Covici, in *Selected Letters 1940-1977*, ed. Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1989) 143.

yours, if you find and follow its undulations" (*SK* 202)–through both interpretations and annotations, I would be disposed to add, but I shall not.