Immortality of Nostalgic Souls in Vladimir Nabokov's The Real Life of Sebastian Knight

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Abstract:

This study is basically concerned with the conceptualization of Nostalgic Souls in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (*RLSK)* as an exile novel. In *RLSK,* Nabokov's creative conceptualization of nostalgia was apparent in his attempts to reveal that nostalgic souls never die. On one hand, in *RLSK,* Nabokov distinctively explores how non-Russians are nostalgic for Russia; the place that once hosted them. Nostalgic non-Russians or the "wandering souls" who lost their host home could practice the same obsessive feeling of longing and belonging experienced by Russian exiles who lost their home. Nabokov wrote that: "Swiss women who had been governesses in Russia before the Revolution… lived in their past...but when these poor wandering souls came home, they found themselves complete strangers …Unknown Russia now took on the aspect of a lost paradise" (*RLSK* 18-19). In this sense, nostalgic Swiss women go under psychological tension because of their longing for a foreign home and their shaky belonging to their native home. Merging real with fictional, those people *exist* in their actual homeland, yet they nostalgically *live* in their virtual host-home, Russia. Such exiles resort to nostalgia to find a fictional home for their "wandering souls." These wandering souls may suffer but virtually never die. Such a conclusion goes in line with Nabokov's mystical vision that "Nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (*Speak, Memory* 77). Similarity, the exiled Sebastian practices memorization to idealize and demonize Russia. Sebastian bitterly declared, "I have not stopped loving you, but because I cannot go on kissing your dim dear face, we must part, we must part" (*RLSK* 56). Sebastian may decide to part Russia physically, yet the expression of his longing "I have not stopped loving you" is an everlasting feeling. The point to be stressed here is that an exile could *exist physically* in one place, but he *virtually lives* in another. For V., he and his brother are physically two bodies, yet they may have a shared soul. Concerning such a case of full soul fusion, V. admitted: "I may have seen and remembered what he saw and remembered" *(RLSK 34).* To facilitate soul fusion, V. exploited Sebastian's statement: "I'm not dead… and this is my Sabbath rest" (*RLSK* 90). Such saying may support the claim that Sebastian's soul faints but never dies.

Keywords: Nostalgic Souls, Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Mystical vision.

مخلص:

ديمومة الأروح التواقة في رواية ڤلادمير نابوكوف

"الحياة الحقيقية لسباستيان نايت"

تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى تحليل موضوع الأرواح التواقة في رواية الحياة الحقيقية لسباستيان نايت للكاتب ڤلادمير نابوكوف كنموذج لأدب المهجر. ومن خلال العرض الإبداعي للكاتب لموضوع الأرواح التواقة خَلُصت الدراسة إلى أن الأروح التواقة لا تموت. ولم يكتف نابوكوف بعرض الاشتياق أو الحنين للوطن من خلال المواطنين الروس الذين أبعدوا عن أوطانهم بل صور موضوع الاشتياق والحنين لدى غير الروس تحت مفهوم "الأرواح الطوافة "التي تنتقل من مكان إلى أخر. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك أشارت الدراسة إلى أن الشعور بالاشتياق والانتماء متوفر لدى المهاجرين من أصل روسي. وبالعودة إلى مفهوم الأرواح الطوافة فقد كان الكاتب يقصد بهم المربيات السويسريات اللائي كن يعملن في روسيا قبل الثورة وأن تذكرهن للماضي والحنين إليه كان مرتبط بماضيهن في روسيا أكثر من موطنهن الأصلي سويسرا فبعد عودتهن إلى سويسرا عاشوا كالأغراب. هذه الأحاسيس وغيرها عاشتها شخوص الرواية ليثبت الكاتب أن الأرواح التواقة للوطن لا تموت فإذا ما حرمت من العودة للوطن بالجسد فإنها يمكن لها ان تعود إلى الأوطان بالروح وهذا ما أسماه "بالعودة الافتراضية".

> We are exiles from our mother's womb, from our childhood, from private happiness, from peace, even if we are not exiles in the more conventional sense of the word. The feeling of looking back for the last time, of setting our face to a new and possibly hostile world is one we all know. (Simpson, vii)

This study is basically concerned with the conceptualization of Nostalgic Souls as reflected in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as an exile novel. Accordingly, both exile and nostalgia are subject to a comprehensive investigation. This investigation highlights the intrinsic features of exile literature that may help provide a new rereading for the relationship between exile and nostalgia.

Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) as a distinguished Russian exiled writer belongs to an aristocratic family in St. Petersburg, Russia. He attended the most prestigious and expensive schools in Russia so that he spoke French, English, and Russian since his early childhood. In 1917, the Bolsheviks took power and Nabokov's family left Russia and settled in the Crimea. As the Bolsheviks threatened the Crimea, the Nabokov's family again fled to England. After that, the family had moved to Berlin where he began publishing fiction and poetry. In 1937, Nabokov left

Nazi Germany and moved to Paris. Later, when the Nazis invaded France, Nabokov fled to the United States. In 1977, Nabokov died leaving a prolific production of literary and non-literary works. Spending more than two thirds of his life in exile, Nabokov mentioned this long exilic lifespan as "a colored spiral in a small ball of glass" (*Speak, Memory* 275).

Torn between his love for Pre-Revolutionary Russia and his dislike for the Soviet regime, Nabokov expressed his anguish through the sad voices of his characters who attempt to cope with reality, yet they are not always successful. In most cases, Nabokov seems to be the prototype of his protagonists. His fictional exiles could not sufficiently relate themselves to the world around them so that they kept yearning for something unattainable. His fictional characters prefer to live in a world of memories that resurrects nothing. The calamity of leaving Russia is the question that Nabokov cannot avoid, and some of his private pain is inevitably imparted into the lives of his fictional characters who confront the same kind of agony. Nabokov declared that his "best works are those in which he condemns his people to the solitary confinement of their souls" (*Speak, Memory* 216-217).

Explaining his exile from Russia, Nabokov stated:

> The type of artist who is always in exile even though he may never have left the ancestral hall or the paternal parish is a well-known biographical figure with whom I feel some affinity; but in a straighter

> sense, exile means to an artist only one thing- the banning of his books. . . It's Russia's loss, not mine. (*Strong Opinions* 118)

Nabokov's words reveal that he wants to utilize memories of his past for maintaining peaceful coexistence in the present. He wants Russia out of his dreams, out of his mind, and out of his life; and yet the prevalent awareness that Russia will never leave him and this explains the emptiness he feels as long as he stays away. This emotional vacuum as "awareness of loss" (xiii). To make up for this loss, Nabokov produced novels filled with memories of the country that he once knew (Tuker 42). Nabokov makes it clear that political changes are only part of a larger problem: "the stress is not on Russian Revolution. It could have been anything, an earthquake, an illness, an individual departure prompted by a private disaster. The accent is on the abruptness of the change" (*Strong Opinions* 148).

Throughout Nabokov's life, the possibility of return remained an open wound. Nabokov tried to make serious adjustments to cope with his long journey of transitions: from Russia to Europe, from Europe to the United States, and from the United States back to Europe. Strikingly, back to Russia remained as a dream.

Trying to clarify his real identity, Nabokov said: "I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany" (*Strong Opinions* 26). In such saying, Nabokov

exposes his multicultural and cosmopolitan background that emphasizes that he was a citizen of the world. Again, Nabokov's love for Russia was shared by America as his "second home in the true sense of the word" (*Strong Opinions* 10). Grayson suggested that Nabokov "had turned the hard-luck story of the dispossessed aristocrat into an American dream" (105). He realized his American dream by being a distinguished American writer in the United States. Stepping into his exile from an early age, Nabokov views his exilic lifespan but "a colored spiral in a small ball of glass" (*Speak, Memory* 275) that seemingly follows some "thematic designs" (*Speak, Memory* 27), and it is his "true purpose" to reveal these designs in an autobiography *Speak, Memory*, in which memory is regarded as the origin of his narrative imagination. As Nabokov put it "I inherited an exquisite simulacrum—the beauty of intangible training for the endurance of later losses" (*Speak, Memory* 40).

Back to his roots, Nabokov wrote: "I do feel Russian and I think that my Russian works, the various novels and poems and short stories that I have written during these years, are a kind of tribute to Russia" (*Strong Opinions* 13). This may confirm Nabokov's strong ties with Russia. That is to say, Russia remains vivid in Nabokov's imagination yet it is trapped in a marginal area. When he was asked about what his exile from Russia meant to him, he replied:

> The type of artist who is always in exile even though he may never have left the ancestral hall or the

> paternal parish is a well-known biographical figure with whom I feel some affinity; but in a straighter sense, exile means to an artist only one thing—the banning of his books. . . . It's Russia's loss, not mine. (*Strong Opinions* 118)

Nabokov's loyalty toward Russia is tested by his desire to exist without any emotional burdens. In his poem "To Russia" (1939), composed in Paris and later self-translated into English, he pleads with his country to leave him alone. The poet depicts an emotional torture that equalizes slow death. Russia remains a place that he will never again visit:

> Will you leave me alone? I implore you!
>
> Dusk is ghastly. Life's noises subside.
>
> I am helpless. And I am dying
>
> Of the blind touch of your whelming tide. (*Poems and Problems*1-4)

Such intense fleeing did not remain longer. Later, Nabokov gave up the idea of returning home because he could learn how to feel at home in exile: "in a new and beloved world, where I have learned to feel at home" (*Speak, Memory* 277). However, Nabokov never forgets Russia. Russia remains in his heart as a nostalgic memory. To this point, Nabokov's hatred for the Soviet regime could not take Russia away from his heart. Nabokov asserts that Russia will remain in his mind, but just as a

dream: “What it would be actually to see again my former surroundings, I can hardly imagine. Sometimes I fancy myself revisiting them with a false passport, under an assumed name. It could be done” (*Speak, Memory* 250).

Seemingly, Nabokov resorts to his memories to relive his past in Russia. He mentioned: “I have a more passionate affection for my old memories, the memories of my childhood, than I have for later ones … I do feel Russian” (*Strong Opinions* 12). He explores deeply the complications of nostalgic feeling for a lost Russia because he believes that return to home can only be made through the passage of memory. In this respect, Seidel stated: “exile contributes to the obsessive release of memory” (224). Along with Seidel, Nabokov adopts both memories and experiences as main tools of his trade or art: “I keep the tools of my trade, memories, experiences, [and] sharp shining things” (*Strong Opinions*155). In this sense, nostalgic memories may be utilized by Nabokov to resolve the tension between today and yesterday, and between here and there.

Shortly, it could be concluded that Nabokov’s exilic experience has a great impact on his literary works. Accordingly, nostalgia seems to be one of the healing mechanisms that Nabokov’s fictional exile characters manipulate to cope with the exile pains. In other words, Nabokov has given nostalgia a permanent place within his fictional works. Stachniak confirms such a conclusion mentioning that "nostalgic voices are prevailing in the literary works of the exiled writers and

undeniable in many exile literary masterpieces (30). To the same line, MacLennan put it: "Exile literature is profoundly nostalgic and yearns for the lost nation" (20).

> No, Leslie, says Sebastian from the floor, I'm not dead. I have finished building a world, and this is my Sabbath rest. (Nabokov, *RLSK* 90)

Nabokov published *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Hereafter *RLSK*) in 1941. It was his first prose narrative in English. Most of the narrative focuses on two exiled fictional characters Sebastian and V. Sebastian is a son of a Russian father and an English mother. He lived his childhood and a large part of his adolescence in Russia. His half-brother V. belongs to the same father and a French mother. "Sebastian Knight was born in 1899 [in Russia]" (*RLSK* 1). V. wrote: "I was born there myself, some six years later" (*RLSK* 2). Like many Russian exiles who could not live in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, Sebastian escaped Russia to England and V. fled to France. The novel is a true biography of the great writer, Sebastian. V. starts to write Sebastian's biography as a reaction to a prior belittling biography of Sebastian written by Mr. Goodman. V.'s biography turns into an obscure story as he searches for the facts about Sebastian's life.

V. committed himself to obtain true biographical information on Sebastian so that he resorts to Sebastian's

recollections as well as his literary works. That is to say, V. tries several approaches: interviewing Sebastian's former governess, his Cambridge friends, and delving into his own memory. Sorrowfully, V. was shocked when he found out that Sebastian's acquaintances have shallow information about Sebastian and this led V to discuss Sebastian's novels in detail. Since the case of uncertainty is well rooted in Nabokov's real and fictional world, the narrator insists on saying or documenting something real: "Suddenly for no earthly reason I … longed to say something real, something with wings and a heart…"(*RLSK* 98).

During the course of information collection, V. received a telegram from Paris telling him that his half-brother is about to die. He travelled to Paris to find Sebastian dead. Sebastian's death represents a dramatic transition in V.'s life. Soon after that, V. has started an endless journey of identity recognition. V.'s odyssey for identifying the real identity of Sebastian, in a world, blends life with death and real with fictional, hinders his mind to recognize his own identity. That is to say, Nabokov fictionally blends the world of V. into the world of Sebastian. Such blend makes it difficult to differentiate between reality and fiction. It also creates a state of uncertainty among most of the exilic characters concerning their real and fictional existence. Consequently, some exilic characters physically exist in a real land while their souls live in another farfetched land. Thus, investigating how exiled characters practice nostalgia to maintain a state of balance between longing and belonging as well as

between factual existence and false coexistence is central to the current argument.

On the one hand, in *RLSK*, Nabokov distinctively explores how non-Russians are nostalgic for Russia; the place that once hosted them. Nostalgic non-Russians or the "wandering souls" who lost their host home could practice the same obsessive feeling of longing and belonging experienced by Russian exiles who lost their home. To pave the way to the non-Russians to express their nostalgia for Russia where they lived and worked for years, V. narrates: "I undertook a journey to Lausanne in order to find the old Swiss lady who had been first Sebastian's governess, then mine" (*RLSK* 18).

In Switzerland, V. met some Swiss women who had been governesses in Russia. Nostalgically, some of those women were reliving their past in Russia:

> Swiss women who had been governesses in Russia before the Revolution… 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… 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… Unknown Russia now took on the aspect of a lost paradise, a vast, vague, but retrospectively friendly place, peopled with wistful fancies. (*RLSK* 18-19)

In light of the above mentioned passage, Nabokov shows how some Swiss governesses who lived in Russia before the Revolution feel nostalgic for Russia, the "lost paradise". Swiss governesses' nostalgia for Russia adds a new dimension to the poetics of nostalgia. Hence, nostalgia could be practiced by non-Russians who did not lose their native home but rather they lost their host home. In this sense, non-native nostalgia refers to nostalgic individuals who lost their host home not their home.

Nostalgic for Russia, Swiss governesses who are "complete strangers" or "poor wandering souls" when they came home, "they found themselves complete strangers in a changed country" (*RLSK* 19). In this sense, nostalgic Swiss women go under psychological tension because of their longing for a foreign home and their shaky belonging to their native home. Such nostalgic women or self-exiles *exist* in Switzerland as physical bodies, while their "poor wandering souls" virtually *live* in Russia. Their shaky belonging reassures their sense of separation that endangers their national identity.

Merging real with fictional, those people *exist* in their actual homeland, yet they nostalgically *live* in their virtual host-home, Russia. As self-exiles or internal exiles, Swiss

governesses' sense of separation is not up to the state of uprootedness where the latter is highly connected with the idea of non-return. This idea is not applicable to those women since they actually exist in their homeland. Hence, one could infer that unsteady belonging to native home amplifies exiles' longing for the host home. Such exiles resort to nostalgia to find a fictional home for their "wandering souls." These wandering souls may suffer but virtually never die. Such a conclusion goes in line with Nabokov's mystical vision that "Nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (*Speak, Memory* 77).

On the other hand, the plight of the exiled nostalgic Russians redirects Nabokov's lens to focus on those characters, namely Sebastian and V., who lost their homeland. The plight of the exiled Russians is that they involuntarily have to be away from Russia, the home they love most, and to accept their new existence in exile. Sebastian confirms his belonging to Russia: "[he] was born and brought up in Russia... Yes, it ought to be a Russian one" (*RLSK* 57). Both Sebastian and the narrator are of Russian origins. This is clear in V.'s narration: "Sebastian Knight was born on the thirty first of December1899, in the former capital of my country" *(RLSK 5).* However, Sebastian bitterly declared, "I have not stopped loving you, but because I cannot go on kissing your dim dear face, we must part, we must part" (*RLSK* 56). Sebastian may decide to part Russia physically, yet his longing "I have not stopped loving you" is an everlasting feeling. The point to be stressed here is that an exile could *exist physically* in one place, but he *virtually lives* in another.

Nostalgia enables exiles to be in one place and live in another. While he was at Cambridge University, Sebastian tried several times to merge himself into the English society, but he could not succeed. Sebastian tries, "but he does not see as others do, he was a colour-blind chameleon" wanting to blend in but unable to do so" (*RLSK* 67). At Cambridge, Sebastian felt he had "an inability to fit into the picture" (*RLSK* 44). He describes himself as a ghost at Cambridge where no one knows him. He feels that his inner self is "huddled up in the darkness" (*RLSK* 69). It is worth mentioning that Sebastian became painfully aware of the fact that he did not belong to the society he is currently living in. Surprisingly, the fictional sufferings that Sebastian practiced at Cambridge were similar to the factual sufferings that evoked Nabokov's nostalgia for Russia. Under the pressures of living in London, Nabokov wrote his mother a letter full of pain realizing that he would probably never again return to Vyra:

> Mother dear, yesterday I woke up in the middle of the night, and asked someone—I don't know whom—the night, the stars, God: will I really *never return*, is it really all finished, wiped out, destroyed . . . Mother, we must return, mustn't we, it cannot be that this has all died, turned to dust—such an idea could drive one mad! I would like to describe every little bush, every stalk in our divine park at Vyra—but no one can understand this . . . How little we valued our paradise . . .—we should have loved it

> more pointedly, more consciously. (*The Russian Years* 177)

Like Nabokov, Sebastian is not willing to physically flee the environment where he found himself rejected. Instead, he perpetually attempts to find out his lost half. In other words, he is seeking the other half of his life or rather the lost part of his own self. Unsuccessful in achieving a sort of co-existence in England, the exiled Sebastian dispraised his host land bitterly: "a dark place where small boys are flogged to death by red-whiskered schoolmasters" (*RLSK*19).

The exiled Sebastian resorted to art and nostalgia to water down his sense of alienation. Withdrawing from the English society, Sebastian decides to stay alone to compose his literary works. In the course of his life, Sebastian did publish four novels and three short stories. Boym mentioned, "Ordinary exiles often become artists in life who remake themselves and their second homes with great ingenuity" (456). The other strategy adopted by Sebastian to escape exilic life is nostalgia: "It is obvious that only one who has known what it is to leave a dear country could thus be tempted by the picture of nostalgia" (*RLSK* 27). Sebastian nostalgically memorizes pre-Revolution Russia:

> [T]hat one of the purest emotions is that of the banished man pining after the land of his birth. I would have liked to show him straining his memory to the utmost in a continuous effort to keep alive and bright the vision of his past: the blue remembered

> hills and the happy highways, the hedge with its unofficial rose and the field with its rabbits, the distant spire and the near bluebell. (*RLSK* 27)

This extract confirms the idea that restoring Russia can only be actualized through remembrance: “the blue remembered hills.” Sebastian's ability to reconstruct the past forms the impression that he gathered his past with his sensitive soul. Exiled from Russia, Sebastian can still recall the landscapes of his youth to sustain his existence in exile. The mystery of moving through time, however, is an experience of constant loss. Sebastian’s desire to recall the past is not only due to his nostalgic feeling for Russia; he is also motivated by Nabokov who mentioned:

> The act of vividly recalling a patch of the past is something that I seem to have been performing with the utmost zest all my life, and I have reason to believe that this almost pathological keenness of the retrospective faculty is a hereditary trait. (*Speak, Memory*75)

For Sebastian, remembrance is not enough to provoke his sense of yearning for past times so that he tends to idealize that past:

> St. Petersburg; the pure luxury of a cloudless sky designed not to warm the flesh, but solely to please the eye; the sheen of sledge-cuts on the hard-beaten snow of spacious streets with a tawny tinge about

> the middle tracks due to a rich mixture of horse-dung; the brightly coloured bunch of toy-balloons hawked by an aproned pedlar; the soft curve of a cupola, its gold dimmed by the bloom of powdery frost; the birch trees in the public gardens, every tiniest twig out, lined in white; the rasp and tinkle of winter traffic. (*RLSK* 5-6)

According to this quotation, Sebastian not only memorizes Russia, but he idealizes life there as well. Sebastian's manipulation of idealization and memorization reveals that he practices nostalgia in its simplest version.

Sebastian memorizes both happy and sad narratives of Russia. Whereas Pre-Revolution Russia is paradise, Post-Revolution Russia is hell. Seemingly, Sebastian tries to use Russia as a "lost paradise" to nostalgically sustain his longing for Russia which, in turn, could decrease the pangs of exile. Similarly, he may utilize Russia as a "hellish place" to decrease his longing for the lost home which in turn could help him to maintain a state of co-existence in the exile home since he cannot return to Russia. Sebastian memorizes the ugliest picture of Post-Revolution Russia saying:

> What can I tell you of my past, gentlemen [he is saying], I was born in a land where the idea of freedom, the notion of right, the habit of human kindness were things coldly despised and brutally outlawed. Now and then, in the course of history, a

> hypocrite government would paint the walls of the nation's prison a comelier shade of yellow and loudly proclaim the granting of rights familiar to happier states; but either these rights were solely enjoyed by the jailers or else they contained some secret flaw which made them even more bitter than the decrees of frank tyranny. (*RLSK* 25-26)

To cut the way back to Russia and to accept his state as an exile, Sebastian sadly declared: "I shall never exchange the liberty of my exile for the vile parody of home" (*RLSK* 26). In addition, he reaffirmed that he will never be back again to Russia: "That last kiss is already dead" (*RLSK* 99). Sebastian added: "I have not stopped loving you; but something is dead in me, and I cannot see you in the mist" *(RLSK `112).* Sebastian depicts a horrible case of abusing human rights in Russia:

> Every man in the land was a slave, if he was not a bully; since the soul and everything pertaining to it were denied to man, the infliction of physical pain came to be considered as sufficient to govern and guide human nature... A dark country, a hellish place, gentlemen, and if there is anything of which I am certain in life it is that I shall never exchange the liberty of my exile for the vile parody of home. (*RLSK* 26)

However Sebastian shows a slight tendency to accept what he called "the liberty of my exile", he seems unable to construct his

identity in exile. Thus, he resorts to nostalgia to balance his sense of longing and his desire for belonging. Davis considered nostalgia as "a psychological lens we [exiles] employ in the never ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities" (31). The key aspect of exile's experience is "identity formation between host country and home country" (Devine xv).

Since one's name is an inseparable part of his identity, V.'s name is just one letter and this may reveal that some letters of his name are missing which, in turn, means a part of his identity is missing or incomplete. Besides, V. never says his name, even when he is directly asked to. He responded: "I am, I answered, Sebastian Knight's half-brother" (*RLSK* 48). "But what is *your* real name, she asked peering at me with her dim soft eyes which somehow reminded me of Clare. I think you mentioned it, but today my brain seems to be in a daze. … Ah, she said when I had told her" (*RLSK* 112). "My name is so-and-so, I said" (*RLSK* 118). "My name is [I mentioned my name]" (*RLSK* 172). Apparently, he affiliated his identity to his half-brother's identity: "I answered, [I'm] Sebastian Knight's half-brother" (*RLSK* 48). It is worth mentioning that V. looks like Nabokov himself who wrote in verse: "I'm prepared to lie hidden forever / And to live without name. I'm prepared" (*Poems and Problems* 9-10).

The repeated and deliberate absence of the narrator's name introduces the theme of absence. Clearly, V.'s incomplete name

is not the only way for expressing exiles' dissatisfaction with exile life. Physical absence is also another way for resisting cruelties of exile life. In this respect, most of V.'s and Sebastian's communications take place via ghostly, shadowy, spiritual, and masked existence. To this point, John Lanchester concluded that *RLSK* "is full of absence" (175).That is to say, the theme of absence dominates the whole narrative. In fact, physical absence is used by exiles to refrain from the pangs of exilic experience. Hence, absence could represent one of the manifestations of nostalgia. *Jane* Zwart stated that "each letter is a circle around [Sebastian's] non-existence" (220).Since Sebastian's body no longer exists, V. pointed out that "for a moment I seemed to see a transparent Sebastian at his desk" (*RLSK*32). In addition, "Sebastian's spirit seemed to hover about us with the flicker of the fire reflected in the brass knobs of the hearth" (*RLSK*38) and that "Sebastian's shade is trying to be helpful" (*RLSK*84). V. "believe[s] even now in his own ghost" (*RLSK*44). Thus, absence doesn't prevent him from expressing his ideas and thoughts."[Sebastian's image] seems to move and live for a minute on its own and presently is drawn back again by grey seas where it sinks or is strangely transfigured" *(RLSK146).*

Contrary to Sebastian who expresses his nostalgia for Russia directly, V. tends to express his nostalgia indirectly by means of yearning for his lost half-brother Sebastian who incarnates the lost home, Russia. That is to say, restoring his brother's life via writing his biography means restoring his personal past in Russia. Since he cannot return to Russia and his

brother cannot return to life, V. decides to incarnate his brother's soul: "Any soul may be yours" (*RLSK* 204). V.'s nostalgia for his brother as well as for his homeland urges him to clutch his brother's soul believing that it would help him overcome the pangs of exile.

Yearning for his brother's soul, V. tries to maintain a sense of soul fusion. The process of soul fusion, as a nostalgia mechanism, passes through two stages. At first, V. wants to maintain a partial soul fusion between himself and Sebastian's soul in order to resurrect his brother's soul and to restore the lost Russia as well. To make such partial spiritual fusion possible, V. rationalizes the abstract side of the idea of fusion saying: "Any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls" (*RLSK* 204). Tangibly, V. begins to focus on the common similarities between him and Sebastian keeping in his mind that there are still slight differences between them. Lanchester remarked that the two brothers in this case "seem like-but-unlike" (177). In this respect, V. mentioned:

> Once I happened to see two brothers, tennis champions, matched against one another; their strokes were totally different, and one of the two was far, far better than the other; but the general rhythm of their motions as they swept all over the court was exactly the same, so that had it been

> possible to draft both systems two identical signs would have appeared. *(RLSK* 34*)*

Actually, Sebastian and V. are a kind of imperfect doubles, being closely joined by a complex and dense web of similarities *"*both systems two identical signs" and references "their strokes were totally different" (RLSK 34). Nostalgically, V. is yearning for his half-brother who physically does not exist, so that he tries to fuse his own body with Sebastian's soul through unification or integration or incarnation. V. would claim that he and his brother are two sides of the same coin*:* "Every small thing which will remind me of you…will always seem to me one half of a shell, one half of a penny, with the other half kept by you" *(RLSK 113).*

In the second stage of soul fusion, V. alternates his partial nostalgic fusion to full nostalgic fusion. Fusion nostalgia in this respect refers to individuals' nostalgia for spiritual fusion between souls and bodies of different identities particularly when they have some shared ideas, desires, and matters that could maintain a sort of exilic relief. Gradually, V. begins to recognize that Sebastian is just a package of memories so he virtually exists as a soul, whereas V. exists physically to narrate Sebastian's memories. As two halves, V. and Sebastian's existence requires the existence of each half. Sebastian is a soul with no body and V. is a body haunted by Sebastian's soul. Both Sebastian's soul and V.'s body share the same longing for fusion. In other words, V. claims that he and his brother are physically two bodies, yet they may have a shared soul. Concerning such a case of full soul

fusion, V. admitted: "I may have seen and remembered what he saw and remembered" *(RLSK 34).*

Sebastian is aware of his soul as he once told his governesses: "I hate everybody except you, Zelle, you alone understand my soul" (*RLSK* 19). In another situation, Sebastian told Leslie: "I'm not dead. I have finished building a world, and this is my Sabbath rest" (*RLSK* 90). Believing in his spiritual power, Sebastian rejects death. For Sebastian, death could defeat one's body, yet it could not defeat one's soul. To this point, Connolly put it clearly that "He [Sebastian] has not died" (From Biography to Autobiography and Back:online).Such saying may support the claim that his soul faints but never dies. V. stated that "Sebastian's spirit seemed to hover about us" (*RLSK* 45). He added that "I am sustained by the secret knowledge that in some unobtrusive way Sebastian's shade is trying to be helpful" *(RLSK 101).*

To consummate the process of full nostalgic fusion, V. recognizes that depicting Sebastian as a soul is not enough so that he begins to prepare his own body to be haunted by another soul or even other souls. Accordingly, V. admitted: "Any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls" (*RLSK* 204).

As soon as both Sebastian's soul and V.'s body are ready to be fully fused, V. abruptly reaches the peak of fusion declaring:

> I am Sebastian Knight. I feel as if I were impersonating him on a lighted stage…. with the people he knew coming and going … I cannot get out of my part: 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. *(RLSK 205)*

The aforementioned statement that "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I" could be regarded as the clearest evidence of V.'s desire for full fusion, but not the solo one. The novel introduces many clues assuring the idea of full soul fusion. V. alludes to this idea as he describes self-transfiguration as a "flight of the One to the One" (*RLSK* 89). That is to say, it is the flight of Sebastian's soul to the nostalgic body of V. Hence V.'s claim "imagination is the muscle of the soul" (*RLSK* 69) is believable. Another evidence could be elicited from Sebastian's quote: "There is only one real number: One" (*RLSK* 113). This quote may refer to the claim that V. and Sebastian are two halves forming one entity. Furthermore, Sebastian reassured the same idea of fusion saying: "The only real number is one, the rest are mere repetition, [(ibid [Lost Property], page 83.)]" (*RLSK*105). V. came again to reinforce the idea of fusion stating: "It is not the parts that matter, it is their combinations" (*RLSK* 176). Finally, V. claims that Sebastian's voice is "in my conscience" *(RLSK 44).*

Furthermore, some critics support the idea of soul fusion. Susan Fromberg remarked: "Sebastian has chosen to live in V.'s

soul" (441). To the same point, Andrew Field argued: "Is it possible that *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is not a biography at all, but a fictional autobiography" (27). In addition, Dabney Stuart stated: "the narrator... is Sebastian himself" (37). To validate Fromberg's and Field's views, A. Brufee mentioned that "Field is correct in saying that the novel is a fictional autobiography… And Stuart is correct in saying that Sebastian has no life apart from the person who composes him; the narrator V. [and that] V. himself actually becomes Sebastian" (181). Fromberg added that "Sebastian's fictional character infiltrates V.'s non-fictional world" (427). Herbert Grabes reported, "The biographer... acts quite consistently when he attempts to enhance his resemblance to Sebastian to the point of complete identity, thus turning his biography into an *autobiography*" (16). Finally, Charles Nicol argued: "V is able to not only grasp Sebastian's soul but to make the visionary leap that perhaps we both are someone else whom neither of us knows" (94).

As long as Sebastian claims that death for him is just "Sabbath rest" and V. similarly believes that "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I", one could confirm that exile's soul could be decayed, yet it never dies. By the same token, the only way to resurrect Russia is to incarnate its virtual soul. Accordingly, Russia may be weakened, yet virtually it will never disappear.

Whether V. himself is Sebastian or at least incarnates Sebastian's soul, the fact is that soul transformation may reveal a sense of metaphysical displacement from life to death and vice

versa. In light of the canons of such proposed metaphysical nostalgia, dead exiles are longing for life and at the same time they refute their belonging to the other world. Such claim may be evidenced by Sebastian's saying: "I'm not dead…. this is my Sabbath rest" (*RLSK* 90). Reincarnating Sebastian's soul, V. stated "I imagined actions of his which I heard of only after his death, I knew for certain that in such or such a case I should have acted just as he had" (*RLSK* 31).

V.'s mystical journey has enabled him to satisfy his longing for his brother's soul as well as Russia, yet such immersion could not help him bring back his half-brother's *real* life: "I would have to undertake an immense amount of research, bringing up his life bit by bit and soldering the fragments with my inner knowledge of his character" *(RLSK 33).* Instead, he immersed himself in fictional metaphysical worlds. It could be true that V.'s attachment to his half-brother's soul may make up for the loss of his half-brother, Sebastian. For V., such a mystical journey may be the only way to virtually bring back his half-brother since he cannot go to him. Hunted by a desire for resurrecting Sebastian's soul, V. could not find out the real life of Sebastian Knight in the real world. In this sense, the real life of Sebastian Knight does not exist in the physical world. Sebastian's real life is life afterlife in the spiritual immortal world. For Sebastian, it is exile that displaced him from the physical world to the metaphysical world. For V., it is exile that splits him into two souls; one is of his own and the other belongs

to his brother. Such duality assures the agony of living in two different homes; native home and host land.

To facilitate soul fusion, Nabokov resorts to combine imagination with memory to maintain a sort of mutability between fact and fiction and that may make it difficult to distinguish between the two. For this reason, both imagination and memory are immeasurable with chronological time. "I witness with pleasure the supreme achievement of memory, which is the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past" (*Speak ,Memory* 170).

To conclude, in *RLSK*, Nabokov practices his rituals of blending what is real with what is fictional. As seen, Nabokov's fictional characters manipulate fictional subjects to find out real objects. In addition, Nabokov explores characters' nostalgia in a very distinctive manner. For the first time, the writer exposes how non-Russian, Swiss wandering souls, practice nostalgia for Russia; the place that once hosted them. Unprecedentedly, non-Russians are nostalgic because they lost their host home, not their native home. Such an innovative attempt is not only an addition to the poetics of nostalgia which was limited to native exiled, it is also a way out for the poor wandering souls to relive their past to remain alive.

As an innovative novelist, Nabokov allows Sebastian to memorize and idealize the paradise-like Pre-Revolution Russia as well as the hellish face of Post-Revolution Russia. In this sense,

happy memories are to enhance Sebastian longing for Russia, while sad reminiscences are to decrease his sense of belonging to Russia. Such strategy may help Sebastian maintain a sort of co-existence in exile. In other words, this plan may help him accept his exile.

Furthermore, according to the characterization plan, Sebastian is depicted as a great novelist of a Russian father and an English mother. Such hybridity is also meant to help Sebastian to fit himself into the English society, the land of exile. However, Sebastian was not displaced from Russia to England only; he was also displaced from England to afterlife world. Sebastian does not only reject exile, he rejects death also: “I'm not dead. I have finished building a world, and this is my Sabbath rest” (*RLSK* 90).

Nabokov’s endless speculations overwhelm V. who practices nostalgia at its peak through what is so called partial soul fusion that allows him partially restore the soul of his lost half-brother. In addition, he wants to fully restore the soul of his lost half-brother using what is so called full soul fusion. Such nostalgia tenets lead him to say: “I am Sebastian or Sebastian is I” (*RLSK* 205). He adds: “Any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations” (*RLSK* 204) and “There is only one real number: One” (*RLSK* 113). Through nostalgic soul fusion, V. could restore his half-brother’s soul to virtually live together. That is to say, while nostalgic exiles physically exist in one place, they spiritually live in another. To this point, the novel is

to confirm that nostalgic souls never die and also confirms Nabokov's mystical vision that "Nobody will ever die" (*Speak, Memory* 77).

In a word, the current argument supports the idea that nostalgic souls may suffer but never die. Moreover, the previous discussion proposes three innovative types of nostalgia, namely non-native nostalgia, partial soul fusion, and full soul fusion through which nostalgic exile could practice nostalgia. In addition, remembering happy and sad Russia adds a new dimension to nostalgia. Another possible reading of V.'s desire for soul fusion is that Nabokov creates him as a narrator who is neither a poet nor a creative writer but whose ultimate goal is to fuse himself with the artist figure through his own biographic or autobiographic work. In light of such distinctive manipulations of nostalgia, it could be stated that nostalgic souls never die in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.*

In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* Nabokov's creative conceptualization of nostalgia was apparent in his attempts to reveal that nostalgic souls never die. On one hand, in *RLSK,* Nabokov distinctively explores how non-Russians are nostalgic for Russia; the place that once hosted them. Nostalgic non-Russians or the "wandering souls" who lost their host home could practice the same obsessive feeling of longing and belonging experienced by Russian exiles who lost their home. "Swiss women who had been governesses in Russia before the Revolution… lived in their past...but when these poor wandering

souls came home, they found themselves complete strangers …Unknown Russia now took on the aspect of a lost paradise" (*RLSK* 18-19). In this sense, nostalgic Swiss women go under psychological tension because of their longing for a foreign home and their shaky belonging to their native home. Merging real with fictional, those people *exist* in their actual homeland, yet they nostalgically *live* in their virtual host-home, Russia. Such exiles resort to nostalgia to find a fictional home for their "wandering souls." These wandering souls may suffer but virtually never die. Such a conclusion goes in line with Nabokov's mystical vision that "Nothing will ever change, nobody will ever die" (*Speak, Memory* 77).

Distinctively, the exiled Sebastian practices memorization to idealize and demonize Russia. Sebastian bitterly declared, "I have not stopped loving you, but because I cannot go on kissing your dim dear face, we must part, we must part" (*RLSK* 56). Sebastian may decide to part Russia physically, yet the expression of his longing "I have not stopped loving you" is an everlasting feeling. The point to be stressed here is that an exile could *exist physically* in one place, but he *virtually lives* in another.

On the one hand, the exiled Sebastian tends to idealize pre-Revolution Russia: "the blue remembered hills and the happy highways, the hedge with its unofficial rose and the field with its rabbits, the distant spire and the near bluebell" (*RLSK* 27). He adds: "St. Petersburg; the pure luxury of a cloudless sky" (*RLSK*

5). Such happy memories keep his nostalgia vivid. On the other hand, he demonizes post-Revolution Russia saying: "What can I tell you of my past, gentlemen [he is saying], I was born in a land where the idea of freedom, the notion of right, the habit of human kindness were things coldly despised and brutally outlawed" (*RLSK* 25-26). Such ugly picture of Russia decreases his longing for the lost home which in turn could help him to maintain a state of co-existence in the exile home since he cannot return to Russia.

For V., he and his brother are physically two bodies, yet they may have a shared soul. Concerning such a case of full soul fusion, V. admitted: "I may have seen and remembered what he saw and remembered" *(RLSK 34).* To facilitate soul fusion, V. exploited Sebastian's statement: "I'm not dead… and this is my Sabbath rest" (*RLSK* 90). Such saying may support the claim that Sebastian's soul faints but never dies. Critics support the idea of soul fusion. Fromberg remarked: "Sebastian has chosen to live in V's soul" (441). In addition, Stuart stated: "the narrator... is Sebastian himself" (37). To validate Fromberg and Field's views, Brufee mentioned that "Field is correct in saying that the novel is a fictional autobiography… And Stuart is correct in saying that Sebastian has no life apart from the person who composes him; the narrator V. [and that] V. himself actually becomes Sebastian" (181). Finally, Nicol argued: "V is able to not only grasp Sebastian's soul but to make the visionary leap that perhaps we both are someone else whom neither of us knows" (94). By the same token, the only way to resurrect Russia is to incarnate its

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