淡江外語論叢 2006 年 06 月 No.7

Parody in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

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【摘要】

在《史貝斯提恩·奈特的真實生活》中，敘述者 V.企圖建構奈特的真實生活，彷彿一位偵探企圖釐清案情的逐步敘述奈特的生活。V.的調查過程以及奈特的生活兩個故事交替呈現，就像偵探小說中辦案的過程會逐步解釋疑點。《史貝斯提恩·奈特的真實生活》只稱得上是一個諧擬的偵探小說。因為 V.的調查結果並沒有使讀者完整認識奈特，不像傳統偵探小說中所有疑惑皆能逐一化解。真實生活中總有些事是曖昧不明、沒有結果的，納博可夫似乎要藉著此本小說讓讀者質疑傳統小說中清楚交代情節的可能性。

【Abstract】

In the novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov presents two parodies of detective fiction. His intentions behind them are quite different. In one parody, *The Prismatic Bezel*, he imitates the basic components of detective fiction and then subverts the reader's expectation. By ridiculing the detective, comic effects are created. In another parody, namely the novel itself, Nabokov also inverts the conventions of detective novels. He intentionally makes the outcome of the "detective's investigation" disappointing to the reader. Behind this parody lies Nabokov's strategy of drawing the reader's attention to the false smooth flow of plot in traditional novels, in order to show that "real life" is sometimes fragmentary and inconclusive.

【Key Words】

parody, detective fiction, anti-climax, irony

As far as Nabokov is concerned, parody is a game. In this article, I am going to explore how Nabokov uses parody in his novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, and his purpose behind it. My understanding of parody is based on the studies done by Linda Hutcheon[1] and Margaret A. Rose[2]. Both of them did extensive researches on parody. According to Rose (171), parody first evokes the text to be parodied by imitation, so the reader will expect it. But the author then presents another version of it and subverts the reader's previous expectation. This difference or contrast between the two texts is where the author would like to attack.

Hutcheon has the similar definition: "Parody is . . . repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (6). Parody appropriates and transforms the conventions of an earlier period and thus a new meaning is created. Since parody doesn't have a standard definition, I want to start from its etymology. According to Hutcheon's studies in *A Theory of Parody* :

> Most theorists of parody go back to the etymological root of the term in the Greek known *parodia*, meaning 'counter-song,' and stop there. . . . The prefix *para* has two meanings, only one of which is usually mentioned – that of 'counter' or 'against.' Thus parody becomes an opposition or contrast between texts. This is presumably the formal starting point for the definition's customary pragmatic component of ridicule: one text is set against another with the intent of mocking it or making it ludicrous. (32)

Hutcheon adds, "however, *para* in Greek also mean 'beside,' and therefore there is a suggestion of an accord or intimacy instead of a contrast. It is this second, neglected meaning of the prefix that broadens the pragmatic scope of parody in a way most helpful to discussions of modern art form" (32).

Based on Hutcheon's etymological explanations, mockery and ridicule should

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[1] *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms.* New York: Methuen,1985.

[2] *Parody: Ancient, Modern, and Post-modern*. London: Cambridge UP, 1993. *Parody // Meta-Fiction*. London: Croom Helm, 1979. In the latter book, Rose thinks parody makes something new out of an old form by laying bare its devices. So, parody is quite close to metafiction. But this perspective is not adopted in my discussion in this article.

not be the only purpose of parody. The agreement or correspondence between the parodic text and the parodied text can also be anticipated in modern parody. Rose also conducted a similar etymological study. The greatest difference between them is that Rose thinks comic effects are essential in parody. She writes, "writers from Aristotle onwards have described how comedy may be produced from the raising of expectations for X and the 'disappointment' of those expectations with the giving of something which is not-X . . ." (170-71). So, when a parody arouses the reader's expectation for something and gives something else which is not expected, the comic effects occur. Another point that Hutcheon criticizes about Rose is that "Rose sees parody as part of a relationship of art to reality, rather than one of art to art" (20). And Hutcheon insists that parody should only be an imitation of a preformed text. Modern parody is revolutionary, as far as Russian Formalists are concerned. Parody lays bare the device of the parodied text, and the device of this exhausted literary form is renewed or "refunctioned" through parody.

Hutcheon mentions the pragmatics of parody: "When we speak of parody, we do not just mean two texts that interrelate in a certain way. We also imply an intention to parody another (or set of conventions) and both a recognition of that intent and an ability to find and interpret the backgrounded text in its relation to the parody" (20). In a parody, an author encodes by synthesizing two texts, and the reader decodes by inferring the author's intent (34). If the reader does not notice an intended allusion, s/he may adapt it to the context and not be able to read between the lines. Without sufficient literary knowledge as background, the reader may misunderstand the parody and its author's specific intent.

"Parody is fundamentally double and divided; its ambivalence stems from the dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces that are inherent in its nature as authorized transgression" (Hutcheon 20). If the reader doesn't have the dual consciousnesses and know the intentional differences between the two texts in a parody, they may miss the double voices in the text as well as the parodic intent of the author. With enough literary knowledge on the part of the reader to discern the parodist's intentions, whether it is ironic, playful, scornful, ridiculous or respectful, confusions can be cleared and pleasure will ensue.

In addition to literary knowledge, the reader also needs an open mind to see the

author playing with multiple conventions. Some critics regard parody as parasitic, because they see it as the enemy of creativity. Actually, parody also involves creativity. By borrowing an existent form, the author is capable of substituting its content and thus transforming this form to relate it with his/her particular intent. As the Russian formalists mention: the "mechanized or automatic" formal elements undergo a dialogue (past with modern or postmodern) or a dialectic relation with the author's intent and are, therefore, "refunctionalized" or revolutionized (Hutcheon 20). A new birth is derived from the old form, with the function changed. This idea is similar to Nabokov's idea of spiral, mentioned in his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*:

> If we consider the simplest spiral, three stages may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We call "thetic" the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; "antithetic" the larger arc that faced the first in the process of continuing it; and "synthetic" the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. (203)

If we apply Nabokov's idea of spiral to parody, the initial arc of the spiral can be viewed as a preformed traditional text, the opposite arc as the difference created by the parodic writer, and the third arc, synthesizing the convention and the creativity, is the work of parody. So, a parody is always a combination, a synthesis, hybrid and "double-voiced." Thus parody can play the role of challenging the reader's anticipation by laying bare the essential conventionality of an old literary form and draws the reader's attention to the author's originality.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight[3] was the first novel written by Nabokov in English. It is mainly about a narrator, V., who wants to write a biography about his deceased half brother, a famous English writer named Sebastian Knight. While the narrator collects material for his writing, he goes to several places where his brother has been to before and interviews his brother's acquaintances. This process is like a detective searching for clues to solve a mystery. So, there will be two stories in the novel. One story is about V.'s investigation and the other is about the revelation of Sebastian's past life. This structure is quite like that of conventional detective fiction, in which a story of investigation will reveal the story of crime. When the

[3] The title will be shortened as *The Real Life* in this article.

investigation is brought to an end, the mystery of the crime will be solved. In addition to this parody, one novel, *The Prismatic Bezel*, written by Sebastian is clearly intended to be another parody of detective fiction.

I will first list the conventions of detective fiction and study how *The Prismatic Bezel* parodies the conventions. Then, a thorough research on *The Real Life* is done to see how it can also be qualified as a parody of detective fiction. I will study how Nabokov imitates and subverts the traditions of detective fiction in order to see his intentions behind this parody. Finally, I will discuss that this novel also reveals Nabokov's satiric attitude towards the mode of biography.

Dennis Porter did a comprehensive study on the conventions of detective fiction (32-33). A detective novel starts with a crime and the question of "Whodunit?" After the above question comes the investigation of the crime. The novel ends with a solution to the crime. Much emphasis is put on the difficulty or complexity of unraveling a crime. What is unique is that the plot is structured backward. Two stories are embedded in each other: one story of crime and one story of investigation. The primary function of the story of investigation is to construct the story of crime. The detective, most of the time a genius, goes over the same ground that has previously been covered by the criminal. The denouement determines the order and causality of the events narrated from the beginning. The investigation is based on the step-by-step process of rational inquiry. There are always some devices to retard the investigation. The narrative promotes the reader's pleasure through the calculation of effects of suspense on the way to a surprise denouement.

In one novel written by Sebastian, *The Prismatic Bezel*, we see a good example of parody of detective fiction. Let me briefly tell this story: Twelve people are staying at a hotel. One of the guests, G. Abeson, an art-dealer, is found murdered in his room. A London detective is asked by the local police officer to come at once, but he is very late in coming, because his car runs over an old lady. He takes the wrong train, loses his way and is finally stuck somewhere in the night. In the meanwhile, the guests in the hotel as well as a chance passer-by, old Nosebag, who happened to be in the lobby when the crime was discovered, are thoroughly examined. All of them except the last named are suspicious. One of them, an art-student, seems especially so because six blood-stained handkerchiefs are found in his room. When

the detective finally arrives, the lodgers are examined once again. New clues are guessed. The detective suddenly gets interested in snuffboxes and says to the art-dealer, old Nosebag, "'Ullo, 'ow about Hart?" All of a sudden, a policeman comes in and reports that the corpse is gone. There was a moment of suspense. Then the old Nosebag said, "I think I can explain." He slowly takes off his beard, gray wig, dark spectacles, and the face of G. Abeson is revealed. "One dislikes being murdered," he said.

In *The Prismatic Bezel*, a murder happens in the beginning. The question of "Whodunit?" arises. All guests in the hotel become suspects, and they are put in a closed location. The servants in the hotel are considered non-existent for the sake of convenience. That is, they are never suspected of being the murderers in traditional detective fiction. The detective is asked to come. He is not an intelligent, efficient genius, but one who repeatedly makes blunders on his way to the murder scene. The intention of the author to make fun of the detective is quite clear. The characteristics of traditional detective fiction are given: a murder, a detective, many suspects and a closed place. Besides, the most suspicious person turns out to be innocent; the innocent, namely the passer-by art dealer, becomes the villain. While everyone, including the reader, is guessing who the murderer is, the murderer reveals himself and he is also the victim. Therefore, there is no murder at all. Art kills the victim. A name shift, from G. Abeson to Nosebag, as well as a facial make-up, constitutes the parodic murder. In this parody, the conventions of detective fiction are adapted to create amusing effects.

After this simple parody, I will go on to look at *The Real Life* as another one. In detective fiction, the detective's genius is emphasized. He must use a rational and scientific thinking in his work. The same method is adopted by V., who reviews Sebastian's letters and interviews his acquaintances. V. tries to use a chronological method to trace the course of Sebastian's past life and puts together information about his life. The reader is enticed to suppose that in such a scientific way, the "real life" of Sebastian will be disclosed finally. But to our disappointment and surprise, at the end of the novel, our knowledge about Sebastian does not increase much.

In traditional detective fiction, one clue leads to another and finally to the answer to the mystery. But in *The Real Life*, almost all clues end in nothing. In the

beginning, a bunch of letters are burned by V. according to Sebastian's demands on his will. Other clues also come to a dead end or do not prove to be very informative. For instance, V.'s mother's memory only provides his daily routines or habits, instead of an insight into Sebastian's inner world. Sebastian's true nature is forbidden to V.'s mother and therefore unknown to the reader.

Other important witnesses of Sebastian's life have nothing valuable to provide, either. The acquaintances that V. interviews either forget Sebastian completely or are unwilling to talk. Sebastian's Swiss governess, Mademoiselle, jumbles V.'s past episodes with other people's. So, it is doubtful that she still keeps a correct memory of Sebastian's past life. V. writes, "I found Mademoiselle very deaf and gray, but as voluble as ever, and after the first effusive embraces she started to recall little facts of my childhood which were either hopelessly distorted, or so foreign to my memory that I doubt their past reality" (22).

This Swiss governess's memory of V. is untrustworthy, so he also disbelieves what she says about Sebastian's as well. As soon as she learns of V.'s attempt to write Sebastian's biography, she cries, "Write that book, that beautiful book . . . make it a fairy-tale with Sebastian for prince. The enchanted prince . . ." (22). Her words show that truth is not important for her at all. As far as Mademoiselle is concerned, a biography and a fairy-tale do not seem very different. Another example of dead clues is Sebastian's former lover, Clare, who does not want to see or talk about Sebastian Knight. Still another example is Sebastian's last lover, Nina, who plays an important role in Sebastian's death. However, she puts Sebastian in a very negative light, so V. is unable to trust her version.

A detective story always starts with a happening of a crime, followed by the investigation of the crime and ends with an explanation of the events that lead to the crime. Heta Pyrhönen explains well the backward narrative structure of detective fiction:

> As the consequences of a crime are revealed well before the events that led up to it become known, plot is structured backwards: it establishes a linear, chronological sequence of events which will eventually explain its own initial baffling situation. This effect depends on a narrative presentation in which the story of investigation embeds the story of crime that supposedly has taken place prior to the beginning of

the investigation. (8)

Plot is structured backward. The crime happens before the investigation. The findings of the investigation will help to construct the story of the crime. Hence, what happens first is revealed to the reader later in the story.

In *The Real Life*, we also see this backward construction. *The Real Life* starts with the news of Sebastian's death, followed by his stepbrother's efforts to construct his past and ends with V.'s rush to the deathbed of Sebastian, an event that happened even before the beginning of the story. Therefore, the cause of V.'s attempt is not revealed to us until the very end of the novel, whereas in traditional detective fiction the cause of the detective is made known from the very beginning.

There is always suspense about the possibility of solving the crime. In traditional detective fiction, the more difficult it is to solve the mystery, the greater suspense it induces in the reader. The suspense of an unanswered question is maintained through a manipulation of the composition of the materials. In *The Real Life* there are many instances of suspense. The greatest suspense among them is to know what V.'s investigation will lead to. But the curiosity about Sebastian's real life is not satisfied, so the story is anti-climax. This ending is completely contrary to conventions of detective fiction, and it challenges the reader's expectation.

Some minor examples of suspense in *The Real Life* function well. When Clare was not in good terms with Sebastian, Sebastian's college friend, Sheldon, asked Sebastian what had happened. Sheldon said, "out with it, man. What have you done to her?" (110) But the outcome is disappointing because Sheldon learns nothing from Sebastian. Another similar example occurs in Chapter Five when V. feels very frustrated, for he does not make progress in his investigation. Suddenly, a voice asks, "Sebastian Knight? . . . Who is speaking of Sebastian Knight?" (51) While the reader is eager to know some important information from the speaker, the reader goes on to find s/he is tricked by the author again. In fact, the voice is coming from the narrator's mind. No one there is to give him any information. Of course, this is anti-climax again. This is a trick Nabokov plays on the reader's expectation, with a view to drawing the reader's attention to the parody in the novel. The smooth flow of the plot can only be found in traditional detective fiction, not in Nabokov's.

Another example is when V. gets a telegram from the doctor, telling him that his

brother is in a critical condition, V. rushes to the hospital. All the way to the hospital, V. has been worrying if he may be too late in arriving at the hospital. Finally, he makes it to the hospital in the midnight and the nurse tells him that his brother is in sound sleep and that it is better not to disturb him. V. feels relieved at that time. While V. sits in the next room, listening to his brother's breathing, he begins to imagine what he will tell his brother the next day when Sebastian wakes up. But then the nurse understands there is some mistake. The patient, who V. is looking for, has passed away the previous night. All of V.'s desperate efforts to see and talk to Sebastian are in vain. The long narrative of these incidents leads finally to some sort of anti-climax. The reader's anticipation is disappointed again and again in *The Real Life*. It is a contrast to the practices of traditional detective fiction, where mysteries are solved one by one and the reader feels a sense of relief.

Porter lists some of the devices of retardation of investigation in his book (32-33), and we can see Nabokov applies these devices to *The Real Life*.

1. **On the level of plot, there is sudden and unexpected postponement of the apparent approach to a solution**. For example, when V. goes to see Sebastian's ex-girlfriend, Clare, who maintained an intimate relationship with Sebastian for some years, she refuses to see him, because Clare is now married to another man. V. is not discouraged, so he goes again the next day and sees her on the street. He follows her but finally when he can talk to her alone, he does not reveal his identity or intention. Instead, he takes out from his pocket the key to Sebastian's house and asks her if she might have lost her key. Of course, she does not and V. lets her leave. Maybe Clare does not remember the key, or maybe she still remembers the key but is unwilling to talk about a past love affair. The point is that V. obviously gives up a chance when he could possibly get very valuable information about his brother. So, the answer to the mystery is postponed.

2. **On the level of roles, there is the anti-detective or criminal, who may remain passive and not impede the detective's search or actively intervene to prevent unmasking and capture.** There is one

parodic anti-detective. That is Goodman, a former secretary of Sebastian, who persuades V. to give up his research, mainly because he has already written one biography about Sebastian, and the manuscript is ready for proofreading. Goodman certainly does not want another biography about Sebastian to compete with his for the market, especially one by Sebastian's half-brother. But Goodman does not take action to hinder V.'s research. He only dissuades him from such an attempt.

3. **On the level of content, there are false clues, mixed with the true clues, making the unraveling more complex.** In order to trace Sebastian's past life, V. goes to Blauberg, where Sebastian once met a woman and fell in love with her. Sebastian deserted Clare for that woman, who however rejected his pursuit. V. guesses this love affair might have smashed his brother, so it is important for him to find out this last lover. When he goes to the hotel in Blauberg to ask for the names and addresses of the Russian women who lived there at the same time as Sebastian's stay, V. is rejected by the proprietor. On his way back home, he meets a Mr. Silbermann on a train. They strike up a conversation and V. tells him his recent frustration. Mr. Silbermann agrees to help and later procures the name list. Finally, V. gets three Russian women's names. Only one of them is what V. wants. Just like a detective, V. must meet everyone of the three to find out who is the possible "culprit." On his first try, he finds out that the first woman on the name list is not likely to be the one he looks for. That is because a woman, so tender and polite, cannot be such a cruel woman as ruins a writer. But accidentally a man who happens to be there finds the woman V. mentions quite like his ex-wife. V. does not know whether he should follow this clue or not and finally decides to give it up. It turns out that his ex-wife is the one V. wants. In his search, an impossible clue becomes the true one.

4. **On the level of character types, there are typically the taciturn detective, garrulous assistant, and other characters, whose oddness makes them for a time impenetrable.** The only mysterious and impenetrable character in *The Real Life* is Nina. When V. reaches the

second woman, Nina, on the name list, she deceives V. and pretends that she is Mm. Lecerf, a friend of the woman, who V. is asking for. Nina is young and attractive. V. judges that she cannot be the woman that would fit Sebastian's taste. But V. himself admits that he would like to make love with her. Mm. Lecerf promises that V. can see Nina at certain time, but she repeatedly delays their meeting. Mm. Lecerf seems like a mystery for some time, but finally she carelessly reveals her true identity.

To sum up, the above four devices of retardation are common in detective novels and we can find them in *The Real Life*, too.

Detective fiction celebrates the triumph of a superior mind. Therefore, the detective hero is always a genius, like Sherlock Holmes in Conan Doyle's detective stories. After the step-by-step process of rational inquiry, the detective brings the investigation to a surprising denouement. But what we get at the end of V.'s search is not Sebastian's real life, but V.'s identification with his half brother. As Pyrhönen states,

> such imaginative identification enables detectives to play criminals in order to find out not only why and how a crime could have taken place but also what possible moves the opponent may, in the future, make in a certain specific circumstances. . . . Imaginative identification necessitates that the detective reflect on the overall design underlying the criminal's plotting. Often such a design emerges when the detective goes over the same ground that has previously been covered by the criminal. (11-12)

Such imaginative identification is used to help the detective understand the criminal's psychology, with a hope that it can contribute to the solution. In *The Real Life*, an imaginative identification is assumed when V. covers the same ground of the trip to Blauberg to find what happened to Sebastian Knight there. At the end of the novel, V. even asserts, "I am Sebastian and Sebastian is I." So, some critics, like Dabney Stuart, claim V.'s investigation is a quest of self-knowledge. The theme of double is developed well by Stuart, who thinks what V. attempts is a "game of detection" and "a quest for self-knowledge" (312). He thinks V. "has been reborn through the process of observing himself reflected in a mirror." That is, the more V. knows about Sebastian, the deeper he can enter his soul, and the more he finds their

similarities. But I want to argue that V.'s emotional proximity or his identification derives from his imagination. But in his understanding, there are some gaps of ignorance. These gaps can not be crossed by imagination. This explains why V. repeatedly makes wrong judgments. However, the idea of "double" is not uncommon in detective fiction. As Oakley writes, "It is common in detective fiction for the detective to exist as a double for the villain as they match each other in terms of intellect" (483).

If *The Real Life* reads both like and unlike detective fiction, if the reader may not care what Sebastian Knight's real life is like since they don't even know who Sebastian Knight is, or if the real life of Sebastian Knight is not fully constructed even at the end of the novel, some readers may begin to question whether these failures come from Nabokov's inability as a writer. This puzzlement can be cleared when we take another parody in *The Real Life* into account. *The Prismatic Bezel* is claimed to be written by the dead novelist. But we know Nabokov is the real author. If *The Prismatic Bezel* is a good parody of detective fiction, there is no room for doubt in Nabokov's skills. So, why does Nabokov write such a story, which seems to fail in many aspects? The answer lies in Nabokov's attitude toward biography. That is why I include the study of biography in this article.

In the following, I will go on to study V.'s and Goodman's different ways of constructing Sebastian's biography and see Nabokov's attitude toward them. A comparison between V.'s and Goodman's biographies can help us see more clearly V.'s efforts. While V. collects materials for Sebastian's biography, he meets Goodman, Sebastian's former secretary. Goodman also writes a biography about Sebastian, but he never knows that Sebastian has a half brother. What is more surprising to him is that V. is also planning to write a biography about Sebastian. That is a threat for Goodman, so he dissuades V. from such an attempt. Goodman tells V.:

> I don't wish to say that a book could not be written about him. It could. But then it ought to be written from a special point of view which would make the subject fascinating. . . . Leave it to some professional fellow, to one who knows the book-market and he will tell you that anybody trying to complete an exhaustive study of Knight's life and work, as you

> put it, would be wasting his and the reader's time. (59)

From his words, we know that he regards himself as a professional writer and that his intentions are quite different from V.'s. What he tries to achieve is to make the biography fascinating, instead of being true to Sebastian's life. What a professional biographer means to Goodman is not one who wants to present a real life, but one who knows the book market and one who knows how to make his attempt profitable. In Goodman's opinion, V.'s efforts are doomed to fail.

As Grabes mentions, Goodman is market-directed. He hopes to gain popular success and to increase the sales, so he tries to make the novel sensational. This can be seen from the title he gives: *The Tragedy of Sebastian Knight*. As far as the truth in his biography is concerned, it is doubtful. Compared to his work, V.'s efforts seem more based on reality, as least the reality he thinks he can reach. Hence, a very different title for his work: *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (3).

V. goes on to explicate Goodman's simple method:

> His sole object is to show "poor Knight" as a product and victim of 'our time'—though why some people are so keen to make others share in their chronometric concepts, has always been a mystery to me. "Postwar Unrest," "Postwar Generation" are to Mr. Goodman magic words opening every door. . . . For Mr. Goodman, young Sebastian Knight "freshly emerged from the carved chrysalid of Cambridge" is a youth of acute sensibility in a cruel cold world. In this world, "outside realities intrude so roughly upon one's most intimate dreams" that a young man's soul is forced into a state of siege before it is finally shattered. (62)

In Goodman's eye, wars have brought senses of futility and cruelty, which have defeated Sebastian and made him a tragic figure, a product of his time.

V.'s despise at Goodman's general remark can be read from his words: "It is one thing to be an author's secretary, it is quite another to set down an author's life; and if such a task is prompted by the desire to get one's book into the market while the flowers on a fresh grave may still be watered with profit, it is still another matter to try to combine commercial haste with exhaustive search, fairness and wisdom" (15). V. attacks Goodman, because being a secretary does not guarantee that Goodman can produce a correct portrait of Sebastian. Goodman never really

understands Sebastian. That is why his biography is too general, not to the point. Besides, all Goodman's considerations are based on commercial profit. He does not spend time enough doing research as extensively as V., and nor is he sensitive enough to Sebastian's unique genius. He thinks Sebastian is a product of his time, thus diminishing the individuality of Sebastian.

To compensate for his lacking in information about Sebastian's background, Goodman adopted certain remarks that he jotted down while he was Sebastian's secretary. But V. finds Goodman always missing the joke. For example, one day Sebastian told Goodman about his first novel, which had been destroyed and unpublished. It is about a student who travels home to find his mother married to his uncle. This uncle, an ear-specialist, had murdered the student's father. Of course, Sebastian is telling a parody of *Hamlet*, but Goodman is too stupid to get it.

Another method criticized by V. is that Goodman quotes passages from Sebastian's novels as a way of making biographical points. V. writes, "Owing to there being in this character's speech a chance reference to 'great woods and snow-covered plains,' Mr. Goodman promptly assumes that the whole passage deals with Sebastian Knight's own attitude to Russia. This is a grotesque misconception . . . ." (26).

But V. is unconscious that he makes the same mistake as Goodman, for he goes on to quote from *Lost Property* for the same purpose. V. quotes a love letter as a reflection of Sebastian's response to the end of his love affair with Clare Bishop. Both Goodman and V. never question the validity of quoting the novelist's works as direct biographical sources.

When it comes to insufficiency of information about Sebastian, V. depends on his inner knowledge to fill out the blanks. He asks himself,

> But what actually did I know about Sebastian? I might devote a couple of chapters to the little I remembered of his childhood of youth – but what next? As I planned my book it became evident that 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. Inner knowledge? Yes, this was a thing I possessed, I felt it in every nerve. And the more I pondered on it the more I perceived

> that I had yet another tool in my hand: when 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. (33)

V.'s inner knowledge is based on the blood relationship between them. But is his inner knowledge trustworthy? Maybe not. This can be confirmed by his wrong judgment regarding Sebastian's love affair with Nina. He assumes,

> A girl of that type would have got on his nerves immediately. For what could her conversation have been, if indeed she *had* managed to get acquainted with that quiet, unsociable, absent-minded Englishman at the Beaumont hotel? Surely, after the very first airing of her notions, he would have avoided her. He used to say, I know, that fast girls had slow minds and that there could be nothing duller than a pretty woman who likes fun; even more: that if you looked well at the prettiest girl while she was exuding the cream of the commonplace, you were sure to find some minute blemish in her beauty, corresponding to her habits of thought. (149)

V.'s seemingly logical argument almost convinces us that Nina is not the type that Sebastian would like. V. thinks he understands his brother well enough to know his taste is high above Nina. Besides, their personalities do not match. Sebastian is quiet, unsociable, while Nina is sociable, talkative and a pleasure-pursuer. Nevertheless, the most impossible woman becomes the type that Sebastian falls in love with. Nina turns out to be the secret mistress of Sebastian, and this shows V.'s inner knowledge is problematic. So, V.'s inner knowledge of Sebastian is purely his personal self-assumption. V. forgets he mentions that in certain circumstances he would do the same as Sebastian. So, since he himself is attracted by Nina, why does he think Nina would not be the type of woman Sebastian likes?

The following is another example, showing V.'s misconception of Sebastian. When V. learns the success of the sale of Sebastian's novel *The Doubtful Asphodel* from the newspaper, he begins to imagine a party, with Sebastian in the center, popular and talkative. But he never knows that in fact at that time Sebastian is suffering from his heart disease. As V. writes,

> I recall vividly the day when I saw *The Doubtful Asphodel* announced in an English paper. . . . I envied his lot more acutely than I had even envied it before. I did not know where he was at the time, I had not seen him for at least six years, nor did I know of his being so ill and so miserable. On the contrary, that announcement of his book seemed to me a token of happiness—and I imagined him standing in a warm cheerful room at some club, with his hands in his pockets, his ears glowing, his eyes moist and bright, a smile fluttering on his lips, --and all the other people in the room standing round him, holding glasses of port, and laughing at his jokes. (180-81)

The picture V. imagines is based on his presumption that success must certainly bring happiness and popularity. But a distance of six years has brought them far apart, not only in space but also in spiritual intimacy. V. has not the least idea of Sebastian's current situation, not to mention his suffering from the illness. This imagination only shows V.'s self-assumption and stupidity.

After interviewing with Sebastian's college friends, V. still does not know much about Sebastian. In his frustration, he hopes he can have such good luck as to have someone who knows Sebastian well to appear suddenly and tell him everything he is desperate to know. So he imagines such a voice in the following scene:

> "Sebastian Knight?" said a sudden voice in the mist, "Who is speaking of Sebastian Knight?" The stranger who uttered these words now approached – Oh, how I sometimes yearn for the easy swing of a well-oiled novel! . . . A handy character, a welcome passer-by who had also known my hero, but from a different angle. "And now," he would say, "I am going to tell you the real story of Sebastian Knight's college years." And then and there he would have launched on that story. But no such thing happens in reality. "But alas, nothing of the kind really happened. That Voice in the Mist rang out in the dimmest passage of my mind." (51-52)

This passage shows V.'s understanding of the difference between novels and reality. Nabokov is being satiric about the conventions of novels, which overlooks the fragmentariness and the inconclusiveness in real life.

Not only is V. conscious of the fictitiousness of novels, but V. is also aware of the false smooth flow of plot in biography. So, he declares,

> For reasons already mentioned I shall not attempt to describe Sebastian's boyhood with anything like the methodical continuity which I would have normally achieved had Sebastian been a character of fiction. Had it been thus I could have hoped to keep the reader instructed and entertained by picturing my hero's smooth development from infancy to youth. But if I should try this with Sebastian the result would be one of those "biographies romancées" which are by far the worst kind of literature yet invented. (20)

V.'s remarks point to his disbelief in the clear logical relation between events in conventional literary biography. He would rather sacrifice sense of continuity than make up a story because what he writes is a "real life," not fiction. This explains why his portrait of Sebastian is inconclusive and fragmentary. V. also doubts the truth of the second-hand information. As he claims, "don't be too certain of learning the past from the lips of the present. 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" (52).

Therefore, a "real" story cannot be always real. Through this parodic biography, Nabokov shows us his satire of the genre of biography. What is fiction and what is real in a biography is hard to judge for a reader. What both Goodman and V. present are not the real pictures of Sebastian. In fact, it is impossible to tell a real life of Sebastian. Everyone's interpretation is also a kind of misinterpretation, as we can see from the ways both Goodman and V. fill out the gaps in their knowledge of Sebastian's past life.

Since there is no completely real life in a biography, is there a need to write or read one? The answer for Nabokov is "Yes." Nabokov thinks art has its own reality; meticulous mirroring of reality does not mean art. He assumes that even if we go back to Pushkin's time, we cannot understand him completely because of the long span of time in between. So, what is the point of writing a biography? As Alexandrov states, "Thus, in Nabokov's view, authentic or high art is never false, in the sense of being gratuitously unrelated to the author's experiences or the world in which he lives, even if it makes no attempt to faithfully mirror "reality" (which is

both meaningless and impossible in Nabokov's conception)" (145).

For Sebastian, the convention of detective fiction has become unable to conjure up a true presentation of human existence. As V. says, "for Sebastian Knight, the merest trifle, as, say, the adopted method of a detective story, became a bloated and malodorous corpse" (91). Since the tradition of detective fiction is not functional any more, a parody of it will renew the reader's impression. V. comments,

> As often was the way with Sebastian he used parody as a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion. . . . With something akin to fanatical hate Sebastian was ever hunting out the things which had been fresh and bright but which were now worn to a thread, dead things among living ones; dead things shamming life, painted and repainted, continuing to be accepted by lazy minds serenely unaware of the fraud. (91)

What was fresh and bright becomes dead things after much use. The worn-out literary forms are not accepted by Sebastian nor by Nabokov. So, both of them express the exhaustion of a literary form by using the mode of parody. So, in both *The Prismatic Bezel* and *The Real Life*, we see the conventions of detective fiction followed but also challenged. But the effects are different. In the former, there is no murder at all. The reader may laugh at the blunders of the detective. The effect is comic. In *The Real Life*, V.'s efforts end in frustration. The mystery of Sebastian's real life remains unclarified. So, Nabokov's attitude toward *The Real Life* is both ironic and satiric: It is impossible to construct a real life of someone and it is also stupid to hope for a complete portrait of someone in a literary biography. Nabokov challenges the reader's preconceptions regarding the complete solution to a mystery. This failure of laying bare the real life of the famous writer causes great disappointment in the reader, but it also provides a chance for the reader to rethink the conventions of this literary mode. In the parody of biography, Nabokov shows his satiric attitude toward biography and his affirmative attitude toward art.

In short, in *The Real Life* Nabokov shows two examples of parody of detective fiction. The two parodies make up the novel in a harmonious way and lead the reader to look at detective fiction from a new perspective.

本論文於 2005 年 12 月 30 日通過審查。

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