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 **Black and Violet Words: *Despair* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as Doubles**

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Nabokov Studies 4 (1997) PRISCILLA MEYER (Middletown) Black and Violet Words: Despair and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight as Doubles "But the dying man knew that these were not real ideas; that only one half of the notion of death can be said really to exist" —Sebastian Knight Despair and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight are novels built on the frightfully boring theme of the Double, and as such are often discussed together, along with *Lolita*, *Pale Fire* and others (Pifer Ch. 5; Nicol 87). Only Susan E. Sweeney has seen the two early works as a pair, suggesting that they are variations on the theme of Nabokov's guilt over his relationship to his younger brother Sergei, the earlier *Despair* written while the brothers were estranged and the later *Sebastian Knight* when they are reunited in Paris.² The relationship is even deeper: Nabokov

has carefully constructed the novels as doubles of each other. Nabokov said that "the Doppelgänger subject is a frightful bore," Appel, 145. 2. Sweeney compared *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* and *Despair* as Doppelgänger fictions based, in part, on Nabokov's relationship with misnomer Sergei in two conference papers ("The Brothers Nabokov" and "Brotherly Love"), an argument that she also extends to one of Nabokov's short stories in her essay "The Small Furious Devil: Memory in 'Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster.'" 38 Nabokov Studies other, connecting them by multiple means so that the negative variant of his own views presented in *Despair* is matched by their positive representation in *Sebastian Knight*. Nabokov's reworking of the second English translation of *Despair* suggests a retrospective highlighting of the elements linking the doubled novels.⁵ Both novels treat the nature of the artist, the focus of Nabokov's parody of the Doppelgänger theme. Motifs, images and aspects of plot link the novels—the violet motif, the myth of Narcissus, portraits of the heroes (by Ardalion and Roy Carswell), leaves reflected in water, the stick and the cane, spiders, Hermann's and V.'s business failures, black and white, dogs, and hinds. These elements are set into opposition in order to treat Nabokov's favorite themes of the interpretation of past and present, of Russian culture by an opposed other culture, and of art and life. For Nabokov these interwoven themes lead inevitably to the opposition between death and immortality, the true doubles of the tales, which, as he says, contain "no 'real' doubles" (Appel 145). Hermann and V. as first person narrators represent opposed polarities of literary method, proceeding from their opposed personalities. Hermann is totally self-preoccupied; V. tries to include "as little of my own self as possible" (141). Hermann's overestimation of his ability is a theme of his account of murder, just as V.'s expression of fear that he will be unable to do so. 3. Brian Boyd calls Hermann's ideas "a negation of all [Nabokov] understands by art" (384). 4. Thoroughly detailed in Jane Grayson, Chapter 4; also discussed by Carl R. Proffer. As Grayson says, "Themes, characters and settings are continually reappearing in different guises, in different contexts" (166); in this case the reappearances are systematically ordered. 5. Brian Boyd has noted Nabokov's habit of writing both positive and negative versions of his work (*The Russian Years*). Black and Violet Words 39 Sebastian Justice (a "hopeless pupil" in a "be-an-author" course [34]) begins the chronicle of his quest for Sebastian. Hermann's control over his tale disintegrates whereas V.'s narrative grows steadily closer to Sebastian's style and skill. Hermann desperately wants to control not only events but also "his" "gentle"/"swine" reader; V. allows himself to be governed by the quest's "own magic . . . forced to recognize that I was being led right" (137), and together with his co-author Sebastian, writes a tale that demands active interpretation by all of us, V. included. Hermann considers that "an author's fondest dream is to turn the reader into a spectator" (16). Consequently, by the end of *Despair* when Hermann has lost control of events and his narrative, Hermann sees his readers as...

PRISCILLA MEYER (Middletown)

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—Sebastian Knight

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