

## Pynchon and Nabokov's V.

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Vague affinities in their fictions and the fact that Thomas Pynchon studied at Cornell under Vladimir Nabokov have led most critics to the general assumption that, as William M. Plater has it, "Without question Pynchon was influenced by Vladimir Nabokov, whom he had as a teacher, but the influence was certainly greater after publication of Nabokov's novels."<sup>1</sup> There may be no question about the fact of that influence, but there also has been almost no questioning about what such influence comprised. Lolita (1955) was first published in the U.S. in 1958, while Pynchon was still at Cornell, and the resultant uproar was certainly enough to attract Pynchon's interest--if, indeed, the undergraduate had not already been attracted by Nabokov's course on Russian writers. But a better case for literary influence than those proposed for either Nabokov's lectures on literature or his Lolita, can be built around Nabokov's first novel in English, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1941), which was reissued in 1959.

The name Knight suggests the extensive chess metaphors of the novel, and this knight must be added to the admittedly long list of possible inspirations for Gerhard von Göll's alias, der Springer, in Gravity's Rainbow (1973). Roger B. Henkle has already noted some closer correspondences between The Real Life and Pynchon's first novel, V. (1963): the use of the same initial, by Nabokov for his narrator-quester and by Pynchon for the object of his quest (Nabokov's V. even spies Pynchon's "magic initial"<sup>2</sup> in a "V-shaped flight of cranes"<sup>3</sup>); the multiple identities of the woman being sought in each novel; and the problem of distorting history by re-creating it, in both works.<sup>4</sup> The last of Henkle's points, a popular academic cliché, obscures more than it reveals. All history is a re-creation, and therefore inevitably distorted, as both Nabokov and Pynchon surely realized. Their interests, in The Real Life and V., are located elsewhere--in the understanding that fiction, as a creation, is free of such distortion. As we will see, in both novels, the hero is only purportedly "re-creating" another's

character, while in fact creating his own.

First, however, we should note some similarities in the circumstances surrounding the quests at the heart of both novels. Nabokov's V., like Pynchon's Herbert Stencil, is searching for an unknown woman. V. does not even know the name of his quarry; he burns her letters to his half-brother after Sebastian's death and on his orders, but inadvertently notices the letters are written in Russian. Later, when V. determines to go in search of Sebastian's Russian correspondent, he learns that "Sebastian had been getting letters in Russian from a woman he had met at Blauberg. She had been living at the same hotel as he. Nothing else was known" (111). Stencil knows slightly more: the woman he seeks has the initial V., as he learns from his father's journal (43). But the goal of both quests is the same: self-knowledge, through the creation of self.

Nabokov's V. begins the hunt supposedly as research for the book he is writing on his half-brother. But from the first page of the novel, it is clear that V.'s identification with Sebastian Knight is more than that of a biographer for his subject or even a younger sibling for his older, famous brother. The final lines of the novel only confirm this. "Try as I may," concludes V., "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" (205).

Herbert Stencil begins reading the journal to discover the father he has never known, Sidney Stencil. But Pynchon makes this into another route to self-knowledge and identification: Stencil refers to both himself and his father simply as "Stencil," and what could be more like-father-like-son than the reproduction of a Stencil? The quest shifts to V. as the unknown in the elder Stencil's life, the key that might explain the father and therefore the son to himself:

Finding her: what then? Only that what love there was to Stencil had become directed entirely inward, toward this acquired sense of animateness. Having found this he could hardly release

it, it was too dear. To sustain it he had to hunt V.; but if he should find her, where else would there be to go but back into half-consciousness? He tried not to think, therefore, about any end to the search. Approach and avoid. (44)

The quest is all. It becomes the quester's identity for Nabokov's V. and Pynchon's Stencil, as well as for Humbert Humbert, Oedipa Maas, Tyrone Slothrop, and the others. The end is always anticlimactic: rather than finding himself, the quester loses what identity has been created. Therefore Stencil fears that "the disassembly of the Bad Priest" (322), the end of V., may be his own:

Stencil would have liked to go on believing the death and V. had been separate for his father. This he still could choose to do (couldn't he?), and continue on in calm weather. He could go to Malta and possibly end it. He had stayed off Malta. He was afraid of ending it; but, damn it all, staying here would end it too. Funking out; finding V.; he didn't know which he was most afraid of, V. or sleep. Or whether they were two versions of the same thing. (324)

The same options, more or less, are explored by Nabokov's V. when he realizes that Sebastian's lover was Nina de Rechnoy, and therefore not the woman he is seeking, Helene von Graun, but the one he has found, Madame Lecerf--unless, indeed, she is all three. V. leaves her without asking the question which supposedly has made her the object of his search:

That question which I had wished to ask Nina remained unuttered. I had wished to ask her whether she ever realised that the wan-faced man, whose presence she had found so tedious, was one of the most remarkable writers of his time. What was the use of asking! Books mean nothing to a woman of her kind. . . . (174)

This could not, of course, have been the original question which V. had wanted to ask his brother's unknown lover, since he didn't know then that she was "a woman of her kind." Her relationship with Sebastian is unfathomable to V., because he has rejected her, and his idea of Sebastian's personality is only a projection of the one he has created for himself. Notice

how this recognition scene with Rechnoy/Lecerf suggests the ultimate difference between fictional creations and historical re-creations, while presaging the anti-climactic nature of all such anticipated revelations in both Nabokov and Pynchon: the story continues in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, as it does after the documentation of V.'s death in V., because literature itself is a continuous, inward-turning quest for an understanding that is always concealed but never revealed within it, or imposed upon it.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> William M. Plater, The Grim Phoenix: Reconstructing Thomas Pynchon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Pynchon, V. (New York: Bantam, 1964), 211. Further references are to this edition.

<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (New York: New Directions, 1977), 139. Further references are to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Roger B. Henkle, "Pynchon's Tapestries on the Western Wall," in Pynchon: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Edward Mendelson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1978), 98.