THOU ARE NOT THOU: EVELYN WAUGH
AND VLADIMIR NABOKOV
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First There Was a Name
"I am not I: thou art not he or she: they are not they. E.W." This briefest of disclaimers appears in the early editions of Evelyn Waugh’s famous novel Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder (1945). On the surface of it, Waugh’s disclaimer aims to protect its author from charges of libel by claiming the sheer fictionality of the novel’s characters and events. Might Waugh’s disclaimer also play a different, obfuscatory role by both concealing and revealing the more (or less?) than fictional debt that Brideshead Revisited owes Nabokov’s The Real Life and Sebastian Knight (1939; pub. 1941)? Recall the mysterious final sentence of Nabokov’s novel: “I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us know” (RLSK 203). Consider also that in Waugh’s Brideshead Revisited (hereafter BR), a principal character is called “Sebastian Flyte.” Phonetically, the likeness of the names “Sebastian Flyte” [Flight] and “Sebastian Knight” is even more suggestive than graphically. The bedeviling resemblance of the names of the two principal characters prompted this inquiry and continues to intrigue us even after we have completed the initial investigation.

These two novels share more than the two characters called “Sebastian.” To list just a few similarities and parallels: both are structured as memoirs; both employ first-person narrators who enjoy a special connection with the characters whom they attempt to reconstruct in the course of their respective narratives; both characters share a strong link to St. Sebastian; in both novels heart disease plays a central role for the Sebastian characters and their families. In addition, the novels share a minor but endearing detail: both Nabokov and Waugh use their alma maters as a setting. (Nabokov attended Cambridge University in 1919-22, shortly before Waugh attended Oxford. Nabokov’s Sebastian Knight attends Cambridge; both Sebastian Flyte and Waugh’s narrator, Charles Ryder, attend Oxford.)

By highlighting the links between the two works and their authors, we propose in this essay that BR borrows a number of narrative devices, themes and cultural motifs from RLSK. We propose that at the time of writing BR, Waugh may not only have been familiar with Nabokov’s first English-language novel, but also leaned upon RLSK in order to develop the principal thematic and structural nexuses of his own novel.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight and Brideshead Revisited: History and Structure

Close contemporaries, Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) and Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966) were sufficiently familiar with each other’s writings. Thirteen years after the publication of BR, in a postcard to John Donaldson dated November 18, 1958, Waugh wrote: “Lolita. I only remember the smut. The Yankee edition is full of very high-brow allusions” (Mark Amory, ed., The Letters of Evelyn Waugh, New Haven, 1980, 516). More than half a year later, still unchanged in his opinion, he wrote to Nancy Mitford on June 29, 1959, “No, I didn’t think Lolita any good except as smut. As that it was highly exciting to me” (Amory 523). Thee years later, Pale Fire did not escape Waugh’s criticism either, and he described it as follows: “New Nabokov a stunt—but a clever one” (Amory 586). Nabokov was equally critical of Waugh. In a letter to Edmund Wilson dated March 8, 1946, Nabokov commented: “At the same time I have been reading some J. Latimer […] and Brideshead Revisited which is very amusing and charming here and there, but is, on the whole, trash (and terribly voulu [contrived] at the
end). Your criticism of it was extremely to the point (and your prediction correct)” (Simon Karlinsky, ed., Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov-Wilson Letters, 1940-1971, Berkeley, 2001, 188). Even prior to the publication of BR, Waugh and Wilson had had a strained relationship, their paths having crossed on a number of occasions. In his letter, Nabokov refers to Wilson’s review of BR published in The New Yorker on January 5, 1946, in which Wilson found the book an artistic failure, and predicted that it would be a bestseller (see Karlinsky 189, n. 11; thirteen years later Wilson discussed Waugh in a letter to Nabokov of March 11, 1959, see Karlinsky 362).

Nabokov’s letter to Wilson postdates the British publication of BR by about ten months.

Published in Great Britain by Chapman & Hall in May 1945, and released in the USA by Little, Brown & Co. later the same year, BR immediately became a popular and commercial success. RLSK, which Nabokov finished in Paris in December 1939, was not a success at the time of its original publication by James Laughlin’s New Directions in December 1941 (four years later, in December 1945, Editions Poetry released it in Great Britain).

Brian Boyd indicates that Nabokov submitted the manuscript of RLSK to a literary competition in London (Boyd, VNRY 496). When we presented an early version of this essay at the Vladimir Nabokov Symposium in St. Petersburg, on July 15, 2002, Boyd voiced skepticism regarding the likelihood of Waugh’s familiarity with RLSK during World War 2 and prior to its British publication. At the same time, Boyd suggested that Waugh may have become acquainted with RLSK as a judge of the literary competition to which Nabokov sent RLSK. Our main source of information about the competition is a letter from Nabokov to his New York agent, Altagracia de Janelli, dated January 25, 1939 (see Boyd, VNRY 580; now at the Berg Collection of NYPL). There is very strong evidence that Waugh could not have judged the 1939 British competition to which Nabokov sent RLSK. In a letter to A.D. Peters, coincidentally dated January 25, 1939, Waugh speaks of his wife Laura’s appendectomy, which allowed him a welcome break from work and compelled him to move to Bristol for a week to attend to her needs (see Amory 119-120). Martin Stannard’s detailed biography of Evelyn Waugh describes the first half of 1939 as a stagnant point in Waugh’s career, spent in his Piers Court residence at Gloucestershire working on Robbery Under Law, and interrupted briefly by his wife’s surgery and his visit to Bristol in the last week of January (Martin Stannard, Evelyn Waugh, The Early Years: 1903-1939, London, 1976, 485). The other biographies of Evelyn Waugh, such as Selina Hastings’ Evelyn Waugh, A Biography (Boston, 1994) and John Wilson’s Evelyn Waugh: A Literary Biography (Madison, NJ, 1996), also contain no information about any literary contests Waugh judged in 1939.

At the same time, we know that while Waugh was at the European war theater, he received regular updates from home about new books. In March 1942 the writer Nancy Mitford, Waugh’s close friend and principal wartime correspondent, started working at a bookshop owned by her friend G. Heywood Hall and located in London’s Curzon Street (see Selina Hastings, Nancy Mitford: A Biography, New York, 1985; see also Amory 162). Mitford’s contemporaries praised the unusual quality of the books sold at G. Heywood Hill Books and described it as “a shop with a relaxed individual flavour” (Harold Acton, Nancy Mitford: A Memoir, New York, 1975). The bookshop was well known at the time for its good selection of literary books published outside of Great Britain. Throughout the war Waugh continued to receive packages of new books from Mitford.

We know enough about Waugh’s life in the 1940s to conjecture about his knowledge of RLSK—or at least awareness of its existence, title and main themes—at the time of BR’s composition, in 1944-45. Waugh commenced his work on BR
in January 1944. He recorded this in his diary of January 31, 1944: “Today, Monday, I came to Chagford with the intention of starting on an ambitious novel tomorrow morning. I still have a cold and am low in spirits, but I feel full of literary power…” (The Diaries of Evelyn Waugh, ed. Michael Davie, Boston, 1976, 557-558). Waugh’s letters attest to the enthusiasm with which he had turned from military service to literature, creating what was to become his most celebrated work. In a letter of March 23, 1944, he writes to Lady Dorothy Lygon, “At the moment I am in Chagford having a little rest between military duties and in consequence working harder than I have done for nearly five years. I am writing a very beautiful book, to bring tears, about very rich, beautiful, high born people” (Emory, 180). Waugh finished working on the novel while serving as a liaison officer in Dubrovnik, then Yugoslavia, and it came out in London on May 28, 1945, practically coinciding with his demobilization from the army (see Mark Stannard, Evelyn Waugh, No Abiding City, 1939-1966, London, 1986, chs. 4-5). The same year, he also wrote a short story entitled “Charles Ryder’s Schooldays” about the childhood of BR’s protagonist. A satellite of the novel, Waugh’s story was not published until 1982, 16 years after his death (see John Wilson 127). While the sources of Waugh’s autobiographical narrator Charles Ryder clearly lie in the writer’s own Oxford days and therefore predate the 1940s and the composition of BR, it is quite likely that Waugh’s Sebastian Flyte owes his appearance to Nabokov’s Sebastian Knight.

Both RLSK and BR are fictional (auto)biographies. Both novels reconstruct biographies of a character named “Sebastian” through the eyes of a first-person narrator. At a first glance, the plot of RLSK unfolds as a mystery story, where V. tries to reconstruct facts from Sebastian’s life by tracing down and questioning his friends and associates. Because of this likeness to a mystery novel, the reconstruction of Sebastian’s life and character unfolds slowly, in pieces that are finally (if at all) brought together at the end. A similarly slow unmasking of the character also occurs in BR. At the beginning of the novel we meet Sebastian as a whimsical and extravagant college student with a bottle of wine, a basket of strawberries, and a teddy bear in the front seat of his car. (BR 18; here and hereafter we quote from Evelyn Waugh, Brideshead Revisited, intr. Frank Kermode, New York, 1993). As the novel develops, so does the drama of Sebastian’s double life as unveiled by the first-person narrator, Charles Ryder.

“I” Am Sebastian: First-Person Narrators and Sebastian

The structural and narrative similarities in the novels invite a detailed look at the first-person narrators through whose medium the two Sebastians are (re)constructed. In RLSK, the fictional author-cum-narrator is V, Sebastian Knight’s half brother. In BR, the connection between the narrator and Sebastian Flyte is not familial but also very intimate, an all-absorbing college friendship turning into an implicit love affair. Both relationships exhibit a powerful male-to-male bond.

From the very beginning of V’s story the readers learn of his revered love of his half-brother; at one point, V states: “and this I do not because I want to annoy him, but merely as a wistful and vain attempt to make him notice my existence” (RLSK 14). He frequently speaks of his love for Sebastian, using phrases such as, “although I loved him dearly…” (RLSK 14). In the concluding scene of the novel, by Sebastian’s deathbed, V confesses of the “…waves of love [he] felt” for Sebastian. (RLSK 200). V not only loves Sebastian but wants to be him, first as a child, later as an adult (and an artist).

Charles Ryder’s relationship with Sebastian Flyte is of a homoerotic nature. Trying to conceal his college love affair, the forty-something Ryder transmits his recollected youthful feelings for Sebastian through a prism of the vaguely homoerotic, euphemizing language. Charles describes Sebastian as “entrancing, with that epicene beauty which in extreme youth
sings aloud for love..." (BR 26). Waugh scholar David Higdon has stressed the fact that Cara (the mistress and companion of Sebastian's father) regards Charles's relationship with Sebastian as a "romantic friendship" (BR 89), and at one point Charles himself admits that he "had no mind then for anything except Sebastian..." (BR 113; see David Leon Higdon, "Gay Sebastian and Cheerful Charles: Homeroeticism in Waugh's 'Brideshead Revisited,'" ARIEL 25:4 [October 1994], 76-89). Evelyn Waugh's biographers discuss Waugh's own homosexual relationships while at Oxford and claim that the relationship between Charles and Sebastian is based on Waugh's long-term affair with Alastair Graham, that lasted all the way through Waugh's marriage to his first wife, Evelyn Gardner (see Douglas L. Patey, The Life of Evelyn Waugh: A Critical Biography, Oxford, 1998, 13).

V's adoration of his half-brother Sebastian Knight echoes in Charles Ryder's ardent admiration for Sebastian Flyte; in the course of their narrative journeys, both V and Charles travel in the direction of becoming "the other"—their respective Sebastian. V longs to know his dead half-brother and searches for a meaningful connection with him and his literary work. At the end of the novel he may have completed the transformation. It is noteworthy that Nabokov's narrator V becomes Sebastian or merges with him by adopting Sebastian's vocation of a writer. The final, mysterious sentence of RLSK invites the reader to ponder the limits of fictional identity transformation, and this Nabokovian mystery rings alarmingly familiar in Waugh's disclaimer and reverberates throughout the text of BR.

The ponderous transformation of Waugh's narrator Charles Ryder is nowhere as explicit as in his adoption of Sebastian's faith system in the latter part of the novel (Sebastian Flyte comes from a prominent family of Anglo-Catholic aristocrats): "So through a world of piety I made my way to Sebastian" (BR 26). As Waugh's biographer Douglas Lane Patey points out, the process is twofold—through piety to Sebastian and later, as it turns out, through Sebastian to piety (Patey 227). The reader discerns from the prologue that at the time of composing his memoir (during World War Two) Charles Ryder has formally converted from Protestantism to Catholicism; one of the minor characters remarks about the Brideshead chapel, located on the grounds of Flyte's ancestral estate: "More in your line than mine" (BR 75). Still an Anglican in the earlier part of the novel, prior to his transformation under Sebastian's impact, Charles Ryder refers to Catholicism as "Sebastian's faith" (BR 75). While V in Nabokov's novel becomes Sebastian by adopting his profession, Charles in Waugh's novel becomes Sebastian by adopting his faith.

Of Saints and Novels
The question of Catholicism brings forth the major thematic, religious, and cultural nexus which the two novels share, the legend of St. Sebastian. Probably a native of Milan and a Roman officer, Sebastian had been a favorite of Diocletian, the Roman emperor famous for his fierce persecution of the early Christians. A convert to Christianity, the would-be martyr was charged and tortured. Tied to a tree and shot with arrows, he was left for dead but, according to the legend, survived. Once recovered, he returned to Rome to preach Christianity to Diocletian, was arrested again and beaten to death by the emperor's soldiers (see E. Hoade, "Sebastian, St.," New Catholic Encyclopedia, vol. 13, 1967, 18-19). The Passion of St. Sebastian, a romance, was created c. 450 CE by a monk of a monastery that Pope Sixtus III had erected in the catacombs in order to expand the cult of St. Sebastian. In Renaissance iconography, St. Sebastian is frequently portrayed as an androgynous young handsome man pierced with arrows.

There is no evidence in RLSK that would directly connect V's knowledge of Sebastian Knight's life with the life and legend of the early Christian martyr. Both Knight and the Christian saint descended from aristocratic families, but that
alone can hardly provide grounds for claiming a connection between them. Furthermore, only two direct references to religion, both brief, occur in Nabokov’s novel. The first reference is Sebastian’s remark, “I have finished building a world, and this is my Sabbath rest” (RLSK 191). The second is V’s: “As it happens with many people who do not trouble about religion in the ordinary trend of life, I hastily invented a soft, warm, tear-misty God, and whispered an informal prayer” (RLSK 191). Most likely, Nabokov was interested in St. Sebastian not as a religious figure but rather as a modernist icon.

That St. Sebastian was a cultural icon in Europe at the turn of the 19th century becomes apparent from the interest many modernist authors took in his character. For instance, Rainer Maria Rilke dedicated a sonnet entitled “Sankt Sebastian” to the martyr. Written in 1905-1906, Rilke’s sonnet does not discuss St. Sebastian as a religious figure, but rather represents him as a young handsome man untouched by suffering and physical pain, immersed in himself and his inner world. Nabokov describes Sebastian Knight as “equally amused and unhappy, joyful and apprehensive” (RLSK 64), echoing Rilke’s Sebastian who stands smiling and unwounded despite the momentous appearance of pain in his eyes (On Rilke and Nabokov; see Thomas Sefrid, “A Salad of Racial Genes: Rilke as a Possible Target of Lolita,” a paper delivered at the Nabokov Centenary Festival, Cornell University, September 11, 1998). A number of modernist authors paid tribute to St. Sebastian in their works. In “Death in Venice” (1912) Thomas Mann alluded to St. Sebastian as an epitome of male beauty. T. S. Eliot in 1911 composed a poem called “The Love Song of St. Sebastian.” Anything but religious, T. S. Eliot’s poem is an intensely erotic sado-masochistic representation of St. Sebastian and a female lover he dreams of strangling so as to express his passion:

I should for a moment linger
And follow the curve with my finger

And your head between my knees –
I think that at last you would understand.
There would be nothing more to say.
You should love me because I should have strangled you
And because of my infamy;
And I should love you the more because I had mangled you
And because you were no longer beautiful
To anyone but me
(T. S. Eliot, “The Love Song of St. Sebastian,” Invention of the March Hare: Poems, 1909-1917. New York, 1996). Other prominent examples include Akutagave Ryunosuke’s story “St. Sebastian” (1927) and Gabriele D’Annunzio’s mystery play “Le martyr de Saint Sébastien” (1911). Claude Debussy’s ballet of the same title was based on D’Annunzio’s play, and Léon Bakst’s well-known sketch preserves the image of Ida Rubinstein who danced the part of St. Sebastian in the first production.

St. Sebastian captured the interest of many writers of the first part of the 20th century. Nabokov’s solid grounding in religious history aside, his interests in RLSK stemmed from the early modernist cult of St. Sebastian. This is not to say, however, that no echoes of the early Christian legend of the martyrdom of St. Sebastian are found in the text of RLSK. For instance, when Claire Bishop meets V, she tells him of her first encounter with Sebastian, “When I first met him he looked a doomed man” (RLSK 71). In the legend, after St. Sebastian is tied to a tree and shot with arrows, he is rescued by St. Irene, the widow of a Christian soldier who nurses his wounds and brings him back to life. Sebastian’s relationship with Clare develops in the same way; Clare quietly enters Sebastian’s world, rescues him from solitude and watches over him and his career as a writer.

For Evelyn Waugh of BR, St. Sebastian is a complex amalgam of the early Christian legend of the martyr, the
In clear water... Thus is Sebastian pointed into a pool at himself.

These eyes and the face itself are painted in such a manner as to convey the impression that they are mirrored in water.

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Meyer insists that Sebastian Knight's narcissism is of a unique kind—he is not looking at his own reflection but the "infinite unknown" (Meyer 44) of the clear water. While this suggestion provides important insight for metaphysical readings of the novel, our concern here is the reference to Narcissus that V himself makes as he resists the simile: "But the face is only a chance reflection. Any man can look into water" (RLSK 118). To this, the painter who created this image of Sebastian, retorts, "But don't you think that he did it particularly well?" (RLSK 118). Nabokov's Sebastian has a special gift of behaving like Narcissus in a way that is apparently creative, for not only has he written works of art himself, but he also inspires other works of art, V's novel and Roy's painting.

Sebastian Flyte's narcissism and self-indulgence are frequently emphasized features of his character analysis, and we will not belabor them further in this essay. We will point out, however, that a direct reference to the myth of Narcissus occurs in Waugh's novel. Anthony Blanche, subsequently Sebastian's slanderer, says this: "Or did he have one [spot], rather a stubborn one at the back of his neck? I think, now, that he did. Narcissus, with one pustule" (BR 44). Blanche's comparison of Sebastian Flyte with Narcissus signals a perfection which is slightly marred by a blemish on his neck. This is finally very poignant, as in both Nabokov's and Waugh's novels, Narcissus serves as a model of beauty and perfection slightly blemished by the romantic and aesthetic excesses of the two fictional Sebastians.

Heart Disease
The prevalence and significance of heart disease and aching hearts in RLSK and BR further augments the link between these two works. Heart disease serves as a marker of privileged characters in a number of Nabokov's works, including "Lik" and Pnin. Heart disease first appears in RLSK with the character of Virginia Knight, Sebastian's mother. (Incidentally, the family histories of Sebastian Knight and Sebastian Flyte possess a measure of congruency: Sebastian Knight's mother abandoned him and her husband when Sebastian was only four; Sebastian Flyte's parents are separated, and his father, Lord Marchmain, is living in Venice with another woman.) Knight's mother "died of heart-failure (Lehman's disease) at the little town of Roquebrune, in the summer of 1909" (RLSK 9). Years later, Sebastian Knight learns that he is also suffering from the heart disease that had killed his mother. Says V: "I suppose Sebastian already knew from what exact heart-disease he was suffering. His mother had died of the same complaint, a rather rare variety of angina pectoris, called by some doctors 'Lehman's disease'" (RLSK 87). The significance of Sebastian's heart ailment is not merely that it connects him to his mother whom he never knew, but that it also indicates the double meaning of an aching heart as both a physical ailment and profound melancholy.

A very similar, double meaning of heart disease develops throughout BR. The heart problems of Sebastian Flyte's mother, Lady Marchmain, underscore her spiritual suffering. While the exact name of her condition is never mentioned, it is implicitly heart-related. At one point, Charles Ryder remarks that, "it seemed her heart was transfixed with the swords of her dolour, a living heart to match the plaster and paint" (BR 171). Not only Sebastian Flyte's mother, but also his father, Lord Marchmain, suffers and eventually dies of a heart disease. His companion, Cara, confides in Charles while visiting Brideshead: "The doctors in Rome gave him less than a year.... His heart; some long word at the heart. He is dying of a long word" (BR 288). The expression "some long word at the heart" suggests both the physical source of Lord Marchmain's suffering and the emotional tumult surrounding his death (and his deathbed return to Catholicism).

Sebastian Flyte carries in him the constant sadness, inexplicable only at a first glance, "[Sebastian] was sick at heart
somewhere, I did not know how, and I grieved for him, unable to help,” Charles Ryder reminisces about the sadness that Sebastian constantly bore inside him (BR 114). The motif of heart disease in BR functions in a way that closely resembles Nabokov’s handling of it in RLSK. This motif augments not only a connection between child and parent through heart-related conditions, but also the notion of a family pattern and destiny that one inherits and carries into the grave.

Towards a Conclusion
We have briefly considered Nabokov’s and Waugh’s use of the genre of fictional (auto)biography; the similarities in the relationship between the narrators and the respective Sebastians; the writers’ reliance on the early modernist cult of St. Sebastian and the myth of Narcissus; and the place of heart disease as both a physical and spiritual condition in the families of Sebastian Knight and Sebastian Flyte. To varying degrees, all of the above points to textual and atmospheric connections between BR and RLSK. The possibility of Waugh’s familiarity with Nabokov’s work as early as the end 1942, and by the time of the composition of BR in 1944-45, gives us reason to believe that he may have obtained from RLSK several of its structural themes and cultural motifs and transformed them in accordance with his own background, aesthetics, and religious sensibility. While the onus of proving, beyond all reasonable doubt, the direct influence of RLSK on BR remains fairly high, it is our view that the trace of RLSK in BR is too significant to be dismissed as coincidental. A broader reexamination of the genesis of BR is currently on the way. Regardless of the final reckoning—and despite Nabokov’s negative opinion of Brideshead Revisited—Waugh’s novel will remain a masterwork in its own right.

Authors’ Note
The initial impulse for this study came in 1994 from Emily Artinian, and we thank her for her splendid insight. We would also like to express our gratitude to Brian Boyd who kindly responded to our query concerning the British contest to which Nabokov submitted RLSK in 1939.

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