Reimagining Nabokov

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In the last quarter century, literary criticism has become increasingly interested in textual “surfaces.” This surface turn has been accompanied by critiques of symptomatic reading, which has enjoyed enormous authority in the field. Simply put, symptomatic reading asserts that “proper interpretation” must ferret out “a latent meaning behind a manifest one,” locating a text’s truest meaning in its depths, while imagining the critic as “wrestling meaning from a resisting text or inserting it into a lifeless one.” In contrast, the turn to the surface supposes and witnesses many things, among them: that the most meaningful meanings are not necessarily the deepest ones; that the forces of repression or domination often operate openly, requiring no unveiling; or that in addition to understanding a work through its content or form, the experience of reading a text—one’s affective response to it—matters.

Of the symptomatic approaches, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick terms “paranoid reading” merits singling out. Sedgwick identifies paranoid practices as those that uncover hidden truth by employing a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” be it unconscious drives undergirding literary forms or oppressive historical forces camouflaged by liberal aesthetics—basically, what Marxist, psychoanalytic, and deconstructive analysis have in common. Pointing to the hegemony of paranoid reading in criticism, Sedgwick wonders what other
ways of knowing are consequently muffled by it. She advocates for a reading practice that pivots from the paranoid position to one she calls “reparative,” from where it is possible to build psychic wholeness and positive affects out of reality—even out of one revealed to be hostile or depressing.

The benefits and drawbacks of symptomatic and paranoid reading, as well as the interpretive horizons opened by a surface turn and the reparative mode, are rewarding topics in classes that study works by Vladimir Nabokov. For one, plenty of Nabokov’s characters are themselves readers, and interpretation is thematicized in his works. But the argument may also be made that symptomatic reading has reigned among scholarly approaches to Nabokov. As Eric Naiman writes, it is not only that “Nabokov’s world is charged with hermeneutic paranoia”; the world of Nabokov studies is also characterized by a kind of hermeneutic performance anxiety, or “hermaphobia.” Thus, bringing discussion of these reading practices into a study of Nabokov sheds light on his characters and how they read and also on how we—Nabokov’s readers—understand and experience Nabokov. It allows us to think carefully about what is gained or lost by our paranoid and symptomatic approaches to Nabokov and to access ways of reading him that encourage the reparative moment: an experience of joy and wholeness in relation to the text, unencumbered by fear of “missing something” or “getting it wrong.”

*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (henceforth *RLSK*) is particularly well suited for an analysis of these issues. It features a quest for a hidden truth or concealed reality (to learn the *real* life of Sebastian Knight) and a quester in the form of a reader, interpreter, and writer (Sebastian’s half-brother, V.). V. operates, often, as a paranoid reader, even like a “hermophobic” Nabokovian scholar, but toward the novel’s end embraces a reparative reading practice, one that allows for psychic reconciliation without solving epistemetic or empirical crisis. As a corollary to this, the novel is fertile ground for queer readings and reading queerly, which have emerged lockstep with both paranoid and reparative reading practices.

**Frameworks**

To set the stage for RLSK, students consider the question *What is real?* together with two theoretical frameworks we’ll work with: the first from Nabokov and the second from Sedgwick.
**Nabokov’s “Reality”**

I provide a handout featuring some of Nabokov’s statements on reality (Appendix A). Students consider these remarks with three tasks in mind.

First, we attempt to understand Nabokov’s comments on their own. What does it mean when he writes “reality” is “one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes”? Or if, as he claims, “The word ‘reality’ is the most dangerous word there is,” what makes it so? Often, the more we discuss his comments the queerer they become, offering multiple potential interpretations while eschewing commonsensical, normative understandings of reality.

Second, we put these comments into conversation with a general class discussion about *What is real?*, involving contemporary concepts such as post-truth, disinformation, alternative facts, fake news, and so on. Compared with notions such as these, Nabokov’s “reality” is perhaps more positively drawn, even though he emphasizes that to perceive “true reality” is impossible. For many, Nabokov’s comments open our original question up to more philosophical and aesthetic considerations.

Third, we explore how these comments impact a reading of the novel’s title. I ask what students assumed *RLSK* might be about knowing only its title. Did this assumption shift once they were clued into Nabokov’s statements on reality? How do these statements inevitably transform the title into a cipher that requires deciphering? (Who here is starting to feel suspicious?)

In adding depth to the novel’s title, we establish questions that will accompany our reading of *RLSK*: How does the narrator V. define what’s real? What counts, for him, as “the real life” of Sebastian—and what doesn’t count? What methods does he use to discover Sebastian’s “real life”? What sources does he trust, and which ones does he dismiss? With these I encourage students to develop a complex and suspicious understanding of the novel’s ideas about reality *and* to see V. as a kindred reader on a similar quest to theirs. After all, V. interprets anecdotes, memories, rumors, and even *his own imaginings* about Sebastian; analyzes Sebastian’s literary texts; and critiques an earlier biography on Sebastian, a newspaper obituary, and reviews of Sebastian’s work—all as part of his mission to uncover Sebastian’s “real life.”

**Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading**

The notion of V. as a reader leads to the second theoretical framework taken from Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So
Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You.” Ideally, students read and discuss this piece in preparation for our conversations about RLSK; otherwise, I provide a summary.

To provide a genealogy of paranoid reading, Sedgwick points to what Paul Ricoeur designated the “hermeneutics of suspicion” as a way of categorizing the position of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. “Beginning with them,” Ricoeur explains, “understanding is hermeneutics: henceforward, to seek meaning is no longer to spell out the consciousness of meaning, but to decipher its expressions”; their “distinguishing characteristic” is “the general hypothesis concerning both the process of false consciousness and the method of deciphering.” Like other symptomatic reading practices, the “hermeneutics of suspicion” locates the most meaningful aspect of a text in what it represses. However, what distinguishes it from religious models of revealed meaning (such as in Gnosticism) is its emphasis on demystification or the “reduction of illusion.”

Sedgwick observes in the “hermeneutics of suspicion” a “concomitant privileging of the concept of paranoia.” Even Freud, Sedgwick reminds us, noted a remarkable correspondence between a patient’s “systematic persecutory delusion” and Freud’s own theoretical system. Paranoid practices are thus methods that lean toward deciphering, diagnosis, and unveiling, operating under the suspicion that the truest (most real) meaning must be plumbed from the depths beneath a false and deceptive surface (be it a text, culture, consciousness, historical record, etc.).

While acknowledging that her own writings have leaned upon paranoid practices (as other scholars have noted), in this essay Sedgwick thinks carefully about their potential disadvantages. One is that the only positive affect the paranoid position seeks is the avoidance of humiliation; otherwise, it is enjoined entirely with negative affect, especially anxiety. Another is that its faith in exposure seems, in retrospect, stunningly naïve: On the one hand, “What is the basis for assuming that it will surprise or disturb, never mind motivate, anyone to learn that a given social manifestation is artificial, self-contradictory, imitative, phantasmatic, or even violent?”; on the other hand, why fetishize unveiling when clear signs of violence and oppression are easily, ubiquitously evident? (“Why bother exposing the ruses of power in a country where, at any given moment, 40 percent of young black men are enmeshed in the penal system?”). Still another is that paranoid reading is hyper-privileged in cultural and historical studies,
likely at the expense of other possible modes of knowing—in particular, a kind she calls *reparative*.

To describe reparative reading, Sedgwick finds useful Melanie Klein’s concept of paranoid and depressive positions. For Klein, the psyche in the paranoid position is one of “terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one.” Meanwhile, the depressive position is “the position from which it is possible in turn to use one’s own resources to assemble or ‘repair’ the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though,...*not necessarily like any preexisting whole....* Among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love.” As Ellis Hanson puts it: “Faced with the depressing realization that people are fragile and the world hostile, a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of political outrages...but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake.” Hence, in contrast to paranoid reading and its demystification, suspicion, decoding, and unveiling of hidden meaning, reparative practices work toward *pleasure* and *amelioration*—the act of trying and trying again to take joy and make whole even in the midst of hostile meaning.

As we study RLSK, one major goal is to come to a better understanding of reparative reading and what it enables us to do, while also honoring what paranoid reading does well and acknowledging where it falls short. To this end, students keep notes regarding V.’s “knowledge-seeking modes”: when does V. employ paranoid practices to seek knowledge about Sebastian, and when does he demonstrate reparative ones? The latter, at least for me, produces the most beautiful moments in the novel, even though these moments are suffused with empirical and epistemological uncertainty (moments when “reality” is deeply in question). Finally, our task will also be to read in both paranoid and reparative modes, exploring how these produce different knowledges about and experiences of the novel.

**RLSK and Paranoid Reading**

**Reality’s False Bottoms**

Nabokov’s statements on reality compel students to re-read the title of RLSK suspiciously. What could the real (without quotation marks) life mean, if reality means nothing without quotation marks? As Gennady Barabtarlo first discovered, anagramming “Sebastian Knight” offers up *A Knight Is Absent,*
feeding our hermeneutic frenzy. Both the title and the title character’s name contain false bottoms, riddles, or traps nestled within them. Through this, what I most want students to grasp is the beginning of a pattern where seemingly stable bits of reality (supposedly solid surfaces), when read in the paranoid mode, become unstable (beneath these surfaces are conflicting, self-sabotaging depths).

To develop this pattern, students keep a list of facts about Sebastian introduced in the first chapter. By “facts,” I mean information about him seemingly not up for debate (in the spirit of the saying, “Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not their own facts”). Here are just three of the most common ones that produce interesting discussion:

1. “Sebastian Knight was born on the thirty-first of December, 1899, in the former capital of my country.”

2. The names of Sebastian’s mother (Virginia Knight), her father (Edward Knight), her cousin (H. F. Stainton), her lover (Palchin), a friend of the family (Captain Belov), and an old Russian lady (Olga Olegovna Orlova). Meanwhile, the names of some characters are not given, including Sebastian’s father, stepmother, and half-brother.

3. How, where, and when Sebastian’s mother died: “She died of heart-failure (Lehmann’s disease) at the little town of Roquebrune, in the summer of 1909.”

All of these, with very little paranoid reading, transition from facts into questions.

Regarding Sebastian’s birthday, seasoned readers of Nabokov are conditioned to wonder which calendar (Gregorian or Julian) is intended whenever a pre-Revolution date is given in connection with Russia. Until 1918, Russia used the Julian calendar and therefore “lagged twelve days behind the rest of the civilized world in the nineteenth century, and thirteen in the beginning of the twentieth.” Like Sebastian, Nabokov was born in Saint Petersburg in 1899, a year that further complicates the transposition of the Julian day into the Gregorian system—if one is born in 1899 (when from Julian to Gregorian it is a twelve-day difference), they inevitably celebrate all their birthdays in the twentieth century (when the difference from Julian to Gregorian is thirteen days). Nabokov notes these imperfectly shifting dates between calendars in *Speak, Memory* to explain why his birthday is sometimes April 10, other
times April 22, and still other times April 23, but he also plays with such slippery dates in his literary works. Which calendar, therefore, does V. have in mind when he tells us Sebastian’s birthdate, and what different meanings do the various possibilities enable?

There is then the curious fact that so many peripheral characters are named in the first chapter, and yet we never learn the name of the father, the stepmother, or the narrator—three who would share the same last name, in all likelihood a Russian one. Observing this, we remember that this Russian family name would also, by tradition, be Sebastian’s. Hence the name’s absence becomes curiouser still. It moreover sharpens focus on “Knight,” the maiden name of Sebastian’s mother. Is “Sebastian Knight,” then, the title character’s birth name? Or is it his pen name? And is “the real life of pen name” the same thing as “the real life of birth name”—or are these different enterprises?

We are now on high alert and tackle the third fact: Sebastian’s mother died of heart failure, specifically Lehmann’s disease. We are fastidious, good readers; we will caress the truth out of every detail, so we look this up. We discover that Lehmann’s disease does not exist (at least not according to any medical dictionary in our world). We massage it even more. “Lehmann’s” sort of sounds like “layman’s.” Could this be a layman’s heart disease, or lovesickness? Another student finds “Hansel” anagrammatically tucked away in “Lehmann’s”: could we be following breadcrumbs? One of these will eventually lead to Sebastian, who also suffers from Lehmann’s disease, mentioned by V. when describing the earliest signs of trouble in Sebastian and Clare’s relationship. Did Sebastian die from lovesickness?

As we go through these details, we become less convinced that we can establish even the basic facts about Sebastian. The novel seems on a mission to undermine any real certainty about its subject (or maybe, one student remarks, V. is just bad at his job). We consider why this might be its mission. What is to be gained by making suspicious what V. writes in a text about a “real life,” and what possible interpretations are enabled here? It says something, of course, about “reality” and how well we can ever know it. But this paranoid method also opens the novel up to several queer possibilities, one of which I turn to now.

Queering the Narrative

Paranoia and paranoid reading have enjoyed an intimate relationship with queer studies. Like feminist resistant readings, which undertook
against-the-grain interpretations of canonical texts to expose misogyny, early queer readings engaged in the symptomatic/paranoid tradition to unveil queer “leakages”—“cracks and fissures in supposedly heteronormative surfaces, which revealed subversive queer connotations.”

Even before becoming a method of queer analysis, during the mid-1980s paranoia was an object of “antihomophobic theory,” a way of understanding “not how homosexuality works, but how homophobia and heterosexism work—in short, if one understands these oppressions to be systemic, how the world works.” In RLSK, a queer narrative can be accessed both through the paranoid practice, which reveals queer leakages in the novel, as well as by considering V.’s paranoia as an object (and not just as one of his interpretive methods)—an object that announces his homophobia.

After demonstrating how the paranoid practice throws into suspense what seem to be the novel’s basic facts, the paranoid impulse dictates we question what V. believes to be key—“the missing link”—to learning the “real life” of Sebastian. This is that Sebastian fell in love with a mysterious woman and left Clare Bishop for her. As V. tells Roy Carswell, underscoring the importance of this to his project: “I must find that woman. She is the missing link in his evolution, and I must obtain her—it’s a scientific necessity.”

In this quest to find the “missing link,” V. adopts radically paranoid methods, from decoding a fictitious letter in Lost Property to searching across the continent for Nina Rechnoy. The energy and urgency he puts into this quest can pull readers in as well, so much so that we risk overlooking some basic questions. Namely, why does V. feel so strongly that this affair is key to understanding Sebastian? Or, put another way: why does V. put so much weight into answering this question? We consider what V. takes for granted about the affair: that it was with a woman. Could he be wrong?

Once we entertain the possibility that the mysterious woman might be a mysterious man, abundant textual evidence can be called to substantiate it. Queer leakages emerge in multiple moments, among them:

1. **Sebastian’s journey with the futurist poet Alexis Pan and his wife Larissa.**

V. dismisses the possibility that Sebastian had an affair with Larissa, which might explain why he went on the trip: “Why he had joined in that ludicrous show and what in fact had led him to pal with that grotesque couple remained a complete mystery (my mother thought that perhaps he had been ensnared
by Larissa but the woman was perfectly plain, elderly and violently in love with her freak of a husband).” 29 Here, a “complete mystery” is tantalizingly put before the reader, but V. allows it to remain unsolved after rejecting just one potential solution. Why not entertain other possibilities, or at least the next one: perhaps it was with Alexis that Sebastian had an affair. V.’s epithet for Alexis—“freak”—may expose subconscious homophobia. In any case, a rigidly assumed heteronormativity is revealed to be operating in V.’s narrative.

2. V. pinpoints the beginning of trouble in Sebastian and Clare’s relationship to a mysterious trip Sebastian took with a Russian man.

Clare arrives at a resort and learns that Sebastian has unexpectedly left for “an unknown destination.” 30 When Sebastian returns, he “was certainly glad to see her but there was something not quite natural in his demeanor. He seemed nervous and troubled, and averted his face whenever she tried to meet his look. He said he had come across a man he had known ages ago, in Russia, and they had gone in the man’s car to—he named a place on the coast some miles away.” 31 We ponder what is “not quite natural” about Sebastian here. And as with the mystery of the futurist trip, we marvel that V. allows this episode to remain cloaked in ambiguity—from the unnamed location, to the identity of the Russian man, to Clare’s worry that Sebastian’s not telling the truth. In other words: what makes some mysteries worthy of solving, and others worthy of forgetting? We see a pattern where V. opts not to search when a queer, homosexual reality is a possibility.

3. V. meets a Russian man who drives—the so-called Uncle Black, cousin of Pahl Pahlich Rechnoy.

While this character appears on the periphery of the chapter with Pahl Pahlich, he is strikingly brought into the narrative’s focus multiple times. He is introduced through the black knight chess piece (which reminds us of another Knight—Sebastian!) that Pahl Pahlich tosses to him. 32 For his nephew he draws “with incredible rapidity and very beautifully a racing car,” 33 whereupon Pahl Pahlich comments: “Oh, he’s an all round genius. He can play the violin standing upon his head, and he can multiply one telephone number by another in three seconds, and he can write his name upside down in his ordinary hand.” The nephew adds, “And he can drive a taxi.” 34 As V. is leaving, Uncle Black and the nephew are returning from a walk. V. notes: “‘Once upon a time,’ Uncle Black was saying, ‘there was a racing motorist who had
a little squirrel; and one day ..’”

These details—the knight, the triple mention of driving or racing cars, the uncle’s charming talents—along with the paranoid imperative, encourage a connection between Uncle Black and the mysterious Russian man who drove a car, whom Sebastian knew “ages ago,” and with whom he traveled when he should have been meeting Clare. Could Uncle Black and this unknown man be the same person? And if so, could he, and not Nina Rechnoy, be the real object of V.’s search (unknown to V.)?

These and other details crack the heteronormative surface of RLSK. What’s revealed is not only the possibility that Sebastian was queer but also that V.’s paranoia over finding the mysterious woman is more about desperately and homophonically asserting Sebastian is not gay than knowing and accepting who Sebastian may really be. What emerges is the tragedy of heteronormativity that devalues, others, ignores, silences, and harms LGBTQ people (as if this isn’t bad enough) and that also limits our ways of knowing the world and perceiving what’s possible.

**RLSK and Reparative Reading**

**Reparative “Undestanding”**

As demonstrated, a paranoid reading of RLSK may reveal the depressing and angering possibility that V. does not accept Sebastian's queerness and hence the tragic reality of homophobia. I ask students: Where do we go from here as readers? What do we do with this interpretation? We might be tempted to reject V. with the proverbial finger and to question how complicit Nabokov is in V.’s homophobia. These are, without doubt, legitimate responses, and we spend time exploring them. But I think a more reparative response is also potentialized here. Sedgwick reminds us that the reparative position is “[n]o less acute than a paranoid position, no less realistic, no less attached to a project of survival, and neither less nor more delusional or fantasmatic,” but it “undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions, and risks.” Thus, the reparative reader is, for example, keenly aware of the depressing reality of homophobia, but they “help [themselves] again and again” to craft something sustaining and positive “from the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.”

One valuable inroad toward a reparative reading for students is through some biographical notes, which also further queer the novel. When Nabokov
writes about his younger brother Sergey in *Speak, Memory*, he mentions *RLSK*: “For various reasons I find it inordinately hard to speak about [Sergey]. That twisted quest for Sebastian Knight…, with its gloriettes and self-mate combinations, is really nothing in comparison to the task I balked in the first version of this memoir and am faced with now.” Of the few anecdotes provided, Nabokov describes how he discovered Sergey was gay and, effectively, outing him to their father: “a page from his diary that I found on his desk and read, and in stupid wonder showed to my tutor, who promptly showed it to my father, abruptly provided a retroactive clarification of certain oddities of behavior on his part.” The discovery was not met with sympathy or acceptance by the family. Nabokov’s biographer Brian Boyd detects here “belated self-reproach” for invading Sergey’s privacy and outing him, which I worry might be too generous of an interpretation. But we ponder whether the novel’s potential closeting of Sebastian might be Nabokov’s way of *not* repeating the deep harm he caused when he read Sergey’s diary and betrayed his privacy—perhaps an attempt to atone for this transgression, though not an unproblematic one?

We also notice that Nabokov’s description of his relationship with Sergey during their childhood years echoes the portrayal of Sebastian and V.’s childhood relationship, but with certain traits of theirs inverted. Sebastian, like Nabokov, is the older sibling born in 1899, the future famous author, adventurous and beloved as a child; but like Sergey, Sebastian is queer. When we get to the novel’s finale, where V. describes having put on Sebastian’s likeness and in so doing has become Sebastian, we return to the idea that Nabokov inversely grafts onto Sebastian and V. his own relationship with Sergey. We couple this with the idea that Nabokov composed *RLSK* in the wake of a period when he and Sergey were “on quite amiable terms in 1938–1940, in Paris.” Could *RLSK* therefore be Nabokov’s way of working through their relationship and coming to a kind of reconciliation, albeit an imperfect one?

In these discussions it is essential to nevertheless acknowledge Nabokov’s discomfiture concerning Sergey’s homosexuality:

Sergey’s homosexuality had always made Vladimir awkward, and the brothers’ first meeting in Paris had not been a success. Nevertheless Sergey indicated he wanted to speak seriously to Vladimir and confront their differences, and a week later they lunched near the Luxembourg Gardens with Sergey’s partner. “The husband, I must admit, is very pleasant, quiet,
not at all the pederast type, attractive face and manner. All the same I felt rather uncomfortable, especially when one of their friends came up, red-lipped and curly.” A week after the public reading, Vladimir and Sergey talked together earnestly, calmly, even warmly. That warmth—never present between them until now, even in childhood—would endure when they met in the future.46

It is difficult to read Nabokov’s characterizations of Sergey’s partner and friend, the homophobic backhands “not at all the pederast type” and “red-lipped and curly” couched meanly among compliments. A reparative response fully recognizes this despairing and homophobic reality, and it does not attempt to fix or explain it away. Rather, it leans toward the hopeful possibility that Nabokov demonstrates both love for Sergey and regret for his past actions, while not excusing or remedying his homophobia.

Nabokov concludes his remarks about Sergey with the following:

I know little of his life during the war. At one time he was employed as translator at an office in Berlin. A frank and fearless man, he criticized the regime in front of colleagues, who denounced him. He was arrested, accused of being a “British spy” and sent to a Hamburg concentration camp where he died of inanition, on January 10, 1945. It is one of those lives that hopelessly claim a belated something—compassion, understanding [sic], no matter what—which the mere recognition of such a want can neither replace nor redeem.47

I always wonder if the misprint of “undestanding” is somehow intentional or at least a telling slip. It underscores, after all, an unknowing that remained between Nabokov and Sergey, Nabokov’s inability to understand or fully accept him.48 It is, perhaps, the perfect means to state that Nabokov, in some fundamental ways, misunderstood his brother—or, to circle back to our original topic, that he could not access his real life.49

Mistakes and “Reading Queer”

In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” Sedgwick quotes a personal communication with Joseph Litvak, who proposes that, while mistakes often condition a paranoid fear of being wrong, ignorant, left out, or humiliated, queer thinkers have found mistakes to also be sites where a reparative impulse is ripe:
It seems to me that the importance of “mistakes” in queer reading and writing...has a lot to do with loosening the traumatic, inevitable-seeming connection between mistakes and humiliation. What I mean is that, if a lot of queer energy, say around adolescence, goes into what Barthes calls “le vouloir être intelligent” (as in “If I have to be miserable, at least let me be brainier than everybody else”), accounting in large part for paranoia’s enormous prestige as the very signature of smartness (a smartness that smarts), a lot of queer energy, later on, goes into...practices aimed at taking the terror out of error, at making the making of mistakes sexy, creative, even cognitively powerful. Doesn’t reading queer mean learning, among other things, that mistakes can be good rather than bad surprises?50

In parsing these comments, it is helpful to recall Klein’s characterization of the depressive position. From the depressive position, one witnesses the fractured, hostile, erroneous world (e.g., heteronormative society, racism, etc.) and yet, rather than expose that world (e.g., through parody, delegitimization), attempts to construct there an experience of joy and wholeness. A good example of this is Sedgwick’s discussion of the queer-identified practice of camp, which she argues is seriously misrecognized when understood through paranoid optics as a way of mocking and denaturalizing dominant culture. Instead, Sedgwick sees camp as a practice of the reparative impulse: “Its fear, a realistic one, is that the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture; it wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self.”51 What Litvak’s comments propose, together with Sedgwick’s discussion of the depressive position and camp as reparative, is that the queer subject, by virtue of being queer, may be ontologically positioned to create positive affects out of mistakes, fractured worlds, hostile environments. This is what it means to read queer.52

These comments offer a valuable way to approach mistakes in RLSK. Students keep a list of mistakes, misreadings, distortions, failings, and losses that appear in the narrative. While V. sometimes leans upon the paranoid mode to unravel information they harbor regarding Sebastian’s “real life” (as with his response to Mr. Goodman’s misreadings of Sebastian’s remarks),53 I ask students to pay special attention to mistakes that inspire a reparative response, either from V. or from us.

Of these many moments, there are three I find essential to discuss: (1) Sebastian’s trip to the wrong Roquebrune;54 (2) the summary of Sebastian’s The Doubtful Asphodel and V.’s response to it;55 and (3) the final scene, where
V. learns that the sleeping patient he thought was Sebastian is someone else and that Sebastian died the previous day.\textsuperscript{56}

Sebastian’s trip to the wrong Roquebrune—where he visited what he erroneously believed to be the house where his mother died and experienced there a queer, spectral vision of his mother—inspires both paranoid and reparative responses. While Mr. Goodman argues that Sebastian viewed this incident cynically, V. insinuates that Sebastian embraced the emotions and ghostly vision he experienced, even after realizing the mistake.\textsuperscript{57}

\textit{The Doubtful Asphodel} describes a dying man who realizes the “answer to all questions of life and death” but fails to pass on this “absolute solution” to the reader. V.’s first response to this is paranoid. He muses, “are we mistaken? I sometimes feel...that the ‘absolute solution’ is there, somewhere, concealed in some passage...,”\textsuperscript{58} anticipating that closer reading could decipher it. But later in the chapter, in response to critical reviews of \textit{The Doubtful Asphodel}, V. exclaims: “Yes, I think of all his books this is my favorite one. I don’t know whether it makes one ‘think,’ and I don’t much care if it does not. I like it for its own sake. I like its manners.”\textsuperscript{59} In the face of the book’s potential failure, V. doesn’t argue the failure away but instead embraces the book “for its own sake”—turning away from thinking to feeling in doing so. If we return to this scene after reading the novel’s finale, there is moreover an undeniable sense that V. is also responding reparatively to Sebastian here: he likes Sebastian for his own sake, for his manners, and without thinking about any “absolute solution.”

The final scene enjoys a special place in our discussion regarding mistakes. Students often notice it has two antecedents—Sebastian’s trip to the wrong Roquebrune and \textit{The Doubtful Asphodel}. In this scene, V. fully embraces the reparative mode. Even when faced with the empirical fact that the patient before him is not Sebastian, V. nevertheless does not disown but rather accepts the profound emotions he experienced before the revelation of the mix-up: “those few minutes I spent listening to what I thought was his breathing changed my life as completely as it would have been changed, had Sebastian spoken to me before dying.”\textsuperscript{60}

During discussion of this scene, there are four points I advance if students don’t develop them themselves. The first: V.’s realization that the soul is “not a constant state” but a “manner of being”\textsuperscript{61} queers the concept of identity, transforming identity from a stable phenomenon to a fluid one, making transition and wonder intrinsic to it.\textsuperscript{62} Second: the final sentence where V. admits
that “perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows”63 elicits yet another reevaluation of the novel’s title and what is meant by the real life. Third: V.’s realization (the secret he uncovers) not only happens thanks to the mistake but is accompanied by acceptance of deep epistemic uncertainty. After all, the final sentence suggests that V. doesn’t know Sebastian and Sebastian doesn’t know V. — and also that they may not know themselves. Epistemic certainty is not a prerequisite to revelation and discovery. And fourth: I introduce Nabokov’s comments on reading with “one’s spine.”

These comments are taken from the lectures “Good Readers and Good Writers” and “L’Envoi.” In the first, his opening one, Nabokov characterizes the “good reader” as capable of reading in a way that produces a “sensual and intellectual” pleasure. “A wise reader,” Nabokov says,

reads the book of genius not with his heart, not so much with his brain, but with his spine. It is there that occurs the telltale tingle even though we must keep a little aloof, a little detached when reading. Then with a pleasure which is both sensual and intellectual we shall watch the artist build his castle of cards and watch the castle of cards become a castle of beautiful steel and glass.64

In “L’Envoi,” the closing lecture, Nabokov returns to the spine and its tingle, advocating a way of knowing that allows one to rise at least a little above existence to catch a moment of wholeness and thrills:

The main thing is to experience that tingle in any department of thought or emotion. We are liable to miss the best of life if we do not know how to tingle, if we do not learn to hoist ourselves just a little higher than we generally are in order to sample the rarest and ripest fruit of art which human thought has to offer.65

I detect in these comments what Sedgwick might characterize as the pleasure and amelioration of reparative reading. As Nabokov encourages his students to seek out a way of knowing the world that allows them to access pleasure and wholeness, V. shows us how this is accomplished in the novel’s final scene, which is flushed with the reparative moment.

Of course, students often argue that this moment inevitably kickstarts another cycle of paranoid reading: a conspiracy that V. is just a character
invented by Sebastian. He never gives us his name, after all, is curiously missing from Mr. Goodman’s biography, and so on. As we indulge this line of thinking, I ask students to consider what’s at stake in it: that is, what is to be gained if we can uncover a hidden truth that V. doesn’t actually exist? And we wonder: would this truth be more meaningful or real than the reparative one?

**Appendix A: Some of Nabokov’s Statements on Reality**

Reality is a very subjective affair. I can only define it as a kind of gradual accumulation of information; and as specialization. If we take a lily, for instance, or any other kind of natural object, a lily is more real to a naturalist than it is to an ordinary person. But it is still more real to a botanist. And yet another stage of reality is reached with that botanist who is a specialist in lilies. You can get nearer and nearer, so to speak, to reality; but you never get near enough because reality is an infinite succession of steps, levels of perception, false bottoms, and hence unquenchable, unattainable. You can know more and more about one thing but you can never know everything about one thing: it’s hopeless. So that we live surrounded by more or less ghostly objects....

The word “reality” is the most dangerous word there is....The reality of art? It is an artificial, a created reality that is only reality within the novel. I do not believe in such a thing as objective reality.

“reality” (one of the few words which mean nothing without quotes)

I tend more and more to regard the objective existence of all events as a form of impure imagination—hence my inverted commas around “reality.” Whatever the mind grasps, it does so with the assistance of creative fancy, that drop of water on a glass slide which gives distinctness and relief to the observed organism.

**Notes**

* I am grateful to Sara Karpukhin and José Vergara for inviting me to write an essay for this collection and for their generous and thoughtful feedback on early drafts.
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3 Sara Karpukhin, whose essay is included in this volume, also finds Sedgwick’s reparative reading to be a productive method for interpreting Nabokov, especially for contemporary students. It is a telling coincidence that in thinking about approaches to Nabokov in today’s classroom, we each independently turned to Sedgwick. We are hopeful that our complementary essays together demonstrate the timeliness of Sedgwick for Nabokov studies today, in and outside of the classroom.


5 Ibid., 124.

6 Using RLSK as a case study, Priscilla Meyer argues that indeterminacy is central to Nabokov’s work: “Nabokov’s art was a quest for that unattainable knowledge. . . . Because such knowledge can never be conclusive, Nabokov’s novels are never closed, in plot, theme, or resolution. . . . Nabokov’s indeterminacy is constructive rather than destructive of meaning.” Priscilla Meyer, *Nabokov and Indeterminacy: The Case of “The Real Life of Sebastian Knight”* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 2018), 4, 9.

7 An earlier version of this essay was published in 1997 under the title “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Introduction Is about You,” in *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1997), 1–37. I use Sedgwick’s 2003 version of the essay, published in *Touching Feeling* (see note 10 below).


9 Ibid., 56.

10 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003), 125.

11 Ibid., 125.


13 Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 141.

14 Ibid., 140.

15 Ibid., 128.

16 Ibid. Emphasis in the original.


20 Ibid., 9.


23 Many critics have attempted to crack the “Lehmann” code, and there exist multiple “solutions” (too numerous to enumerate here, but see, for example, Meyer, *Nabokov and Indeterminacy*, 26, 76, 96, 157n23, 161n32). Students have enjoyed researching this problem on their own, while comparing their findings with those offered by scholars.

24 Nabokov, *RLSK*, 87.


26 Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 126.

27 Nabokov, *RLSK*, 118.

28 Gerard de Vries observes that many of the novel’s motifs “point to homosexuality” and argues that “the inner story of the novel” could be that Sebastian had an affair with a man, in all likelihood the character dubbed “Uncle Black.” See de Vries, *Silent Love: The Annotation and Interpretation of “The Real Life of Sebastian Knight”* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 173, 193. See also note 36 below.


30 Ibid., 85.

31 Ibid., 86.

32 Ibid., 140.

33 Ibid., 142.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 146.

36 As far as I know, de Vries was the first to propose that “the man Sebastian met [in Germany] is most probably ‘Uncle Black’ as V. calls him, or the ‘chess player Schwarz’ as he is named by Sebastian.” He further makes the case that Uncle Black was modeled on Hermann Thieme, Sergey Nabokov’s lover. See *Silent Love*, 174, 192.

37 Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” 150.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 150–151.

40 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 257.

41 Ibid., 257–258.
Students enjoy comparing the description of the brothers’ childhood relationship on page 257 of *Speak, Memory* with the first two chapters of *RLSK*. Numerous scholars have made this case. For example, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney considers *RLSK* to be just one of Nabokov’s “*Doppelgänger* fictions” that play out versions of his relationship with Sergey: “complementary and interdependent roles are reversed; names, personalities, narrative voices, and histories are exchanged; each brother suffers or enjoys the other’s fate. ... Both [*Despair* and *RLSK*] repeat Nabokov’s childhood relationship with Sergey, but each corrects it in a different way: *Despair* through fantasies of role reversal and mistaken identity, and *Sebastian Knight* by asserting the underlying affinity of the two brothers despite their apparent differences. Thus Nabokov has indeed transformed his anxious memories of Sergey into ‘transcendent fiction.’” See “The Small Furious Devil: Memory in ‘Scenes from the Life of a Double Monster,’” in *A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov’s Short Fiction*, ed. Charles Nicol and Gennady Barabtarlo (New York: Garland, 1993), 208.

It is worthwhile to note what Nabokov leaves out of his description of Sergey’s arrest and death in *Speak, Memory*. Prior to his arrest for being a “British spy,” in 1943 Sergey was arrested in Berlin for homosexuality. A cousin was able to secure his release five months later, whereupon Sergey relocated to Prague. There, he was arrested once again after his co-workers turned him in for openly voicing contempt for Hitler. The fact that Nabokov does not mention that Sergey fell victim to the Nazi persecution of homosexuals reads here as a pregnant absence, as yet another way that Nabokov fails to know and accept Sergey. His papering over Sergey’s sexual orientation is especially troubling considering that Sergey was persecuted for it. Thus, “understanding” manifests through what is not said or acknowledged here. For more on Sergey’s arrests and death, see Simon Karlinsky, *Dear Bunny, Dear Volodya: The Nabokov–Wilson Letters, 1940–1971*, revised and expanded edition (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001), 174; and Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991), 88–89. See also note 49 below.


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56  Ibid., 199–203.
57  Ibid., 18.
58  Ibid., 178.
59  Ibid., 180.
60  Ibid., 202.
61  Ibid.

62  Susan Fromberg argues that V.’s final speech “is a deliberate and conscious echo of the final speech in *Alice in Wonderland.*” See Fromberg, “The Unwritten Chapters in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,*” *Modern Fiction Studies* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1967–1968): 439. Meyer, on the other hand, suggests that it may crib elements of Bernard’s final soliloquy in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves.* Meyer, *Nabokov and Indeterminacy,* 66. Comparative analysis of RLSK’s final scene with the relevant quotes from *Alice in Wonderland* and *The Waves* is productive in class discussions.

63  Nabokov, *RLSK,* 203.


