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“ANY MAN CAN LOOK INTO WATER”:
SEBASTIAN KNIGHT’S PORTRAIT AND ROBERT FROST’S “FOR
ONCE, THEN, SOMETHING”

Robert Frost’s poem, “For Once, Then, Something,” apparently provided the model for Roy Carswell’s portrait of Sebastian Knight. Both the poem and V.’s characterization of the portrait refute the idea that the subject is only concerned with his own image reflected on the surface of the water that each is staring into.

In *RLSK*, V.’s description of the portrait might mislead us into thinking Sebastian self-preoccupied: “These eyes and the face itself are painted in such a manner convey the impression that they are mirrored Narcissus-like in clear water.”¹ The paragraph ends: “Thus Sebastian peers into a pool at himself.” However, V. then tells Carswell, “the likeness is excellent, and I love that floating spider immensely. Especially its club-footed shadow at the bottom. **But the face is only a chance reflection. Any man can look into water**” (118). Sebastian’s face is a “chance reflection” because it is unavoidably reflected if he is looking at the spider’s shadow; he can search beyond the surface without narcissism. From what we know of his writing, he is likely to be as interested in the spider’s club-footed shadow in the depths as V. is.

V.’s understanding of the portrait refutes the reviled Goodman’s version of Sebastian, whom Goodman describes as “incapable of caring for [the] serious core [of things]” (18), “extraordinarily vain, like most modernist writers,” a “poseur” who “made a great show of Byronic languor” (114).

V. sees Carswell’s portrait as a rendering both of Sebastian’s visible surface (his “likeness”) and of his deeper concerns. His version is confirmed over Goodman’s by its relationship to Frost’s poem, which seems to have inspired V.’s description. Both are built on the same three layers, in physically descending (but spiritually ascending) order:

A. That which is reflected (an implied sun-ray, a twig and Sebastian)

¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. NY: Vintage. 1992, 117. Numbers in parentheses in the text refer to this edition.

B. The surface of the water (a withered leaf, the water spider and Sebastian's reflection), distorted by two ripples

C. Under the water (the spider's shadow)

Here is the whole passage:

But as I look at the portrait Roy Carswell painted I seem to see a slight twinkle in Sebastian's eyes, for all the sadness of their expression. The painter has wonderfully rendered the moist dark greenish-grey of their iris, with a still darker rim and a suggestion of gold dust constellating round the pupil. The lids are heavy and perhaps a little inflamed, and a vein or two seems to have burst on the glossy eyeball. These eyes and the face itself are painted in such a manner as to convey the impression that they are mirrored Narcissus-like in clear water — with a very slight ripple on the hollow cheek, owing to the presence of a water-spider which has just stopped and is floating backward. A withered leaf has settled on the reflected brow, which is creased as that of a man peering intently. The crumpled dark hair over it is partly suffused by another ripple, but one strand on the temple has caught a glint of humid sunshine. There is a deep furrow between the straight eyebrows, and another down from the nose to the tightly shut dusky lips. There is nothing much more than this head. A dark opalescent shade clouds the neck, as if the upper part of the body were receding. The general background is a mysterious blueness with a delicate trellis of twigs in one corner. Thus Sebastian peers into a pool at himself. (117)

And here is Frost's poem:

Others taunt me with having knelt at well-curbs
Always wrong to the light, so never seeing
Deeper down in the well than where the water
Gives me back in a shining surface picture
Me myself in the summer heaven godlike
Looking out of a wreath of fern and cloud puffs.
Once, when trying with chin against a well-curb,
I discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,

Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,
Something more of the depths—and then I lost it.
Water came to rebuke the too clear water.
One drop fell from a fern, and lo, a ripple
Shook whatever it was lay there at bottom,
Blurred it, blotted it out. What was that whiteness?
Truth? A pebble of quartz? For once, then, something. (1920)²

Again, the three layers represent the above-water, the below-water, and their divider:

- A. That which is reflected (Poet, well-curb, fern, cloud puffs)
- B. The surface of the water (“me myself” in a shining surface picture), first clear, then shaken by a ripple
- C. Under the water (whiteness)

“Others” taunt the poet with “never seeing/Deeper down”; “the water/Gives me back in a shining surface picture/Me myself in the summer heaven godlike.” They see the exterior action, not suspecting any interior perception, and like Sebastian’s Goodman, view him as a Narcissus figure.

Jay Parini (and others) consider the poem Frost’s answer to critics who consider his work reflects only the “shining surface” of country life.³ The poet responds that he “discerned, as I thought, beyond the picture,/Through the picture, a something white, uncertain,/Something more of the depths,” at least until a ripple blots it out (182). He seems to glimpse either an abstraction (“Truth?”) or a hard quartz pebble (physical reality). Frost presents a dynamic moment of perception that vanishes, while the spider-shadow in Carswell’s portrait is necessarily fixed in the painting, though dynamic in the real world.

In *RLSK*, we readers become Goodman, and the “others” who taunt Frost’s narrator, if we mistakenly find Sebastian to be Narcissus-like.

Nabokov replaces Frost’s ambiguous flicker of truth/pebble with the spider’s emblematic shadow. Both Frost and Nabokov imply an

² Frost, Robert. *The Poetry of Robert Frost. The Collected Poems*. Ed. Edward Connery Latham. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1979, 225.

³ Parini, Jay. *Robert Frost: A life*. New York: Henry Holt, 1999, 181-182.

unknowable *something* beyond the surface of the physical world, and the difficulty of perceiving it. In both descriptions, the uncertain vision beneath the surface is distorted by ripple(s) on the surface. Surface reality obscures the transcendent; Frost's persona glimpses the juxtaposition of reality to higher meaning, while Nabokov's painting reveals the simultaneous both/and of the Real and its shadow that even non-poets – Carswell, Sebastian, V., the reader — can see as ever present. Frost's poet's quest for the transcendent remains indeterminate, like V.'s quest for Sebastian, but Nabokov's shadow asserts its existence.