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# NABOKOV'S OPTICAL PAINTBOX: COLOR IN *THE REAL LIFE OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT*

## *INTRODUCTION: ARCHIVING COLOR*

Vladimir Nabokov's life (1899-1977) was literally saturated with color. From his work as a lepidopterist to the colored notecards upon which he drafted his manuscripts to his colored-letter synesthesia, to catalog Nabokov is to archive color in its various forms.[1] The Nabokov Archive located in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library is a physical manifestation of such an endeavor: visitors can see and handle Nabokov's butterfly drawings alongside hundreds of notecards inscribed with his meticulously tiny handwriting. A previously unpublished drawing of a color wheel, which I discovered in the summer of 2013 in a box of notecards labeled "Notes on Various Subjects," indicates that Nabokov was acutely aware of the discipline known as "color theory" and applied it methodologically to his prose. On the back of a notecard dated 1940, Nabokov has drawn in pencil a type of color wheel known as a "color star," complete with labeled colors, lights, and pigments (Figure 1). Although the drawing itself is not in color, it is a visual mapping of color notation, of word to image.

[1] As Stephen H. Blackwell points out, Nabokov's practice of drafting his manuscripts on notecards stems directly from his lepidoptery, indicating a method of "working in nonlinear fashion" and "thinking of novelistic time as a painted canvas or a foldable magic carpet." See *Fine Lines: Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art*, ed. Stephen H. Blackwell and Kurt Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), ix.

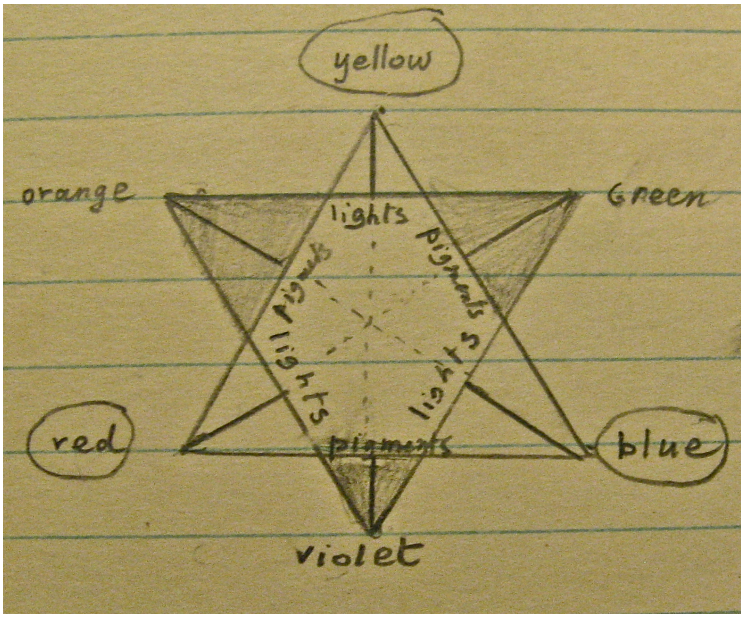


Figure 1: Vladimir Nabokov, hand-drawn image from the Berg Collection. Copyright ©Vladimir Nabokov, courtesy of the Berg Collection at The New York Public Library, used by permission of the Wylie Agency LLC.

A color wheel is an abstract method of organizing color hues in a circular shape, showing relationships between primary, secondary, tertiary and complementary colors. Historically, color wheels have emerged in various guises, straddling disciplines ranging from physics to visual art to philosophy. What these different models have in common, however, is the division of a spectrum, a gradient even, of light and pigments found in nature, into a fixed set of verbal units. In making his color wheel, Nabokov was following in a long line of illustrious predecessors, which include Goethe's subtractive color wheel from his *Theory of Colours,* or *Farbenlehre* (1810)*,* Newton's additive color prism from *Opticks* (1704), Johannes Itten's twelve-step color wheel from the Bauhaus (1920), and many more.

A preliminary comparison between Nabokov's color star and preexisting systems suggests that his chart was most likely drawn from two color wheels: those of nineteenth-century art critic Charles Blanc, whose "color star" consisted of two triads: primary colors red, yellow and blue, and secondary colors green, orange and violet (Figure 2), and that of Auguste Laugel, which also favored this symmetrical arrangement (Figure 3). Nabokov's color star differs from these two models, however, in his inclusion of "lights" and "pigments," and seems to be a combination of the additive (scientific) model, usually attributed to Newton, in which colored light overlaps to create pure white, and the subtractive (painterly) model, usually attributed to

Goethe, where there is a reduction in light of pigments. The diagram indicates that Nabokov was not only reading works from theorists such as Blanc and Laugel, but that he was also modifying their drawings according to the principles of color theory. Indeed, in *Speak, Memory,* he mentions Maerz and Paul's *A Dictionary of Color* (1930), a book comprised of hundreds of color swatches, in relation to his own colored-letter synesthesia.[2]

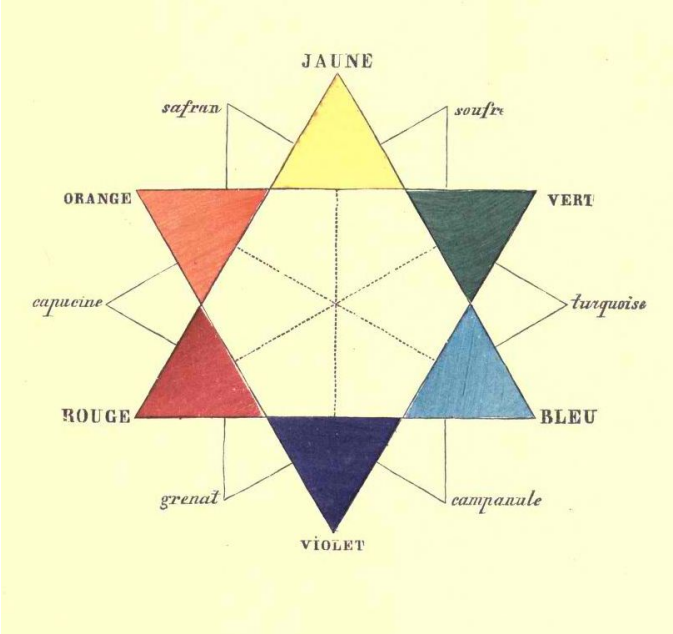


Figure 2: Charles Blanc, *Color Star,* 1867. Courtesy of Philip Ball, *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

The fact that Nabokov's color star is a hybrid of these two models, additive and subtractive, indicates the ways in which he constantly effaces distinctions between art and science, maintaining his chosen identity as "half-painter, half-naturalist."[3] As Stephen H. Blackwell and Kurt Johnson discuss in their 2016 edited volume *Fine Lines*: *Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art,* Nabokov's butterfly drawings "demonstrate the connection between aesthetic 'seeing' and taxonomic 'knowing'… [suggesting] that viewing with an eye towards both artistic exactitude and beauty can lead to a more complete form of knowledge."[4] Indeed, it seems hardly

[2] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited,* 1st Vintage international ed. (New York: Vintage, 1989), 35.

[3] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita,* ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 364.

[4] Stephen H. Blackwell and Kurt Johnson, "Introduction." In *Fine Lines*: *Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art,* 4-5.

a coincidence that studying butterflies also involves researching theories of color — not only the distinctive patterning of different species, but also how these colors themselves are produced (i.e. through iridescence or pigmentation).[5]

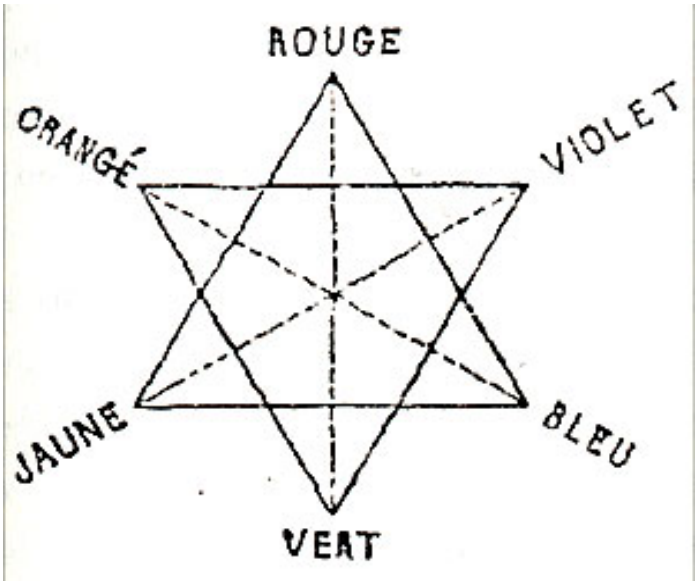


Figure 3: Auguste Laugel, *Color Circle,* 1869. Courtesy of Philip Ball, *Bright Earth: Art and the Invention of Color* (University of Chicago Press, 2003).

It is significant that in addition to his more objective drawings of butterfly genitalia (his primary subject of research), Nabokov also drew several "fictional" or "imaginary" butterflies, mostly dedicated to his wife, Véra. One such butterfly, titled *Vanessa Incognita* (a name that may evoke Aleksandr Blok's 1906 poem *Neznakomka*, or "The Stranger"), is rendered in lush shades of blue that, as Kurt Johnson has discussed, "would not appear in these groups [of *Vanessa verae* butterflies] in nature" (Figure 4).[6] Similarly, another butterfly drawing addressed to Véra, titled *Colias lolita Nab.* in a not-so-subtle reference to *Lolita,* is also drawn in a deep "unnatural" blue, as *Colias* butterflies are always yellow (Figure 5).

[5] The connection between lepidoptery and color theory has several historical precedents. Most notably, Giovanni Antonio Scopoli (1723-1785), an Italian naturalist, introduced a disk mixture as a tool for objectively describing colors in his *Entomologia Carniolica* (1763). A decade later, Austrian lepidopterist Ignaz Schiffermüller (1727-1806) developed a standardized nomenclature that would help him identify species of butterflies. In his *Versuch eines Farbensystems* (1772), Schiffermüller presented a table classifying and sub-classifying shades of blue in German, Latin and French, indicating the discrepancies between linguistic and experiential understandings of color. Schiffermüller also included a color wheel depicting adjacent tints merging into one another.

[6] Quoted in Stephen H. Blackwell, "Color Plate 58 '*Vanessa incognita*.'" In *Fine Lines*: *Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art,* 183.


Figure 4: Vladimir Nabokov, "*Vanessa incognita*" butterfly drawing. Courtesy of Stephen H. Blackwell and Kurt Johnson, *Fine Lines: Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art* (Yale University Press, 2016).

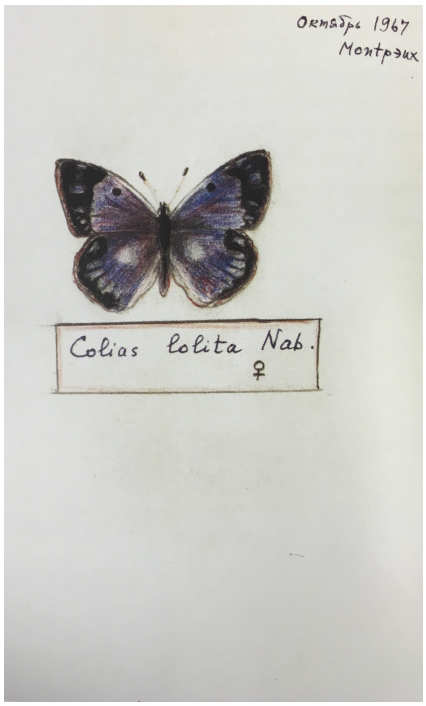


Figure 4: Vladimir Nabokov, "*Vanessa incognita*" butterfly drawing. Courtesy of Stephen H. Blackwell and Kurt Johnson, *Fine Lines: Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art* (Yale University Press, 2016).

The inversion of blue and yellow, which are complementary colors, as well as Nabokov's coloration of butterflies in shades that would not exist in nature, suggests a connection between a heightened sense of color and imaginary or fictional spaces, as well as a profound delight for finding the whimsical or aesthetically pleasing in the scientific realm.[7] Even Nabokov's colored-letter synesthesia maintains a sensual but equally clear structure, in which each letter corresponds to a precise shade, and often, even tastes, smells and textures ("alder-leaf f, the unripe apple of p, pistachio t," to name a few).[8] Synesthesia is not merely an artistic device for Nabokov, but a mode of classification, much like the way in which a lepidopterist might organize his butterfly specimens.[9]

[7] Brian Boyd, "Color Plate 59 '*Colias lolita Nab.*'" In *Fine Lines*: *Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art,* 184.
[8] Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory,* 35.
[9] See Stephen H. Blackwell, "Nabokov's Morphology: An Experiment in Appropriated Terminology." In *Fine Lines: Vladimir Nabokov's Scientific Art,* 260-268.

Following these leads, this article investigates the utility of colors in Nabokov's first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941). In this novel, as with much of Nabokov's work, adopting terminology from color theory has ramifications for both narrative identity and the construction of "reality," motivating a unique visual methodology for reading his prose through color. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight,* the interplay of light and dark, refraction and reflection, bridges the gap between fantasy and reality.

## *COLOR AS EIDETIC EXPERIENCE: BEYOND SYNESTHESIA*

Though there have been several notable studies of Nabokov and color, the majority of these critics focus on "motif" readings — that is to say, they are interested in the frequency with which certain colors are mentioned in Nabokov's work, and in turn, what these colors might signify or symbolize.[10] For example, D. Barton Johnson and Gerard De Vries' *Nabokov and the Art of Painting* primarily discusses the way in which colors in Nabokov "contribute mythological, conventional and cultural connotations" in order to "recompose [the subject matter of] existing paintings."[11] Color in *Nabokov and the Art of Painting,* as well as in Gavriel Shapiro's *The Sublime Artist's Studio* (2009), is discussed iconically, particularly the ways in which it reproduces or references the iconography of preexisting paintings. Alternately, the majority of works that discuss Nabokov's synesthesia invoke color as a primarily linguistic phenomenon: D. Barton Johnson, for example, does an admirable job of discussing the ways in which the letter-color combinations Nabokov discusses in *Speak, Memory* differ in his Russian translation of the text, *Drugie Berega* ("Other Shores").[12]

By contrast, my reading of color is as a mode of world building, or the ways in which visual and spatial entities such as color and light serve as the building blocks of Nabokov's nested narratives. A focus on world building and chromatic structure, as opposed to the more

[10] It is perhaps worth mentioning that Nabokov himself, in a discussion with Alfred Appel, Jr., scorned the notion of color as symbol "because it substitutes a dead general idea for a live specific impression." See Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita,* ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 364.

[11] D. Barton Johnson and Gerard De Vries, *Nabokov and the Art of Painting* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006)*,* 20 and 26.

[12] See his essay "Synesthesia, Polychromatism, and Nabokov" in *A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov,* ed. Carl R. Proffer (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1974): 84-103, as well as the chapter "The Alphabetic Rainbows of *Speak, Memory*" in *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985): 10-46.

traditional task of literary interpretation, is an approach that has been largely neglected in Nabokov studies. My methodology is thus more indebted to studies that investigate the relationship between color and perception in Nabokov's prose, such as Stephen H. Blackwell's *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science* (2009), which approaches Nabokov through the lens of intellectual history, explicitly mentioning Goethe and Newton as they relate to Nabokov's interest in prisms. Another such text is Kevin T. Dann's chapter on Nabokov in *Bright Colors Falsely Seen: Synaesthesia and the Search For Transcendental Knowledge* (1998), in which he argues that in addition to his synesthesia, Nabokov possessed an eidetic memory. An eidetic memory, as Dann defines, is the ability to remember images so vivid that they are "seen" inside the mind and accompanied by bodily engagement with the image.[13] Nabokov, who claimed to "[not] think in any language… [but] in images," constructs imaginary worlds that are filtered through the dual lenses of time and memory.[14] Nabokov's memory is not merely photographic, but allows him to conceive of reality as a single image. The distinction between the *imagined* (from the root *imago,* or "to picture to oneself") and the real becomes blurred, since eideticism is not merely recalling information, but visualizing it.

Because so much has been written regarding Nabokov's "colored hearing," the synesthesia he describes directly in *Speak, Memory* and *The Gift,* it becomes difficult to separate color in Nabokov's work from sensory experience. Nabokov's perception of color, as mentioned above, was not simply due to his synesthesia, but also to his eideticism, which is perhaps best summarized by John Shade in *Pale Fire* when he writes: "My eyes were such that literally they took photographs."[15] Nabokov's process of color-letter visualization meant that he was forced to confront his synesthesia not as "colored hearing," but as a "color sensation… produced by the very act of my orally forming a given letter while I imagine its outline."[16] Nabokov's eideticism explains his ability to "move" between narratives through pictorial recollection, as we will see in the primary case study of this paper, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.* What remains constant

[13] Kevin T. Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen: Synaesthesia and the Search For Transcendental Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 105.
[14] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 1st Vintage International ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 14.
[14] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Farbenlehre*, trans. Charles Lock Eastlake (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970), 14.
[15] Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire,* 1st Vintage International ed. (New York: Vintage, 1989), 34.
[16] *Speak, Memory,* 34.

from Nabokov's synesthesia to his eidetic memory, however, is color, which saturates his description of his "own personal rainbow."[17]

## *CAMOUFLAGING COLOR, CAMOUFLAGING WORLDS*

Nabokov's study of color permeates his oeuvre from his earliest Russian works and culminates in *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969), but this article primarily focuses on Nabokov's first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941, hereafter *Sebastian Knight*), for two principle reasons.[18] First, the date on the back of the color star drawing from the Nabokov Archive, 1940, strongly suggests that Nabokov was researching color wheels just as he was making the transition from Russian to English, after the completion of *The Gift* (first published serially from 1937-1938 under his penname, V. Sirin) and before the publication of *Sebastian Knight*. Thus, one sees in this linguistic shift a concurrent preoccupation with color perception — there is a direct link between the construction of fictional worlds and the ways in which Nabokov applies color theory methodically to his prose, allowing "such shining giants of our brain as science, art or religion [to fall] out of the familiar scheme of classification, and joining hands, [be] mixed and joyfully leveled."[19]

Second, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* contains a multiplicity of nested narratives; thus, there are multiple opportunities for Nabokov to build narrative worlds through color. In this novel, adopting terminology from color theory has ramifications for both narrative identity and the construction of "reality" (a word Nabokov claimed "mean[s] nothing without quotes") motivating a unique visual methodology for reading Nabokov's prose through color.[20] In addition to Nabokov's above-mentioned eideticism, time and memory act as a lens through which Nabokov perceives colors through images, allowing him to "move" between different realms of perception.

[17] *Speak, Memory,* 35.

[18] A study of color in *Ada* is beyond the scope of this paper and merits its own study, but it is worth noting that Nabokov's use of color in this work is increasingly more cinematic than his earlier novels: it is not only color theory and painting, but also cinematic color processes such as Technicolor that are evoked in this novel.

[19] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight.* 1st Vintage International Edition (New York: Vintage, 1992), 177. All subsequent citations are taken from this edition.

[20] Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita.*" In *The Annotated Lolita,* 312.

*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* contains reviews of fictitious novels, which are layered to produce a work that is both Nabokov's creation and pseudonymous narrator V.'s biography of his half-brother, Russian émigré novelist Sebastian Knight (born in 1899, the same year as Nabokov). When V. attempts to track down Sebastian's acquaintances and former lovers, fact and fiction are blurred as he finds himself reliving the plots of Sebastian's novels. By the end of the novel, the reader is unclear as to the identity of the narrator: the final sentence, "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows," traps the reader within an entangled web of subjectivities and narrative worlds (203). The interplay of light and shadow, color and monochrome, heightens the reader's sensitivity to the false dichotomies of biography/fiction, V./Sebastian, and memory/imagination.

Color is everywhere in Nabokov, even when it appears to be absent. It is undeniable, as critics such as Priscilla Meyer and Julian Connolly have observed, that on the surface, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is one of Nabokov's more achromatic novels.[21] However, as we will see, what appear to be clearly designated shades of black and white actually represent an infinite spectrum of colors, or what Humbert Humbert calls "cryptochromisms" (secret colors).[22]

At first glance, the most prominent colors in the novel are the combination of black and white. Sebastian is described almost exclusively in terms of these two shades: during his poetry-writing years, V. remembers him as "tall and sallow-complexioned with a dark shadow above his upper lip." Sebastian also writes in a "black copybook" and signs his poems with "a little black chess-knight drawn in ink" (15).[23] Sebastian's earlier works *Albinos in Black* and *The Back of the Moon* further evoke the black-and-white combination (Mr. Silbermann, a German character

[21] See Priscilla Meyer, "Black and Violet Words: Despair and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight as Doubles," *Nabokov Studies,* 4(9), 1997: 37-60, and Julian Connolly, "Black and White and Dead All Over: Color Imagery in Nabokov's Prose," *Nabokov Studies,* 10(0), 2006: 53-66.

[22] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita,* 227.

[23] Indeed, perhaps the most obvious instance of the black-and-white combination in this novel is through its prominent chess theme, which Anthony Olcott has meticulously tracked. In addition to the more obvious Knight, there are the two bishops, Clare and her brother. Nina Rechnoy's maiden name "Toorovetz" comes from the Russian "tura" for rook. The novel also begins and ends on a chessboard: St. Damier, the fictional French town where Sebastian dies, is French for "chess board." The "gentle chess player Schwartz" from Sebastian's novel *The Doubtful Asphodel*, has the word for "black" in his name. V. does not notice that Schwartz appears in the form of Uncle Black, playing a game of chess with Pavel Rechnoy, whose last name is an anagram of the Russian "chyorny" for black. See Anthony Olcott, "The Artist's Special Intention: A Study of The Real Life of Sebastian Knight." In *A Book of Things about Vladimir Nabokov,* ed. Carl R. Proffer (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1974): 104-121.

who has come to life from Sebastian's *The Back of the Moon*, where he is named "Mr. Siller," warns V.: "you can't see de odder side of de moon" (130)).

Perhaps most significant, however, is that Sebastian, speaking through the narrator of *Lost Property* (which V. deems Sebastian's most autobiographical novel (4)), confesses his own difficulty describing color: "In my disastrous attempt to match the colour of my surroundings I could only be compared to a colour-blind chameleon" (65). Yet, though this self-deprecating description of Sebastian-the-narrator might appear to further enforce the status of *Sebastian Knight* as a novel devoid of chroma, upon a closer look, we see that the relationship between chromatic and monochromatic colors in this novel is a porous one that closely parallels the blurry boundary between truth and fiction.

Sebastian's secret lover, Nina Rechnoy, alias Madame Lecerf, is also described almost exclusively in terms of these polar contrasts ("true" black and white, with "black having the darkest achromatic visual value and white the lightest achromatic visual value"), but these blacks and whites actually exhibit varying degrees of brilliance and transparency.[24] V. observes: "She turned out to be a small, slight, pale faced young woman with smooth black hair. I thought I had never seen a skin so evenly pale; her black dress was high at the neck, and she used a long black cigarette holder" (149). He also notes her "ghostly eyebrow," "a gleam on the lower eyelid, and a gleam on the full dark lips" (150), her "transparent skin and dark hair" (153), her "dark velvety eyes," the "dull whiteness of her throat" (170), and her "diaphanous complexion" (163).

Adjectives such as "diaphanous," "ghostly," and "transparent" are characteristic of what color theorists refer to as *film color,* which exists independently of an object's surface color.[25] What appears to be pure black or white here in fact contains an additional layer of color: the sun lends Nina's hair a "bluish sheen" (164). We thus see the ways in which Nabokov differentiates between *degrees* of blackness and whiteness, implying the presence of chromatic colors that are not explicitly named. In *Speak, Memory,* the "black group" of his synesthesia contains "hard g (vulcanized rubber)," and "r (a sooty rag being rubbed)," while the "white group" includes

[24] Julian Connolly, "Black and White and Dead All Over: Color Imagery in Nabokov's Prose," *Nabokov Studies,* 10(0), 2006, 54.
[25] Josef Albers, *The Interaction of Color* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 45.

"oatmeal n, noodle-limp l," and the "ivory backed hand mirror of o."[26] The difference between these letters is not merely color, or *value*, but texture, what color theorists have referred to as *brilliance* or *quantity* (as opposed to *quality*, a color's position on the color wheel). Despite their lack of chroma, black and white become vehicles of shadow and light via texture and sheen.

It is also worth noting that the chromatic colors that *are* frequently mentioned in *Sebastian Knight* — namely, pastel blue and violet — have a close relationship to black and white when examined through the lens of color theory. Pastels, or *tone,* which are associated with Clare Bishop, Sebastian Knight's long-term girlfriend, actually contain both black (*shade*) and white (*tint*); they are colors devoid of brilliance and saturation.[27] We are told that Clare is "pretty in a quiet sort of way with a pale faintly freckled complexion, slightly hollowed cheeks, blue-gray near-sighted eyes, a thin mouth." She appears clad in a "gray tailor made with a blue scarf and a small three-cornered hat" (69), "gray suede glove[s] with a white lining" (71), in a "blue mackintosh" (85), and as a "blue-gray figure" (72) with "pink nostril[s]" and "dim eyes" (105).

Nabokov's choice to juxtapose pastel blue with gray here indicates the close relationship between these two colors: both are elusive, blending into the imperceptible region between shades. Clare "[seems] to pass through Sebastian like a ghost. Then she would fade away as silently as she had come" (108). V.'s description of Clare as "mnemogenic," or the ability to "[remain] in one's memory as if she were subtly endowed with the gift of being remembered" (80), gives him false hope that "one glance" at her will be enough "to animate the past" (74). Pastels here are situated in a transitory space between the polar worlds of black and white. Unlike Clare, Sebastian is not mneumogenic; as V. confesses, "Sebastian's image does not appear as part of my boyhood… nor does it appear as a succession of familiar visions, but it comes to me in a few bright patches, as if he were not a constant member of our family, but some erratic visitor passing across a lighted room and then for a long interval fading into the night" (16). By describing this murky memory of Sebastian as "a few bright patches" of light within a darkened room, it becomes clear that V.'s black-and-white descriptions of Sebastian are deliberately constructed as a sort of mneumonic device — again, nowhere in the "reality" of this novel do we find absolute black or white.

[26] *Speak, Memory,* 34.
[27] Johannes Itten, *The Art of Color* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1961), 41.

Similarly, the only color that appears in the novel with more frequency than the black-and-white combination is violet, which takes the form of both its namesake flower and the color itself.[28] However, violet also possesses the unique characteristic of being the color with the shortest wavelengths of light, which often makes it difficult to distinguish between spectral violet or ultraviolet (which is invisible to the human eye) and black. Violet's tints are also widely spaced, whereas its shades are close together: when lightened, it becomes mauve, lilac, even bluish (drawing another parallel to Clare Bishop's pastel blue appearance), but when darkened, it subtly approaches black. The subtlety of the black-violet relationship means that black is often present in *Sebastian Knight* even when the word "black" does not appear, and vice-versa: Mr. Goodman coughs and selects a "black-currant lozenge from a small box on his distinguished-looking desk" (56), Madame Lecerf's eyelids are "violet-dark" (171), and V. notes "the violet-blue night-lamp [reflected] in the black glass" (190). The Camberwell Beauty, the only butterfly mentioned in *Sebastian Knight* (137), is generally thought to be black and white, but in fact, it is violet and yellow, with iridescent blue spots lining its wings. When light hits the top surface of the film on the wing and refracts, it gives the impression of a color palette in flux.

Violet, in its ability to skirt the boundaries of human perception, makes manifest the relationship between color perception and the construction of "reality" in *Sebastian Knight.* As Clare types Sebastian's manuscripts, the "black and violet words" that emerge "bridge the abyss between expression and thought, the maddening feeling that the right words, the only words are awaiting you on the opposite bank in the misty distance, and the shudderings of the still unclothed thought clamouring for them on this side of the abyss" (81). Thus, as Meyer points out, "In *Sebastian Knight* black is everywhere coupled with violet-lilac-iris, hinting at the unknowable world beyond the spectrum where the double rainbows merge."[29] The "world beyond the spectrum," or the murky boundary between "real" and "imagined" color, makes implicit the connection between spectral color and world-building.

[28] As Priscilla Meyer has discussed, violet is connected to Sebastian's mother, who dies at "Les Violettes," which V. later visits, noting a "clumsily painted bunch of violets" on the gate (19). Sebastian holds on to "a small parcel of sugar-coated violets" she has given him. In Sebastian's flat after his death, V. also notes the talcum powder tin "with violets figured between its shoulders, standing there alone, reflected in the mirror" (37). See "Black and Violet Words: *Despair* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* as Doubles."

[29] Priscilla Meyer, "Black and Violet Words," 54.

## *ADDITIVE, SUBTRACTIVE, AND COMPOSITE WORLD-BUILDING THROUGH COLOR*

As we have seen thus far (and as its very title would suggest), *Sebastian Knight* is first and foremost a novel about the construction of reality: color here becomes a perceptual category and vehicle of world-building in its own right. In this section, I will examine the three primary methods of color mixing — additive, subtractive, and partitive — and show how these can be used as a methodology for building worlds through color. By "worlds," I mean the layers of narratological meaning that force readers to question the notion of "reality," both their own and that of the text itself. My methodology overlaps with the ideas presented by Kathryn Hume in *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (1984). In Hume's response to Auerbach's *Mimesis*, she argues that there is no need to separate the fantastic impulse from the mimetic. Hume does not see fantasy as a separate literary genre, but rather as an alternate representation of reality.

Hume's methodology includes "additive," "subtractive," and "contrastive" means of constructing reality. She defines "additive methods" as the creation of an augmented world, one that "presents a reality fuller than our own."[30] Subtraction, according to her, also involves the creation of new worlds, but through "the exclusion of what the author deems inessential… Because subtractive techniques simplify reality so starkly, they naturally tend to crystalize out in an image, and thus are forcefully expressive of some new reality which challenges our own."[31] Finally, Hume emphasizes a third "contrastive" construction of reality, a juxtaposition of the two above methods. Contrastive literature "forces us to try to make sense out of two clashing views of reality, as well as contrast those with our own."[32]

Although she does not cite any connections to painting or optics, there are striking parallels between these models and Newton's prismatic, or additive color mixing, the subtractive color mixing presented by Goethe and seen in painting, and finally, Seurat's "optical painting," or partitive color mixing. When I discuss additive color mixing, I am specifically referring to the overlapping of light rays through a prism, the refraction of which can alter perception. Subtraction in visual terms involves the reduction of light in unexpected ways: the phenomenon

[30] Kathryn Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 87.
[31] Ibid, 91.
[32] Ibid, 94.

of the after-image, for instance, is a result of overlapping complementary colors. Similarly, partitive color mixing in painting can be seen as a combination of additive and subtractive mixing, situating it at the intersection of art and science. The partitive color palette, for example, uses Newton's additive complementaries, but the mixture these complementaries create results in a gray similar to the one mentioned in Goethe's *Theory of Colors.* What distinguishes partitive color mixing is a process that takes place within the eye itself.

With Newton's *Opticks*, it became evident that light was present in color in all its manifestations, since color was the result of refracted light.[33] Additive color mixing occurs when two or more beams of light are focused on the same spot. The additive palette includes its own primary colors: red, violet-blue and green. When these three principal colors are overlapped, the result is white light. This kind of color mixing is also seen in the theater, where stage lights are actually red, blue, and green, although they appear colorless. What led Newton to write his *Opticks* was the discovery that individual colors were a result of the degree of refracted white light, with red refracting the least and violet the most when passed through a triangular prism.[34] He subsequently divided the prismatic spectrum into seven chromatic areas, which he arranged in a circle according to his harmonic theory.

The concept of the prism has long been seen as integral to Nabokov's writing. In *Speak, Memory,* we see this most clearly when Nabokov envisions his own life as "a colored spiral in a small ball of glass."[35] Although a sphere, unlike a prism, has no edges, light rays entering the sphere will reflect off the far side, then exit the sphere (refract) in a direction exactly opposite to its original direction. Prisms appear in many forms in *Speak, Memory:* Nabokov imagines a childhood birthday party "through a tremulous prism," and he is mesmerized by both panes of colored glass and the slides — "neat little worlds of hushed luminous hues" — that his tutor Lenski (whose name is likely a play on "lens")[36] once used in his magic lantern projections.[37]

[33] John Gage, *Color and Meaning: Art, Science, and Symbolism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 121.
[34] Ibid,15.
[35] *Speak, Memory,* 275.
[36] "Lenski" here appears to be a carefully chosen pseudonym, as supported by the line, "He will have to figure here under the name of Lenski" (159). Though the lens/Lensksi wordplay does not translate into Russian, such a pun is made more compelling by the fact that *Speak, Memory* was originally written in English.
[37] Ibid, 171, 105, and 166.

Sebastian Knight's first novel is a parody of multiple genres called *The Prismatic Bezel* (1925). In an earlier scene, we see Sebastian struggling over the title of this work, muttering to himself: "The prism… the prismatic edge…", to which Clare responds, "A title… must convey the colour of the book, not its subject" (70). From the get-go, prisms in *Sebastian Knight* maintain a close connection to color and light—it hardly seems coincidental that V. first sees Sebastian in this scene for the first time in two years filtered "through the glass front of a popular café" (69). There are several other moments in the narrative in which reflective surfaces mediate between V. and the deceased Sebastian — the prism here is the lens through which the past is refracted into the present. When V. visits Sebastian's flat in London after his death, he is particular drawn to the lamp in his study, noting: "I found [the lamp's] pulse and the opal globe melted into light: that magic moon had seen Sebastian's white moving hand" (36). On another occasion in Cambridge, V. imagines, "Sebastian's spirit seemed to hover about us with the flicker of the fire reflected in the brass knobs of the hearth" (44). Such surfaces — glass windows, electric lamps, and metal knobs — may not be "true" prisms in the Newtonian sense, but as with Nabokov's colored spiral, they involve the same kinds of photic and optical maneuvers as a prism, as well as a similar geometrical perfection.

Though the reader is given a brief plot summary of *The Prismatic Bezel,* V. makes it clear that his real interest lies in "[showing] the workings [of the novel], perhaps detrimentally to the impression of beauty left by the book itself, apart from its artifices" (96).

Despite appearing comedic on the surface, as V. describes, the novel contains several nested narratives, the combination of which causes the tale to "[take] on a strange beauty… A new plot, a new drama utterly unconnected with the opening of the story, which is thus thrust back into the region of dreams, seems to struggle for existence and break into light." Here V. draws an allusion between light and the very title of the novel — similarly, the characters' lives "shine forth with a real human significance" (92). As Julia Bader observes, "bezel" refers simultaneously to the tool (method), the gem (theme), and that which holds the gem in place (style); thus, it is hard to imagine a bezel that could be prismatic in reality.[38] Gerard De Vries suggests that this apparent incompatibility of prism and bezel may indicate the "union of refraction and reflection" in Nabokov's prose, as the prismatic bezel both "fragments and

[38] Julia Bader, *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 16.

integrates its surrounding lights."[39] Through this juxtaposition of refraction and reflection, method and theme, the reader is made aware of the construction of the narrative, thus uprooting his or her notions of what constitutes "fiction" versus "reality." In *Sebastian Knight*, this additive methodology is not concealed, but rather made implicit in the narrative. The augmentation of reality through rays of light brings the reader one step closer to a "perfect" vision.

Unlike additive colors, which involve the superposition of light rays, subtractive colors result from absorption. We see this in painting, when colors are mixed. The process of mixing colored pigments on our palettes subtracts and diminishes the light waves that bounce off the paint, meaning that colors move from lighter values to darker ones. Goethe's *Theory of Colors* was the first comprehensive overview of colors that encompassed both the objectivity and subjectivity of color: his opposition to Newton's theory that color was a function of light alone was favored among painters and the Romantic movement.[40] With painting, both painter and viewer perceive surface colors and reflective lights, with black possessing the least brightness and white the maximum amount of light. It was Goethe who pointed out that complementary colors such as violet and yellow could be classified as "polar" colors exhibiting extreme light and darkness, and that a shadow of a color will always possess the color of its complement.[41]

For Nabokov, art is not sacrificed for science; rather, he possessed an excellent command of both practical and creative faculties. Nabokov, who once said he was "born a painter," was equally fascinated with subtractive and additive color mixing, manipulating color through both pigment and light.[42] Like the young Nabokov of *Speak, Memory,* who was trained in painting, Sebastian Knight was also fascinated by watercolors as a boy. V. vividly remembers "trying to get a better glimpse of the paint box beyond my half-brother's moving elbow; sticky reds and blues, so well-licked and worn that the enamel gleams in their cavities. There is a slight clatter every time Sebastian mixes his colors on the inside of the tin lid, and the water in the glass before him is clouded with magic hues" (14). Subtractive complementary colors reduce to gray, unlike additive complementary colors, which converge at the white end of the spectrum. When

[39] Gerard De Vries, *Silent Love: The Annotation and Interpretation of Nabokov's The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2016), 38.
[40] For more parallels between Nabokov and Goethe, see the chapter "Nabokovian Science and Goethean Science" in Stephen H. Blackwell's *The Quill and the Scalpel: Nabokov's Art and the Worlds of Science* (The Ohio State University Press, 2009): 53-70.
[41] Goethe, *Farbenlehre,* xxviii.
[42] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions,* 17.

mixed, red and blue form a grayish-violet shade that clouds the water in the glass, reducing the amount of light in the pigment, yet this muddy admixture is still perceived as magical.

Sebastian is described as both novelist and painter in V.'s above-mentioned review of *The Prismatic Bezel*: "[The novel] is as if a painter said: 'look, here I'm going to show you not the painting of a landscape, but the painting of different ways of painting a certain landscape, and I trust their harmonious fusion will disclose the landscape as I intend you to see it'" (93). Once again, methodology trumps iconography: this description does not concern the contents of the painting, but rather the means by which it is constructed. This "harmonious fusion," like the "magic hues" of Sebastian's paint, shows clear Romantic tendencies. The novel is compared to a blank canvas, the writer to a painter, as though given divine agency. V. sees his unwritten biography as "a book with a blind spot. An unfinished picture — uncolored limbs of the martyr with the arrows in his side" (123). The same image is given when V. imagines Sebastian with his first love. The girl, whom V. is unable to visualize, is pictured as blank: "achromatic… a mere outline, a white shape not filled in with color by the artist… The painter has not yet filled in the white space except for a thin sunburnt arm streaked from wrist to elbow along its outer side with glistening down" (136).

Much like what we saw with prisms, the reader here is given is a memory image, with colors and outlines, an artistic rearrangement of past events. Nabokov describes his process of memoir writing as a thoroughly eidetic one:

> The past is a constant accumulation of images, but our brain is not an ideal organ for constant retrospection and the best we can do is to pick out and try to retain those patches of rainbow light flitting through memory. The act of retention is the act of art, artistic selection, artistic blending, artistic re-combination of actual events… The good memoirist… does his best to preserve the utmost truth of the detail. One of the ways he achieves his intent is to find the right spot on his canvas for placing the right patch of remembered color.[43]

[43] *Strong Opinions*, 186.

Nabokov's memories thus also function as visual impressions, allowing him to piece together the past through imagery and color. By "painting" his narratives, he is able to move closer to an idealized harmony of color.

When Goethe describes a color harmony that creates a "much more perfect visible world that the actual one can be," to what extent does this go beyond painting into prose?[44] As seen with his butterfly research, Nabokov was fascinated by coincidence and mimicry, which show an "artistic perfection usually associated with man-wrought things."[45] When V. meets Mr. Silbermann, a character from *The Other Side of the Moon,* in person, fiction bleeds into reality, going beyond our understanding of coincidence. This theme is summarized for the reader in a quote from Sebastian's *Lost Property:* "All things belong to the same order of things, for such is the oneness of human perception, the oneness of individuality, the oneness of matter, whatever matter may be. The only real number is one, the rest are mere repetition" (103). Herein lies the notion of harmony: like Nabokov's colored spiral, these "copies" of true perception and individuality create more perfect images than can exist in reality.

Partitive color mixing, closely related to additive color mixing, occurs when dots of different colors are juxtaposed. The resulting color reflects the same quality of light, as if colors had been mixed additively. For example, with partitive mixtures, dots of a color such as blue, when placed next to yellow, will create a gray sensation, as opposed to a green, as in subtractive mixing, when pigments are physically mixed. The result situates itself between the *corporeal* (subtractive) and *noncorporeal* (additive). Unlike additive color mixing, where colors are mixed via light rays, and subtractive color mixing, where colors are mixed on the palette, with partitive color mixing, colors are mixed in the eye itself.

Georges Seurat's "optical painting" was based on a specific philosophy of perception: by darkening edges where they met light and vice versa, colored boundaries would be tinged with their complementaries. This maximal contrast between complementaries allowed for maximum harmony. However, this depended on the viewer: only by moving in relation to the canvas would a shimmer effect, or "luster" be produced.[46] There are several parallels between Seurat and Nabokov: both found themselves at the crux of art and science, and both enjoyed the

[44] Goethe, *Farbenlehre*, xxi.
[45] *Speak, Memory,* 124.
[46] John Gage, "The Technique of Seurat: a Reappraisal," *The Art Bulletin,* Vol. 69, No. 3 (September 1987), 448-454.

manipulation of optical contrasts, the fact that there was no "true" color in perception except those of the light rays reflected back into the eyes of the spectator.[47] Seurat, like Nabokov, was certainly influenced by contemporaneous scientific developments. Ogden Rood, an American physicist working in color theory, made use of additive colored mixing using a dotted technique, based on the prismatic primaries red, blue-green and violet (as opposed to the subtractive primary set of yellow, red and blue). Due to Rood's influence, Seurat was able to reconcile a tonally arranged (subtractive) palette with the order of hues in the solar spectrum.[48] Partitive color mixing can be seen as a compromise between the Romantic and the scientific, between Goethe's subjectivism and Newton's prism-based color spectrum.

Like the phenomenon experienced when moving away from a Pointillist painting, a shimmering sensation can be created in narrative through a sequence of moving images. V. is able to isolate a fantasy involving Sebastian as a single image noting that the "picture… kept shining in its trembling pattern of white shirtfronts and black dinner jackets and mellow-coloured wine, and clear-cut faces, as one of those coloured photographs you see on the back of magazines" (179). This "trembling pattern" of color and light is indicative of the unreliability of V.'s imagination, as seen when V. revisits the memory of his and Sebastian's mother, who abandoned the two brothers long ago. V. describes: "Gradually I worked myself into such a state that the pink and green seemed to shimmer and float as if seen through a veil of mist" (19). It is shortly after this, when he imagines Sebastian's mother standing in front of the boarding house *Les Violettes,* that he "regains consciousness." The contrast between pink (closely related to red) and green is strikingly like the additive primaries used in partitive color mixing, the fusion of which creates a gray or "misty" sensation. On another occasion, V. describes a similar hallucination:

> My righthand number sighed and tried to wipe the window-pane, but it remained misty with a faint yellowish light glimmering through…. I tried to shut my eyes and to doze, but my eyelids were lined with floating designs—and a tiny bundle of light, rather like an infusoria, swam across, starting again from the same corner… Then colors appeared, and a pink face with a large gazelle eye slowly turned towards me—and then a basket of

[47] Ibid, 449.
[48] Ibid, 450.

> flowers, and then Sebastian's unshaven chin. I could not stand that optical paintbox any longer, and with endless, cautious manoevering… I got out into the corridor (192).

The appearance of an infusoria is not coincidental. As a scientist, Nabokov would have known full well that an infusoria is a microscopic organism with a dotted shape much along the lines of optical painting. V.'s "optical paintbox" also describes a situation where colors are mixed within the eye itself; however, as he is unable to fully control his senses and perception, he flees the situation immediately. In *Sebastian Knight,* "shimmer" is also directly tied to the blurry boundary between fiction and reality. V. writes: "The light of personal truth is hard to perceive in the shimmer of an imaginary nature, but what is still harder to understand is the amazing fact that a man writing of things which he really felt at the time of writing, could have had the power to create simultaneously—and out of the very things which distressed his mind—a fictitious and faintly absurd character" (112). By using the verbs "shimmer" and "glimmer" to describe this narrative subjectivity, Nabokov achieves a wonderfully ethereal effect analogous to Seurat's "optical painting."

The multiplicity of layered worlds in *Sebastian Knight* results in a product mirroring not the reader's own reality, but a self-contained artistic one.[49] As I have argued throughout this article, Nabokov makes false any distinctions between fantasy and realism, the imagined and the mimetic. Thus, when Sebastian says, lying on the floor of his office, "No, Leslie… I'm not dead. I have finished building a world, and this is my Sabbath rest" (88), he makes explicit the relationship between artistic creation and world-building, one I have shown can be construed via additive, subtractive, and partitive color mixing. This self-contained artistic world is composed not only of words, but also of colors and shapes. Nabokov's prose, then, must be conceived of not merely linguistically, but imagistically—the verbal and visual are one.[50]

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[49] Julia Bader, *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov's English Novels,* 15.

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