



Life Writing: A Parodical Springboard in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*

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Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov is a parodist par excellence targeting numerous earlier literary texts as well as devices. Parodies manipulated in his 1962 novel, *Pale Fire*, are more intricate, mannered, and fabricated in terms of their dimension and depth than those in his previous novels. This essay intends to address one specific parodied artifice in the novel of interest, life writing (more often referred to as auto/biography), specifically from the perspective of the formal and textual construction in two major regards: first, the translation and annotation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* not only provides the source of inspiration but also serves as one parodied means of life writing to shape the structural framework of this uniquely personalized novel; and second, the novel draws heavily from the life writing in Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson* by parodying the biographer/subject relationship. This essay contends that it is through the prism of parody that Nabokov revives and innovates in *Pale Fire* life writing both as a genre and literary approach by referring the readers back to the pre-texts. In this sense, parody functions as a springboard to a higher level of literary creation, as is typically exemplified in *Pale Fire*.

Key words: Parody; *Pale Fire*; Life writing; *Eugene Onegin*; *The Life of Samuel Johnson*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 1966, Nabokov (1990) wrote, "I shall be remembered by *Lolita* and my work on *Eugene Onegin*" (p.127). The success of *Lolita* enabled Nabokov to retire from the very tiresome and time-consuming teaching profession, go back to Europe, and devote himself solely to writing. *Eugene Onegin*, a combined work of Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's classic novel in verse and the accompanying academic commentary, took him as much time as he spent on three novels together, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Ada*. In 1964, *Eugene Onegin* was published in 4 copious volumes. *Pale Fire* was written while he was working on *Eugene Onegin*, which is generally considered to be the major source of the novel's formal genesis.

Despite mixed reviews, *Pale Fire* is generally acknowledged as one of the greatest works of the 20th century. The first thing that comes to readers' mind is perhaps Mary McCarthy's response to this novel: "*Pale Fire* is a Jack-in-the-box, a Faberge gem, a clockwork toy, a chess problem, an infernal machine, a trap to catch reviewers, a cat-and-mouse game, a do-it-yourself novel. ... When the separate parts are assembled, according to the manufacturer's directions, and fitted together with the help of clues and cross-references, which must be hunted down as in a paperchase, a novel on several levels is revealed, and these 'levels' are not the customary 'levels of meaning' of modernist criticism but plans in a fictive space, rather like those houses of memory in medieval mnemonic science, where words, facts and numbers were stored till wanted in various rooms and attics or like the houses of astrology into which the heavens are divided" (Page, 1982, p.124). McCarthy's laudatory review has

a crucial part in igniting readers' curiosity and passion toward this largely "unreadable" book. Brian Boyd (1991), Nabokov's biographer, recognizes its unique formal feature, "in sheer beauty of form, *Pale Fire* may well be the most perfect novel ever written" (p.425). Its formal experiment has been extensively studied and is largely attributed to the artifice of parody. Hailed as an experimental work of postmodern metafiction, *Pale Fire*, as explored below, parodies academic literary criticism as sophisticatedly manifested in the author's own *Eugene Onegin*, which gives shape to the novel's textual structure: a composition of an epigraph, table of contents, a foreword, an eponymous poem with 999 lines in 4 cantos, lengthy commentary, and an index. The autobiographical poem allegedly composed by John Shade, a fictional Popean poet, presents several aspects of his life: his encounters with death, his wife Sybil and his daughter Hazel, his search of meaning in the afterlife, and his thoughts on poetry. As the contrapuntal part of Shade's poem, the accompanying commentary should have provided fundamental biographical information related to Shade's life and the poem. Instead, Shade's mad commentator, an American scholar of Russian descent, usurped the poem and told in the commentary three totally unrelated stories. The first story describes how Charles Kinbote, as an imagined friend of John Shade, inspired him to write the poem by repeatedly stuffing him with materials of the now deposed-king from a northern country, Zembla, and how Kinbote acquired the manuscript of Shade's poem and the permission from Sybil to edit and annotate it after Shade was mistakenly murdered. The second story pieces together in the comments the King's escape from the revolutionaries in Zembla via a secret underground passage with the help of brave supporters. The third story juxtaposes the process of Shade's composing the poem with the approaching of Kinbote's imagined Zemblan assassin all the way through Europe to America and to New Wye, where Gradus killed our poet mistaking him for the exiled Zemblan king.

Nabokov is a parodist par excellence with numerous earlier texts as well as literary devices on his radar. To him, parody is "a game" rather than "a satire". Appel (1967) examined various parodies in his novels and claimed that parody is central to all Nabokov's novels, "Nabokov has shown how parody may inform a high literary art, and parody figures in the design of each of his novels" (p.212). Appel concluded that "The texture of Nabokov's parody is unique because, in addition to being a master parodist of literary styles, he is able to make brief references to another writer's themes or devices which are so telling in effect that Nabokov need not burlesque that writer's style. He not only parodies narrative clichés and outworn subject matter, but genres and prototypes of the novel" (p.212). A careful

reading of *Pale Fire* can verify Appel's view in terms of what Nabokov's novels parody. Life writing, or auto/biography, falls into the category of these "genres and prototypes" that Nabokov parodies in *Pale Fire*. This essay will investigate the parodical parallels in this respect existent between *Pale Fire* and two pretexts, *Eugene Onegin* by the author himself and *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (referred to as *Life* afterwards) by James Boswell. The apparently grotesque structure, as a novel, resembles the academic commentary genre in *Eugene Onegin*, in which Nabokov establishes a biographical monument for the greatest ever Russian poet, Pushkin. The novel also mimics mockingly the biographer/subject (in this novel, poet/commentator) relationship in Boswell's *Life*, a biography of Samuel Johnson. This essay seeks to examine the artifice of parody in two regards, commentary genre as in Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* and the biographer/subject relationship as in Boswell's *Life*. Hopefully, this interpretation can contribute to a deeper insight into the novel's formal structure and character relationship.

2. EUGENE ONEGIN AND COMMENTARY GENRE

The first sparkle of translating *Eugene Onegin* came in 1945 when Nabokov moved to Cornell and prepared to teach Russian literature there. His wife suggested him translating Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* himself when he complained about the "rhymed paraphrases" in existent English versions. The laborious undertaking was finished 10 years later and the manuscript was given to Bollingen press. To his disappointment, its first publication was delayed until 1964. The hard work of translation and annotation of Pushkin's novel in verse resulted in a work of 4 copious volumes, 80% of which are occupied by erudite commentaries and critical studies of Pushkin's life and work. Its publication by the Bolling Foundation in 1964 immediately ignited a storm of controversy among literary critics: "... no other book by Nabokov, with the exception of *Lolita*, has caused such a row as his most sedate, most scholarly and time-consuming project—the annotated translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* ..." (Alexandrov, 1995, p.117). Edmund Wilson, his mentor as well as personal friend, claimed that "this production, though in certain ways valuable, is something of a disappointment" (Page, 1982, p.175). Criticism mostly focused on Nabokov's literal translation into unrhymed iambic lines of unequal length, in which he "sacrificed to completeness of meaning every formal element save the iambic rhythm: its retention assisted rather than hindered fidelity ..." (Nabokov, 1964, p.x).

Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* consists of 389 fourteen-line stanzas (5446 lines) of iambic tetrameter, which has been recognized as "Pushkin sonnet". Despite Nabokov's

initial wish of “a little book on *Eugene Onegin*: complete translation in prose with notes giving associations and other explanations for every line — the kind of thing I have prepared for my classes” (Boyd, 1993, p.319), the finalized version of the work extended to 4 volumes of more than 1,700 pages. The first volume is composed of a foreword, contents, translator’s introduction, and the literal translation of the poem (pp. 91-345). Volume II & III, 1087 pages together, feature very detailed scholarly commentaries of Pushkin’s poem, the length of which was considered by some critics as “out of proportion” and strongly “opinionated” (Alexandra, 1995) while hailed as “a genuine work of literary art” (Warner, 1986). The last volume comprises appendixes and index (112 pages) and the facsimile reproduction of the poem in Russian (310 pages). Besides being a mass of information about poetic diction, the commentaries have now been accepted “a monument to its author’s scholarship and a splendid proof of his devotion to Pushkin” (Page, 1982, p.181).

Pale Fire would not appear in its current form before readers without his previous efforts on *Eugene Onegin*. Those years of devotion awoke Nabokov’s passion of creating a novel that resembles the genre of academic criticism, however bizarre, or gothic, or eccentric it might seem as a novel: an epigraph, table of contents, a foreword, a poem of 999 iambic pentameter lines, extensive commentary, and index, which subverts the formal convention of a novel and poses a substantial challenge to reader reception. Also, for this very reason, *Pale Fire* has excited such curious readers as Mary McCarthy, who exclaimed in her frequently-cited review “This centaur-work of Nabokov’s, half-poem, half-prose, this merman of the deep, is a creature of perfect beauty, symmetry, strangeness, originality, and moral truth” (McCarthy & Scott, 2002, p.102). Equally odd is that the commentator and biographer does not construct a life of the intended biographee but one of himself.

The poem *Pale Fire* can be read as a parody of the poem *Eugene Onegin* by Pushkin. This 999-line poem in 4 cantos is composed by the fictional American poet and literature professor, John Shade, and intended as his autobiographical record of his own life. Canto 1 is a recollection of Shade’s childhood and youth: he was orphaned and raised by Aunt Maud; he was delighted in colors; he felt disillusioned with religion; he was fascinated with the natural world; he lacked athletic agility; he was caught by a seizure... Canto 2 recounts the deaths of two people close in life: Aunt Maud suffered paralysis and his daughter, Hazel, committed suicide after one disappointment after another in her short miserable life. This canto also recalls his happy marriage with Sybil. Canto 3 describes Shade’s experience of and thoughts on the afterlife. The last canto is attributed to his ambitions for poetry and his

affection towards poetic techniques. Considering the summary above, the poem is meant to be a(n) life writing/autobiography of the poet *per se*, which is different from the parodied poem by Pushkin. However, both poems end up with starkly different treatments in the hands of their commentators, Nabokov and Kinbote.

As Nabokov has John Shade put it, “Man’s life as commentary to abstruse / Unfinished poem” (Nabokov, 1962, p.48), his commentary in *Eugene Onegin* serves as an exhaustive life writing of Pushkin, which has been parodied in *Pale Fire* to help construct one fictitious autobiography of John Shade in the poem and another even fantastical biography of the commentator, Charles Kinbote. Though by and large contextual and relevant, Nabokov’s commentary of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* is criticized by some as “digressive”. Eskin suggests a reading of the commentary as a fictional/literary text, in which Nabokov juxtaposes himself alongside with various personae in Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* (Picon, 2009). Eskin sees the authorial presence of Nabokov in many of the commentaries as the commentator’s self-reference or the “competition” between the commentator and commented author, in this case, Nabokov and Pushkin. However, Picon (2009) disagrees with Eskin and contends that this self-reference serves as a means for Nabokov to recreate Pushkin’s living surroundings and the text. The commentary is distinctively characteristic of Nabokov’s uniqueness, including entries on animals, insects, plants, locales, and entries expounding on poetic techniques.

This commentary genre has been exploited to the maximum in the hands of Kinbote, with Nabokov pulling the strings at his back, to achieve his self-serving purpose, which has its first sign in the foreword even before readers go to the commentarial notes. The foreword does include some biographical facts about the poet and his composition of the poem. However, it seems that an even larger portion of the foreword is dedicated to informing readers of how “friendship” was developed between Kinbote and Shade and how he grabbed the right to edit and annotate the poem and see to its publication. He intentionally forsakes his ethical responsibility as a commentator and biographer and impatiently urges readers to search for the “human reality” that “only my notes can provide” (p.19). Kinbote as a biographer provides readers very little of his subject’s life and work. Instead, he takes advantage of this opportunity to present readers with an “autobiographical” fantasy of the deposed Zemblan king. The paradoxical irony is evident when readers make a comparative reading of Kinbote/Shade against Nabokov/Pushkin in terms of the biographer/subject relationship. Kinbote succumbs to his constant temptation of constructing a verbal Zemblan monument in the first note to the first four lines of Shade’s poem: “I was the shadow of the waxwing

slain / By the false azure in the windowpane; / I was the smudge of ashen fluff — and I / Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky” (p.23). In this note some biographical facts are indeed provided — “We can visualize John Shade in his early boyhood, a physically unattractive but otherwise beautifully developed lad, experiencing his first eschatological shock, as with incredulous fingers he picks up from the turf that compact ovoid body and gazes at the wax-red streaks ornamenting those gray-brown wings” (p.53). Then Kinbote intentionally (and habitually in later notes) digresses to his fantastical Zembla story by bringing up “*sampel*”, one of the three heraldic creatures “in the armorial bearings of the Zemblan King, Charles the Beloved (born 1915), whose glorious misfortunes I discussed so often with my friend” (p.53). This commentarial digression though is also present in Nabokov’s annotation to *Eugene Onegin*. However, when parodied in *Pale Fire*, it is expropriated not to add to any biographical understanding of the subject, John Shade in this case, but to cater to Kinbote’s own egocentric purpose, making this commentary genre rather absurd and ironic.

Also noteworthy is Kinbote’s commentary to line 149 where Shade is contemplating over the death, afterlife, and infinity — “And then black night. That blackness was sublime. / I felt distributed through space and time: / One foot upon a mountaintop, one hand / Under the pebbles of a panting strand, / One ear in Italy, one eye in Spain, / In caves, my blood, and in the stars, my brain” (p.27). The poet recalls his first encounter with death and presents it as a very evocative, almost cosmic experience when he had a seizure in his early boyhood. Kinbote is reluctant and does not even care to delve into Shade’s metaphysical world as a commentator or biographer should have. He feels attached to the word “mountain”, which he purloins to his own end to tell the his Zemblan story. Rather absurdly and ironically, Kinbote blatantly devotes 7 pages (pp. 99—106) to his glorified escape over the Bera range. At the end of this elongated digression, Kinbote says smugly, “I trust the reader has enjoyed this note” (p.106), hoping to find resonance in his reader instead of showing any sign of apology. Though Nabokov does digress, more than occasionally, when he is annotating on Pushkin’s poetry, he does so to help shape or reshape the knowledge in relation directly or indirectly to Pushkin and his work of art. What distinguishes Kinbote’s mimicking or parodying this commentary genre in *Pale Fire* from Nabokov’s in *Eugene Onegin* lies in their diametrically opposite motives: Nabokov pursues a non-utilitarian artistic purpose of contributing to Pushkin’s life writing while Kinbote is unscrupulous in his pursuit of a fantastical epic irrelevant to the supposed subject (Shade’s life actually is erased by the “human reality” provided by Kinbote in his commentary). In terms of this, Kinbote

well might share some common ground with his creator — “...reality is neither the subject nor the object of true art which creates its own special reality having nothing to do with the average ‘reality’ perceived by the communal eye” (p.94). Parody of this commentary genre connects these two works but reveals the unbridgeable gap for curious readers to explore, of which both Kinbote and his creator are clearly conscious. In the last note, when Kinbote finishes his annotation, he imagines himself in a number of roles including his creator — “I may turn up yet, on another campus, as an old, happy, healthy, heterosexual Russian, a writer in exile, sans fame, sans future, sans audience, sans anything but his art” (p.212), where both the fictional character and the real author once again converge into one entity. This hint of authorial presence indicates that the transplantation of commentary genre from *Eugene Onegin* into *Pale Fire*, however seemingly dissimilar they are, is reflexive of Nabokov’s view on artistic reality as created in his novels.

3. THE LIFE OF SAMUEL JOHNSON AND THE BIOGRAPHER/SUBJECT RELATIONSHIP

As previously stated, the artifice of parodying life writing in Nabokov’s own *Eugene Onegin* shapes the novel’s structure in the unusual form of critical apparatus. The supreme design in *Pale Fire* via parody also has both overt and covert manifestations in the novel’s frequent association with James Boswell’s *Life*, commonly acknowledged as the greatest biography in English language. There seems to be a consensus among critics that *Life* marks the modern development of the genre of life writing. In 1762, the 22-year-old James Boswell came from his native Scotland to London where he met Samuel Johnson the next year and developed a friendship with Johnson to the end of Johnson’s death. Johnson was then the leading literary figure — a poet, a biographer, a lexicographer, a conversationalist, a playwright, and an essayist. As an ambitious and compulsive writer, Boswell had a habit of keeping a detailed journal in which he recorded Johnson’s witty daily-life conversations. *Life* relies heavily on his journal and gives readers an unforgettable Flemish portrait of Johnson. *Life* has been appreciated for the “details” and “treasure of conversations” jotted down in Boswell’s diaries. However, *Life* has been questioned to what extent it is an “objective” biography due to the fact that these “details” and “conversations” are believed to have been revised by Boswell and, therefore, the biography’s legitimacy has been compromised for it is suffused with Boswell’s subjective attitudes, ideas, and wishes. Donald Greene (2004) denies the validity of

Life as true to Johnson's life because the conversations recorded in it are "heavily (and silently) edited versions of Boswell's earlier jottings — edited so as to add color, heighten their dramatic effect, emphasize the traits of the Boswellian 'Johnson' ..." (p.164).

Parody of *Life* models on, redefines and subverts the biographer/subject (Shade/Kinbote) relationship in *Pale Fire*. This association is immediately brought to the foreground when Nabokov directly quotes *Life* as the epigraph: "This reminds me of the ludicrous account he gave to Mr. Langton, of the despicable state of a young gentleman of good family. 'Sir, when I heard of him last, he was running about town shooting cats.' And then in a sort of kindly reverie, he bethought himself of his own favorite cat, and said, 'But Hodge shan't be shot: no, no, Hodge shall not be shot'" (p.6). Nabokov left readers a difficult riddle as to how this quote fits into the text in *Pale Fire*. What also remains intriguing is that, though the position of this quote as the preface or epigraph of this meticulously wrought novel suggests its significance, quite few connections can be found explicitly as we read into the text. However, it is largely certain that this quote establishes a parodic parallel between Boswell/Johnson and Kinbote/Shade. This parodic relationship is confirmed in the note to line 894, where Kinbote reveals the physical resemblance of Shade to Johnson. Shade is portrayed to resemble four people: "Samuel Johnson; the lovingly reconstructed ancestor of man in the Exton Museum; and two local characters ..." (p.188). This resemblance actually extends from physical appearance to the treatment of their life writing in the hands of the digressive unreliable biographers (Boswell and Kinbote). Shade is a happy agnostic while Johnson is a serene Christian. In terms of the Boswell/Kinbote parallel Nabokov creates via parody a distorted or even reversed image, not a mirrored reflection of the character. Both hates music, dancing, and cats. Boswell is obsessed with Scotland, and Kinbote Zembla. Boswell is known for his promiscuous sexual relations, and Kinbote energetic homosexuality. Both suffer from constant fears and want to commit suicide. Both are on the verge of insanity and seek help in religion. Both feel a sense of fulfillment towards the end of their work. Kinbote writes: "My notes and self are petering out" (p.212) when his work is finished. For him life has no more meaning or purpose and he commits suicide as Nabokov suggests. Both like to keep away from the rest of the world and stay "in the company of his poet". Both assert themselves to be worshippers of their idolized poets. Boswell (2008) writes before their first meeting in the bookshop: "Though then but two-and-twenty, I had for several years read his works with delight and instruction, and had the highest reverence for their author, which had grown up in my fancy into a kind of mysterious veneration, by figuring to myself a state

of solemn elevated abstraction ..." (p.204). An analogy is drawn in *Pale Fire* in a more elevated and hyperbolic way. The description of Kinbote's admiration is highly exaggerated to a parodic effect: "I experienced a grand sense of wonder whenever I looked at him, especially in the presence of other people, inferior people. This wonder was enhanced by my awareness of their not feeling what I felt, of their not seeing what I saw, of their taking Shade for granted, instead of drenching every nerve, so to speak, in the romance of his presence. Here he is, I would say to myself, that is his head, containing a brain of a different brand than that of the synthetic jellies preserved in the skulls around him. ... I am witnessing a unique physiological phenomenon: John Shade perceiving and transforming the world, taking it in and taking it apart, re-combining its elements in the very process of storing them up so as to produce at some unspecified date an organic miracle, a fusion of image and music, a line of verse" (p.18). We need to be aware that there is a significant difference between the time spans of the friendship. The friendship between Boswell and Johnson lasted 21 years since their first meeting in 1763 while that between Kinbote and Shade lasted only five months, give or take, from February 26 to July 21, 1959. Kinbote's claim sounds dubious considering the span of their friendship and the much fewer conversations included in his commentary, which makes him a less reliable biographer and commentator. Both evaluate themselves as more qualified biographers than their rivals. Boswell (2008) accuses Sir John Hawkins of lacking "that nice perception which was necessary to mark the finer and less obvious parts of Johnson's character" (p.20). Boswell actually strew such critical attacks upon Johnson's other biographers throughout *Life*. Nevertheless, these accusations and attacks are justified by his method of life writing with minute, even mundane descriptions and conversations. Similarly, Kinbote has his peer rivals under even harsher ridicules and attacks, including one of the "professed Shadeans", "Prof. Hurley and his clique", "Shade's former lawyer", his "former literary agent", "Prof. C", and etc.

Besides, Kinbote discloses that his "scholarly" method of life writing is vicariously influenced by Boswell in his comment to line 172: "In a black pocketbook that I fortunately have with me I find, jotted down, here and there, among various extracts that had happened to please me (a footnote from Boswell's *Life of Dr. Johnson*, the inscriptions on the trees in Wordsmith's famous avenue, a quotation from St. Augustine, and so on), a few samples of John Shade's conversation which I had collected in order to refer to them in the presence of people whom my friendship with the poet might interest or annoy" (Nabokov, 1962, p.111). Given the divide of the friendship span, Kinbote convinces his readers that "... there exists friendships which develop their own

inner duration, their own eons of transparent time, ...” despite the fact that “the calendar says I had known him only for a few months” (Nabokov, 1962, p.11). This way, he tries to justify his mimicking Boswell’s method of constructing a biography by largely citing Johnson’s conversations recorded in his journal and “letting my illustrious friend speak for himself” (p.11). When compared with Boswell’s *Life*, conversations of Shade recorded by Kinbote take a much smaller proportion of the entire work. These conversations find their presence mainly in the notes to line 172, 433-434, 549, 629, and 894, among which readers might find those in line 172 and 549 conducive to John Shade’s life writing. In the comment on line 172, they exchange their views on such subjects as book reviews, teaching Shakespeare, impacts of Marxism and Freudism, students’ papers, and colleagues at college. Shade seems to dominate the stage and “speak for himself” in this note. The note to line 549 is seemingly attributed to expounding on Shade’s views on religion. Boswell’s life writing method of quoting conversations from his journal is parodied as evidently exemplified in “My little diary happens to contain a few jottings referring to a conversation the poet and I had on June 23 ... I transcribe them here only because they cast a fascinating light on his attitude toward the subject” (Nabokov, 1962, p.159). These conversations do convey to readers Shade’s views on “sin” and “faith” in “I can name only two (sins): murder, and the deliberate infliction of pain” and “life is a great surprise. I do not see why death should not be an even greater one” (p.160). Even here Kinbote leads these conversations to elaborate on his resort to God to fight off the “religious doubts”. It might well be rational to deem that these conversations are purposely picked out and most probably revised to suit Kinbote’s own needs.

Kinbote is keen on superimposing his own life onto Shade’s biography in the commentary to the extent that Shade’s life is overshadowed and indeed overwhelmed by his own. Both do not rest content with only writing lives of their subjects, but always seeks to construct their own lives, to different extents of course, around their idols. Boswell’s *Life* is not, but derives from, what he considers as historical truth. However, Kinbote’s commentary heavily relies on his own fantasies. If *Life* is more about Boswell than about Johnson, then *Pale Fire*, except in the poem, is not about Shade but about Kinbote. Put another way, when writing someone else’s life, they are both writing their own lives, where Kinbote actually is more subjective than Boswell is. While Boswell is striving to compete for his own dominance in *Life*, the egocentric Kinbote always has a firm grip of the situation. Though his effort to have Shade compose a poem of his mythical Zembla is frustrated, he manages to weave his parasitic life into the commentary by any means necessary. Kinbote reveals his wish in the note

to line 42: “By the end of May I could make out the outlines of some of my images in the shape his genius might give them; by mid-June I felt sure at last that he would recreate in a poem the dazzling Zembla burning in my brain. I mesmerized him with it, I saturated him with my vision, I pressed upon him, with a drunkard’s wild generosity, all that I was helpless myself to put into verse. ... At length I knew he was ripe with my Zembla, bursting with suitable rhymes, ready to spurt at the brush of an eyelash ...” (Nabokov, 1962, p.58). Later Kinbote admits that the final text of Shade’s poem “has been deliberately and drastically drained of every trace of the material I contributed” and attributes it to “the control exercised upon my poet by a domestic censor” (p.59). He refuses to accept the situation and remains committed to his goal of constructing his own life by fabricating “the variants”. Charles Kinbote follows Boswell’s steps and even goes beyond that to blatantly undermine and fully subvert the biographer/subject relationship, which is laid bare when he writes at the end of his foreword, “The commentator has the last word” (p.19). Nabokov, as he habitually does in his novels, pokes fun via parody at the “objective criticism” as expected to be found in Boswell’s *Life* as a life writing of Samuel Johnson.

4. CONCLUSION

Indebted to the German aesthetic idealism, Nabokov is strongly against aesthetic utilitarianism and instead seeks “art for art’s sake” in his literary creation. For this artistic purpose, he has shown a predilection for the use of parody throughout his literary career. He explains this device as “a game”, the use of which enriches the texture of his novels by creating a game-like narrative structure. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, he has his narrator use “parody as a kind of springboard for leaping into the highest region of serious emotion” (Nabokov, 1941, p.76). Therefore, a proper exploration of parodies helps gain an insightful understanding of Nabokov’s truthful and complicated feelings. This literary strategy adds significantly to the fascination of the book and requires readers to read and re-read it in a different light. Parodies of life writing provide readers a possible angle to approach Nabokov’s original and creative works of art through negotiations with pre-texts in this genre. In the case of *Pale Fire*, the author’s own *Eugene Onegin* well may trigger its formal genesis via the commentary genre and the parody of Boswell’s *Life* helps weave its textual fabrics especially in regard to the subject/biographer relationship. Nabokov uses parody as “a game” to achieve the sense of play, and this sense of play can have serious motives and influence on reality. These two earlier pre-texts, together with many others, set the stage for Nabokov’s creative fictitious novels like *Pale Fire* through the artifice of parody, life writing

as singled out for analysis in this essay. When at the disposal of our genius parodist, life writing functions effectively as an artistic springboard toward a higher literary purpose for both the writer and his readers in such aspects as textual form, content, and philosophy. Though it requires a strenuous intellectual effort to dig into such a complicated novel, we will be rewarded with what Nabokov promises as “aesthetic bliss”.

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