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Keith David Leisner

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**“Mutual Relations of Dialogue, Parody, Contestation”: Writing  
Nabokov’s Life in the Age of the Author’s Death**

**APPROVED BY  
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

**Supervisor:**

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Evan Carton

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Brian Bremen

**“Mutual Relations of Dialogue, Parody, Contestation”: Writing  
Nabokov’s Life in the Age of the Author’s Death**

**by**

**Keith David Leisner, BA**

**Report**

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## **Dedication**

To those unashamedly interested in the lives of others

## **Acknowledgements**

When I was first beginning this project, one night over drinks I asked a colleague who had been working with Evan what it was like. His reply, “he’ll push you,” didn’t mean much to me then, but it does now. Evan, thank you for pushing me to produce my best writing, thank you for your generous edits and comments, and above all, thank you for your intellectual guidance.

The remarks above shouldn’t detract from the difficulty of the writing process, which I do not think I would be able to endure without the thought of seeing my family. Thank you Scott and Iriabeth, and your wonderful children, for being a constant source of strength to me in moments of loneliness, frustration, and exhaustion.

## Abstract

### **“Mutual Relations of Dialogue, Parody, Contestation”: Writing Nabokov’s Life in the Age of the Author’s Death**

Keith David Leisner, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

Supervisor: Evan Carton

In her introduction to a special issue of the *South Central Review* on literary biography published in 2006, Linda Leavell writes:

Many would trace the disdain for literary biography—in both senses of the word “literary”—back through Roland Barthes’s “death of the author” to the New Critics’ division of text from context all the way to T. S. Eliot’s theory of impersonality. Critical theory of the past century has generally deemed an author’s life, personality, and intentions irrelevant to the text. (1)

Leavell’s explanation of how critical theory of the twentieth century came to shape the current scholarly attitude towards literary biography establishes the genre’s status in an era of literary theory that is commonly characterized by the diminishment of the author as the source of meaning in a text, an era in which we remain. This characterization, however, overlooks the different ways that the theorists of the era displaced the author as

the dominant figure in literary studies. This paper demonstrates how these different ways, despite whatever damage they might have done to the status of literary biography, actually benefit the study of the genre. Additionally, this paper argues that they not only comprise one side of Vladimir Nabokov's contradictory views on his own authorship, which makes him an ideal subject for the study of authority over biographical representation, but also gave rise to new methodologies of literary biography, which are the methodologies of Nabokov's biographers themselves. As a result, this paper concludes, "an author's life, personality, and intentions" in turn have assumed new relevancy in literary studies.

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## INTRODUCTION

*By the Old Style I was born on April 10, at daybreak, in the last year of the last century, and that was (if I could have been whisked across the border at once) April 22 in, say, Germany; but since all my birthdays were celebrated, with diminishing pomp, in the twentieth century, everybody, including myself, upon being shifted by revolution and expatriation from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian, used to add thirteen, instead of twelve days to the 10th of April. The error is serious. What is to be done?*

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory* (13)

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Leavell’s explanation of how critical theory of the twentieth century came to shape the current scholarly attitude towards literary biography establishes the genre’s status in an era of literary theory that is commonly characterized by the diminishment of the author as the source of meaning in a text, an era in which we remain. This characterization, however, overlooks the different ways that the theorists of the era displaced the author as the dominant figure in literary studies. Ironically, these different ways, despite whatever damage they might have done to the status of literary biography, actually benefit the study of the genre. They not only comprise one side of Vladimir Nabokov’s contradictory views on his own authorship, which makes him an ideal subject for the study of authority

over biographical representation, but also gave rise to new methodologies of literary biography, which are the methodologies of Nabokov's biographers themselves. As a result, "an author's life, personality, and intentions" in turn have assumed new relevancy in literary studies.

As the quotation from Leavell implies, foremost among these ostensibly anti-biographical theorists are T. S. Eliot, Roland Barthes, and W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, two of the founders of the New Critical school. Whatever their differences, their texts on the place of the author in the critic's interpretation and evaluation of a literary work all begin by acknowledging the author's elevated status in culture or society. In "Tradition and the Individual Talent," Eliot notes that if people were to interrogate their thoughts as they read, "[o]ne of the facts that might come to light is [. . . their] tendency to insist, when [. . . they] praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else" (140). In "The Death of the Author," Barthes also attributes the elevated status of the author to his uniqueness. Barthes, though, attributes popular fascination with the author not to his artistic distinctiveness but to the production of individuality and celebrity by various media: "The *author* still reigns in histories of literature, biographies of writers, interviews, magazines, as in the very consciousness of men of letters anxious to unite their person and their work through diaries and memoirs" (143). And in "The Intentional Fallacy," Wimsatt and Beardsley acknowledge the author's elevated status by conceptualizing it as a function in a "formula" for determining artistry: "'Intention,' as we shall use the term, corresponds to *what he intended* in a formula which more or less explicitly has had wide acceptance" (4).

To displace the author as the dominant figure in literary studies, Eliot, Barthes, and Wimsatt and Beardsley proceed to set forth theories that remove the author from the text by relocating the source of its meaning. Eliot, in response to “[. . . readers’] tendency to insist, when [. . . they] praise a poet, upon those aspects of his work in which he least resembles anyone else,” argues for the replacing of the poet’s uniqueness—which broadly includes his difference from his forerunners and the relevance of his feelings to interpreting his work—with a “depersonalization” that makes poetry poetic (17). To achieve this depersonalization, Eliot states that “[t]he progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (17). This “extinction of personality” is then used as a criterion for artistry. For Eliot, “the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates” (18). Barthes moves the source of meaning beyond the text itself to the reader, claiming that “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that *someone* who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted” (148). By making the reader the source of meaning in the text and the source of that meaning’s variation, Barthes reconfigures the text as a dialogic medium that “is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation” (148).<sup>1</sup> Because a text cannot be isolated to a single writing, and therefore a single identity, “writing [ultimately] is the destruction of every

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<sup>1</sup>. My understanding of the word *dialogic* is informed by Bakhtin’s definition of it from “Discourse in the Novel,” which is an essay in his book *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*.

voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (142). Wimsatt and Beardsley also think that there is an erasure of identity in writing, though they describe it in terms of the loss of ownership: “The poem is not the critic’s own and not the author’s (it is detached from the author at birth and goes about the world beyond his power to intend about it or control it)” (5).

Eliot’s, Barthes’s, and Wimsatt and Beardsley’s theoretical positions are more sophisticated than I have indicated here. But, as briefly stated types, these positions are useful for my purposes because they set up one side of Nabokov’s view of his authorship, which I henceforth describe as the destabilization of his authorial identity, that makes him such an ideal subject for the study of authority over biographical representation. “Poststructuralism” is the label that has come to designate the at once critical and temporal shift from a hermeneutics of authorial centrality and elevation to one that displaces and destabilizes the author. This theoretical shift and the historical events that helped cause it uniquely inform Nabokov’s authorial persona and his works. Additionally, contestation over authorial individuality, ownership, and the text as a dialogic medium are recurrent features in the author’s biographies.

On the one hand, Nabokov insistently maintained his authorial status and privilege. Preparing for a legal battle over the content of one of his biographies, he writes to his lawyer, “I cannot tell you how upset I am by the whole matter. It was not worth living a far from negligible life . . . only to have a blundering ass reinvent it” (Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* 616). On the other hand, a major device in

Nabokov's novels is the destabilization of his extra-textual authorial identity by distributing autobiographical and quasi-autobiographical details among his fictional characters. For example, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*—Nabokov's first English novel, which follows the narrator V. as he writes a biography of his half-brother the titular character—includes several autobiographical details across different characters and plot points: V.'s biography of Sebastian, like Nabokov's actual novel, is his first literary work; Sebastian, like Nabokov, is a Russian born English novelist who attended Cambridge University. *Pnin's* similarities are more consolidated. It is narrated by Vladimir Vladimirovich N---, who, more than his name, is almost identical to Nabokov. The character, like the author, is a wealthy émigré from Russia who gets a job as a professor in the United States. Moreover, both character and author share a passion for lepidopterology, the study of butterflies. Lastly, *Look at the Harlequins!* follows Vadim Vadimovich, a Russian American writer whose narrative devices, primarily diaries, become increasingly unreliable as he suffers from neuralgia-induced insomnia and an inability to conceptualize spatial movement. Beyond his similarities to Nabokov, Vadim is a caricature of Nabokov's first biographer Andrew Field and of Field's misrepresentation, in Nabokov's view, of him as a biographical subject (Boyd, *The American Years* 614).

The two sides of Nabokov's authorship seem to be a binary response to his never ending dispossession of a feeling of home by the violent events of the twentieth century. In Russia Nabokov experienced bloody political revolutions that would eventually force him to become an émigré across Europe. In Europe he would barely escape the racial

purges of The Nazi Party (Boyd, Chronology 757, 764-65), catching the last ship sailing to America. Even once he reached America, he still did not have a permanent home. He initially had difficulty finding a job and consequently moved from rented house to rented house, a habit that he kept the rest of his life. When he eventually found secure employment as a professor, he still continued to rent houses from other professors who were on sabbatical, and he spent the final years of his life renting out a floor of a hotel in Switzerland. The two ways that Nabokov copes with this dispossession, then, are by seeking to control his authorial image in his public and external relations while destabilizing that image in his fiction, a contradiction that is perfectly contained in Nabokov's decision to sue one of his biographers over the content of his biography.

Biography as a genre, like the court as an institution, is characterized by the utilization of evidence to present a definitive representation of events. This characteristic, however, much like actual court cases, is belied by both theory and practice. In the aforementioned issue of the *South Central Review*, Allen Hibbard, citing Ira Bruce Nadel's *Biography: Fiction, Fact & Form*, defines biography as a genre limited by a set of expectations to capture the "essence" of the subject that is written in a narrative stance—mainly dramatic/expressive, objective/academic, or interpretive/analytic—and that inevitably includes the narrative of the biographer (19, 20-21). Nadel's conceptualization of biography as comprising multiple narrative stances complicates the form's aspiration to achieve perfect representation of a life—an aspiration that the mediatory character of language already resists. That biography, in Nadel's formulation, inevitably includes the narrative of the biographer further compromises its claim to unitary truthfulness and, in

fact, renders it a type of dialogic medium reminiscent of Barthes's theory of the text as dialogic space. In the end, "[b]iographers," Janis P. Stout writes in the same issue of the *South Central Review*, "may think they are personal only in their examination of their subjects, . . . but they are also personal in their revelations of self . . . The biography is also, at some level, an autobiography" (73).

The awareness of the biographer's presence in the biography has several theoretical implications for the biographer's authority over biographical representation that parallel the theoretical shift to poststructuralism. They are particularly salient in the biographies of Nabokov, which, because of the author's simultaneous stabilization and destabilization of his textual and extra-textual authorial identities, make more room for the presence of the biographer. Foremost, if a biography is not only a single representation of the subject's life, then the definitiveness, or facticity, of that representation is called into question. The debate over the importance of facticity to biographical representation is exemplified by comparing Leon Edel's and Hayden White's polar views on the concept.<sup>2</sup> In the introduction to *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica*, Edel states, "[a] writer of lives is allowed the imagination of form but not of fact" (13). White, however, is not as rigid, complicating this binary opposition in his essay "The Fictions of Factual Representation." In it he argues that "[a] mere list of confirmable singular existential statements does not add up to an account of reality if

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<sup>2</sup> Although *Writing Lives: Principia Biographica* was published in 1984, one year before *Tropics in Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*—in which "The Fictions of Factual Representation" is collected—I still put the two texts in dialogue.

there is not some coherence, logical or aesthetic, connecting them one to another” (122). By making an account of reality reliant upon a type of coherence, White breaks down the perceived division between form and fact, subjecting historical discourse to the same narrative techniques that define fiction. The result, White continues, is that because historical events require fictional techniques to be rendered intelligible, the truly objective mode of discourse that historians seek is nonexistent (126-27). In actuality “there are different historiographical modes—different ways of hypotactically ordering the ‘facts’ contained in the chronicle of events occurring in a specific time-space location, such that events in the same set are capable of functioning differently in order to figure forth different *meanings*—moral, cognitive, or aesthetic—within different fictional matrices” (127).

Still, Edel, pressing his point about the difference between form and fact, declares, “Some critics hold [. . . the] belief [that biographies are a type of fiction]. But they are wrong” (15). Yet, by calling upon biographical narrative “to sort out themes and patterns, not dates and mundane calendar events which sort themselves . . . by use of those very devices that have given narrative strength to fiction” (30-31), he virtually paraphrases White’s argument that statements require a type of coherence in order to represent reality. Ironically, because form and fact are reliant upon one another, only the biographer who is unaware of this reliance is dishonest in her representation of a life.

Literary biography has accounted for the poststructuralist shift in literary theory in a number of ways reviewed here. It has been re-conceptualized as a medium containing both the narrative of the subject and the narrative of the biographer. Because it contains



both of these narratives, it also has become a contested space in which it is not always clear who has authority over biographical representation and whether or not those representations need to be based on fact. In the next two sections of this paper, I introduce Nabokov's three biographers and evidence how each of their methodologies incorporates one of the three alternative arenas of textual authority opened up by poststructuralist destabilization of the author: language, audience, or history.

## **THE “DOUBLE PAPER CHASE”: THE INTERACTIONS AMONG NABOKOV’S BIOGRAPHERS, THEIR POSITIONS, AND THEIR METHODOLOGIES**

Nabokov hated biographies. In his published lecture on Leo Tolstoy, he affirms, “I hate tampering with the precious lives of great writers and I hate Tom peeping over the fence of those lives—I hate the vulgarity of ‘human interest.’ I hate the rustle of skirts and giggles in the corridors of time—and no biographer will ever catch a glimpse of my private life” (“Leo Tolstoy” 138). More than just hating the invasiveness of biographers, though, Nabokov also consciously led a life that resists the prying of the biographer. After the controversy over the publication of *Lolita*, he shut himself away from the world on a floor of The Montreux Palace, a hotel in Switzerland, where he lived with his wife Vera until he died. On the rare occasion that he granted an interview, in print or on television, he would require the questions in advance, so he could prepare written responses to them. And he regularly wrote to editors of publications, correcting factual inaccuracies (Boyd, *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays* 17). In short, for an author who was so playful with his identity in his work, he was very particular about its public presentation. Nabokov’s third biographer, Andrea Pitzer, perfectly summarizes the extent of his control: “He was a man in almost perfect control of his public persona, and the persona he created was that of the reserved, jolly genius who was both a master and a devotee of his art” (6).

Despite the lowering of the author’s status in culture and society, and despite the fact that Nabokov led a life un-amenable to biographical representation, numerous biographers have been drawn to him and his life. This attraction to Nabokov in an era of

literary theory characterized by the diminishment of the author is expressed in Andrew Field's treatment of Nabokov's autobiography *Speak, Memory*, in which the author reconstructs roughly the first half of his life solely from memory. Field, Nabokov's first biographer, explains that the book "was represented by its author as not only a factual account, which it is, but also a wholly sufficient factual account of his life until 1940, which—how to put it?—is a notion I find contrary to my interest and belief" (*Nabokov: His Life in Part 9*). Field's implicit disagreement with Nabokov's claim that *Speak, Memory* is "a wholly sufficient factual account of his life" not only establishes his specific interests and beliefs as a biographer but also frames the interests and beliefs of all three of the biographers analyzed here.

Indeed, *Speak, Memory* was thought by Nabokov to be such a definitive representation of his life that he even argued with family members who contested the accuracy of certain details. Although he eventually conceded that some of them may be inaccurate, by privileging his memory above others', and by being initially unwilling to admit that no memory is perfect, Nabokov once again displays the side of his view of authorship that returns the author to his position as the dominant figure in literary studies. Field's disagreement, then, represents each biographer's attempt to reveal or establish an unauthorized identity of Nabokov that takes back control over biographical representation. Additionally, and more provocatively, Field places his own interests and beliefs as a biographer on par with the factual sufficiency to the life of his subject as a criterion of biographical authority. This placement exemplifies the new, dialogic, and

somewhat paradoxical methodologies of literary biography produced by poststructuralism and the displacement of the author writ large.

All three of Nabokov's biographers, Field, Brian Boyd, and Pitzer, encountered the author as students through his work, experiences that would determine how they define their relationships to him, how their biographical methodologies map onto his contradictory view of authorship, and the purposes of their biographies to reveal or establish a "sufficient" account of Nabokov's life. Additionally, how they come to define their relationships to the author overarching forms, whether they know it or not, the relationships among their own biographical projects. I have mentioned that Field wrote his dissertation on Nabokov. Boyd, Nabokov's second biographer, reveals more about his first exposure to the author in *Stalking Nabokov*, an omnibus of reflections on his career as a Nabokov scholar. Recalling his excitement over his discovery of the author, he writes, "I read [. . . *Pale Fire*, Nabokov's fifth English novel] with more enchantment and exhilaration than anything I had ever encountered—and I still regularly recall that sense of explosive discovery and vivid magic when I think of the best in Nabokov" (20). And later in his life, he recalls his increasingly long assignments as a student on the author: "I wrote an essay on Nabokov in my first year at university, when I was seventeen, and then an MA thesis and a doctoral dissertation" (9). Pitzer, in the Introduction to *The Secret History of Vladimir Nabokov*, her biography on the author, shares Boyd's excitement over Nabokov's writing: "Many writers, myself included, would weep with gratitude to have written those four sentences [from *Glory*, one of Nabokov's Russian novels], just half a paragraph in a throwaway scene from one of Nabokov's least famous books" (xi).

Nabokov's biographers' fascination with his work as students initially subordinates them to the author's authority and romanticization as genius, the pre-poststructuralist view of authorship. Substantiating Nadel's definition of biography as a medium that inevitably includes the narrative of the biographer, however, Field, Boyd, and Pitzer inevitably depart from their positions as students, becoming instead "authors" of their own autobiographical narratives and authors of Nabokov's biographical representation. The poststructuralist influence on the methodologies of these "texts" places them in competition not only with Nabokov but also with one another.

In his biography, Field immediately aligns himself with Nabokov's attitude towards the genre: "I do not like biographies and in past years read very few of them, though by now I can pretend to some expert knowledge of the sorry genre. Nabokov does not like biographies either, and, when he taught, he used to refer to them as psychoplagiarisms" (*His Life in Part* 6). By doing this, Field elevates his status from biographer to equal, establishing his own authorial identity alongside Nabokov's in order to promote an image of himself as an equal artist, an agenda that will shape the rest of his biography. Notwithstanding the fact that it was published nine years after *His Life in Part* (Boyd, *The American Years* 619), Field's next book on Nabokov, *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*, a combination and expansion of *Nabokov: His Life in Art*—a critical monograph on the author's collected works heavily informed by biographical context—and *His Life in Part*, more clearly describes how he will achieve this image: "There are grounds to suppose that Nabokov never intended that the details of his life be known. It is the purpose of this book to describe that secret life" (3). Field, then, not unlike what

Nabokov does in his own works, will use the artistry of language and its capacity for interpretation, the first of three alternative arenas of textual authority opened up by poststructuralist destabilization of the author, to reveal this “secret life,” thereby establishing him as an equally talented artist, the source of his biographical authority. Ironically, what will upset Nabokov is that Field reveals this life by artistically reordering facts and presenting patently false rumors as true, the very opposite of a “wholly sufficient factual account.”

Boyd, Nabokov’s second biographer, takes Field to task for the errors in which his artistic rendering resulted. Relating his relationship with Vera during the construction of his biography, Boyd explains, “She and Nabokov had been badly hurt by their experience with Andrew Field, whose biography of Nabokov had been riddled with envious rivalry, wild guesses, and astonishing errors” (*Stalking Nabokov* 12). Boyd’s actual description of his biographical approach to Nabokov and *Speak, Memory*, however, somewhat belies his sternness:

I adopted two different solutions to the problem: first, to interpret *Speak, Memory* as a work of art—and to show how the artistry, the transforming imagination of the writer, in fact can reveal *more* about Nabokov than a more direct transcription from life would do; and, second, to ferret out those direct transcriptions, the raw facts behind the art, the things that Nabokov would rather we didn’t know. (13)

Boyd’s first solution for dealing with *Speak, Memory*, that “artistry . . . in fact can reveal *more* about Nabokov than a more direct transcription from life would do,” is nearly identical to the statement of Field’s biographical interest in *His Life in Part*: “The most

important things I know and wish to convey about the Nabokov family are the very things which are impossible to prove or even state with any precision” (63). And his second solution, to reveal facts about Nabokov’s life that he would not want people to know, evokes Field’s statement of his biographical purpose in *The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov*: “There are grounds to suppose that Nabokov never intended that the details of his life be known. It is the purpose of this book to describe that secret life.” By treating *Speak, Memory* as a work of art and as more of a literary than an autobiographical resource for the biographer, Boyd approaches Nabokov’s account of his life with the same skepticism as Field.

Whereas Field establishes his authority as a biographer by destabilizing facticity to prove his artistic equality and create a representation of Nabokov’s life that is unauthorized by the author, though, Boyd purportedly uses the art behind facticity only insofar as it allows him to establish his biographical authority by constructing a reparative biography of Nabokov’s reputation of being only a gifted stylist. In Chapter 1 of *Stalking Nabokov*, Boyd describes the common perception of the author when he began writing his biography: “Nabokov was widely accepted as one of the great stylists of all time but many thought him rather heartless, with nothing to say, only a brilliant way of saying it. For me, that was quite wrong” (10). In attempting to repair Nabokov’s reputation, however, Boyd’s biographical project is similar to Field’s in more than just its treatment of *Speak, Memory*. Both biographers promote representations of Nabokov as an artist fascinated by the possibilities and effects of language. The key difference between them is that Boyd—unlike Field, who sees Nabokov as only an artist—seeks to redefine

the author's image as an artist who also speaks about moral concerns to his audience, who has a heart and something to say beyond his style. While this is a significant difference from Field's image of Nabokov, Boyd's attempt to redefine the author's authorial concerns is nonetheless an interpretive representation of Nabokov's life.

In the same way that Boyd's representation parallels the artistry of Field's, Boyd also serves, more than chronologically, as a mediatory figure to Pitzer. She, like Boyd, expresses a desire to see Nabokov's reputation as only a gifted stylist repaired. This desire, though, did not come to her immediately. Recalling her first exposure to Nabokov, Pitzer writes, "I came to [. . . him] as a college student and found myself put off by the abuse he heaped on his characters. . . . I wanted some sense from Nabokov that . . . his characters had something to offer beyond their unblinking submission to his stylistic gifts" (x). "The more Nabokov [. . . she] read as an adult," she admits, though, "the more [. . . she] began to suspect that what [. . . she] had longed for at eighteen was in there somewhere" (x-xi). What was "there," and what Pitzer argues throughout her biography, is that Nabokov's works are filled with hidden references to the violent historical events of the twentieth century that are unrecognized by a general audience—the "secret history" referenced in the title. "[B]y losing the particulars of that violence and that history," she argues, "the ways in which these events made their way into his stories have often also been lost. And a whole layer of meaning in his work has vanished" (xii). While Pitzer's desire for Nabokov's characters to have "something to offer beyond their unblinking submission to his stylistic gifts" is akin to Boyd's representation of Nabokov as an artist with moral concerns, her illumination of the historical events in the author's



works actually broadens the biographical project established by Boyd in the same way that he broadens Field's. Pitzer's biographical project attempts to represent Nabokov as an artist who is also concerned with history.

Ultimately, all three biographers seek to reveal or establish an unknown or secret identity of Nabokov that not only competes for control over the author's biographical representation but also, because of their interrelatedness, compete with one another for control over biographical authority. Ironically, in a 1966 interview published in *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Nabokov was asked about the possibilities of literary biography. His response not only is characteristic of his attitude towards the genre but also foresees the interaction of these biographies: "Sometimes the thing becomes a kind of double paper chase: first, the biographer pursues his quarry through letters and diaries, and across the bogs of conjecture, and then a rival authority pursues the muddy biographer" (Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* 67).

## TAMPERING WITH LIVES: FIELD'S, BOYD'S, AND PITZER'S BIOGRAPHIES OF NABOKOV

In 1968 Field began writing his biography of Nabokov. Even though Vera had told Field that her husband “could not imagine anyone else whom he would want to accept as his biographer” (Boyd, *The American Years* 532),<sup>3</sup> by 1971 their relationship began to become strained. Field had been interviewing Nabokov’s family and friends, a method that, though common among biographers, Nabokov found intrusive. Field quickly apologized in a letter only for a more significant strain to occur a year later when he discovered a reporter’s notes about him in a file for *Time*’s cover story on Nabokov.<sup>4</sup> Unused in the printed article, they document an interview with the author in which he says that he is withholding his Cornell lectures from Field, “however much [. . . he] may want them” (604). The reporter’s notes continue, “Field . . . appears to have settled on Nabokov for his life’s work. Nabokov may know a Quilty when he sees one” (604). This time their positions were reversed. Field reacted extremely (580-82), eschewing the author as a source of information in order to prove that he was “his own man” (604). The allusion to *Lolita*, in which Humbert Humbert, on the road with the titular character, begins to imagine Clare Quilty as “another Humbert” (Nabokov, *Lolita* 217),<sup>5</sup> degrades

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<sup>3</sup>. This source is not the original.

<sup>4</sup>. *Time*’s cover story was published three years earlier, in 1969.

<sup>5</sup>. For a compelling analysis of this merging between Humbert and Quilty, see “Chapter Three” of Benjamin Widiss’ book *Obscure Invitations: The Persistence of the Author in Twentieth-Century American Literature*.

Field's identity as an artist by relegating him to the rank of an inferior doppelgänger. He is no longer a "[I]ittle Nabokov" or "not immune" to the author's style—as some critics would call him—which at least, to some extent, portrays him as a student. This comparison, more than Nabokov's withholding information or the *Time* reporter's generalization of Field's then life work, seems to be the root cause of his turn away from the author as a source of information. While Field's behavior is not fully explainable since numerous scholars have made careers out of studying only one author, the causes of it are certainly more complex than simply being offended by a reporter's generalization. Practically, his behavior is a reaction to Nabokov's repeated obstruction of his biographical investigations. More theoretically, Field's behavior is a struggle to achieve his artistic ambitions with a poststructuralist methodology in a genre dominated by the author as subject.

In no place are these ambitions clearer than in Field's *His Life in Art*. In the forward to it, Field, enumerating unusual features of the book, declares that it is of an "innovatory nature as a work of criticism: it is *formal*, that is, it is structured in a way roughly corresponding to that of the narrative in fiction" (6). He then proceeds to set his own standard of artistic success, claiming, "The book is successful if the reader senses the harmony between *what* is said, *where* it is said, and *how* it is said. Only in an effort to satisfy all these conditions of content, form, and style, respectively, can literary criticism aspire to be considered an art in any rigorous sense of the term" (6-7). For Field artistry is determined by the ordering of narrative, a technique of fiction that guides the construction of *His Life in Art*, which begins in the "middle" of Nabokov's works with an

analysis of “Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable” (“Pushkin, or the True and the Probable”). More significantly, by aspiring to have literary criticism seen as art, Field defines the critic, or in the case of biography, the biographer, as an aspiring artist and competitor of the object of the critic’s explication. Indeed, these attitudes are seen in *His Life in Part*. Divided into seven non-chronological chapters, its narrative is interjected with dialogue among Nabokov, Field, and occasionally Vera. This view of criticism/biography as art is corroborated by the reviews of *His Life in Part*. In *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Beverly Lyon Clark writes, “Field does well when he shows the biography in process, the relativity of biography, and incorporates Nabokov’s Ada-like comments on what [he,] Field[,] has written” (175).<sup>6</sup> Leon Edel, the famed biographer of Henry James, is more explicit in a blurb for the dust jacket of the first edition of the biography: “Field has found a delightful many-voiced form in order to cope with the interrupting and talkative Nabokov . . . When a biography is as inventive as this one, we may certainly call it a work of art.” The most positive review, though, is in *World Literature Today*. In it Roland Christ writes, “For the art of biography, *Nabokov: His Life in Part* constitutes an important formal invention: a way to write about a living person and to incorporate that person’s running commentary on his past into the biographer’s exposition while also incorporating dissenting, amplifying voices” (293). Christ proclaims, “his invention of a form for biography . . . is major” (293).

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<sup>6</sup> Clark is referring to *Ada or Ador: A Family Chronicle*, Nabokov’s sixth English novel.

While ordering his biography with a convention of fiction, and the multi-voiced impression which resulted from it, gave Field the artistic independence that he desired, it still paradoxically subordinated him to Nabokov. For every positive comment by a reviewer, there is one that pejoratively compares Field's writing style to Nabokov's. In *The Sewanee Review*, Kenneth Cherry, listing the limitations under which Field worked during the construction of his biography, calls him a "Little Nabokov" (cii). Clark is less pejorative, qualifying the similarities between Field's and Nabokov's styles as a hazard of the biographer's job: "One of the dangers of writing about Nabokov . . . is the temptation to write like him, and Field is not immune" (175). The diminishment of Field's accomplishments as an artist by comparisons of his style to Nabokov's recalls the initial comment by the reporter from *Time*—"Nabokov may know a Quilty when he sees one"—that caused Field to eschew the author as a source of information.

Although the decision to eschew Nabokov as a source of information resulted in numerous errors (Boyd, *The American Years* 614-619), to view Field's behavior as only a petulant reaction to a reporter's comment overlooks the theoretical value of the relationship between biographer and subject. Most of all, it overlooks Nabokov's role in the clash and the significance of the reaction; it is more productive to view Field's reaction as a response to Nabokov's attempts to control the biography or, failing that, to subvert Field's control over his representation. The first example of this subversion occurs almost immediately in *Life in Part*. During the two months that Field spent with Nabokov constructing his biography, Field recounts a Sunday on which they dined in Nabokov's hotel, reporting, "Nabokov fell behind to ask me in a lowered stage voice not

to let him forget to tell me about his daughter and his previous wife afterwards” (10). Nabokov does not have a daughter or a previous wife, but the allure of this information, whether true or false, is exemplary of his attitude towards Field’s biography and the method with which he attempts to destabilize it. Discussing family matters three pages later, Nabokov uses the same method when replying to Field’s theory that he might be related to Tsar Alexander II: “As for the rumour that Nabokov’s father, the distinguished jurist V. D. Nabokov, might have been the illegitimate son of Tsar Alexander II, he was equivocal. At first he dismissed the topic out of hand, but then he said with a straight face: —Yes, sometimes I feel the blood of Peter the Great in me” (13). Field, even though he has had more access to Nabokov than any other writer, does not get Nabokov’s humor and earnestly believes that he has struck a revelatory piece of information. Although he later decides that “the case is closed, the truth of it is now unknowable; all the rest is gossip, the biographer’s Tenth Muse” (58), the allure of the possibility remains throughout the book.

Whereas in the previous examples Nabokov entices Field with misinformation, in the following ones he entices him by withholding information. In one of the biography’s interwoven snippets of conversation, Field attempts to dispel Nabokov’s belief that he is speaking into the tape recorder incorrectly, telling him, “You are very wrong,” to which Nabokov replies, “No, no, I am so careful. I am so careful that once or twice I was on the point of saying something really interesting and Nabokovian, and I stopped” (11). Nabokov’s humor is more obvious here; he uses the word *careful* to mean that he is careful to speak into the tape recorder and that he is careful not to say something “really

interesting and Nabokovian.” Still, by exhibiting awareness that his name has been converted into an adjective, he distinguishes between what he is saying and what he is expected to say as a famous author, further enticing Field by suggesting that he is on the precipice of revelation. Nabokov uses this method again in a letter to Field, assuring him that “his romantic life has been more extensive than any of his biographers have assumed” (27).

If Nabokov wants to unsettle Field’s claim to biographical authority and accuracy, Field himself cannot be judged innocent on this score. While he does protect his biography, he also co-opts it himself to fashion his own authorial identity as an artist. This process originates outside of *Life in Part*. As previously mentioned, in the preface to *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, published ten years before *Life in Part*, Field writes, “[the book] is structured in a way roughly corresponding to that of the narrative in fiction. . . . I have treated Nabokov’s novels, poems, stories, plays, and essays as characters in a novel, and each has its role and place carefully prefigured and integrated into the whole” (6). While the organization of *Life in Art* is appropriate for its critical subject matter, Field’s choice to arrange Nabokov’s works around the artistic template of the novel becomes more manipulative when the works are replaced with biographical details.

Field’s manipulation of Nabokov’s life is further seen in his conceptualization of truth. “Any given truth,” Field claims, “may stand very well by itself but be substantively modified upon being placed in proximity to another given truth, and even a statement which is patently false may more often than not involve capillary truths and histories which are interesting in their own right.” That is, Field believes that truth is relative and

is interested in ordering truths to produce the most interesting interpretation. Mapped onto his artistic ambitions, this means creating the most provocative narrative of Nabokov's life. This credo manifests itself throughout *Life in Part*. Immediately following its assertion, Field demonstrates a false statement's ability to "involve capillary truths and histories which are interesting in their own right," conceding that "[t]he story of the Jewish servants [told earlier in the book . . .] is nonsense, but it may reveal something about relations and family politics within the various branches of the Nabokov family," and later he abandons the burden of truth altogether, believing that "[t]he most important things [he] know[s] and wish[es] to convey about the Nabokov family are the very things which are impossible to prove or even state with any precision." Although *Life in Part* received mostly positive reviews at the time of its publication, a few critics did indirectly comment on the effects of Field's artistic ambitions. Wishing that the book had more insight, Ronald Christ writes, "Field's present book refuses to study the writer's life" (293), and Beverly Lyon Clark, echoing Christ, ambivalently states, "Field gives us the self-conscious biography" (175). Expectantly, Field's harshest criticism comes from Nabokov's "authoritative" biographer Brian Boyd fourteen years later: "One bizarre consequence of his ambition was that he confused disdain for mere accuracy with proof of artistry." In pursuit of his artistic ambitions, then, Field co-opts the biography from Nabokov by trivializing truth in service of interpretation.

As previously established in the introduction to Nabokov's biographers, Boyd shares to some extent Field's artistic representation of Nabokov but disagrees with its depiction of the author as an artist concerned with only the production of his art. One way



that Boyd corrects and broadens Field's representation is by interpreting Nabokov's works in service of his biographical project to persuade his readers to see Nabokov as an artist also concerned with moral issues. Although numerous places exist in Boyd's biography that demonstrate how he establishes his biographical authority by redefining Nabokov as an author concerned with substance, not just style (the biography is over 1300 pages long, comprising two volumes), the obvious beginning point for examination is the chapters of it that interpret *Lolita*, since that is the book through which most people were first exposed to Nabokov. (In fact, Pitzer mentions that *Lolita* "had managed to sell more copies in its first three weeks in America than any book since *Gone with the Wind*") (3). Boyd begins his reparative project almost immediately in these chapters. In section one, Boyd includes a quotation from the author when he was beginning to write the novel: "[I was] always ready to sacrifice purity of form to the exigencies of fantastic content, causing form to bulge and burst like a sponge-bag containing a small furious devil" (*The American Years* 228).<sup>7</sup>

By positioning this quotation at the beginning of the section on Nabokov's best known creative period, Boyd takes advantage of the biography's spatial arrangement to maximize the effect of his representation of the author as one concerned with substance. The quotation does a number of things to promote this image. Firstly, by describing Nabokov's sense of style as pure, it does not show Boyd to be hiding from the fact that Nabokov was highly conscious of style when he wrote. Secondly, Nabokov's willingness

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<sup>7</sup> The original source is *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, an expanded edition of the original autobiography including pictures.

to sacrifice the purity of his style to “the exigencies of fantastic content” displays the importance that he placed on style and substance (joined in the descriptor “fantastic”) respectively. Thirdly, and most importantly, Nabokov’s metaphor of form as a “sponge-bag” reveals what supporters of the author have always known, that Nabokov’s style is a vehicle by which the “furious devil” of his substance is delivered.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, the first section of Boyd’s biography is spent summarizing that substance, which is the surprising emotional depth of a man who loves a twelve-year-old girl. Boyd singles out the beginning of *Lolita* as exemplary of this depth, which is quoted here for convenience: “Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.” (Nabokov 1). About this beginning, Boyd writes, “Humbert invokes Lolita with a passion more appropriate to a lyric poem than to a novel” (228). This comparison of Humbert’s passion to a poetic genre once again links Nabokov’s style and substance. Still, for the persuasiveness of his argument, Boyd acknowledges the perception of Nabokov as a writer who was more concerned with style than substance: “Some readers worry about language that sounds so good: has Nabokov not sold off sense to the bawds of euphony?” (228). Providing an example of this argument, Boyd paraphrases Christopher Ricks correction “that in an English ‘t’ the tongue taps the alveolar ridge, not the teeth” (229), seeming to imply that Nabokov sacrificed an accurate description of pronunciation for alliteration. Boyd, however, counters that “that is precisely Nabokov’s

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<sup>8</sup> M Page Stegner also promotes this image of Nabokov in his book *Escape into Aesthetics: The Art of Vladimir Nabokov*.

point, and Humbert's: Lolita's name is not to be pronounced in the American manner, with a thick 'd' sound ('Low-leed-uh'), but Spanish style. Lolita was conceived on her parents' honeymoon in Vera Cruz: Dolores [Lolita's actual name] and her nickname are mementoes of two weeks in Mexico" (229).

Boyd's best example of Nabokov's style being in service of *Lolita's* themes is found at the end of section three. Examining Humbert's various strategies and tactics to manipulate the novel's jury and the reader's morality, and their effect on Lionel Trilling, a famous American literary critic, Boyd explains that "[b]y making it possible to see Humbert's story so much from Humbert's point of view, Nabokov warns us to recognize the power of the mind to rationalize away the harm it can cause" (232). Nabokov's style, then, becomes a linguistic representation of the mind's ability to rationalize away unpleasantness that parallels Humbert's own rationalizations for his behavior. Moreover, as Boyd explains a page later, Nabokov's style does not just parallel mental rationalization; it also instructs the reader on how to read (233). By creating a style that lures the reader into complicity with Humbert's thoughts and behavior, Nabokov demonstrates the danger of inattentive reading, a concern that, above all else, establishes him as an author who cares about his readers.

In fact, that Humbert is such a complex character, eliciting simultaneously disgust and sympathy in the reader, is evidence against the charge that Nabokov wrote *Lolita* solely as a testament to the amoral power of artistic creation with nothing meaningful to say. What Boyd argues in his biography is that the complicated characterization of Humbert in *Lolita* includes one of Nabokov's thematic concerns, the power of

consciousness. Boyd captures the beauty of this theme at the beginning of section five: “Humbert is a triumph of the imagination,” Boyd writes. “For all Humbert’s vices, Nabokov refuses to make him a subhuman ogre and even selects him to express his own positives: the inordinate riches of consciousness, the intensity of passion, the tenderness of the senses, the mind’s many-branched awareness within the moment” (234). Nabokov’s style, then, in addition to being instructive and a linguistic representation of the mind’s ability to rationalize, is also an articulation of the scope of consciousness.

Boyd argues that Nabokov’s characterization of *Lolita* is also in service of a greater theme. In section six, Boyd expresses his amazement at how many critics accept Humbert’s opinion of *Lolita* as ““a charming brat lifted from an ordinary existence only by the special brand of love”” (236).<sup>9</sup> Boyd disagrees, however, stating, “Such readings misconstrue *Lolita* only because they are accustomed to books that oversimplify life. Nabokov refuses: he creates a *Lolita* far more rounded and rich than that flat image—and allows even Humbert himself in the last third of the book to recognize that that portrait does her no justice” (236). Boyd’s interpretation that Humbert’s stylistic objectification of *Lolita* portrays her as “flat” and “does her no justice” further repairs Nabokov’s reputation as a heartless stylist by separating author from character. The failure of Humbert—whose stylistic defense of his actions drives the entire novel—to fully describe *Lolita*, and his awareness of it, consequently characterizes the author in the opposite. In this formulation, Boyd does not just represent Nabokov as an artist with a

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<sup>9</sup>. Boyd is quoting a description of *Lolita* from a letter to Nabokov.

heart and with something to say; he undercuts Field's belief that "proof of artistry" is a sufficient representation of a life at all. Ultimately, Boyd's interpretation of *Lolita* contributes to his biographical representation of Nabokov, not just an understanding of the novel.

Boyd's argument for Nabokov's characters possessing qualities that represent themes such as morality and the power of consciousness recalls Pitzer's initial complaint as a college student that she "wanted the events and the people in [. . . the author's] books to matter. [. . . She] wanted some sense from Nabokov that he loved what he had created, and that, on closer inspection, his characters had something to offer beyond their unblinking submission to his stylistic gifts" (xi). Beyond literary interpretation, Boyd proves that the opposite is in fact true by also providing biographical details that evidence Nabokov's "love" for his characters. Boyd reports that in a radio interview for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, Nabokov was asked who his favorite characters were. His reply, "Lolita, Pnin, and the father of the hero of *The Gift* – in this order," verifies the depth of Boyd's analysis of these characters. Although Pitzer would eventually come to see this depth as well, the image of him as an artist who also speaks about moral issues to an audience would not be enough for her. She would need to broaden a representation of Nabokov's life to include a historical context.

Pitzer starts this broadening in Chapter One of her biography by tracing the divergent yet intertwined lives of Nabokov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Russian novelist whose work is famous for, among other humanitarian interventions, exposing the severity of the Soviet Union prison system. Pitzer juxtaposes their thematic concerns to

initially accentuate the typical perception of Nabokov as historically removed. However, consistent with her biographical project, she turns on this expectation, stating, “What Solzhenitsyn—and the world—didn’t realize was that Nabokov had spent decades burying some of history’s darkest moments within the framework of his fiction” (18).

Pitzer elaborates on the layers in Nabokov’s writing later in her biography:

Nabokov deliberately crafted lush, unforgettable images and dramatic plots to allow his stories to function on a surface level as literature independent of the time and place in which they were set. And that is how many readers, sometimes even careful readers, read them, rarely noticing the other stories waiting underneath, or the supporting role Nabokov gave history in sparking madness and violence in his characters. (222)

Nonetheless, in “Chapter Three: War,” Pitzer firmly establishes the cause of this historical presence as the violence that Nabokov witnessed as a child. Surveying the horrors of Revolutionary Russia, she concludes the chapter: “the violence of the world and the search to escape it would soon become a theme in Nabokov’s life and a dominant feature of his work” (64). Pitzer illuminates, in particular, the representation of labor camps in the author’s fiction. “As an adult,” she writes, “Nabokov would refer to the ‘regime of bloodshed, concentration camps, and hostages’ that followed on the heels of the Bolshevik takeover. He would consistently lay responsibility for the first post-Revolutionary camps at the feet of Lenin, and in one form or another they would haunt his writing for the next five decades” (63). Indeed, two chapters later, Pitzer provides a summary of these representations in Nabokov’s early novels:

In *Mary*, Nabokov had nodded toward an absent love living through ‘years of horror’ in the Soviet Union. In *The Defense*, he had mentioned penal servitude, torture, and hard labor camps, but without specifics. In *Glory*, he has Martin [the novel’s protagonist] briefly imagine himself escaping from labor camps, but only in passing. Concentration camps had started to cast a pall over Nabokov’s novels, just as they were continuing to expand into his century, but they had only begun to shadow his own life. (101)

In addition to labor camps, Pitzer also illuminates the presence of the Nazi surveillance state in Nabokov’s novels. Describing the political climate in which he wrote *Invitation to a Beheading*, several days of arrests and assassinations, Pitzer marks the thematic emergence of this historical moment:

*Invitation to a Beheading*, like *Despair* and *The Gift*, marked Nabokov’s third novel in a row with a key character imprisoned not for his deeds but his thoughts, his words, or his identity. The imprisoned characters’ stories ranged from pure history to pure invention, but refracting the madness of the police state, Nabokov was in the throes of a new theme, and he would spend many more years devoted to it. (121)

Although these examples of the influence of historical events on Nabokov’s novels are insightful, the escapism and paradoxical preservation of history through art that Pitzer identifies as themes in the author’s work are more significant features of her biography. They become, not unlike Field’s and Boyd’s, Pitzer’s own interpretive representation of the author’s life and work that informs the rest of her biography. Two

chapters later, plotting the artistic growth of Nabokov as seen through his first completed novel *Mary*, she writes, “If *Mary* showed Nabokov looking to the East [the novel is set in Germany, where many émigrés settled] wondering if everything that had been lost might be recovered, he was suggesting it could happen, but only through art and memory—never in life” (95). Pitzer’s interpretation of *Mary* determines the function of Nabokov’s writing as a way back to the home that he lost due to political upheaval. This interpretation not only places Nabokov’s life in a broader historical context, but it also personalizes his writing, adding another dimension to Nabokov’s “heart” as an artist. Pitzer more precisely articulates this relationship between Nabokov and his writing by comparing the author to his character Martin, who also fled Russia: “Like Nabokov himself, Martin tries to use longing to create an artistic experience from historical exigencies, refusing to serve or engage on anyone’s terms but his own” (101).

Towards the end of her biography, Pitzer returns to the seeming contrast between Nabokov’s and Solzhenitsyn’s artistic projects. After being released from a Soviet prison, Solzhenitsyn read the works of his fellow émigrés while traveling abroad. He was shocked, Pitzer relates, to discover that none of them seemed concerned with the history or fate of Russia: “‘They wrote as if there had been no Revolution in Russia, or as if it were too complex to explain.’ The most important events of their lifetime had gone unrecorded. They had ignored the suffering of their own people. Nothing they had written would save Russia” (229). By attributing this sentiment to Solzhenitsyn, Pitzer also attributes it to Nabokov through her intentionally unlikely comparison of the two authors’ themes at the beginning of her biography. This attribution to Nabokov not only places



him in a broader historical context, but it also represents him as a preserver of that history and a political advocate. Additionally, Pitzer's displacement of Nabokov's biography onto the events of the twentieth century parallels the poststructuralist destabilization of the author.

## **“THE SORRY GENRE”: THE NEW RELEVANCY OF THE “AUTHOR’S LIFE, PERSONALITY, AND INTENTIONS”**

Although critical theory of the twentieth century negatively influenced the current scholarly attitude towards literary biography, ironically, it also to some extent restored the genre’s relevance to literary studies by enabling new ways of representing the biographical subject. These new ways, however, have not, at least in this paper, moved us much closer to determining the differences between literary biography and non-literary biography. In fact, because these new ways of representing the subject are roughly correlated to alternate arenas of textual authority opened up by the poststructuralist destabilization of the author, they actually may resist yielding insights about non-literary biography. Nonetheless, the dominant difference between the two seems to be that in literary biographies, the biographers establish their own authorial identities and biographical authority by creating in many cases unauthorized representations of their subjects through writing, the very medium of the subjects themselves. While this transformation of the genre into a dialogic space defies the traditional convention of biographies to present a definitive chronicle of a subject’s life, it, unexpectedly, resurrects the author in different ways that all depend on different aspects of his work.

Unlike Boyd’s and Pitzer’s biographical projects on repairing Nabokov’s reputation, the relationships among biographer, biographical representation, and authorial works demonstrated in this paper only go so far in restoring literary biography’s relevancy to literary studies. Unfortunately, Linda Leavell’s pronouncement, that “[c]ritical theory of the past century has generally deemed an author’s life, personality,

and intentions irrelevant to the text,” for the most part, still remains true. This is in despite the fact that biographies, including literary biographies, are one of the best-selling categories of books, increasing 77% between 2002 and 2010 (*Bowker*). Although this statistic does not prove the relevancy of an author’s life to a text, it does indicate that for many people, the author’s life, or at least the lives of others, is still extremely relevant to their definition of material culture. Perhaps further research into this division between the Academy and the popular literary marketplace could not only resurrect the author from her poststructuralist death but also once doing so more precisely determine her role in material culture. Indeed, the need for precision of the author’s location in an era of destabilized meaning is greater than ever, an exigency exemplified in Nabokov’s description of his authorial self in *The Eye*: “For I do not exist: there exist but the thousands of mirrors that reflect me. With every acquaintance I make, the population of phantoms resembling me increases. Somewhere they live, somewhere they multiply. I alone do not exist” (103).

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