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UNRELIABLE NARRATORS AND GROUPIE FICTION

Abstract: Danilo Kiš's "Crvene marke s likom Lenjina" has received comparatively scant critical attention. This essay takes another look at the story, focusing on its literary genealogy. Examined in the context of Henry James's "The Aspern Papers" and Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, Kiš's brief story reveals a complex of concerns connected to questions of the interpretation and ownership of literary texts and their ability to escape the constraints of literary criticism and critics.

Keywords: Danilo Kiš, Vladimir Nabokov, Henry James, "death of the author", reader response criticism, literary biography, literary hoaxes.

"Crvene marke s likom Lenjina" ("Red Stamps with Lenin's Picture") is the final story in Danilo Kiš's celebrated collection entitled *Enciklopedija mrtvih* (*The Encyclopedia of the Dead*).¹ As this was the last fictional work Kiš published before his untimely death in 1989, the story can be considered his valedictory work. For all that, however, it has not received a great deal of critical attention. In this essay, I propose to take another look at the "Red Stamps". Focusing particularly on its somewhat unexpected literary genealogy, I will argue that this brief work packs a complex literary punch

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¹ Danilo Kiš (1935–1989) was the most important writer of post-war Yugoslavia. Born to a Hungarian Jewish father and Montenegrin mother, Kiš barely survived World War II (his father perished in the Nazi camps). Having graduated in comparative literature from the University of Belgrade in 1958, he embarked on a literary career, publishing a series of brilliant novels in the course of the 1960s. Perhaps his best-known work is *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, subtitled "seven chapters of a single novella", published in 1976.

that was important at the time it was written and is perhaps even more relevant today.

The story takes the form of a letter, purportedly written to a literary critic concerned with a Soviet-era Yiddish-language poet named Mendel Osipovich, who apparently perished in the purges of Soviet Yiddish cultural figures of the early 1950s.² From the context, it appears that the critic had recently (presumably sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s) given a lecture in Paris at which he expressed the hope that letters written by the great poet might still be extant and could eventually surface, thereby throwing important light on his life and work. The letter's writer informs him that she had been in the audience and proposes to clear up the mystery of the missing correspondence. She tells him that she was Mendel Osipovich's long-time semi-clandestine lover, and her letter describes their fateful affair, from its inception in Russian émigré circles in Paris in the 1920s, through its continuation over many years in the USSR. Along the way, the writer deploys her intimate knowledge of Osipovich's life to undermine accepted critical readings of the great man's oeuvre and to provide alternative readings. Finally, she discloses that after having discovered that Osipovich was corresponding with his Russian-language translator about his poetry (which the narrator believed belonged solely to herself) she destroyed all of their correspondence. Therefore, she tells the critic, he is wrong to believe that any further material related to Osipovich will see the light of day.

Following the narrative techniques Kiš developed in *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, the story does not describe any actual Soviet writer, but it does employ sufficient realistic context to create an aura of documentary believability. Critics have noted that the Jewish background and the great poet's initials hint at a connection to the most celebrated poetic victim of the Gulag, Osip Mandelstam.³ But, of course, Mandelstam did not write in Yiddish and he perished well before the purges of Jewish writers in the early 1950s. In my view, however, the actual writers whose biographies Kiš used to create the composite figure of Mendel Osipovich are not particularly important. Instead, I am concerned with where he came up with the idea to create such a story and what he might have meant to say by so doing.

² For more on this chapter of Soviet history, see Estraiikh.

³ See for example Thompson, p. 289, note 114.

Rather than focusing on the identity and work of the poet, we should pay attention to the other protagonists of the story: the letter writer and the critic. To be sure, we do not know a great deal about either of them but let us review what we can glean from the text. Turning to the latter, we learn from the letter that his lecture concerned not the literary work of M.O. but rather a collection of letters that, purportedly, was published by the famous Russian émigré firm Chekhov House, a collection he suspects to be incomplete.⁴ According to the paraphrase provided by the letter writer, he believes it is likely that some individual “drži ključeve tajne,” (holds the keys to the secret) and might someday be found (Kiš 2004: 156).⁵ Presumably, although this is not stated overtly, he is the type of critic who thinks that an important tool for understanding a writer’s oeuvre is an analysis of the paratexts of letters and other extra-literary material.

Regarding the letter writer, we know a bit more, although as she is the only speaker in the story, we have no independent way to verify her claims. Still, we can find many examples of her interpretive methods, which rely heavily on insider knowledge extrinsic to the literary text. In fact, she reads every poetic text as a straightforward transposition of life into art. Her *bête noire* is the invented literary critic Nina Rot-Swanson, who, in the absence of such data, apparently interprets the author’s work more universally and symbolically, often from a Freudian slant. Thus, for example, we read the following relatively early in the story: “U pesmi pod zagonetnim naslovom ‘Stelarni kanibalizam’ (T. 1, str. 42), ‘susret dve zvezde, dva bića,’ nije nikakav, ‘proizvod tesne saradnje između predpoznajne i nepoznajne aktivnosti’, kako to tvrdi gospođa Nina Rot-Swanson, nego pesnička transpozicija onog strujnog udara koji je potresao dušu Mendela Osipoviča u trenutku kada su naši pogledi sreli, tada, u redakciji *Ruskih zapisa* ... jednog sumornog novembarskog dana hiljadu devetsto dvadeset i druge” (156–57).⁶

⁴ Chekhov House was indeed an independent, New York-based publisher that specialized in Russian émigré literature and brought out more than one hundred titles between 1952 and 1957. It is typical of Kiš to refer to actual, plausible sources in order to give his invented stories and personages a ring of authenticity.

⁵ All further citations from the story will be made in the main text from this edition. Translations are mine.

⁶ “In the poem with the mysterious title ‘Stellar Cannibalism’ (vol. 1, p. 42), ‘the meeting of two stars, two beings’ is in no way ‘a function of the tight interaction of conscious and unconscious activity,’ as is claimed by Ms. Nina Rot-Swanson, but rather a poetic transposition of the incredible blow that shook Mendel Osipovich’s soul the moment

At first, the reader is inclined to take the letter writer's claims at face value. As the story continues, however, various red flags are raised until it becomes impossible to ascertain whether the narrator really did play a major role in the life of the great artist or is an obsessed fan, subject to self-deception or hallucinations regarding her role in his life. After all, is it plausible that the multi-year liaison she describes could have failed to attract the notice of critics and biographers of the poet? Do her highly narcissistic interpretations of the great man's poetry stand up to scrutiny? Perhaps we have to do here with a deluded groupie, who has rewritten the poet's life and interpreted his work to fit her picture of the world?

To get a clearer idea of what is at stake in "Red Stamps" and to appreciate both its debt to tradition and its originality, I suggest that we turn away from it for a moment and examine its genealogy. I propose to examine two texts in this regard, both from the Anglo-American tradition: Henry James's short story "The Aspern Papers" (1888) and Vladimir Nabokov's novel *Pale Fire* (1962). As we will see, what links all three works is the following:

- 1) A first-person narrator/literary critic is interested in the life and work of an invented and now dead writer.
- 2) He/she hopes to acquire or claims to possess unique materials that can provide first-hand knowledge of the writer's life and work.
- 3) He/she uses or hopes to use this esoteric knowledge to disparage the claims of other supposed experts on the subject.
- 4) As the work develops, the reader becomes skeptical of certain claims of the first-person narrator, who comes to seem increasingly unreliable.
- 5) By the end of study, the reader is unable to tell whether there is any truth to the claims made by the narrator and is unsure whether any insight has been acquired.

In its turn, this type of text harks back to two earlier literary strategies. The running commentary cum biography of a famous writer by a literary hanger-on has deep roots; an early and very well-known example in the Anglo-American tradition is Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson LL.D.*, based on extensive quotations written down during the period in which Boswell worked as Johnson's secretary. Another example dating well before our texts is Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe*, and such works continued to

our glances met in the offices of *Russian Notes* ... one cloudy November day in nineteen twenty-two."

be produced into the 20th century (the many volumes of Robert Craft's *Conversations with Stravinsky* come to mind in this context as well as *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov*).⁷ Of course, in these instances both the commentator and the subject were real persons who did in fact know each other, and it is generally accepted that at least some quotations and commentary are authentic. Nevertheless, reading works of this type, we cannot help but wonder how much of what is presented is the literal truth and how much is invented (a problem in the case of the autobiographical genre in toto, of course).

The creation of non-existent authors and literary works for the purposes of mystification has an equally long genealogy, harking back in the Anglo-American tradition at least to the "transcribed" verse of the alleged oral poet Ossian, which appeared in the early 1760s but were soon discovered to be a fraud perpetuated by James Macpherson, though in some cases based on authentic older material (among the fiercest debunkers of the work was none other than Samuel Johnson). In this type of work, the author and his/her texts turn out to be non-existent, but as a rule they are presented by a real editor (who in reality often turns out to be the actual author).⁸

Thus, the fictional works we will discuss here seem to be a combination of the hagiographic literary memoir and the literary mystification. Let us dip a bit deeper into them to see how our three authors handle this material.

The narrator of "The Aspern Papers" presents himself as an acolyte of an American poet named Jeffrey Aspern who is said to have died young, likely sometime in the 1830s. Writing in the 1880s, he presents himself as one of the leaders of a latter-day cult of the author. "The world, as I say, had recognized Jeffrey Aspern, but Cumnor and I had recognized him most. The multitude today flocked to his temple, but of that temple he and I regarded

⁷ Boswell's work was originally published in 1791 and is generally considered an exemplary work of literary biography. Johan Peter Eckermann's "Conversations" were published between 1836 and 1848. Robert Craft (1923–2015) "spent nearly a quarter-century as Stravinsky's amanuensis, rehearsal conductor, musical advisor, globe-trotting travelling companion and surrogate son." NY Times Obituary (Nov. 14, 2015) <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/15/arts/music/robert-craft-stravinsky-adviser-and-steward-dies-at-92.html> Of these figures Volkov is the most controversial. His book claimed to be a biography based on extensive conversations with the composer. It was denounced as a fraud by many musicologists but was endorsed by the composer's son Maxim.

⁸ For an interesting take on Ossian and his creator, see Schmitz.

ourselves as the ministers.” (James 2015: 4019).⁹ The approach that he and his co-editor take is purely biographical: “We held, justly as I think, that we had done more for his memory than anyone else, and we had done it by opening lights into his life” (4019). The question of why biographical information, “esoteric knowledge” as the narrator puts it at one point (4116) should be relevant to the appreciation of a poet is left unasked, let alone unanswered, and as opposed to the other two works we will consider here, “The Aspern Papers” does not quote a single line from the poet’s purported oeuvre.

As early as the first chapter we learn that the co-editors have discovered that although they believed that everyone who knew the poet had long since died, a certain Juliana Bordereau, supposedly a former lover and dedicatee of some of his work, is still alive, living in Venice and in possession of a cache of papers related to her connection with the poet in around 1825. The bulk of the story concerns the editor’s attempts to lay his hands on the precious papers, which Miss Bordereau shows no inclination to turn over. Aware of this, the editor is prepared to go to ethically questionable lengths to achieve his ends. As he notes to a friend in the first chapter: “Hypocrisy duplicity are my only chance. I am sorry for it, but for Jeffrey Aspern’s sake I would do worse still”¹⁰ (4033).

Using a false name and introducing himself as an American writer wishing to rent a suite of rooms in a Venetian palazzo with a garden, the editor introduces himself to Miss Bordereau’s niece Tita, who lives fully under the thumb of her somewhat terrifying aunt. Eventually, after painful negotiations (the editor finds it hard to imagine that his idol’s former lover could care so much about mere money), he agrees to rent rooms in the palazzo. Over the next months, he does his best to worm himself into the good graces of his landladies, congratulating himself that they do not suspect the real reason for his presence. As we read, however, we come to suspect that the narrator is not as clever as he thinks, and that the two women have guessed what he wants, and perhaps even who he is. The narrator tries in a variety of ways to become intimate with the ladies, asking leading questions of Tita, sending them endless flowers from garden he has renovated, and using his servants to try to worm information from their servants.

⁹ Further references to the story will be made in the main text by reference to the page number in this edition.

¹⁰ The underlying conceit of the story is based on an attempt in the late 1870s by an American by the name of Silsbee to purloin a cache of papers belonging to one Clair Clairmont (1798–1879), who had had an affair with Lord Byron and, possibly, with Shelley.

As time goes on, he becomes increasingly frustrated by his inability to make headway towards acquiring the desired papers. Despite his general obtuseness, he also begins to suspect that the two women have intuited his real reasons for being their tenant. The game of cat and mouse becomes more transparent one evening, when he finds Tita waiting for him in the garden and willing to converse in a much more open way than has been the case. He ventures to bring up his sacred subject with Tita, when she asks him what he does at night. "In general, before I go to sleep – very often in bed (it's a bad habit, but I confess to it), I read some great poet. In nine cases out of ten it's a volume of Jeffrey Aspern" (4164). Having noted that the poet is known to her and her aunt and hearing of the narrator's veneration of him she adds: 'My aunt used to know him – to know him' – she paused an instant and I wondered what she was going to say – 'to know him as a visitor'" (4166). This conversation at least in part blows the narrator's carefully created cover, but he continues to deceive himself as to the opacity of his intentions, thinking instead, "Miss Tita went away, toward the staircase, with the sense evidently that she had said too much" (4170). Moments later, however, he abandons all pretense regarding his intentions when in response to Tita's question, "Do you write about HIM – do you pry into his life?" he answers, "Yes, I have written about him and am looking for more material. In heaven's name have you got any?" (4173).

It is not clear whether Tita tells her aunt about their lodger's aims. She claims not to have done so, but there is no obvious reason to believe her. In any case, at this point Juliana asks to see the narrator and suggests that he take her niece out on the town. During this outing, the narrator tries to convince Tita to spirit the papers away from her aunt and let him examine them, as "they would be of such immense interest to the public, such immeasurable importance as a contribution to Jeffrey Aspern's history" (4216). He appears to care not at all for Juliana Bordereau and any squeamishness she might have in regard to the baring of her personal secrets.

The narrator begins to get into his head the idea that the best way to the papers might be through the affections of Tita, but it is in a conversation with Juliana that he first lays eyes on hard evidence that she does indeed possess at least some material related to Aspern. She unwraps a miniature portrait and asks how much it might sell for. The two of them pretend ignorance of each other's wiles: "At the first glance I recognized Jeffrey Aspern, and I was well aware that I flushed with the act. As she was watching me however, I had the consistency to exclaim, 'What a striking face! Do tell me who it is.'

‘It’s an old friend of mine, a very distinguished man of his day. He gave it to me himself, but I’m afraid to mention his name, lest you never should have heard of him, critic and historian as you are’ (4275–6).

Almost immediately after this conversation, Juliana Bordereau falls deathly ill. Assuming she is on her deathbed, the narrator finally unburdens himself to Tita, fully admitting his ulterior motives in coming to live in their palazzo. Now we discover just how far he is willing to go to possess the materials chronicling the relations between Juliana Bordereau and Jeffrey Aspern. As Juliana lies dying (so he thinks), he sneaks into her part of the house and focuses his gaze on a large antique secretary in the anteroom. He approaches it and touches the button that would open it. At that point he looks over his shoulder. “Miss Bordereau stood there in her nightdress, in the doorway of her room, watching me” (4307). “I turned, looking at her, she hissed out passionately, furiously: ‘Ah, you publishing scoundrel!’” (4308).

Although by all rights she should have died just at that moment, she fails to do so and the narrator, finally ashamed of his behaviour, flees Venice. Upon his return some days later, he discovers that Juliana has finally died. Now that she is dead, the narrator must decide how hard to push Tita to get the papers. He tries to decide what he would be willing to do. Become her guardian? Tita, however, has other ideas. She tells him that she rescued the papers from being burned by her aunt, but that she cannot show them to him. Instead, she gives him the miniature portrait of Jeffrey Aspern. But she hints that if he were to marry her then he would become a relative and she might then feel comfortable giving him access to the papers. Despite having spent so much time and effort on the chase, the narrator realizes that he has some scruples after all and finds himself unable to take this step. “I could not accept. I could not, for a bundle of tattered papers, marry a ridiculous, pathetic, provincial old woman” (4357).

By the next day, however, he decides that perhaps he can overcome his scruples and is ready to agree to the deal after all. But now it is too late. The devil’s bargain is no longer to be had. Miss Tita tells him that she has burned all of the papers, leaving our narrator in possession of the portrait but nothing else.

Of course, it is by no means clear that the story is as straightforward as the narrator tells it. He gives himself credit all along for his ability to deceive the two old ladies. But there is no reason to believe that they were in fact deceived. Perhaps they saw through him from the beginning, and the entire charade on their part was played in order to convince the duped narrator

first to pay an exorbitant rent and later to marry Tita and therefore provide for her future. Furthermore, there is no incontrovertible evidence that there were any papers to begin with. There was a portrait, to be sure, but it does not follow that there were papers. No one but Juliana ever touched them, and it is perfectly possible that they “existed” only to trap the foolish narrator, who escapes the fate of marrying Tita by the skin of his teeth.¹¹ And, more important, even if the papers had existed and even if he had been able to read them, what would they ultimately have told him and future generations that would have justified his sacrifices? Why do we (and the narrator) believe that evidence in the form of love letters between a poet and his muse can contribute anything to a writer’s real legacy: his/her literary work?

In *Pale Fire* Nabokov follows the same basic scheme that James provided in “The Aspern Papers.” Let us recall:

- 1) A first-person narrator/literary critic discusses the life and work of a non-existent and now dead writer.
- 2) He/she hopes to acquire or claims to have unique materials that can provide first-hand knowledge of the writer’s life and/or work.
- 3) He/she uses this esoteric knowledge to disparage the claims of other supposed experts on the subject.
- 4) As the work develops, the reader becomes skeptical of the claims of the first-person narrator, who comes to seem increasingly unreliable.
- 5) By the end of study, the reader is unable to tell whether there is any truth to the claims made by the narrator.

In this instance, the literary critic is one Charles Kinbote, who examines the life and work of the American poet John Shade. To be sure, Nabokov kicks the literary mystification up a few notches. As opposed to James, who does not give us even a word of Aspern’s poetry, Nabokov provides a 999-line poem by his invented American poet, which he surrounds with an introduction, extensive commentary and madcap index by Shade’s hanger on, erstwhile colleague and eventual editor. And Kinbote, unlike James’ narrator, claims to have had extensive contact with Shade, thus in a sense also playing the role taken by Juliana Bordereau.

While the reader of James’ story comes to recognize that the narrator is probably deluded as to the success of his ruse and even as to whether the famous papers ever existed, we do not question his basic sanity. In

¹¹ On this topic see Korg.

the case of *Pale Fire*, within a very few pages the reader realizes that the commentator and editor Kinbote is unreliable and quite possibly insane. The novel itself is a hall of mirrors and many interpretations regarding the relationship between or even existence of the supposed characters are possible. Indeed, an extraordinary amount of critical ink has been spilled trying to work out this relationship, but my reading of the novel follows the line of reasoning that suggests we are ultimately meant to understand Shade and Kinbote as separate personages, writer and editor, who function as a kind of photographic negative and positive (Shade, as his name indicates, is the austere negative to Kinbote's exuberant positive).¹² The central drama of the novel, from my perspective, is the radical incompatibility of Shade the person and poet we can discern between the lines of Kinbote's commentary and Shade the person and poet as Kinbote sees him. The slippage between these two images generates the novel's comedy and its tragedy.

Thus, as far as I am concerned, *Pale Fire* contains two writers: the first, the American poet John Shade, produces the poem "Pale Fire"; the second, the émigré professor Charles Kinbote, pens the introduction, the commentary, and the index.¹³ On this reading, Kinbote, a long-time fan of the poet, uses his position as a visiting professor at Wordsworth University to ingratiate himself with Shade. Shade finds Kinbote somewhat amusing, but his wife and colleagues dislike the émigré hanger-on intensely.¹⁴ Discovering that Shade is about to write a major poem, Kinbote decides to provide him with appropriate epic subject matter (the story of his alter ego Charles the Beloved, exiled King of Zembla), but Shade is completely oblivious to these attempts.¹⁵ Realizing that Shade is reaching the end of the project and already suspecting that he has failed to use the material

¹² For a comprehensive discussion of various theories about the internal logic of the novel, see Boyd.

¹³ References to the novel will be made in the main text by page number from this edition. Of course, both of these writers are produced by the master magician Nabokov, whose presence can be felt not just in the typical Nabokovian literary games and allusions scattered throughout the work but perhaps also in the epigraph, which stands outside both fictional writers' texts.

¹⁴ According to Kinbote's commentary, Sybil Shade calls him 'an elephantine tick; a king-sized botfly; a macaco worm; the monstrous parasite of a genius.'" (commentary to line 247), p. 545.

¹⁵ Alternatively, it is possible that both Kinbote and Charles the Beloved are both alter egos of one V. Botkin, an émigré professor at Wordsworth. For more on this possible reading, see Kaplan.

relating to Charles the Beloved and Zembla, Kinbote steals the manuscript and contrives to murder Shade.¹⁶ Having convinced Shade's widow that he is a hero rather than a murderer, Kinbote escapes with the manuscript and her agreement to edit and publish it. But, after having read the poem and realizing that it indeed does not contain any of the material he proposed, Kinbote is horrified. He composes his forward, commentary and index as a paratext to Shade's "Pale Fire," thereby allowing himself both to tell the story of Charles the Beloved in the commentary and to take his revenge on Shade's wife, whose evil machinations are adduced as the reason that story does not make it into Shade's poem.

We noted earlier that the roots of the critical problems tackled by these texts lie in two phenomena that surfaced in the British literary tradition in latter half of the 18th century: the celebrity literary memoir and the literary mystification/fraud. Perhaps we should not be too surprised then, to find that *Pale Fire* signals this genealogy to the attentive reader (Nabokov, of course, is past master at dropping such clues in his work). The novel's epigraph, which, as noted in footnote 12, cannot be ascribed to either Shade or Kinbote and seems to bear little relationship to anything that follows, is drawn from the aforementioned *Life of Johnson*, hinting perhaps at Kinbote's Boswellian pretensions.¹⁷ And, later in the novel, Kinbote alludes directly to what some

¹⁶ There are a number of references in the footnotes that allow us to suspect that, deluded as he may be, Kinbote begins to suspect, long before he actually has the chance to read the poem (which occurs only after Shade's murder), that the poet has not actually included the material about Zembla and Charles Xavier in the poem. We see it first in the note to line 12, where Kinbote says: "Many a time have I rebuked him in bantering fashion: 'You really should promise to use all that wonderful stuff, you bad gray poet, you'" (p. 214). His fears and suspicions, he further tells us "led me to indulge in an orgy of spying which no considerations of pride could stop" (note to lines 47-48, p. 257). Although the idea that Kinbote is actually Shade's murderer is not a standard interpretation, I am not the first reader to propose it (see, for example <https://blog.regehr.org/archives/154>). It should be noted, however, that my overall interpretation does not hinge on this claim.

¹⁷ The positioning of the epigraph is really worth considering. It appears immediately after the dedication page ("To Véra"), which is obviously the work of Nabokov, not Kinbote or Shade and before the table of contents. So, it appears clear that the epigraph has been selected by the author rather than by one of his narrators (in the Russian edition this is less obvious, due to the absence of the table of contents [Владимир Набоков. *Бледный огонь*. Trans. Vera Nabokova. Ardis, 1983]). It is also worth noting that Kinbote appears to recognize, if only dimly, his kinship to Boswell, remarking in his footnote to the poem's line 172, that he had noted down "a footnote from Boswell's *Life of Dr. Johnson*" (489). The Boswell/Johnson connection is further emphasized later in the commentary (note to line 894) when Kinbote reports a conversation in which Shade is said to have claimed: "I have

commentators (though not Nabokov, who actually translated the work into English) consider a paradigmatic example of Ossian-inspired literary mystification of the late 18th century, *The Lay of Prince Igor*.¹⁸

The editor of “The Aspern Papers” is convinced that the revelations hidden in the letters in Juliana Bordereau’s possession can provide valuable knowledge about the long-dead poet. Kinbote is sure that first-hand contact with Shade amplifies information derived from the literary text. In response to an unnamed critic who claims, “none can say how long John Shade planned his poem to be...”, Kinbote points first to internal textual evidence. “Nonsense again! Aside from the veritable clarion of internal evidence ringing throughout Canto Four,” but then adds, “there exists Sybil Shade’s affirmation (in a document dated July 25, 1959) that her husband ‘never intended to go beyond four parts.’” (24) This is precisely the type of extratextual documentary material that the standard literary biographer employs (and which, perhaps, James’ editor was seeking). But Kinbote takes this approach further, marshalling even less tangible evidence to clinch his argument: “For him the third canto was the penultimate one, and *thus I myself have heard him speak of it, in the course of a sunset ramble, when, as if thinking aloud, he reviewed the day’s work*” (25, italics mine). Needless to say, given Kinbote’s overall unreliability, the reader can be excused if he/she is skeptical towards this nugget of knowledge.

The futility of using extrinsic information to provide understanding of the literary work becomes ever more apparent as we read more deeply into the poem and its accompanying commentary. We see in multiple places just how absurd and misleading commentary based on Kinbote’s insider knowledge is. Perhaps the first such instance is in the commentary to the first canto, lines 34–35. In this section of the poem, recalling his childhood self, Shade describes the photographic memory that allowed him to store up images he would later turn into poetry: “My eyes were such that literally they / Took photographs. Whenever I’d permit, / Or, with a silent shiver, order it, / Whatever in my field of vision dwelt-- / An indoor scene, hickory

been said to resemble at least four people: Samuel Johnson ...” (852). For a discussion of the Boswellian elements of *Pale Fire* (but one that in my view misses their main point), see Stewart.

¹⁸ In a final aside to his commentary to line 681, Kinbote/Charles describes the lover of Zembla’s Queen Yaruga as “a poet of genius, said to have forged in his spare time a famous old Russian *chanson de geste*, generally attributed to an anonymous bard of the twelfth century” (785). For more on this topic see Meyer.

leaves, the svelte / Stiletto of a frozen stillicide / Was printed on my eyelid's nether side / Where it would tarry for an hour or two, / And while this lasted all I had to do / Was close my eyes to reproduce the leaves, / Or indoor scene, or trophies of the eaves" (81–82).

Kinbote's commentary shows no interest in the internal logic of the poet's lines. Rather, he attempts to demonstrate that the poet's thought should be understood as deriving from their biographical connection. He comments: "How persistently our poet evokes images of winter in the beginning of a poem which he started composing on a balmy summer night! The mechanism of the associations is easy to make out (glass leading to crystal and crystal to ice) but the prompter behind it retains his incognito. *One is too modest to suppose that the fact that the poet and his future commentator first met on a winter day somehow impinges on the actual season*"¹⁹ (228–229, italics mine).

From the above analysis, I hope it is clear that James' story and Nabokov's novel share non-trivial structural similarities with Kiš's "Red Stamps with Lenin's Portrait."²⁰ Now it is time to think about what the authors might have been trying to say by writing stories of this type.

Let us begin with James, who was not unaware of the lure and dangers of writing literary biography. He published a biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1879, and Gary Scharnhorst suggests that Hawthorne was the model for Jeffrey Aspern.²¹ This same critic claims that in writing the biography, James became "disturbed by the invasions of Hawthorne's privacy

¹⁹ Nabokov's own thinking on the folly of such critical approaches can be gleaned from his commentaries to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. In the very first note, discussing the novel's "master motto," which is said to have been taken from a "private letter," Nabokov opines: "It would be idle to speculate if that 'private letter' ever existed, and if it did to wonder who was its author; but for those who like to look for the actual models of fictional characters and who search for 'real life' in the dead ends of art, I have prepared a little line of sterile inquiry in *One*: xlvi : 5–7." Vol. 2, p. 5.

²⁰ I have no information that would indicate that Kiš consciously borrowed from the works I discuss here, but given his erudition and literary interests, it is very probable that he knew them both. However, his possible knowledge of these precursors is immaterial, as we are discussing a type of text, rather than attempting to prove literary influence. James and Nabokov are not generally considered particularly compatible literary bedfellows, though Owens-Murphy considers *The Turn of the Screw* and *Lolita* in a chapter devoted to unreliable narration (pp. 119–156), without mentioning either *Pale Fire* or "The Aspern Papers." Thompson compares Kiš's novel *Hourglass* to *Pale Fire* in passing (p. 153).

²¹ Other models for Aspern have also been proposed, including Byron and Shelley. On the connection with Hawthorne, see Scharnhorst.

– the ethical problem at issue in the *nouvelle* – some fifteen years *before* he heard the anecdote about Silsbee and Clair Clairmont” (Scharnhorst 1990: 212). Originally, these invasions of privacy were perpetrated by the author’s son Julian, but eventually the desire to know as much as possible about his subject appears to have rubbed off on James himself, who met specially with Julian in 1879 in order to “pump me on his biography of my father”, as Julian put it in his diary (qtd. Scharnhorst 1990: 213).²² Thus, on this understanding of the story, one can read in the obtuse and worshipful biographer of “The Aspern Papers” a kind of self-parody. And, as Scharnhorst points out at the end of his article, it is probably no coincidence that at the end of his life James burned all of his files, as part of an effort “to thwart his future biographer,” according to Leon Edel (qtd. Scharnhorst 1990: 217).

All this may well be true, but it still does not answer the question of what the story is actually about. In Scharnhorst’s reading, the central problem is one of ethics. What is a biographer permitted to do in order to find out about his subject? In my view, however, the problem should rather be seen as one of ontology. Although never asked directly, the question that comes to the fore is, supposing the editor were to have gotten a hold of the papers, what could he have actually learned? Certainly, we might have an extra factoid or two about the author’s life, but would that help to read his work, which, presumably is what readers actually care about? That is to say, “The Aspern Papers” encodes a critical insight for which Roland Barthes would be lauded almost a century later. In “La mort de l’auteur”, Barthes says: “Though the Author’s empire is still very powerful (recent criticism has often merely consolidated it), it is evident that for a long time now certain writers have attempted to topple it. In France, Mallarmé was doubtless the first to see and foresee in its full extent the necessity of substituting language itself for the man who hitherto was supposed to own it.” (Barthes 2021).

It follows that what the reader cares/should care about is not details of the writer’s life, but rather the literary text itself. The editor who narrates “The Aspern Papers” is, as it were, simply barking up the wrong tree in attempting to dig up a few more (inevitably extraneous) facts about the life

²² Perhaps the most memorable description of the problematic ethics involved in biography (literary biography in particular) can be found in an aside by Janet Malcolm: “The biographer at work, indeed, is like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away.” “The Silent Woman”, *The New Yorker*. August 23–30, 1993.

of Jeffrey Aspern.²³ And James himself, by burning his papers, indicated his understanding that material of this sort could only interfere with an appreciation of a writer's true legacy and was therefore best destroyed. To be sure, as a writer James did not pose and answer the question about the relationship of the author's life to his/her texts as rigorously as a critic like Barthes. Instead, through his own literary text he brought up the problem, hinting at the futility of the editor's quest and, by extension, of any such approach to understanding literature.

Nabokov also wants the reader to focus on the literary text itself. His approach is a bit roundabout, but it goes something like this: the more we recognize the comic inadequacy of the commentator, the more we are likely to turn our attention back to the original literary work that is being commented upon, in this case Shade's poem "Pale Fire". For Nabokov has more than an academic interest in our reading the poem carefully. We should keep in mind that while an American writer might consider being known as a great novelist the highest compliment, the Russian tradition holds poetry in higher esteem than fiction. Nabokov started his career as a poet and continued to write poetry in Russian and in English throughout his life. Indeed, from his perspective it was perhaps unfortunate that the renown of his novels far eclipsed that of his poetry. In *Pale Fire*, we can see Nabokov the poet taking typically Nabokovian revenge on those admirers who saw him exclusively as a fiction writer: on this reading, the prose apparatus provided by Kinbote is simply an elaborate packaging and frame for Shade's poem, which is what Nabokov really wants us to savor, and which we likely never would have swallowed had it been published as a stand-alone work of English-language poetry.²⁴

To be sure, it is hard to say that this ploy fully works. Kinbote's commentary is so over-the-top hilarious that the majority of readers end up focusing on it rather than on the poem, and as a result the novel can also

²³ In a punning coincidence that Nabokov would surely have appreciated had he known about it, Barthes' essay first appeared in a journal entitled *Aspen*, merely one letter off from Aspern. On the subject of the essay's initial publication, see Logie.

²⁴ Like Joseph Brodsky to follow, Nabokov believed Russian prosody, which continues to this day to favor metered and rhymed verse, to be far superior to the free verse favored by most American post-war poets. This preference has caused many American readers to find both Nabokov's and Brodsky's English-language verse mannered and a bit fusty. In 2011, however, a stand-alone version of the poem "Pale Fire" was published. In an amusing article Giles Harvey asks himself and other poets whether the poem is worth reading as a work in itself.

be read as an example of how the editorial and critical process can destroy a work of literature (and, perhaps, even the work's actual writer). On this view, Kinbote is the same kind of acolyte as the editor in James' story, and his ultimate goal is to usurp the author rather than illuminate his work. If James' story raises the question of "the death of the author" *avant la lettre* Nabokov's novel does this while simultaneously providing an equally *avant la lettre* parody of reader response theory, with the hypertrophic Kinbote acting as the kind of out-of-control interpreter only a mad reader-response critic could have loved.²⁵

So, what does Danilo Kiš add to story type produced by James and Nabokov? The same basic themes are present, after all, and the same questions are raised. Can material extrinsic to the literary text, particularly biographical material, provide us with an interpretive perspective that enhances our appreciation of the text? If not, why do we care so much about uncovering such material? And even when and if we uncover it, and even if it could provide insight, is it trustworthy? James raises these questions without providing any answers. Nabokov raises them and does, at least implicitly, let us know what he thinks. Kiš, I would argue, is both more explicit about what is at stake, and moves the discussion from the realm of irony, parody and farce to that of high tragedy.

Discussing *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, Mark Thompson notes: "The application of Borgesian technique to the Soviet system... was a superb invention. For other writers in Yugoslavia, where he was a cult author in the 1970s, Borges offered an escape from politicised realist conventions. For Kiš, he provided a means of writing *about* politics. In this way, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* pays creative homage to Borges while 'correcting' one of his faults." (Thompson 2013: 230–231). The story "Red Stamps with Lenin's Picture" did not appear in *A Tomb*, but it is the only story in Kiš's final collection *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* that could have been included in the

²⁵ If my reading which claims that Kinbote is actually Shade's murderer is correct, he can be said to have fully realized the "death of the author" metaphor. It is interesting to imagine what Nabokov, ensconced in Montreux, might have thought about the reader-response criticism of Hans Robert Jauss and Wolfgang Iser, which was developed in Konstanz, a mere three-hour drive away from his home, starting in the late 1960s. The phenomenon of a parody existing before the work (or type of work) that it is parodying has appeared is not unheard of. See, for example, Chekhov's parody of symbolist drama in *The Seagull*, written in 1895, well before any of the symbolist dramas parodied in Konstantin Treplev's terrible play had seen the light of day.

earlier work.²⁶ Like all the stories in *A Tomb* (and none in *The Encyclopedia*) “Red Stamps” creates the fictional, but entirely plausible and eminently tragic biographies of people caught up in and ultimately destroyed by the Stalinist system. The narration is buttressed by many references to real places and convincing, if invented, situations, along with liberal quotations from the supposed verse of Mendel Osipovich.²⁷

In his account of Kiš’s life and work, Thompson notes some biographical connections between the story and the author’s own life. And while it is true that his wife Mirjana destroyed their correspondence after their divorce in 1981, I think that in connecting “Red Stamps” too closely to the author, we risk falling into the same trap that ensnares the narrators of “The Aspern Papers,” *Pale Fire*, and “Red Stamps” itself: we begin to rely on extra-textual information to provide a supposedly unique and incontrovertible key to reading literary works and we fail to pay the necessary attention to the text itself. In this instance, Kiš provides plenty of clues to indicate that the biographical reading proposed by the unnamed narrator (and by extension to any biographically oriented reading) is untrustworthy. Indeed, although less extravagant than Kinbote, in her own way Kiš’s narrator seems an even less reliable interpreter. Kinbote hoped that Shade would write an epic poem about the adventures of Charles the Beloved, but when he reads the manuscript, he recognizes that Shade failed to do so. He attributes this failure to various external causes, but for the most part he recognizes that the final poem is not about him, even if he cannot help smuggling himself into the commentary. Kiš’s narrator, on the other hand, is a monomaniacal critic, who believes that Osipovich’s work is simply impossible to understand without a biographical lens. As she insists towards the end of her letter: “Ja,

²⁶ Indeed, I would argue that it should have been the final story of that “novella,” replacing the “Short Biography of A. A. Darmolatov”. Both stories concern the tragedy of the writer in the Stalinist world, a theme close to Kiš’s heart. But Darmolatov’s short biography is one of Kiš’s weaker works, while the much stronger “Red Stamps” does not fit well into the overall scheme of *The Encyclopedia*.

²⁷ There are a number of anomalies in the story, starting from the title. The stamps with Lenin’s picture were, presumably, on the envelopes of the letters that the narrator and Mendel Osipovich sent to each other while living in the USSR, but they do not make any appearance in the story other than in the title. The story itself is in Serbian, and the verse, which Osipovich apparently wrote in Yiddish, is also quoted in Serbian. It seems unlikely, however, that the story’s putative author and the critic are supposed to be perceived as South Slavs. The lecture which prompts the writing of the letter was given in Paris, likely in French (or maybe Russian) but almost certainly not in Yiddish or Serbian.

gospodine, jesam *delo* Mendela Osipoviča, kao što je i on moje delo” (167), (I, sir, am Mendel Osipovich’s work, just as he is mine). But precisely by insisting on reading the poet’s work solely in the context of his life (even assuming that her claims are true), she consigns it to inevitable death. The entire point of great literary works is that they can and must be read outside of the context in which they are written.²⁸ But in her view, without the biographical subtext the work is literally unreadable.

As Gordana Crnković notes, “In *The Anatomy Lesson*, Kiš rejects the critical practice that imprisons a work of literature within its immediate historical, national, or political context” (Crnković 2021: 164).²⁹ Attempting to remove “Red Stamps” from its immediate context is admittedly difficult. Like the stories in *A Tomb*, it unquestionably forms part of the “cenotaph” for the victims of the Stalinist period who lie moldering in unmarked graves throughout the world. At the same time, we would do well to recall that the penultimate story of that collection “Dogs and Books”, is set in 1330, a hint that there is unfortunately nothing unique about the Stalinist period. In this respect, *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* can be seen as a kind of mirror image of *A Tomb*. In that collection, 6 stories are firmly set in the Stalinist period, while “Dogs and Books” points outside the immediate context to more universal themes of misunderstanding, treachery, and self-deception. The stories in *The Encyclopedia*, on the other hand, are set in all over the world and at various times, with “Red Stamps” being the only story set in the East European Stalinist world of *A Tomb*. As such, it serves to indicate that the universal themes of love and death that dominate *The Encyclopedia* remain as important for the immediate past as they have always been.

In the story “Red Stamps” itself, this universality is hinted at in the epigraph: “Song of Songs 8:6.³⁰ In the King James translation, the verse reads: “Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love

²⁸ To be sure, this story implies that not every possible reading is legitimate. For while the letter writer’s interpretations seem overly biographical, the Freudian-inspired critiques of Nina Rot-Hanson, which she ridicules seem equally, if not more absurd. A distaste for cheap Freudian interpretations links Nabokov and Kiš.

²⁹ “The Anatomy Lesson” is a major critical essay that Kiš published in 1978.

³⁰ It is not clear whether we are supposed to understand the epigraph as part of the letter that makes up the story’s text or an interpolation by the critic who received the letter and has decided to publish it (the same can be said for the story’s title, by the way). According to the information provided by the letter writer, Osipovich translated “Song of Songs” in 1928 (though, presumably, into Yiddish, not Serbian). The ambiguous status of the epigraph is one more thing that connects Kiš’s story with *Pale Fire*.

is strong as death; jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire, which hath a most vehement flame.”³¹

Ultimately, the theme of jealous possession is what connects the works we have considered here. Jeffrey Aspern’s editor (and perhaps Julianna Bordereau) hope to control readers’ perceptions of the poet by through possession of knowledge unavailable to others. Kinbote needs to possess the manuscript of Shade’s poem so that as editor and commentator he can impose his narrow (not to mention insane and inadequate) interpretation on it. The unnamed narrator of Kiš’s story insists that her great love gives her the right to possess both the poet and his work. And yet, in each case, the literary work itself struggles against any attempt to possess and constrain it and points to a world beyond its immediate context. Though we never have the chance to read Aspern’s poetry, we recognize that whatever knowledge Julianna might have had has disappeared leaving only the verse behind. Kinbote has attempted to impose his story on top of Shade’s poem, but “Pale Fire” lives to tell its own story. The anonymous letter writer tries to force Osipovich’s poetry into a narrow interpretive box and the Stalinist regime kills its author. But these texts, and by extension any literary text, are wise and cunning. They elude attempts at critical control and point to knowledge and insights beyond what any individual reader, contemporary or otherwise, could imagine.

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³¹ <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/k/kjv/kjv-idx?type=DIV1&byte=2578814#:-:text=%5B1%5D%20The%20song%20of%20songs,love%20is%20better%20than%20wine.&text=%5B4%5D%20Draw%20me%2C%20we,wine%3A%20the%20upright%20love%20thee>

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Ендру Вахтел

НЕПОУЗДАНИ ПРИПОВЕДАЧ И ГРУПИ ФИКЦИЈА

Сажетак: Новела „Црвене марке с ликом Лењина” Данила Киша добила је релативно оскудну критичку пажњу. Рад пружа још један осврт на ову причу, усредсређујући се на њену књижевну генеологију. Посматрано у контексту „Аспернових рукописа” Хенрија Џејмса и романа *Бледа вајра* Владимира Набокова, Кишова кратка прича открива сложеност у вези са питањима тумачења и власништва књижевних текстова и њихове способности да избегну ограничења књижевне критике и критичара.

Кључне речи: Данило Киш, Владимир Набоков, Хенри Џејмс, „смрт аутора“, критика читалачког одзива, књижевна биографија, књижевне подвале.