

On the Dual “Defamiliarization” Method and Its Source in *Pale Fire*

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Nabokov believes that “art is a method by which the writer is able to cause a special aesthetic experience among the reader”; language, structure, style and other means of expression are always more important than the plot of the work. We can find a vivid embodiment of this creation view in *Pale Fire*. Because of the method “defamiliarization”, the aesthetics of the whole novel is expressed in three key steps: the introduction of poetic ambiguity on Shade’s poem; an explanation of poetic ambiguity by means of Kinbote’s commentary; regeneration of ambiguity through the suspension of Kinbote’s commentary from Shade’s poetic language. The artistic theme of ambiguity is a manifestation of the author’s hidden feelings for the homeland. Nabokov, as an expatriate Russian writer, is experiencing not only a deep relationship with his homeland, but also a sense of bitterness from being in exile. His impression and memories of hometown became the inspiration for creation.

Keywords: *Pale Fire*, Nabokov, “defamiliarization”, homeland

Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov is a Russian-American writer, translator and critic. The trajectory of his life and literary activity covered Russia-Western Europe-the United States. His unique life experience, together with the creation view, brought the world a number of engraved literary works. The *Pale Fire*, which is a masterpiece of formalism, remains one of the most difficult works of Nabokov. Boyd commented on *Pale Fire* as follows: “Nabokov’s most sophisticated work became a paradigm of literary elusiveness, an expression of obvious uncertainty” (Boyd, 1999, p. 3). But what is hidden behind these magnificent forms often went unnoticed. Therefore, this paper will try to analyse *Pale Fire* from the point of “defamiliarization”, and then explore its source.

The Dual “Defamiliarization” in *Pale Fire*

Pale Fire is the most complex work of Nabokov. This novel is unique in structure. The whole book consists of four parts: foreword, poem, commentary and index. Shade’s poem *Pale Fire* as the main part of the novel, which consists of 999 lines and double rhymes.

Once during the discussion on «Why Poetry Is Meaningful to Us», Shade fainted again, on the border between the world of flesh and the world of spirit, Shade seemed to find the key to all the secrets of the world—a

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white fountain. When Shade knew that a woman who almost died but was rescued, saw a white fountain like him. Shade thought the fountain was an index and sign that invited him to the border of mystery. He drove a few miles to visit this woman, but found that they have nothing to talk about because the “fountain” in the article was wrong printed of the word “mountain”. Shade got the enlightenment on his way home:

And stop investigating my abyss?
 But all at once it dawned on me that this
 Was the real point, the contrapuntal theme;
 Just this: not text, but texture; not the dream
 But a topsy-turvical coincidence,
 Not flimsy nonsense, but a web of sense. (Nabokov, 2011, p. 42)

When we read this stanza, we can tell the difference between poem and daily communication or novel, which lies in the periodic rhyme. For poem, rhyme is a symbol of poetic organisation. Semantics and logic in poem sometimes make a concession to the rhythm, and this is the method “defamiliarization” in poetic creation. Rhythm plays a decisive role in transmission of the poem’s connotation, and even “poetry” lurks in it. Shade sacrificed his life and talent for finding the meaning of life and death. Because of the description of Shade’s precinct journey into the afterlife, Nabokov introduced a fountain symbol, which is a metaphor for the meaning of life, something authentic compared to the illusion, present compared to fictional. Nabokov’s aesthetic concept indicates the presence of a binding element that connects two opposite principles, indicating the metaphysics of our coexistence in a limited habitat. Such a connecting element in the novel is the counterpoint, which unites the two main characters of the novel—Shade and Kinbote.

Another protagonist of the novel, Kinbote, he only knew Shade for a few months, but believes Shade is his intimate friend. After Shade’s death, he took over the work of editing and publishing the poem *Pale Fire* and wrote his own commentary to it.

Kinbote, tells another story about a northern kingdom called Zembla. In commentary, Kinbote associates himself with Charles II, flees from Zembla, changes his name and goes to the United States. Kinbote built his Zembla to free himself from the sense of loss that emerged from the loss of his homeland and life in exile. “Земля” means “land” in Russian, similar to the pronunciation of Zembla. Kinbote’s Zembla is also inextricably linked to Russia

As Kinbote wrote in commentary: “When I was a child, Russia enjoyed quite a vogue at the court of Zembla but that was a different Russia—a Russia that hated tyrants and Philistines, injustice and cruelty, the Russia of ladies and gentlemen and liberal aspirations”. (Nabokov, 2011, p. 227)

The stereotypical attitude to literature tells us that commentary on poem is an indispensable auxiliary tool for understanding poem. By evaluating the language characteristics and selection of poems or supplying corresponding life of the poet, commentary helps us enjoy the “circumlocutory” poems better. Kinbote is even recommended readers to read his commentary before the poem. When readers go further in *Pale Fire*, they will find the connection between commentary poem is illusory (Zheng, 2019, pp. 224-236).

As readers, we anticipate seeing the subtle beauty of literature at the intersection of these two texts. Shade’s poem is a complicated, distorted and “defamiliarization” text; and Kinbote’s commentary is in colloquialism should give us a clear picture of the poem; but when we combine them, we get an even vaguer text. When two

“authors” under Nabokov’s pen create two “texts” with dual “defamiliarization”, the aesthetics of the whole novel is realised in the process of introducing, explanation and regeneration of the ambiguity.

The Source of “Defamiliarization” in *Pale Fire*

Whether its poem or its confusing commentary, we clearly feel how the “method” works in *Pale Fire*. According to the Russian poet and critic Khodasevich: “Sirin is an artist who strives for form, and a writer who pays attention to the method. The reason Sirin doesn’t hide his method in the texts is that his main idea is to reveal the method” (Nabokov, 1997, p. 249). This so-called “revealing method” is a kind of “defamiliarization” method. Nabokov does not secretly guide readers during novel, but exposes all his artistic “traps” in front of them. Nabokov, as the author of the novel, always controls every part of his work to hide the real feelings under these “defamiliarization” and “revealing” methods.

Shade has an misfortuned fate with the metaphysical thinking about life, Kinbote has the loss of a fictional kingdom and a continuous change of residence and identity. They were intertwined with Nabokov’s own memories, which palely hints at his fate and homeland. Nabokov’s life path is divided into three parts by most researchers: Russian, European and American. For Nabokov, born and got education in Russia, because of the youth and the delicate care from the aristocratic family, the value of homeland was in the graceful dense fog for Nabokov during the Russian period. As a result of the Revolution, his family was forced to leave their homeland and go into exile, suffering without means of subsistence and getting daily news about the changing situation of Russia in expatriate area. The impression of the homeland became clear during the European period. The relative freedom, environmental stability, and he had been leaving hometown for 20 years, the impression and memories of the hometown, which gradually blurred, were important inspiration for creation in America undoubtedly. Impressions and feelings about the homeland, like in *Pale Fire*, are stretched in the process of introducing, explanation and regeneration of the ambiguity.

Conclusion

We can say this “defamiliarization” method and content arose from the fact of Nabokov’s exile and cultural conflict: he was always been at odds between Russian culture and foreign culture, in the confrontation between history and reality, past and present memory and oblivion, as well as in the rupture of identity and self-realisation. In such a confrontation and clash, Nabokov has always been in an “outsider” state, while striving for coexistence and constantly creating new meanings.

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