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Vladimir Nabokov as a Bridge between Modernism and Postmodernism

Abstract

This paper focuses on the main traits that make Nabokov be categorized as a modernist or a postmodernist writer. He would consider this categorization as of “no importance whatsoever in relation to the development of a writer’s talent” because as Nabokov continues “a group is always impressive to the historians of literature” but real literature in itself is a “product of individuals, not groups” (Nabokov, 1975). In fact, there has not been a discussion whether Nabokov should be labeled as a modernist or a postmodernist due to the variety of opinions by Nabokovians. It seems like his prophecy that he would never be categorized according to a certain literary school because art doesn’t know boundaries and as a consequence a writer should be free to create according to his genius, is fulfilled. In this paper, I would not like to go counter to this prophecy of a great master but I would rather try to watch him through the lens of two important currents of literature, yet not trying to categorize him but finding traits which make him an idol of the uniqueness and timelessness.

Introduction

Nabokov believed that for a writer it is not important to be labeled or to belong to any literary school. Despite his insistence that “the reader has no business bothering about the author’s intentions” (Dipple, 1988) many critics still struggle today to label him. Ihab Hassan points out that modernism and postmodernism are not separated by an Iron Curtain or the Chinese Great Wall (Hassan, 1987). Postmodernism is in fact a continuation of modernism as every literary current has a kind of link with the previous one because periods are not clearly cut. As Nabokov lived in these periods, he was influenced by both of them. In agreement with Hassan’s opinion, this article argues that writers at the same age might not necessarily belong to the same literary school, but the same author can write both modernist and postmodernist works in different periods of time. Nabokov is one of them.

Modernism and Postmodernism in Nabokov's Works

Like many other writers who had an influence on the American prose of the 60s, Nabokov represents the main link between the earliest periods of the modernist movement and the development of that way of writing that is called "postmodernist" in the USA (Daiu, 2000). Traits of both currents can be found in his literary works: his masterpiece "Lolita" is known for its rich style, power of language, alienation, games and doubles. "The Gift" is widely known for its richness of detail, and "Pale Fire" for its metafiction, pastiche, technical ingenuity. "Lolita" might be read as a modernist or postmodernist novel while his later works "Pale Fire" and "Ada or Ardor" are more likely to be postmodern.

Modernism might be considered as the root of Nabokov's literary work. Let us take into account his twentieth-century modernism. What made Nabokov so unique and special when viewed in this way was his consciously polemical attitude as an alternative to canonical English-language definitions of that movement, especially those influenced by such authors as Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. We can find experimentation, anti-realism, individualism and intellectualism in Nabokov's works. One feature above all is striking in Modernism: experimentation, change for the sake of change, a need to be constantly at the cutting edge in technique and thought and as Pound said: Make it new (Foster, 2008). Joseph Frank in his essay on spatial form in modern literature, first noted that a central characteristic of modern fiction is the replacement of normal cause-effect sequence by word-groups which relate to each other internally, independently of the time sequence of the narrative. Frank explains that a reader cannot apprehend the meaning of a word-group in a modern novel "until the entire pattern of internal references can be apprehended as a unity". This is the way of saying that modern fiction, by definition cannot be read but only reread, since "a knowledge of the whole is essential to an understanding of any part" (Parker, 1987).

Harold Bloom (2010) states that where Nabokov can hardly be overprized is in his achievement as a stylist. As Nabokov himself claimed, style for him is matter and art at its greatest is highly deceitful and complex. In *Lolita* we can find even the use of French language by Humbert for the sake of alienating himself from that community so as to show to Lolita that he was different from the others when it comes to culture. Nabokov's use of invented languages in other works such as in "Solus Rex", "Bend Sinister" and "Pale Fire", are clear indications of literary bilingualism. His uniqueness does not only lie in his writing style, his Russian aristocratic background, or the combination of scientific preciseness

and artistic imagination in his presentation of reality, but also in the fact that his novels are imbued with modernist and postmodernist elements, thus becoming a link between modernism and postmodernism in twentieth-century American fiction.

We have so far focused on modernist traits of Nabokov's novels but we often get stuck because Postmodernism as a literary current has left its traits in his later works such as in "Lolita" (which marks the transition from modernism to postmodernism), "Ada or Ardor", "Pale Fire" and "Invitation to a Beheading". Viewing his novels from a postmodernist point of view, we notice his polyphonic use of voices, and his playful conception of himself, such as in the case of Humbert. It is a trait of postmodernism to deal with new themes which may have been forbidden before, such as the theme of pedophilia in "Lolita". From the perspective of postmodernism, Humbert is a strange character. His attempts to explain everything to the reader, his attitude towards children is a result of his wish to be accepted by the society. As Lolita is a mirror of the American Dream, there have been many opinions on the fact that civilization makes us unhappy. Cuzzort and King (Cuzzort, King, 1989) argue that a simple conception of the rise of civilization would be that it emerged to provide people with greater protection. But if civilization makes us miserable, then why bother with it? The fact that it retains a great degree of dissatisfaction suggests a difference between people's sociological and psychological natures. This difference forced Freud into a thorough consideration of the relationship between society and the individual.

The term Postmodern literature is used to describe certain characteristics of post-World War II literature (relying heavily, for example, on fragmentation, paradox, questionable narrators, irony, absurdity, playfulness, pastiche, quotations, references, allusions, etc.) and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas implicit in Modernist literature. Where the modernist struggles to find the meaning in a chaotic world, the postmodern author plays with the situation without bothering to find out if there is any possibility of finding the meaning of life in this world. The postmodern novel is often a parody of this quest such as in the case of Lolita, because while modernism views reality as a tragedy, postmodernism views it as a farce. Modernist literature sees fragmentation and extreme subjectivity as an existential crisis, or Freudian internal conflict, a problem that must be solved, and the artist is often cited as the one to solve it. There is a premise that it is an unavoidable conflict between individual people and the societies they created (Cuzzort, King, 1989). In postmodern literature this crisis is avoided, the artist is impotent and the only recourse against "ruin" is to play within the chaos. The total incorporation of the individual into the state or the community can also

create a generation of monsters. There is, from a Freudian point of view, no happy resolution to the problem of repression.

In order to leave us at a loss, Nabokov turns back in time, infusing traits of romanticism in his novels. Foster (Foster, 2008) takes into consideration one of the concluding passages from *Lolita* where Nabokov described the image of "the tinkling sounds of the valley town coming up the mountain trail" as one of the nerves of the novel. Humbert, while being carried off by police and paramedics "evoke[s] a last mirage of wonder and hopelessness": he conjures a memory of a "melodious unity of sounds rising like vapor from a small mining town that lay at my feet, in a fold of the valley." He speaks of a "vapory vibration of accumulated sounds".

In his 1797 dedication to *Faust*, Goethe speaks of being "seized by an unaccustomed longing, for that still, earnest, kingdom of spirits, It is suspended only in indefinite tones/ My whispered song, like an Aeolian harp,/ A shudder seizes me, tears follow tears,/ The strong heart, it feels mild and tender". Goethe is here evoking the image of a harmony of voices. For both writers, what is preserved through memory creates a connection, a passageway, to the community of "blended voices, majestic and minute, remote and magically near." Goethe insisted that he did not write *Faust* to convey an "idea". Nabokov, too, maintained: "I don't think in any language. I think in images". (Foster, 2008) Foster includes a third current such as romanticism in the categorization.

While reading Nabokov's literary works, apart from a kind of headache (which in my opinion is a symptom of postmodernism), we are astonished by a childish love for beauty. It seems like we are reading Edgar Allan Poe or Charles Baudelaire. We soon find out that our assumption was not wrong as there are many allusions from both writers in his masterpiece *Lolita*.

Conclusions

Nabokov writes beyond the literary currents of modernism and postmodernism by being subject to his artistic instinct. He regards art as continuity and a process and points our way to the future. We should view Nabokov's artistry as a unique and highly individual mixture of what he had learned and observed from romanticism and modernism with his own aesthetic tendency and imagination. He was free enough to not simply be a modernist reactive to social realism, or a postmodernist obsessed with modernism. Thus, he was able to create genuinely new fictions of the future. Not only can we find traces of modernism

and postmodernism in his works, but traces of romanticism as well. This is proof that artistic genius does not bother about any school when he creates under the inspiration of his muse.

Again Nabokov leaves us at a loss, in the middle of a tunnel where there is darkness but soon the snap light of a train which awakes us is better than being forever at light. We find our self stuck in time. Which does he belong to? Of course, not to the society as we might pretend but to that simple individual somewhere in a corner of the world, transcending our assumptions to categorize him because a literary genius doesn't need labeling.

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