



A Nostalgia and Metaphor of Flora and Fauna: The Primitive Imagination in *Pale Fire*

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Abstract: Much has been written about the intertextuality and hypertextuality of the novel *Pale Fire* written by Nabokov Vladimir from the perspective of reader-response theory. As manifested by the name of the above study, the approach of interpreting this novel is not stuck to one. Following the principle of not sticking to one angle scholars have displayed their literary criticism with a wide range of focuses. Among the various kinds of critical interpretations, there are those whose concern are of the natural elements demonstrated throughout the novel with the well-acknowledged consensus that the author Nabokov is a butterfly expert. Nevertheless, excluding butterflies, there are other flora and fauna such as birds (sparrows,) and flowers, i.e., the elements of “natural” writing remain overlooked. To broaden the attention to delineation of “semi-natural” elements, this paper attempts to explain the excellent role of the “primitive” writing in *Pale Fire* combined with its metaphor with human. As to the connotation of the term “semi-natural”, it refers to the non-human object or beings that are branded with human civilizations. This paper states that the “primitive imagination” in this novel is realized through the portray of flora and fauna and characters and that the primitive imagination in this novel is not opposite of the civilized settings in the novel, nevertheless, the flora and fauna with the qualities of human and the human with the qualities of the wild is a distinctive feature of Nabokov’s writing and that the imagination serves as the drive for the narrator to motivate the development of the novel.

1. PRIMITIVISM IN LITERATURE

The origin of the term primitivism could be traced to the two scholarly published works: *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935) by Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas and *Avant-Garde and Primitivism* (1938) by Clement Greenberg (Etherington and Samuel J. 127). Initially, primitivism was approached as a case study in the history of ideas, examining civilized man’s misgivings about his performances, prospects, and himself. Subsequently, it emerged as a central discipline in art history, particularly in modernist painting as manifested in the paintings of Gauguin, Matisse, Kandinsky, Nolde, and Picasso, where it was seen as an artistic vehicle for innovation, often rooted in the visual encounter with “primitive” objects in museums (Etherington and Samuel J. 127).

One of the central debates in primitivism is its relationship with colonialism and racism. Many scholars argue that primitivism is inextricably linked to the epistemology of the colonial project, often used to justify the subjugation and marginalization of indigenous groups (Garrigan Mattar, Camayd-Freixas, Leal and Santos). However, others contend that primitivism can also be a form of resistance to colonial violence, as evidenced in the works of Indian modernist sculptor Ramkinkar Baij and the Indigenist Marxism of José Carlos Mariátegui (Etherington and Samuel 128). Another significant concept in primitivism is its double bind—the force of its critique emerges from the very forces it critiques. This explosive power explains why primitivism was once a central element of art and literature and why it has been easy to overlook those forms of primitivism hidden in the shadows of ambivalence (Etherington and Samuel 126).

Literally and of origin, the connotations of primitivism (such as unrefined) are in the contrary side of that of civilization (Van Esveld 3). Though there are traditional patterns of primitivism, however, there is a tendency to expand the connotation of it; furthermore, the dichotomy between civilized and primitive would be amplified given the various multifarious explorations of primitivism. As concluded by Etherington and Samuel (2024), from its early origins in the history of ideas and modernist painting

to its contemporary debates on decolonization and rewilding, primitivism continues to offer insights into human society's relationship with nature, authenticity, and the past. By embracing the broadening of boundaries, scholars can continue to uncover new perspectives and deepen the understanding of this enduring concept (Etherington and Samuel 133). The debate about the term primitivism is a constant procession that there is not a fixed definition of the term, yet, one thing should be sure that "primitivism is not singular" (132) and that "Looking at articulations of primitivism in a range of social contexts, the contributors do not merely apply the concept; they develop it." (132). In *Pale Fire*, there is harmonious fusion of both the primitive and civilized connotation. Nabokov share the similarity with the modernist writers and artists who, cognizant of the disappearance of primitive ways of life in modernity yet aware of their persistent, albeit concealed, presence beneath the facade of civilization, posited themselves as occupying a distinctive and advantageous position in relation to contemporary society (Van Esveld 2).

2. PRIMITIVE IMAGE IN *PALE FIRE*

To figure out the source of Nabokov's preference to primitive flora and fauna, his monologue in *Speak, Memory* serves as a kind supporting material when he writes "That this darkness is caused merely by the walls of time separating me and my bruised fists from the free world of timelessness is a belief I gladly share with the most gaudily painted savage" (18). Nabokov reveals the "savage" in his mental space when it comes to his vagary and elucidation of fancy. Other than this, his exploration of the life cycle of human has brought him to the "primordial cave" where it is not decorated by the primitive flora and fauna but civilized by human "A big cretonne-covered divan, white with black trefoils" and "a large potted hydrangea shrub, with pale blue blossoms and some greenish ones, half conceals" (20) in *Pale Fire*. It is the "Grotto" (200) where Gordon used to spend a night there with his friend; to be more "primitive", the animate characters are compared to the flora and fauna "An elderly footman in green appeared from a green side door and..." (199) and "there came out a slender but strong-looking lad of fourteen or fifteen dyed a nectarine hue by the sun... he had nothing on save a leopard-spotted loincloth" (199). The teenager wears the loincloth that is usually utilized by people of primitive tribes, yet, from the manners of him, he is not that barbarous. There is a blend of his primary dress and his modern style of life. For a modern society in which the piano occurs to play the role of entertaining, when Gradus enters the music room, there is "the grand piano upon which a pair of beach sandals stood as on the brink of a lily pond" (199). In his "acculturating everything" era, Nabokov's release of "nature" is realized through his floristic elements in the settings of environment.

3. THE PRIMITIVE PHYSICALITY IN *PALE FIRE*

As commented by Ramey (2004): Renowned for his aversion to "primitivism" in art, Nabokov viewed civilization, especially the intellectual pursuits housed in university libraries, laboratories, and sophisticated art forms, as a monumental advancement that far surpassed the cultural development of our "baboon-like parents" (205). However, it should be stated that his antipathy towards the traditional primitivism does not prevent him from creating a fresh "primitivism" that is modernized and enjoys both the traits of the civilized and the primitive. In *Pale Fire*, the primitivism goes through literalization by his blending of the modern physical products with the implicit "spirituality" of objective things. Taking electricity as an example, Nabokov makes what is seemingly absolute unliterary gain the literary quality. In modern society in which electricity is the thread that contributes to the role of light during the day, the primitive quality of electricity is manifested thorough Shade's poem "The Nature of Electricity":

The dead, the gentle dead—who knows?—
In tungsten filaments abide,
And on my bedside table glows
Another man's departed bride.

And maybe Shakespeare floods a whole
Town with innumerable lights,

And Shelley's incandescent soul
Lures the pale moths of starless nights.

Streetlamps are numbered, and maybe
Number nine-hundred-ninety-nine
(So brightly beaming through a tree
So green) is an old friend of mine.

And when above the livid plain
Forked lighting plays, therein may dwell
The torments of a Tamerlane
The roar of tyrants torn in hell.

(*Pale Fire* 192)

In this poem, the function of electricity in modern society is too crucial to be overlooked. This kind of role, however, is not always forward. Other than “semi-natural” settings, there is art whose essence has been affected by the tendency towards primitivism and the view of death. There is imagination of the pre-eminent litterateurs whose life illuminated by the “artificial” light given by electricity. What the electricity brings to people might actually be torture. Behind the right up and down surface of modern life, there is invisible control of primitivism that takes the role of balancing the anxiety of modern creation (of poem) and inner peace. Following the chronological order of literary development, there are distinct connotations of primitivism, however, this is not to say that there are specific standards in literary primitivism. This primitivism manifested in the poem is the one that hides behind the modern civilization, which means that the modern development does not wipe out the trace of primitive elements, i.e., there is a kind of harmony between these two. In this poem, the former three stanzas' anthem to the electricity is accompanied by the cruel history. The convenience and progress brought by the civilized society does not die out the memory of the origin that serves as the nature of electricity. The occurrence of electricity is conducive to the associated appearance of “The torments of a Tamerlane” and “The roar of tyrants torn in hell.” (192) in evening. The nature of electricity is that it makes possible to accord the artificial with the primitive. The sense of Nabokov to internalize and naturalize the civilized and the primitive, except the poem, is reflected through furniture settings of the house.

4. PRIMITIVE CHARACTERIZATION IN *PALE FIRE*

4.1. The Primitive Animal with the Traits of the Modern and the Primitive

Georgian poets Rupert Brooke and Walter de la Mare have influenced Nabokov's master theme and writing techniques (Johnson 193). As summarized by Johnson (1999) “Much of de la Mare's quietly fantastic poetry and prose strongly hints that our world merely masks a deeper reality, and Gennady Barabtarlo has remarked certain parallels between the early Nabokov and the British poet and prose writer. De la Mare applies the name ‘the other- world’ to this higher reality in at least one of his works.” (193). As a beneficiary to Georgian poets, Nabokov might try to examine and experiment the artistic views of them. It is no fresh information that *Pale Fire* enjoys a sophisticated and consummate techniques. The appeal for craft unfolded through “Georgians argued the necessary separation of non-poetic from poetic statements by appealing to the structure of human experience.” (Simon 133) is realized in Nabokov's works. In *Pale Fire*, this kind of resorting to real life is demonstrated through Nabokov's double and synthetic narration of the explicit modern life and the implicit primitive life.

Under the great mythos of death, there is the tendency to take one of the faunas, the cocoon as the metaphor of death.

Retrace her style: the leaf sarcophagus

(A Luna's dead and shriveled-up cocoon)

(*Pale Fire* 114)

The death of Hazel is to some critics one of the themes of the novel. The description of the mourning of her parents is not about the coffin that is utilized to accommodate the corpse but a naturalized and primitive yearning that bears the implication of the wild (cocoon) in human world. The infinite process of mourning is pervasive in the novel as shown by the above portrayal of the cocoon as acknowledged by Nabokov himself "People tend to underestimate the power of my imagination and my capacity of evolving serial selves in my writing." (Nabokov 24). In this sense, the primitive imagination is realized through his resorting to the imagination of flora and fauna. As concluded by Simon:

Aesthetic experience is experience at what is virtually the threshold of consciousness, that primary stage of perception at which the human response to experience is most direct and unaffected. It is experience in its most immediate terms, prior to rationalization and moralization where it is not actually insusceptible to such translations (Simon 133).

4.2. Primitive characterization in *Pale Fire*

Nabokov has not concealed his dismissal of Freud', however, it should be questioned that his writing is a playback and combination of his conscious and "serial selves". His imagination navigates a cruise that sails from the Georgian principle that "In natural surroundings they (Georgians) felt themselves less distracted by contemporary and historical fashions, and thus better able to grasp and penetrate those endlessly recurring experiences most central and urgent to our humanity" (132). Inspired by the Georgian poets and their creative concepts, Nabokov's works have been painted with the implication of grasping the elements central to his humanity. For Nabokov, the elements that central to his humanity have to do with flora and fauna in nature. In the essay "Parasitism and *Pale Fire's* Camouflage: The King-Bot, the Crown Jewels and the Man in the Brown Macintosh", Ramey (2004) states that there is a kind of parasitism connection between the author and reader by taking the botfly as the model of the character Charles Kinbote through a metaphor. This metaphor of comparing a human character with an insect is one of his primitive imaginations. Insect is regarded as a kind of animal that pertains to wild or uncivilized world. The primitivation of Kinbot is realized through his function of moving between the reader and the author and the characterization by Nabokov. There are multifarious kinds of Kinbote's presence in the novel as to the elucidation of the poem "Pale Fire". It begins with the commentary of the line 1-4 as "The image in these opening lines evidently refers to a bird..." (73), then to "how persistently our poet evokes images of winter in the beginning of a poem which he started composing on a balmy summer night!" (79), and finally to "My notes and myself are petering out." (300). This primitivism is manifested through the "wild" and "forced" interpretation of the poem by Kinbot. It is in this aspect that Nabokov serves as the metaphor. In this metaphor, Kinbote represents the generally acknowledged and unsophisticated taste and the method of reading by a certain kind of writers, namely, the civilized; the author of the poem Shade is, yet, the authentic, or, in the structure of primitive/civilized, the primitive representative of reading. In this case, the portrayal of Kinbote plays the role of combing the civilized and the primitive from the angle of composition by Nabokov.

The sense of Nabokov to internalize and naturalize the civilized and the primitive, except the poem, is reflected through furniture settings of the house. The content of the pictures in the house rent by Kinbote shows the primitive inclination of him, after Kinbote enters the house near Shade's, he tries to figure out the decorations of the house "In the study I found a large picture of their parents, with sexes reversed, Mrs. G. resembling Malenkov, and Mr. G. a Medusa-locked hag, and this replaced by the reproduction of a beloved early Picasso: earth boy leading raincloud horse" (83). Kinbote's sense of the similarity of the painting is that human shares the inner and essential quality of images in myths and legends. Medusa is the monster figure who is "usually represented as a winged female creature having a head of hair consisting of snakes" (Britannica) while the painting by Picasso shows the image of naked male child leading raincloud horse. Kinbot's perception seamlessly intertwines the natures of humans and animals,

creating an elevation that feels neither forced nor abrupt, but rather, a harmonious blend of the two. From the living environment and temper of Kinbote, it is highly likely that Kinbote is the reified character of the blend. The landlord of Kinbote treats him as a kind of “semi-human” who retains the wild habitus and who knows the rules of human world “Not only had he left me a detailed inventory of all such articles as cluster around a new tenant like a mob of menacing natives, but he had taken stupendous pains to write out on slips of paper recommendations, explanations, injunctions and supplementary lists.” (84). According to the information given by the novel, Shade respectfully addresses Kinbot as professor rather than someone who is ignorant of the skills of living in a “modern” house, the description of these directions for Kinbote serves as the evidence for proving the monstrosity of Kinbote. Therefore, it is in this sense that Kinbot is the one who enjoys the blending traits of the primitive and the civilized. His function of moving between the reader and the author is the realization of his becoming a sublimated “being” who makes it feasible to connect the qualities of the primitive and the civilized.

In Shade’s poem “Pale Fire”, there are a variety of natural elements, like

Covered my glimpse of lawn and reached up so

As to make chair and bed exactly stand

Upon that snow, out in that crystal land!

... (line 10-12)

Retake the falling snow: each drifting flake

Shapeless and slow, unsteady and opaque,

A dull dark white against the day’s pale white

And abstract larches in the neutral light.

... (line 13-16)

From Kinbote’s declaration, Shade is also the one who enjoys the combined qualities of Kinbote as analyzed above, i.e., they are not the normal persons who are opponents of the primitive elements, yet, for Shade, his sense of death after a heart attack reveals the internal association of the essence, and his confession about his attitude towards the doctor is a mild integration of the primitive and the humanized:

The scene was not our sense. In life, the mind

Of any man is quick to recognize

Natural shams, and then before his eyes

The reed becomes a bird, the knobby twig

And inchworm, and the cobra head, a big

Wickedly folded moth. But in the case

Of my white fountain what it did replace

Perceptually was something that, I felt,

Could be grasped only by whoever dwelt

In the strange world where I was a mere stray.

(“Pale Fire” Line 710-719)

It is not a fresh view that one of the themes of the poem “Pale Fire” is death. After Shade’s reviving from the heart attack, his perception of being “alive” is the ability to sense the natural or primitive flora and fauna that are more concerned by the original creatures like flocks and herds which live on these natural plants. If he is a normal person, the primary thing that he concerns would be something of great consequence for him, for example, his wife or someone like his friends. A sensible interpretation would be that Shade is the combination of the primitive and the civilized. This explanation could be further

consolidated by the Kinbote's presentation that "my friend had a rather coquettish way of pointing out with the tip of his cane various curious natural objectives. He never tired of illustrated by means of these examples the extraordinary blend of Canadian Zone and Austral Zone that 'obtained'..." (169) and the physical appearance of Shade "My sublime neighbor's face had something about it that might have appealed to the eye, had it been only leonine or only Iroquoian; but unfortunately, by combining the two it merely reminded one of a fleshy Hogarthian tippler of indeterminate sex." (26). It is not that clear to tell the physical features of Shade, yet, what it is sure is that he does not look like normal person and that he enjoys the traits of a lion that belongs to the wild species.

Other than the human to animal metaphor, there is the animal to human metaphor.

Under the presupposition that Nabokov inherits from the Georgian poets the artistic principle that writing is about penetrating to elements central to humanity accompanied by his understanding to the author's relationship to the world (disguise) as well as the autobiographical presupposition of the novel. The figure of the brown Gradus makes a difference to the nostalgia of Nabokov's mother who is fond of "that old brown dachshund fast asleep on the sofa" (97). As stated by some critics (including Gavriel Shapiro), the image of dachshund and borzoi is the metaphor to Nabokov's mother and father respectively and "the joyous encounter of the members of these two breeds, respectively favored by his father and mother, evoked in the writer's mind, by association, his parents' blissful relationship and the happiness of his own childhood and youth" (2). Nabokov's father "killed by an assassin's bullet" (169) during his childhood is followed by his acute perception to the cruel reality of politics, which might be the root cause of his being haunted by the scene. Therefore, the inner primitivism lasts and does not fade away. This kind of primitivism is camouflaged by his commutation between the "evil" and the "good" image. In *Pale Fire*, the evil image of Gradus, the assassin and the one who bears the fusion of the primitive and the civilized elements, serves as the incarnation of primitivist image. From the intentioned connotation of Nabokov, however, the villain Gradus is actually the other side of his childhood memory which is light-hearted without the apprehension of the adulthood. The "brown dachshund" undergoes humanization in *Pale Fire*. Gradus is the one who bears both the purest essence of human and the most brutal nature of animals. Gradus used to be the "person" with the most integrity in his ample experience "He started as a maker of Cartesian devils—imps of bottle glass bobbling up and down in methylyte-filled tubes hawked during Catkin week on the boulevards. He also worked as teaser, and later as flasher, at governmental factories—and was, I believe, more or less responsible for the remarkably ugly red-and-amber windows..." (151). However, it is the dark side of human that makes him impatient of what happened to him. Furthermore, the wording of Nabokov attaches Gradus to his wild nature "Mere springs and coils produced the inward movements of our clockwork man." (152). The springs and coils are tools for hounds, which further potentiates the metaphorical correspondence between Gradus and dachshund of Nabokov's mother. There is not detailed portray of his turning into someone who "disliked injustice and deception" (152). What can be inferred is that his life as a social being is anguishing. Suffering from the pain both physically and mentally, he becomes what is the blend of the primitive and the civilized; thus, his ferity comes into light, which is manifested in his seasoning the pain and suffering of the king who represents those who ignore the misfortunes of others. Therefore, it is not nonsensical "When the fallen tyrant is tied, naked and howling, to a plank in the public square and killed piecemeal by the people who cut slices out, and eat them, and distribute his living body among themselves" (154), Gradus "points out the right instrument and directs the carving" (154).

5. CONCLUSION

Pale Fire displays a roll of imagination that combines the primitive and the civilized elements. However, this combination is not through a direct way. It is realized through a complicated and literary method, namely, in the plot and the characterization of the novel. The wide spread of flora and fauna in this novel *Pale Fire* and the poem "Pale Fire" is not optional, it is an intentionally literary operation of Nabokov who attempts to actualize his inner primitivism that has ingrained in him since his childhood. Nabokov's repulsion towards primitivism serves as the fuel igniting his innovation of literary works. His identity as a butterfly expert drives him to pay special attention to natural creatures his works. Accompanied by his childhood experience of being with the brown hound that represents his attachment to his mother. In his works, the primitive imagination is not explicitly pure description of the wild competition between different species, yet, both human and creature are invisibly influenced by each other and each bears the qualities of each other.

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Citation: Changfei Li. "A Nostalgia and Metaphor of Flora and Fauna: The Primitive Imagination in Pale Fire". *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL)*, vol 13, no. 6, 2025, pp. 38-44. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20431/2347-3134.1306006>.

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