Nabokov’s Nostalgic Farewell to Europe in His First English Short Story ”The Assistant Producer”

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https://doi.org/10.15017/1300175
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Introduction

After emigrating to the United States in 1940 Vladimir Nabokov (1899 - 1977) was faced with a huge dilemma. He had by now developed quite a reputation as one of the leading Russian émigré writers in Europe between the world wars while residing mostly in Berlin after escaping from Russia during the Russian Revolution. However, finding himself penniless in America he had to deal with the task of earning a living for his wife, Vera, and small child, Dmitri. Nabokov was therefore forced to earn his living as a teacher of Russian at Wellesley College near Boston. In addition, he also worked as a research fellow in entomology investigating butterflies. He had always considered himself to be a writer first and foremost, but now he had lost that small but loyal audience and reputation that he had so carefully built up over the years in the Russian émigré circles of Paris and Berlin. Nabokov therefore decided to do something quite bold and astonishing. Namely, he abandoned his luxurious native Russian prose and started to write in English. The reason was actually quite simple. Due to the fact that the Germans were sweeping across Europe, Nabokov made the decision that to survive both physically and artistically he had no choice but to abandon his mother tongue. While in France from 1937 to 1940, he briefly considered writing in French, however, when the Germans quickly overran France in 1940, Nabokov did everything in his power to allow he and his family to escape to America.

As shocking a decision as this must have been for so talented a writer as Nabokov, he actually had already prepared himself to make such a
move. He had attended Cambridge University in England on a scholarship from 1919 to 1922 and graduated with a degree in French Literature. He had also continued to teach English privately to rich Germans during his fifteen year stay in Berlin. As a result, he indeed possessed the basic tools to use English, however, he well knew the tremendous gap that existed between a working knowledge of a language and artistic excellence. Another problem was that he still considered himself a writer and wanted to continue to be accepted as such even if he had to switch linguistic modes.

From 1922 until 1939, Nabokov had published 59 short stories and 7 novels in his native Russian in various journals throughout Europe. In January 1943, after having spent more than two and one half years in America, he published his first English short story entitled “The Assistant Producer.” Interestingly, in his first English short story, Nabokov decides to relate a story that actually happened. In sharp contrast to his short works in Russian, he retells a well-known incident that actually took place in Paris among the Russian émigré community.

“The Assistant Producer” provides great insight into Nabokov’s transition between his Russian and English literary periods. In this story, Nabokov interestingly chose to write about Russians who were lost in the aftermath of the bloody Russian Revolution. At times it seems as if Nabokov is saying farewell to both his native tongue and to Europe at the same time in this work. This short story is also interesting in the fact that Nabokov does his best to give a fairly straightforward account of a sordid affair which took place in the late 1930’s in Paris.

Throughout this tale, Nabokov experiments with language and voice in quite a bold and modern fashion. He continually shifts voices and styles and, more than anything, does his utmost to give the story a very modernistic feel to all that he relates so that the reader feels as if he is observing the events on a movie screen. This cinematic style was intentionally utilized by the author to give the events of the story a kind of B-grade movie-like quality and atmosphere.

Though intricately described by Nabokov, the story is based on a
true incident. In Paris, a famous Russian popular singer, Nadezhda Plevitskaya, was sentenced to 20 years in prison for her role in helping her husband, a former General in the Russian White Army, abduct and kill General Miller, the leader of the émigré White Warriors Union (W.W.) in Paris. The husband, on the other hand, vanished without a trace after his guilt came to light. Further culpability was also assumed since General Miller’s predecessor had also been killed under mysterious circumstances some years earlier.

In the story, Plevitskaya is called “La Slavska” (i.e. the Slavic Lady) while the author changes the name of her murderous husband to “General Golubkov”, which in Russian means something like “the foolish one.” In the first part of the story, the author describes both the milieu and reputation of La Slavska along with the typically hopeless situation among the émigré White Russian communities of Europe in general, and in Paris in particular, for whom she so often held her dynamic, colorful and patriotic but less than artistically refined performances. Nabokov also reveals how she came to meet General Golubkov during the Revolution, marry and eventually escape to Western Europe when the Bolsheviks proved victorious. While living in France, Golubkov starts to work as a triple agent for the Whites, the Reds and the Germans. At the same time, La Slavska continues to give powerful patriotic recitals of rather vulgar and tasteless songs. While working as a triple agent, general Golubkov becomes active in the White Warriors Union (W.W.) and secretly desires to become its president. As a result, with this one goal in mind, Golubkov sets out to methodically plan the murder of the reigning leader for no other purpose than to improve his own rank and status. Nabokov hints several times in the story that the previous two leaders of the very same organization also died under mysterious circumstances while Golubkov was always conveniently lurking around. Nabokov tells, in a quite interesting and amusing manner, the details of Golubkov’s plot to kidnap and murder the leader of this organization as well as deftly portraying Golubkov’s sudden disappearance into thin air after his vile deeds are found out. The story finally ends with La Slavska in prison and eventu-
ally dying due to ill health sometime shortly after the Germans occupy Paris.

Nabokov employs a variety of techniques in telling his story and this study will focus on 5 main aspects of Nabokov’s literary devices including his extensive use of a semi-journalistic style, his mixing of style, voice tone and narrative mode throughout the story, his use of nostalgia to recreate the mood and ambience of the period, his innovative use of cinematic devices and imagery to give his story the appearance of a typical love-romance B-class movie and, finally, his use of Russian poshlost’ to demonstrate the cheapness and vulgarity of the people he describes.

I. Semi-journalistic Style

Throughout the story, Nabokov peppers his prose with numerous editorial comments such as:

The French police displayed a queer listlessness in dealing with possible clues, as if they assumed that the disappearance of Russian generals was a kind of curious local custom, an Oriental phenomenon, a dissolving process which perhaps ought not to occur but which could not be prevented. (p.553)

(Hereafter, unless otherwise stated, all quotations are taken from the The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov, New York, Alfred Knopf Publishers, 1995)

Such commentary tends to give the story a rather journalistic veneer as well as intensifying the realistic tone of the story itself. As a result, the reader often has the impression that the story may thus be closer to journalism that to fiction.

Nabokov deftly uses various techniques to obtain his desired realistic effect. A good example of this is when describing the modus operandi of his murderous plot:
The thirty-five minutes or so during which he was gone proved quite a comfortable margin. About the time she started fooling with that dead telephone, he had already picked up the General at an unfrequented corner and was driving him to an imaginary appointment the circumstances of which had been so framed in advance as to make its secrecy natural and its attendance a duty. (p.550)

The use of such a journalistic tone makes the entire story much more believable and also imparts a kind of verisimilitude to the whole series of events, even though we gradually come to realize that the author could not possibly have known what kind of conversations actually went on between the protagonists

II. Pleasure in Manipulating the English Language

It is very clear throughout the story that the author is himself finding great joy in utilizing the English language for the first time in a magically unique manner by constantly switching from a friendly or chatty first person narrative mode, to a narrative mode, with frequent ellipses and changes of topic, which often leave the reader to marvel at the author's amazing ability to manipulate this newly embraced language. Such a tendency is nowhere more clearly observed than in the story's opening paragraph which appears to immediately answer the reader's curiosity as to why this story might be called "The Assistant Producer:"

Meaning? Well, because sometimes life is merely that - an Assistant Producer. Tonight we shall go to the movies. Back to the thirties, down the twenties, and round the corner to the old Europe Picture Palace. She was a celebrated singer. (p. 542)

In the first word, the author appears to be answering the reader's obvious question. The second word is a very conversational "Well," which is then followed by a very strong and professional explanation. The third
utterance is, in contrast, a friendly invitation to “go to the movies” which surprises the reader due to its obviously overly familiar use of the rhetorical “we.” Then, in the next sentence: “Back to the thirties...”, the author again abruptly shifts gears, so to speak, and heads off in a descriptively historical mode similar to that which a tour guide might employ. Finally, we encounter a simple declarative sentence: “She was a celebrated singer.” Here again, the reader is once again thrown off guard since the author has now changed over to a traditional introduction of the main character of the story without any prior warning or any sense of a smooth literary transition on Nabokov’s part. Such abrupt juggling of language, style, voice and narrative mode do not by any means indicate the author’s clumsiness in using English. In contrast, this introductory paragraph shows a writer who is in complete control over his self-created artificial world. Nabokov mixes different styles to show to what extent language can indeed be molded and manipulated to obtain the author's desired effect. The reader soon accepts his fate and follows the author on the linguistic adventure which slowly unfolds on the ensuing pages. Nabokov again uses this technique of abruptly changing from a descriptive narrative voice when describing Golubkov and says directly to the reader:

   I want all your attention now, for it would be a pity to miss the subtleties of the situation. (p. 545)

In this instance, Nabokov appears to stop almost in mid-sentence in order to “wake up” the reader. Thereafter, he immediately and smoothly returns to his journalistic tone.

Throughout the story, Nabokov continues to shift his voice and narrative mode. Finally, in the last “scene” of the story he suddenly informs the reader that he is actually similar to a movie goer leaving the movie theater after a good film. Here, Nabokov makes his last abrupt shift:

   ...Quick, children, let us get out of here into the sober night, into the shuffling peace of familiar sidewalks, into the solid world of
good freckled boys and the spirit of comradeship. Welcome reality! This tangible cigarette will be very refreshing after all that trashy excitement. See, the thin dapper man walking in front of us lights up too after tapping a “Lookee” against his old leathern cigarette case.

Once again the author suddenly becomes our jovial friend, chap, interlocutor. Finally, the story finishes just dripping with irony when Nabokov uses the phrase “Welcome Reality!” The reality the author speaks of is then followed by the chilling image of a man who looks hauntingly similar to Golubkov and who also happens to be tapping his cigarette against the same old cigarette case that the murderous general used to carry.

The overall effect of such textual juggling is to shock, amuse, but most of all maintain the reader's interest at a very high level. In that regard, Nabokov achieves his goal with great success.

III. The Author's Farewell to Russia and His European Émigré Past

In this, his first English short story since arriving in America, Nabokov seems to have intentionally chosen a very European and, simultaneously, a very Russian milieu. In fact, Nabokov had always personally loathed being cast off into Western Europe after the Russian Revolution. He was thus never able to set down his roots anywhere even though he had studied in England and then later became a writer while living first in Germany and then in France. He was just another unwanted foreign national without a passport and without a country to ever return to. America finally gave him a home and a relatively stable income as a writer, teacher and researcher. In “The Assistant Producer” Nabokov seems to say farewell to the sights, sounds, smells and ambience of that quickly fading émigré Russian world to which he had once belonged. It had been a melancholy existence since most individuals had lost everything and were now just living in the past by trying to reminisce about the “good old days.” Nabokov describes this age with sincerity and a large dose of cynicism along with a good measure of irony and pity as well. This mixture of
nostalgia and cynicism can be clearly observed in the opening paragraph as he describes La Slavska and while also trying to explain the essence of her popularity:

“La Slavska” - that is what the French called her. Style: one-tenth tzigane, one-seventh Russian peasant girl (she had been that herself originally), and five-ninths popular - and by popular I mean a hodgepodge of artificial folklore, military melodrama, and official patriotism. The fraction left unfilled seems sufficient to represent the physical splendor of her prodigious voice. (p. 542)

Nabokov also attempts to portray the nostalgia that all émigré Russians felt after having lost their country due to a twist of fate, i.e. the Bolshevik Revolution, as he describes how La Slavska’s life might have been back in old Russia:

Had things gone on as they were seeming to go, she might have been still singing tonight in a central-heated Hall of Nobility or at Tsarskoye, and I should be turning off her broadcast voice in some remote corner of steppe-mother Siberia. But destiny took the wrong turning; and when the Revolution happened, followed by the War of the Reds and the Whites, her wily peasant soul chose the more practical party. (p. 543)

In his farewell to his stateless and wandering days in Europe, Nabokov pulls no punches when he describes the narrow-minded, back-stabbing “virtual” world created by the White Russians in exile who created various right-wing organizations to occupy their time and soothe their injured pride while imagining that someday they might triumphantly return to Mother Russia. This aspect is clearly observed as Nabokov cynically describes General Golubkov and his role in the White Warriors Union:
Quite naturally he became an efficient member of the W.W. (White Warriors Union), traveling about, organizing military courses for Russian boys, arranging relief concerts, unearthing barracks for the destitute, settling local disputes, and doing all this in a most unobtusive manner. I suppose it was useful in some ways, that W.W. Unfortunately for its spiritual welfare, it was quite incapable of cutting itself off from monarchist groups abroad and did not feel, as the émigré intelligentsia felt, the dreadful vulgarity, the Ur-Hitlerism of those ludicrous but vicious organizations. When well-meaning Americans ask me whether I know charming Colonel So-and-so or grand old Count de Kickoffsky, I have not the heart to tell them the dismal truth. (p. 544)

Nabokov clearly considers such pompous individuals to be complete buffoons.

Despite such cynicism, however, Nabokov nevertheless marvelously recreates the feeling and atmosphere of émigré Russian culture with all its crassness and vulgarity, while, at the same time, also possessing a twinge of sad melancholy for a time that has now vanished:

Indeed, when I recall the halls where the Slavska sang, both in Berlin and in Paris, and the type of people one saw there, I feel as if I were technicoloring and sonorizing some very ancient motion picture where life had been tinted (a sickly blue), while some hand machine imitated offstage the hiss of the asynchronous surf. A certain shady character, the terror of relief organizations, a bald-headed man with mad eyes, slowly floats across my field of vision with his legs bent in a sitting position, like an elderly fetus, and then miraculously fits into a back-row seat. Our friend the Count is also here, complete with high collar and dingy spats. A venerable but worldly priest, with his cross gently heaving on his ample chest, sits in the front row and looks straight ahead.
While painting a superb picture of old aristocrats and soldiers who had lost their country but not their culture or dreams, Nabokov is able to give the reader a glimpse into the author's own recent and quickly disappearing past. It is as if the author wants to digest the entire scene one final time by describing it all in intricate detail in his new language (English) in order to then let go and let it all recede into his own past history.

IV. The Theme of Russian poshlost'

There was one nagging problem that had frustrated Nabokov ever since arriving in America, namely the fact that the overwhelming majority of Americans could not even begin to comprehend the meaning of Russian poshlost' which is a major theme throughout many famous works of Russian literature. The author seems to have intentionally chosen the subject matter of this story in order to give his English reading audience an almost textbook introduction to the theme of poshlost'. Nabokov himself magnificently describes poshlost' in his brilliant study of Nikolai Gogol which was published in 1944, which he had already begun to write at the same time that he was writing "The Assistant Producer." Nabokov requires 11 full pages in his Gogol book to satisfactorily define the meaning of poshlost': "English words expressing several, although by no means all aspects of poshlost' are for instance: "cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin', in bad taste." My little assistant, Roget's Thesaurus, (which incidentally lists "rats, mice" under Insects" - see page 21 of Revised Edition) supplies me moreover with "inferior, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry, gimcrack" and others under "cheapness." All these, however, suggest merely certain false values for the detection of which no particular shrewdness is required. In fact they tend, these words, to supply an obvious classification of values at a given period of human history; but what Russians call poshlost' is beautifully timeless and so cleverly painted all over with protective tints that its presence (in a book, in a soul, in an institution, in a thousand other places) often escapes detection." (Nikolai Gogol by Vladimir Nabokov, New Directions Paperbook, 1944, p. 64).

For Nabokov, poshlost' seems to be an innate human fault in some
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poor souls, especially Russians, who are unable to overcome the cheap and vulgar monotony that surrounds them and instead embrace their mundane existences as something admirable and highly worthwhile. Nabokov's haughtily condemnation of such poshlost' is unmistakenly evident when describing how La Slayska cherished a medalion that she had received from the Tsar's wife:

Up to her very death she treasured above all - or pretended to do so - a fancy medal and a huge brooch that had been given her by the Tsarina. (p. 542)

The same theme of poshlost' is also used to describe how General Golubkov so easily became a triple agent and spy:

Thus, General Golubkov was a godsend. The Soviets firmly expected that under his rule all W.W. spies would be well known to them - and shrewdly supplied with false information for eager German consumption. The Germans were equally sure that through him they would be guaranteed a good cropping of their own absolutely trustworthy agents distributed among the W.W. ones. Neither side had any illusions concerning Golubkov's loyalty, but each assumed that it would turn to its own profit the fluctuations of double-crossing. The dreams of simple Russian folk, hardworking families in remote parts of the Russian diaspora, plying their humble but honest trades, as they would in Saratov or Tver, bearing fragile children, and naively believing that the W.W. was a kind of King Arthur's Round Table that stood for all that had been, and would be, sweet and decent and strong in fairy-tale Russia - these dreams may well strike the film pruners as an excrescence upon the main theme.

The little general is content to see himself as an important man, even if it is only his petty delusional imagination which drives his ambitions.
Nabokov goes on to further describe the poshlost' of Golubkov as actually being a sense of pride and joy for the despicable little man:

I consider that, artistically, he overstressed his effacement, unwittingly introducing a hired-lackey note - which now seems singularly appropriate; but he of course was trying to base his existence upon the principle of contrast and would get a marvelous thrill from exactly knowing by certain sweet signs - a bent head, a rolling eye - that So-and-so at the far end of the room was drawing a newcomer's attention to the fascinating fact that such a dim, modest man was the hero of incredible exploits in a legendary war (taking towns single-handed and that sort of thing). (p. 547)

The epitomy of poshlost', however, is seen in Nabokov's description of La Slavska's artistic talent while she sings old worn-out patriotic Russian songs:

Her artistic taste was nowhere, her technique haphazard, her general style atrocious; but the kind of people for whom music and sentiment are one, or who likes songs to be mediums for the spirits of circumstances under which they had first been apprehended in an individual past, gratefuly found in the tremendous sonorities of her voice both a nostalgic solace and a patriotic kick. She was considered especially effective when a strain of wild recklessness rang through her song. Had this abandon been less blatantly shammed it might still have saved her from utter vulgarity. The small, hard thing that was her soul stuck out of her song, and the most her temperament could attain was but an eddy, not a free torrent. When nowadays in some Russian household the gramophone is put on, and I hear her canned contralto, it is with something of a shudder that I recall the meretricious imitation she gave of reaching her vocal climax, the anatomy
of her mouth fully displayed in a last passionate cry, her blue-black hair beautifully waved, her crossed hands pressed to the beribboned medal on her bosom as she acknowledged the orgy of applause, her broad dusky body rigid even when she bowed, crammed as it was into strong silver satin which made her look like a matron of snow or a mermaid of honor. (pp. 548-549)

In the above passage, the reader clearly realizes the author's revulsion at an artist such as La Slayska whose entire existence is based on the cheap, vulgar banality of slogans and patriotic stereotypes.

By describing the vulgarity of both Golubkov and La Slayska in such minute detail, Nabokov is able to give the reader great insight into the decadence associated with the theme of poshlost'. This theme is repeated again and again in numerous of his later English works as well.

V. The Use of Cinematic Techniques

From the title itself, “The Assistant Producer” the reader instantly understands that the entire story is to be presented in terms similar to those encountered when watching a film at a movie theater. Nabokov tells us so in the first line:

Well, because sometimes life is merely like that - an Assistant Producer. (p. 542)

Thereafter, throughout the story there are numerous scenes which are presented as if we are experiencing them on a movie screen.

The first such imagery is observed when Nabokov describes how General Golubkov got his reputation during the Russian Revolution and the War between the Reds and the Whites:

Ghostly multitudes of ghostly Cossacks on ghost-horseback are seen charging through the fading name of the assistant producer. Then dapper General Golubkov is disclosed idly scanning the
battlefield through a pair of opera glasses. When movies and we were young, we used to be shown what the sights divulged neatly framed in two connected circles. Not now. What we do see next is General Golubkov, all indolence suddenly gone, leaping into the saddle, looming sky-high for an instant on his rearing steed, and then rocketing into a crazy attack. (p. 543)

The above passage could be taken from any big-budget epic war movie made in the 1930's. The cinematic drama is then further intensified as Nabokov describes how La Slavska and Golubkov meet on the battlefield:

But the unexpected is the infra-red in the spectrum of Art: instead of the conditional *ra-ta-ta* reflex of machine gunnery, a woman's voice is heard singing afar. Nearer, still nearer, and finally all-pervading. A gorgeous contralto voice expanding into whatever the musical director found in his files in the way of Russian lilt. Who is this leading the infra-Reds? A woman? The singing spirit of that particular, especially well-trained battalion. Marching in front, trampling the alfalfa, and pouring out her Volga-Volga song. Dapper and daring italics Golubkov (now we know what he had descried), although wounded in several spots, manages to snatch her up on the gallop, and, lusciously struggling, she is borne away. (p. 543)

In these two passages noted above, Nabokov is intentionally trying to recreate the imagery of the scenes that one might experience in a movie theater.

The Hollywood type of vulgar imagery is further intensified as the author describes the death of two soldiers:

We get a glimpse of ravens, or crows, or whatever birds proved available, wheeling in the dusk and slowly descending upon a
plain littered with bodies somewhere in Ventura County. A White soldier's dead hand is still clutching a medallion with his mother's face. A Red soldier nearby has on his shattered breast a letter from home with the same old woman blinking through the dissolving lines. (pp. 543-544)

Nabokov gives us a "glimpse" as we view the above scenes. The vulgar Hollywood aspect is also completed as Nabokov politely mentions that the dead soldiers on the battlefield are somewhere in Ventura County - which conveniently happens to be a popular site for making movies outside of Los Angeles, i.e. the battlefield in not real. It is instead just a set made for the movies.

Nabokov also makes numerous asides to show that this entire story is like a B-grade movie made by a large movie company:

- There is little doubt that her capture had not been an entirely fortuitous occurrence. Indeterminism is banned from the studio. (p. 544)

In addition, as Nabokov describes how 2 past presidents of the W.W. mysteriously died he suddenly realizes that he is getting ahead of himself in the story and stops by saying:

- but my reel is going too fast. (p. 545)

Later, when Nabokov relates how La Slavska used to offer condolences to the wives of the men her husband had really secretly murdered, the author does so completely in grand cinematic style:

You will see her next (if the censor does not find what follows offensive to piety) kneeling in the honey-colored haze of a crowded Russian church, lustily sobbing side by side with the wife or widow (she know exactly which) of the general whose kidnap-
ping had been so nicely arranged by her husband and so deftly performed by those big, efficient, anonymous men that the boss had sent down to Paris. (p. 549)

In this passage it is interesting to note that the author uses such terminology as "will see" to stress the visual aspect. In addition, Nabokov also jokes about the role of censors in allowing certain scenes to be shown.

The cinematic imagery of the story is most effectively used at the end of the story when the unfortunate La Slavska has finally been put into prison:

We get a few last glimpses of the Slavska in prison. Meekly knitting in a corner. Writing to Mrs. Fedchenko tear-stained letters in which she said that they were sisters now, because both their husbands had been captured by the Bolsheviks. Begging to be allowed the use of a lipstick. (p. 554)

The reader gets glimpses and images of the heroine in her sad imprisoned state.

The most powerful cinematic technique is employed just at the end of the story when Nabokov humorously announces that the "show" is finally over and the "audience" can now throw away their popcorn bags and go home:

Anyhow, the show is over. You help your girlfriend into her coat and join the slow exit-bound stream of your likes. Safety doors open into unexpected side portions of night, diverting proximal trickles. If, like me, you prefer for reasons of orientation to go out the way you came in, you will pass again by those posters that seemed so attractive a couple of hours ago. The Russian cavalryman in his half-Polish uniform bends from his polo-pony to scoop up red-booted romance, her black hair tumbling from under her Astrakhan cap. The Arc de Triomphe rubs shoulders with a dim-
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The domed Kremlin. The monocled agent of a Foreign Power is handed a bundle of Secret papers by General Golubkov. (p. 555)

Therefore, from the first sentence until the end of the entire story, Nabokov gives his little tale the feel of a 93 minute B-movie. Ironically, instead of art imitating life, as is normally done in the movies, Nabokov has taken a true story and made it appear like an old-fashioned Hollywood movie. Nabokov masterfully succeeds in creating a modern cinematic atmosphere and this technique gives his story a very modern and experimentally bold aura about it.

Conclusion

In his first English short story, Nabokov is thoroughly successful in using his English imagery and in his control of his characters and storyline. Even though at times his language might seem to have a touch of unnaturalness about it, the reader nevertheless feels that the author is always in complete control of his art. He exudes confidence in his use of English with a sense of joy and merriment as he constantly jokes and puns along throughout the work. The seeds of several future works can also be found in this brief story. It is truly a pleasure to read along with an author who has so joyously embraced this new language as his own.

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