VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S COLOUR TERMS: A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: The present article aims at looking closely at words denoting colour in the novels by Vladimir Nabokov from a linguistic perspective. It is a well-known fact that this author – being one of the most famous bilingual writers of the 20th century – elaborated a peculiar and perfectly recognizable style in both English and Russian prose. This paper deals with one of the characteristic features of Nabokov's verbal art – that of an abundant (sometimes even excessive) use of colour. We are trying to demonstrate the variety of colour words present in the author's artistic prose in both languages mentioned above (namely, Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical novels "Conclusive Evidence", "Другие берега" and "Speak, Memory"), as well as to offer possible solutions for their classification. A comparative study of the three pieces of artistic prose will also allow us to contrast the author's use of colour in his English and Russian works.

Keywords: Vladimir Nabokov, colour terms, autobiographical prose, comparative analysis, bilingualism

Preliminary remarks

It is a well-known fact that Vladimir Nabokov – being one of the most famous bilingual writers of the 20th century – elaborated a peculiar and perfectly recognizable style in both his English and Russian prose. One of the characteristic features of Nabokov's verbal art is, undoubtedly, that of an abundant (sometimes even excessive) use of colour. Thus, the present paper is aimed at analysing words denoting colour in the autobiographical novels "Conclusive Evidence", "Другие берега" and "Speak, Memory" by Vladimir Nabokov. It has to be mentioned in this connection that the three volumes present a case of self-translation: first the author elaborated an English version ("Conclusive Evidence") in 1951, then he translated it into Russian ("Другие берега") in 1954 and, having observed the deficiencies of the initial text, undertook its rewriting ("Speak, Memory") that was finished in 1967. Even

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though the narration in the three novels corresponds more or less precisely, one can hardly fail to observe a large number of divergences between the texts, especially as far as the Russian variant is concerned. Thus, the three novels can (and will) be referred to as three independent entities (for more details see Polozova, 2013).

As far as colour terms present in the novels are concerned, there can be little doubt that these are meant to create a strong colourful impression upon the reader. Nabokov's manner to write an autobiography is unique: even the title of the third version of the novel – "Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited" – confirms it. The author had his own worldview, perceiving environment in lively colours – the fact that can be easily shown by means of the analysis of his autobiographical novels in which Nabokov "walks" through his memories, surrounded by his past and inviting the reader to join him:

I see the tablecloth and the faces of seated people sharing in the animation of light and shade beneath a moving, a fabulous foliage, exaggerated, no doubt, by the same faculty of impassioned commemoration, of ceaseless return, that makes me always approach that banquet table from the outside, from the depth of the park—not from the house—as if the mind, in order to go back thither, had to do so with the silent steps of a prodigal, faint with excitement. Through a tremulous prism, I distinguish the features of relatives and familiars, mute lips serenely moving in forgotten speech.

На скатерти та же игра светотени, как и на лицах, под движущейся легендарной листвой лип, дубов и кленов, одновременно увеличенных до живописных размеров и уменьшенных до вместимости одного сердца, и управляет всем праздником дух вечного возвращения, который побуждает меня подбираться к этому столу (мы, призраки, так осторожны!) не со стороны дома, откуда сошлись к нему остальные, а извне, из глубины парка, точно мечта, для того чтоб иметь право вернуться, должна подойти босиком, беззвучными шагами блудного сына, изнемогающего от волнения. Сквозь трепетную призму я различаю лица домочадцев и родственников, двигаются беззвучные уста, беззаботно произнося забытые речи. (Nabokov, 2004: 250-251)

This walk through the author's past is specially rich as far as colour is concerned: it has already been shown (see Polozova, 2013) that Nabokov's novels abound in colour terms. They can hardly be called just an element of narration – colour words are meant to be not only

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expressive, but also emotionally-marked. This goal is reached by means of an incredible diversity of colour terms used in the text – so much so that the simple ones like *white*, *black* or *blue* no longer make up the majority of words denoting colour. In order to embrace the variety of colour terms used by Vladimir Nabokov, in what follows we are going to suggest several possible classifications of these words.

Classification of Colour Terms According to Colour Naming

The first classification suggested in the present paper deals with the way a term names a colour. It divides all the colour terms that appear on the pages of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical novels into the following groups:

1. direct colour terms
2. indirect colour terms
3. words denoting the presence or absence of light
4. words denoting the presence or absence of colour.

The first category includes adjectives denoting a certain colour or its tint in a direct way, for example, *green*, *reddish*, *turquoise*, *dark blue* etc. These words have already received great attention on part of a large number of scholars as culturally and historically determined lexical units (see, for example, Ammer, 1992; Балека, 2008; Бережных, 2009; Данилова, 2000; Гольцова, Наумова, 1996; Кульпина, 2001; Курмакаева, 2001; Макеенко, 2001; Василевич, 2002). However, as far as the second category – indirect colour terms – is concerned, it has so far remained on the periphery of philological studies. Even though this phenomenon was observed and mentioned by a number of scholars (see Шхвацабая, 1985; Чеснокова, 1989; Кульпина, 2001; Макеенко, 2001; Носовец, 2002; Кезина, 2005; Родионова, 2007), their primary attention was still directed towards the direct variety of words denoting colour, whereas the terms they used in order to name the notion differed in each case. In our previous research we have already suggested our own term – "indirect colour terms" – that would not only be easy to use, but also create a certain dichotomy between the two categories of colour words (see Polozova, 2014a). By "indirect colour terms" we mean objects of extra-linguistic reality that are immediately associated with a certain colour or shade; this category of colour terms may sometimes be used by the author in order to add to a carefully elaborated colourful picture created on the pages of his pieces of verbal art. This is, no doubt, the case in Vladimir Nabokov's writing – the fact that has already been mentioned in the preceding studies (for example, Курмакаева, 2001).

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The third type of colour words present in Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical novels is words denoting the presence/absence of light (such as *dull light, glint of dewy brillancy, light, shade, sun, dark* etc.). These words have also been rather neglected by the majority of scholars. The few studies that incorporated this category into the analysis include a paper by Valeria Kurmakayeva that analyses the symbolism of colour in the English literary texts. The scholar tends to believe that the description of the characteristic features of the functioning of colour terms in literary texts can hardly be called complete without taking into consideration words like *dark* or *pale* for two reasons. First, these are immediately associated with colour rather than with luminosity. Second, both their frequency and importance in the English and American prose are extremely high (Курмакаева, op.cit.). Proceeding from the ideas expressed by Valeria Kurmakayeva, the present study supports the opinion that the colour terms that render the presence or absence of light contribute to building up a colourful image in the reader's mind, being meant to take part in the interaction of tints and shades produced by the author – the statement that is specially true for Vladimir Nabokov, a writer with an extraordinary colourful vision.

The fourth type of colour words widely used by Vladimir Nabokov is made up of terms that denote the presence or absence of colour. The former is of crucial importance for the analysis of Nabokov's palette since it is represented by a large number of colour terms with high frequency. Such abundance can be accounted for by the fact that the words falling into this category are not only those meaning the presence of light, but also those that denote objects presupposing a large variety of colours. For example, the word *chrysanthemum* can hardly be labelled as belonging to a particular colour since this flower has about 40 species of different shades and colours: pink, violet, yellow, orange etc. However, this word should by no means be neglected during the analysis since it contributes to creating a colourful picture in the reader's mind, even though it is not clear what colour association it will trigger. Including such words into the analysis of colour terms in a work of verbal art is also supported by explanatory dictionaries: Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, for example, presents the word *chrysanthemum* in the following way: "a garden plant with large brightly coloured flowers" (cf. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, s.v.). Thus, we support the idea that names of flowers should also be taken into account in the analysis of colour terms, assigning them to the category "bright" (for more details on the importance of names of flowers as colour words see Polozova, 2014b). As far as the words denoting the absence of colour are concerned, their number is not so substantial on the pages of Vladimir

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Nabokov's autobiographical novels. However, we strongly believe that they should also be part of the analysis of colour terms since they as well assist the writer in creating his highly elaborate colourful picture.

Classification of Colour Terms According to Morphological Features

The second classification of colour terms suggested in the present paper deals with their morphological features. Words denoting colour that appear on the pages of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical novels belong to different parts of speech. This aspect of the diversity of colour words is mentioned in the paper by Valentina Kulpina: according to the scholar, it is only natural that the majority of colour terms are adjectives, however, nouns, verbs and adverbs can also be used for rendering colour (Кульпина, 2001: 25). Nabokov's novels abound in such cases – a feature that adds to the originality of the text and the use of colour, providing these words not only with the possibility to describe, but also to act and to represent an object or a phenomenon. Thus, colour terms used by Vladimir Nabokov in the novels "Conclusive Evidence", "Другие берега" and "Speak, Memory" include the following five parts of speech:

- adjectives (*blue-black, greenish-brown, white, иссиня-черный, голубой, серо-зеленый* etc.)
- nouns (*blackness, blueness, greenery, bloated blues, creaminess, чернота, смуглота, бельмо, седина трав, зелень, синь, просинь*)
- verbs (*to grey, to shade, чернеть, пожелтеть, рдеть, синеть*)
- adverbs (*steely, rustly, redly, черно синеть*)
- participles, both active (*greying, darkening, зардевшийся, раскрасневшийся, посиневший*) and passive (*blacked-out, autumn-rusted, беленый, синеный*).

As can be seen from the examples adduced in the present classification, the texts in both languages – English and Russian – contain colour terms belonging to different part of speech – the fact that adds to the expressivity of the author's style, as well as to the originality of his use of colour.

Classification of Colour Terms According to Word Complexity

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The third classification that is going to be discussed in this paper looks into the complexity of the words that the writer used in order to create new colour terms. The importance of this aspect can be accounted for by the fact that the terms that appear on Nabokov's pages are extremely varied: colour may be rendered by means of a simple word, a compound word, a word combination, an occasional word etc. In what follows we shall try and present the great variety in structure of colour words invented and used by the author. Thus, colour terms – both direct and indirect – present in the three autobiographical novels can be divided into the following categories:

1. simple words (*white, black, yellow, синий, розовый, зеленый*)
2. compound words containing two roots (*blackbooted, синеоконный, седобородый*)
3. compound words containing two roots with a hyphen (*bronze-colored, purple-faced, honey-bright, черно-волосатый, блестяще-сиреневый, черно-сливовый*)
4. compound words containing two roots with a hyphen and a conjunction (*grey-and-white, blue-and-yellow*)
5. compound words containing three roots with hyphens (*black-velvet-clad, бело-розово-фиолетовый, мрачно-фиолетово-зеленый*)
6. simple word combinations containing two words (*fiery red, light blue, черно синеть*)
7. complex word sequences containing three or more words (*brassy with an olive sheen, with great patches of purple-blue, пестровато-корчиневый с фиалковыми темнотами, мрачный йодистый блеск*).

In order to underline the complexity of colour terms used by the author of the novels we shall adduce a table that presents the number of direct and indirect colour terms belonging to the above mentioned categories (the calculations did not include the words from the categories "the presence/absence of light" and "the presence/absence of colour").

Table 1. Complexity of Colour Terms in the Novels "Conclusive Evidence", "Другие берега" and "Speak, Memory" by Vladimir Nabokov

Type of colour term / Novel	simple words	compound words	compound words with a hyphen	compound words with a hyphen and a	compound words containing three roots	combinations containing two words	combinations containing three or more

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				conjunction			words
"Conclusive Evidence"	512	22	126	4	1	74	13
"Другие берега"	684	11	111	–	4	72	23
"Speak, Memory"	638	31	146	14	1	116	14

Tabel 1 shows that the majority of colour terms used by Vladimir Nabokov is naturally comprised of direct colour terms in all the analysed novels. The second category, as far as the frequency of the words is concerned, is that of compound words with a hyphen (126 cases in "Conclusive Evidence", 111 cases in "Другие берега" and 146 cases in "Speak, Memory"). Thus, it may be concluded that the author prefers this derivational model – the fact that might be accounted for by the possibilities provided by this way of word creation: being an extremely productive model both in English and in Russian, it allows the elaboration of some highly original occasional words meant to impress the reader and to create a lively and bright picture in his mind. Another frequent category is that of word combinations containing two words (74, 72 and 116 cases respectively). Such a large abundance in this type of colour terms in "Speak, Memory" can be explained by a great number of words denoting colour indirectly present only in the final version of the novel that are not infrequently accompanied by direct colour terms. Compound words and word combinations containing three or more lexical units are not as manifold; however, even if their number is less substantial, they do not fail to produce a strong effect on the reader.

Classification of Colour Terms According to Derivational Models

As has been demonstrated above, colour terms incorporated by Vladimir Nabokov in the texts of his novels are not only simple words, but also the complex ones. In order to reveal their originality and, at the same time, their complexity, in what follows we shall introduce yet another classification that enumerates the modalities of word formation in the case of complex colour terms, and namely compound colour words containing two or three roots with

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or without a hyphen/hyphens or conjunction, and simple and complex word combinations, as far as their semantics is concerned:

1. colour + colour rendering one single colour (*greenish-brown, blue-black, черно-бурый, розовато-телесный, вишнево-кирпичный, черно-сливовый*)

2. colour + colour rendering several colours (*grey-and-white, blue-and-yellow, бело-розово-фиолетовый*)

3. colour + light/brillance (*glossy black, brilliant white, блестяще-сиреневый, глянцевито-красный*)

4. colour + penetration of light through the object (*translucent green tone, беспросветно-черный*)

5. colour + volume (*пышно-синий*)

6. colour + fabric (*пурпурово-бархатный, шелковисто-лазоревый, розово-фланелевый, шелковисто-багряный*)

7. **colour** + light/dark (*light blue*)

8. **colour** + bright/pale (*pale-blue, бледно-розовый, бледно-золотой, пестровато-коричневый*)

9. colour + intensity (*rich-brown, густо-лиловый*)

10. colour + object described by this colour (*blackbooted, blue-windowed, red-shirted, white-pillared, blue-coated, blue-papered, aquamarine-eyed, red-trousered, purple-faced, turquoise-veined, седобородый, черноглазый, синеоконный, черно-волосатый*)

11. colour + object describing this colour (*snow-blue, mouse-grey, coal-black, talcuum-white, скалисто-серый, снежно-синий, облачно-голубой, кроваво-красный*)

12. colour + damp/dry (*влажно-голубой*)

13. colour + tactile sensing (*fluffy-grey, пушисто-сизый*)

14. colour + clearness (*dim, dreamy blue, мутно-карий*)

15. colour + clean/durty (*пыльно-ольховый, чисто-серебряный*)

16. colour + stone (*янтарно-коричневый*)

17. colour + material (*oak-brown, желто-деревянный*)

18. colour + metal (*silver-grey*)

19. colour + evaluative word (*dull green, indignantly blue, oppressive black, sickly blue, мрачно-фиолетово-зеленый, нездоровый синий цвет*)

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20. word describing a colour + *-colored / окрашенный* (*cream-colored, bronze-colored, blood-colored, straw-colored, violet-tinged, sky-colored, coral-tinted, фуксином окрашенный*)

21. combination *color of ... / цвета ...*(*color of young fircone, цвета сырой ветчины, мышиного цвета*)

22. colour + comparison (*красный, как апельсин-королек*)

23. **light/dark** + colour (*garnet-dark, ruby-dark, лилово-темный*)

24. **bright/pale** + colour (*bright-golden, sea-bright, copper-bright, honey-bright*)

25. **light/brillance** + colour (*мрачный йодистый блеск, медвяный блеск*)

26. preposition "with" + colour (*с прожелтью, с ржавой искрой, с фиалковыми темнотами, со ржавчиной, темно-коричневый с лиловизной*).

This classification clearly shows that colour terms present in Vladimir Nabokov's novels are, no doubt, a fruitful subject that deserves to be studied in detail. Moreover, the originality of word formation suggests the fact that direct and indirect colour terms are used by the author as a tool with a view to create an emotional and moving text, to impress the reader and to recreate a lost world – Russia that once used to be, but does not exist any longer. Thus, colour terms should be regarded as an extremely important element for fulfilling the author's intention, as well as for revealing inherent meanings hidden by Nabokov on the pages of his novels.

Synaesthesia

The empirical component of the meaning of the words describing objects is of crucial importance in Vladimir Nabokov's texts: these lexical units are built up through the author's personal vision of colour, smell, taste, form of the object etc. (Козловская, 1995: 21). Thus, the reception and interpretation of Nabokov's texts is mostly based on the reader's experience as far as sensorial perception of the environment is concerned. His mind tends to evoke scenes retained in his own memory, as well as feelings experienced in the past. As a result of the process of decoding, the reader's imagination revives the same scenes and experiences as those described by the author (Ibid.: 79).

As can be observed from the last classification adduced in the preceding section of the paper, the importance of sensorial perception in the case of Vladimir Nabokov's works may also be referred to colour terms. This physiological phenomenon is called synaesthesia – blending the products of sensorial perception modes that usually appear independently. Being,

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to some extent, present in the case of each and every person, inter-sensorial blendings can be divided into three groups:

- photisms (intense, detailed and coloured vision with eyes closed)
- phonisms (verbal hallucinations)
- chromesthesia (conversion of acoustic perception into colourful visual effects) (Barton Johnson, 1974: 84).

As far as Vladimir Nabokov's writings are concerned, we should introduce the notion of literary synaesthesia (as opposed to the psychological one). It can be described as a metaphor of senses that includes the use of words and images that would normally fit into a description of a certain type of sensorial perception (Ibid.: 85). From his early childhood Nabokov was subject to mild hallucinations, and in his autobiographical novels the writer mentions that the first time he realized the fact that he possessed this chromesthetic gift was while he was playing with a set of coloured cubes that represented the alphabet. The child observed that the colours of the cubes failed to correspond to the "real" colour of the letters. Moreover, Nabokov describes the relation between the Russian and the English versions of the autobiographical novel as the difference between capital and small letters. The importance of the form of the letters is also mentioned by Vladimir Nabokov in the description of his reaction to these texts written in two different languages. According to the author, even a minor difference in the physical form of the letter that stands for the same sound in different languages alters its colour impression. These observations indicate the fact that in the case of Vladimir Nabokov the correspondence between a sound or a letter and its colour depends on several factors such as sound itself, physiology of articulation, the form of the letter and taste (Ibid.: 87-88). Thus, there can be little doubt that sensorial experience is an important part of the colour palette of the texts analysed in the present paper.

Yet another aspect that stands out even more clearly in Vladimir Nabokov's novels is the author's polychromatism: colours and their combination are an important aspect of the writer's worldview and, at the same time, of his literary style. One of the most complex colourful images that frequently appear on the pages of his novels is that of the rainbow. The author's acronym for it in the Russian language is ВЕЁПСКЗ (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet) that corresponds to a bright, primary rainbow with red on the top of it, whereas its English counterpart KZSPYGV corresponds to a paler rainbow with red on the bottom in the author's mind. In nature there are two types of rainbow – the primary and the secondary one. The primary rainbow, therefore, is represented by Russian letters, while the

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secondary one appears in the combination of English letters. According to Donald Barton Johnson, Vladimir Nabokov's chromesthetic rainbow is, no doubt, a carefully elaborated symbol of the process of creation. Thus, physiological synaesthesia observed in the case of Vladimir Nabokov was used as a basis for the metaphor that describes his art (Ibid.: 95-97). Moreover, it would not be an exaggeration to say that synaesthesia is one of central mechanisms in the functioning of the author's memory (Ibid.: 101).

As far as lexicological studies of Vladimir Nabokov's writings are concerned, a large number of scholars observed a typical feature of the author's style consisting in adjectival combinations characterising an object from different perspectives (for example, *пурпурово-бархатный шнур*). Producing unusual combinations of words and meanings, the writer builds up occasional syntagmatics based on less obvious semantic connections that appear only in a certain context and constitute one of the most interesting tools used in Nabokov's poetics. Lexical combinability in these cases forms a new meaning that characterises Nabokov's own worldview. In the situations when there is no semantic coordination between the parts of a complex image rendered with the help of an unusual word combination, special importance is given to some hidden associative links (Козловская, op.cit.: 114-115). Such metonymical and metaphorical associations of usual adjectives that appear on the pages of a text in uncommon combinations are sometimes too unclear to be interpreted in a single way (for example, *замшевая походка, гитарные ноги*) (Виноградова, Улуханов, 1996: 270). As a result, these combinations are extremely powerful from the stylistic point of view since they never fail to produce an immediate effect on the reader and to attract his attention.

Combining visual, auditory and tactile perception is a characteristic tool of both "amplification of meaning" and elaboration of metaphors (Ibid.: 275). In the course of Vladimir Nabokov's novels some certain meanings tend to disappear and reappear later. The author creates the density of sense not only as a variety of meanings, but also as a "semantic picture" or "semantic fabric": the combination of thought and meaning, object and its image, sound and its image, and that of man and his image (Латухина, 1992: 129).

To sum up, Nabokov's texts prove to be extremely complex, filled with senses and meanings. The author elaborates the semantic fabric of his novels with great attention to each and every detail, where no word or sound is arbitrary or random. This affirmation is also true for colour terms: as has been shown, Vladimir Nabokov tends to proceed from the peculiarities of his own sensorial perception, creating lively and coloured images and a

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stylistically marked text, as well as attracting the reader's attention to occasional words and uncommon word combinations.

Conclusions

The analysis carried out in this paper has demonstrated that the diversity of colour terms in Vladimir Nabokov's texts is extremely large. Apart from "traditional" words denoting colour, the author uses quite a few indirect colour terms that do not point to a colour directly, but suggest its presence. Thereby the objects immediately associated with a certain colour penetrate into the reader's mind, acting as effectively as direct colour terms. Thus, the author creates a colourful picture not only by using colour terms proper, but also by introducing other words describing objects and phenomena from the environment that, when combined with direct colour terms, produce an impressive and original colouring due to the fact that they are immediately associated with a certain tint. Along with these words, the author tends to use the terms denoting light or its absence and the intensity of colour that also contribute to fulfilling Vladimir Nabokov's aims.

From the morphological and derivational points of view, colour terms in Vladimir Nabokov's novels were also shown to be highly varied. It has been demonstrated that words denoting colour that appear in the three novels under discussion include different parts of speech: tints and shades are rendered not only with the help of adjectives (the most common way to indicate a colour), but also by means of verbs, nouns, adverbs and participles. This diversity adds to the originality of colour rendered by these words, bringing them out and highlighting them in the text of the novel. Moreover, colour terms used by Vladimir Nabokov stand out due to their complexity. The author not infrequently tends to invent compound terms, thus creating occasional units. Numerical analysis of simple and compound terms has demonstrated that the majority of words denoting colour are, obviously, simple colour terms. However, the amount of compound words and word combinations rendering colour is also substantial – the fact that allows us to conclude that colour terms are intentionally brought out by the author, being an extremely important element for the fulfilment of the author's goals. The high level of originality of the text is reflected in the fact that the author creates long and unexpected terms, blending incompatible colours and characteristics or providing an object with an unusual colour. Derivational models of colour words are also highly varied – the fact that suggests that colour terms created by Vladimir Nabokov are not only original, but also extremely diverse, thus contributing to producing a powerful effect on the reader.

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An extremely important phenomenon for the analysis of colour terms in Vladimir Nabokov's autobiographical novels is synaesthesia. In these volumes the writer re-experiences his sensorial impressions from the past – the impressions described by means of combining a large number of perceptions: colour, sound, tactile sensations etc. Blended in a single word combination or even in a single word, synaesthetic experiences become a characteristic feature of Vladimir Nabokov's style. Moreover, such junctions stand out in the text and immediately draw the reader's attention to colour, contributing to the reproduction of a lively and detailed picture of the past.

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