

The Game Poetics of the Novel *The Death of Achilles* by B. Akunin

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Abstract—The task of the research is to reveal the characteristic features of postmodern detective fictions, specifically of the works of B. Akunin. Methodologies such as formalist approach, semantic analysis of images and comparative studies are used in this article, which leads to the conclusions that the new detective fictions, unlike the classical ones, are much more free in choosing and interpreting historical material and that the writer's strategies are to play with the reader and give him an active role in the unfolding of the text by using various literary devices. The article discusses the features of the game poetics of B. Akunin's novel *The Death of Achilles*. The system-forming components of game poetics are distinguished: stylization, playful intertextuality, theatricality of reality, the effect of deceived expectation, game structure, manifested in the ambiguity of plot lines, and game narration. The analysis also shows how the writer organically combines game mechanics and historical elements in a special kind of detective genre, as well as how he implements the interactive principle to create a provocative text.

Keywords—Boris Akunin, ludology, game poetics, detective genre, allusion, intertextuality, theatricality, stylization

I. INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Game poetics as a literary category goes back to a broader culturological concept of game. Having received its substantiation in the works of J. Huizinga, M. M. Bakhtin, game studies, also known as ludology or gaming theory, constantly attracted the interest of researchers in various fields of humanities research. The position of game discourse as the most important component of any artistic creation was initially founded and further confirmed.

The classical works of J. Huizinga, M. Bakhtin, J. F. Lyotard, G. Deleuze, J. Derrida, J. Kristeva, M. Foucault identified the main characteristics of Game, revealed its dominance in the culture of certain historical periods.

The time of domination of postmodernism gave new impetus to the development of game mechanics in literature. Game in the aesthetics and poetics of postmodernism plays

the most important system-forming role. Researchers also began to look for game elements in classic works. Generally, in all aspects of culture, new content and formal values of Game were discovered, and an expansion of its playground was indicated.

The “game” approach to the world is inherent in postmodernism. In connection with this, game components tend to become dominant in modern society. Accordingly, Game has become one of the fundamental elements of postmodern poetics. In literature, the multilevel structure of postmodern text in combination with a set of mandatory formal features of the detective genre forms a special game poetics of the latter. Many aspects of this phenomenon remain unexplored and need to be clarified.

Several articles, monographs, dissertations, collective research publications are devoted to game studies in modern scientific literature. A number of works emphasize a fundamentally new quality of Game in literature, which in the last decades of the twentieth century acquired the status of a conscious strategy. Among them, suffice it to mention the monograph by M. N. Lipovetsky “Russian postmodernism (Essays of historical poetics)” [6], I. S. Skoropanova “Russian postmodern literature: a new philosophy, a new language” [9], V. Kuritsyn “Russian literary postmodernism” [5], as well as the results of a collective study published under the title “Game poetics. Collection of scientific works of Rostov school of game poetics” [2]. In the context of this article, the most interesting is the concept of “game poetics”, actively developed in modern literary criticism.

O. A. Kornienko offers the most general definition of “game poetics”: the artistic system, elements of which have an enhanced game modus and are aimed at playing game with the reader” [4]. It is clear that this formulation lacks not only the description of how specific element functions and where lies the boundary of their functioning, but also the nomenclature of each actual game element. Nevertheless, the list of elements of game poetics must be supplemented with several more elements of the postmodern paradigm, which to certain extents manifest themselves in the works of contemporary authors, including Boris Akunin. Such elements are allusions, intentional ambiguity (the aptness of

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text to various interpretation), carnivalization, theatricality, polysemy, duality of character, irony, modification of traditional genre formulas.

II. THE WRITER BORIS AKUNIN AND HIS RETRO-DETECTIVE FICTIONS

Novels by B. Akunin aroused controversy among the literary critics. However, for many years they have enjoyed great success with mass readers, and the writer surely takes a noticeable place in modern literary process. The majority of Akunin's novels are detective stories and the popularity of the genre also contribute to the mass interest in his works.

B. Akunin actively develops the detective genre in line with postmodernism that allows him to use all variety of elements, which define the genre forms of his books: historical, ironical, espionage, political and other types of detective fiction. A special place among them is held by historical detective fiction, presented by the author generally in the form of novels. A striking example is the best-selling series of books about the adventures of Erast Fandorin.

The novel *The Death of Achilles* is among the first four novels which laid the foundation for the Fandorin series. The subtitled "a detective story about a hired killer" to a large extent defines its content, rather than its genre form. It is noteworthy that the first four books of the series were all published during the year 1998, and *The Death of Achilles* marks the entry of the hero into a new stage of life. After returning from Japan, Fandorin immediately finds himself in the center of the investigation into the murder of General Mikhail Sobolev, the victim of an assassin, behind whom stood the Imperial family.

The combination of the genre form of detective novel and the historical materials, which B. Akunin interprets depending on his own artistic "goals", can be referred to as so-called "retro-detective fiction". According to G.S. Klyuiko, the genre of retro-detective is "a type of literary work, the main plot-forming element of which is the process of crime investigation, taking place in the artistic world, stylized as texts representing a certain historical era" [3].

Developing his own version of the retro-detective fiction, Boris Akunin actively uses elements of stylization, mystification, provocation, etc. There're many postmodern and game elements of *The Death of Achilles* that we as literary critics need to delve into, in hopes of gaining a better understanding of the poetics of the text.

III. FEATURES OF THE GAME POETICS IN THE NOVEL *THE DEATH OF ACHILLES*

A. *Playful modifications of classic detective and historical genres*

B. Akunin considerably modifies many components of the classic detective genre. In particular, in *The Death of Achilles* and other novels Erast Fandorin is not always a successful detective. Having solved the murder of the

general Mikhail Sobolev, Erast Fandorin is under suspicion and is actually forced to run, fearing the charges of treason, as well as misappropriation of one million rubles, collected by general Mikhail Sobolev for military coup. And only the appearance of "Deus ex machina" in the form of Frol Vedishchev, the valet and confidant of Prince Dolgorukov, puts a happy end to his investigation in the novel: the detective receives rewards and anonymously sends the general's money to City Council, donating them for the construction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The final catharsis is carried out not in the resolution of a detective mystery, but in the neutralization of the conflict between the service to the state, the governing body and the service to one's own country, Fatherland. In other words, the dominance of the conflict between truth and falsehood, and then the hierarchically lower clashes between justice and lawlessness, good and evil, are replaced by the coexistence of a number of confrontations without a well-established hierarchy. In the case of Akunin, this replacement may be a controversy between determinism and freedom, memory and oblivion, nihilism and anti-nihilism, piety and godlessness, etc.

B. Akunin does not hide the peculiarities of his artistic method, drawing a distinction between literature and literary project, emphasizing the designedness and speculative rationality of the latter: "I thought up the multicomponent, intricate drawing. Therefore – a project. What is the difference between literature and literary project? In my opinion, it's the fact that literature takes roots in the heart, and literary projects take roots in the head." [8]

B. Akunin usually does not depict significant events that left a mark in history, or rather, if any, they serve in his novels as backgrounds, in front of which the crime investigation unfolds. A characteristic feature of the retro-detective fiction in contrast to the historical novel is that the author does not strive for historical authenticity. The life story of the "white General" Mikhail Skobelev, the prototype of the hero Mikhail Sobolev in *The Death of Achilles*, is full of great deeds and ends with a mysterious death. The real historical facts around the prototype are subject to the free distortion by the author to achieve artistic objectives, especially games with the reader, who is willing to play. Different versions of the death of real Skobelev are reflected in the investigation of the death of fictional Sobolev. At the same time, there remains a significant difference between the character and his prototype. For example, Skobelev's doubt in the value of victories that cost thousands of human lives and his reasonable, progressive political convictions are opposed to Sobolev's simplistic, romantic thirst for glory.

"He (Sobolev) believed in the historical mission of the Slavs and an unique path for Russia, I (A character who speaks the opinions of Skobelev) believed, and still believe that Russia needs not the Dardanelles, but enlightenment and a constitution" [1]. It turns out, if the reader is familiar with the real history, he can enter a new level of play with the author. It can be assumed that the text is created with an

educational goal, which is to surprise the reader with the fascination of Russian history. This also accords with the fact that B. Akunin is an advocator for the gamification of learning.

B. Allusions and intertextuality

Starting with the name *The Death of Achilles*, the novel has many allusions to Homer's Iliad and the Greek myths. The nickname "Russian Achilles" was given to general Sobolev in the previous book "The Turkish Gambit", and in the beginning of this story Fandorin asks Guchmazov, the adjutant of the general: "Long time no see! Still the Patroclus with our Achilles?" [1]. The story of the assassin Achimas Welde, in turn, contains a number of intertexts. Achimas's parents are Pelef and Fatima, whose names are similar to Peleus and Thetis. There are also other consonant names: in school Achimas killed his classmate Kikin and the teacher Tenetov, while mythical Achilles killed Trojans Cycnus and Tenes. Achimas for a time in his early years was hiding in a monastery, disguising himself as a girl, this reminds the events from the youth of Achilles, who allegedly lived on the island of Skyros together with the daughters of King Lycomedes, dressed in woman's clothes. During robbery of the house of Medvedev, in which Achimas takes part, the deceived lover of him Evgenia perishes. As Homer describes Achilles's involvement in Trojan War, princess Iphigenia thought she would be married to Achilles, instead she is to be killed as a human sacrifice. Like Achilles, Achimas during his long, bloody career has never been wounded. The storyline of Achimas echoes the legend of the great warrior Achilles as a whole and in the details, which is apparent in the ending: Fandorin put an arrow into Achimas's heel. Moreover, making Achimas the main narrator in the second part of the book, the author in his game text tries to analyze the inner world of the mighty, coldbloodedly rational, but immoral killer, a double of the famous hero of the Trojan War. Achimas is a kind of nihilist, and he dies at the end of the book exactly because of his deviation from nihilistic principles. Thus, the author reveals a preferred theme of nihilism, which is as relevant at the present as in the end of the XIX century.

Allusions presuppose the presence of a prepared and attentive reader who, in the process of intellectual games, is able to put together pieces of the puzzle and uncover not only the full picture of the crime, but also intentions of the writer. It's unlikely for a mass reader to comprehend the deep artistic meanings hidden in allusions and reminiscences inaccessible to him, still, he can surely appreciate the absorbing narrative. This kind of game strategy forms a double encoding, therefore attracts both elite bookman and reader, whose interest hardly goes beyond detective intrigues.

C. Game elements in the structure and the narration

From the numerous rumors and gossips generated by the death of Mikhail Skobelev, B. Akunin constructs his own version of the mysterious circumstances around the death of General Sobolev, which involves German intelligence, the Moscow underworld and representatives of the imperial

family. The game poetics of the writer is developed as a system of interaction of many components, which form several semantic layers realized directly in the text as well as beyond it, at the "author-reader" level.

Let's give examples. The plot advances, in a certain sense, due to the chaotic struggle within the power structure of the Russian Empire in the late XIX century. The novel shows the aggravation of social problems, including the stratification of society and the poor state of young generations. The general lack of conjugation led to the weakening of the Empire, thus provoked foreign interference and an increase in crime. All this is laconically weaved into a single artistic whole; "La femme fatale" Wanda, the coquette and singer who indirectly killed both "Achilles", belongs to one of the most universal culture images. In the novel, Wanda performs an important function not only in terms of plot, but also in the sense that she connects all the female characters under a theme about woman's fate; At the beginning of the epilogue a picture is described where "... locomotive Erikson eagerly puffs smoke, ready to dart off and gallop on the shining rails in pursuit of the sun" [1]. This picture contains meaningful allusions. The locomotive is most likely named after Erik Erikson, whose works about youth and old age, life cycle and identification have a significant impact on the themes of Akunin's books. The image of a steaming machine ready to break loose tells about the anticipation of a new time full of events and the impatience of the technology-enhanced mankind, captured by the ever-accelerating pace of life.

The reader's knowledge of the impending historical catastrophes gives the "smoke" an ominous hue. "Run after the sun" implies, perhaps, the spiritual orientation of Russia to the West, and imminent arrival of "sunset" and "twilight". Another interpretation is associated with Kua-fu, the giant in ancient Chinese mythology, who was puzzled by the location of the sun at night therefore decided to pursue it and even caught it. Having caught up with the sun, Kua-fu could not stand the outgoing heat. Lagged behind, he continued to follow the sun from East to West until he died of thirst and exhaustion.

Boris Akunin builds multiple storylines in this book. Every step of their development brings the reader closer to solving the mysterious murder of the general and to the final confrontation of Erast Fandorin and the assassin Achimas Welde. In fact, here a special literary device of double reading is in play.

The novel *The Death of Achilles* consists of three parts plus "the last Chapter, where everything is arranged", which works as an epilogue. The first two parts of the novel have a high degree of isomorphism. The first part is entitled "Fandorin" named after the hero detective Erast Fandorin. In the second part "Achimas", Fandorin hand over the narration to his antagonist Achimas Welde. There the reader gets the opportunity to play all the plot situations already known to him from the first part a second time, to look at them from a different point of view. It is clear that the detective game between the protagonist and the antagonist

has already been played and it can not be replayed. All story events remain the same, but you can evaluate how successful or unsuccessful the moves made by Fandorin and Achimas. The author takes full advantage of the effect of expectation and recognition, making it much more effective through the technique of “the unknown known.”

It is worth noting that the first part of the book is printed in a more old-fashioned font, and the second part is minimalistic. The fonts intuitively correspond to the temper of each independent narrator. In the third part, two different font alternate when Fandorin and Achimas, mirroring each other as hero and anti-hero, gradually converges and finally came face-to-face. At the end of this part the narration turned into a passage of their dialogue, visually arranged in two fonts. In this dialogue, the main intrigue of *The Death of Achilles* is resolved, and the image of the anti-hero is fully revealed. At the same time, the evolution of Erast Petrovich is completed, and there is a certain merging of two mutually reflecting heroes. Such interpretation is facilitated, for example, by the dying words of Achimas about the inevitable death of Fandorin due to “national necessity” by the orders of his own superiors, because he “knows too much”. Understanding the hopelessness of his situation, Fandorin is ready to flee Russia and even reluctantly agrees to fulfill the request of the dying enemy to transfer fifty thousand rubles to Wanda. Hypothetically we can assume that Fandorin, to some extent, identifies himself with Achimas, at least he agrees with the analysis of the situation and considers himself a washed-up man who “lost everything – service, honor, Meaning of life” [1]. Only in the last Chapter, the epilogue, the conflict is miraculously resolved, Fandorin chooses the only acceptable way for him to stay true to himself and serve his own country, Russia.

Another spectacular device of playful plot design in the novel is the skillful delivery of intrigue. For example, when the rescue of the prodigal son Pierre Fekhtel is described, the reader is prone to foresee the positive results and needs only to finish reading the following pages.

D. Effect of deceived expectation

There are established canons of retro-detective fiction. The founder of the genre in the Russian literature is thought to be L. Yuzefovich, who wrote three novels about the adventures of a real historical person – the head of the St. Petersburg investigations police Putilin [7]. B. Akunin contributed a lot to the development of the retro-detective genre, significantly expanding its horizons.

The mutation of traditional genres is typical of postmodern poetics. B. Akunin considerably alters the form of classic detective story. While keeping its main characteristics (presence of crime, riddle and punishment, opposition between a criminal and a detective, presence of an assistant and a witness, determinacy, use of false moves, etc.), the writer largely changes the game rules. First of all it concerns the so-called “deceived expectation” of the reader. The reader receives only partial information and will probably be misled into a false version. Even a “naive” reader knows about this feature of detective fiction and

understands that the author deliberately leads him away from the truth. The confusing plots, so popular in the classic detective genre, forms a plot-compositional game in the novel *The Death of Achilles*. The reader is provided with implicit “code” to solve the puzzle, which keeps him interested throughout the novel. Moreover, the author makes the personages, police officer Karachentsev and Erast Fandorin, go through some possible versions of the committed crime so the reader gets the opportunity to compare them with his own assumptions.

E. Masquerade, “false attributes” and theatricality of reality

The confusing plot of the novel is underlined by constant renaming and disguising of the personages. Erast Fandorin appears on the first pages of the novel as a Parisian dandy with an intriguing appearance, but under glamour and showiness lies something more respectable, which is indicated by the gray at the temples, a cliché, but still an unmistakable detail. At the same time the governor regarded Fandorin as an overseas guest who just came back from Japan. Further into the story, depending on the situation, Fandorin appears as a “prowling” ninja, stalking his enemy, a vulgar, despotic merchant like one of A. N. Ostrovsky’s characters, a poor hunchback, etc. Fandorin has an arsenal of tools and an actual theatre makeup room for the purpose of changing looks. Fake humpback is a quite traditional method of disguise. But the use of a bull’s bladder as an analogue of eye lens in the XIX century to create the illusion of leukoma should be considered an element of game poetics, referring to the experience of later cinema art.

The espionage element of the novel presupposes camouflage and disguise. German intelligence agent Herr Knabe also turned out to be a master of transfiguration. Fandorin would never have recognized him under the guise of a red-bearded mister in a checkered jacket, in contrast to “blonde of the third degree with a slight reddishness” [1], if not warned ahead of time. Erast Fandorin’s Japanese servant Masa can be seen in different images too. Each of his dress-up, for practical purposes or for the manifestation of exoticism, is important for the plot or ideological construction of the text.

Another feature of B. Akunin’s game strategy in this book is to integrate into the system of game poetics the device of “transfiguring” various surrounding objects. This technique can be called “false attributes”, when an objects are designed to be misperceived. Several times the archaic and ritual role of the ceremonial sword, which is a mandatory attribute of the officialese uniform, is played out ironically. When equipping Fandorin for the meeting with the Governor-General, his servant and assistant samurai Masa felt that it is improper to go there without a sword. In fact, Fandorin’s sword is just a ceremonial one for parades, but the Japanese delivered it to his master “reverently on his outstretched hands” [1]. However, the Governor-General did not appreciate the observance of etiquette and, in his own way, made a friendly remark: “Why are you stopping at the doorstep? Come over here and have a sit. The uniform is

unnecessary, let alone the sword. You can simply come in a coat” [1]. Having played its ritual role, the “short skewer” is respectfully wrapped in silk and put into the chiffonier by Masa. Once again the sword appears in the text, when Masa “brought the owner on outstretched hands the damned skewer” [1], assuming that Fandorin, challenged to a duel, will have to fight with swords. Later the same sword ironically turns out to be a useless decoration when Masa tries to commit suicide to save his honor. Masa lost his honor precisely because he naively trusts any person in an official uniform, with impressive sword and solemn demeanor, thus gave the crucial portfolio to the deceitful enemy. In the novel swords have become metaphors and are repeatedly used in the author's game. In the same spirit “false attributes” are applied to a portfolio with one million rubles. As it turns out in the end, the money didn't serve as motivation for the murder of the General, and surprisingly everybody was hindered by it and wanted to get rid of it. Similar jocosity can also be found in minor details, e.g. the headscarf and the robe on Masa, who improvised a disguise, turn out to be the mat and the cover from a hotel chair.

Erast Fandorin not only masquerades and changes clothes, he is in deed an ingenious impersonator. For example, in the role of the merchant, he plays a little fool: pours champagne into a tea Cup, and from there into a saucer and drinks with a loud squish. In the novel Fandorin is acknowledged by others to be “an unsurpassed master of masquerade”, that for him “to pretend to be a local criminal is a piece of cake”. Theatricality in the novel is not limited to dressing up and role-playing. The scene of General Sobolev's funeral is depicted as a show, a grandiose spectacle, where each participant plays a hyperbolized role intended for him. On the eve of the ceremony, the characters seem to be running backstage and preparing for their acting. All of them are at the same time players of shady intrigues, and actors on a brightly lit stage.

The author is happy to bring the masquerade to the point of absurdity. Reputable Xavier Feofilaktovich Grushin, the former detective officer of Moscow police, volunteered for an undercover operation and actually “died on his beloved stage”. Acting is also inevitable in each brilliantly executed murder by the antagonist Achimas. His incredible art of disguise deserves a comparison with the excellence of Achilles. The disguises of the characters are always flawless by themselves, their true identities are never revealed for “technical” reasons.

In the book, passers-by at the site of the final confrontation are supposed to be allies in disguise, then to the surprise of the hero and the reader, for some reason they are just commoners, but later at the climax one of them turns out to be the faithful assistant Masa, and in the epilogue the reader understands that again he's been deceived by the author, because among the passers-by hides the secretive and observant valet Vedishchev.

Most of the main characters of the novel have several names. General Sobolev – Achilles, the hero of Plevna and of Turkestan, the White General, the Russian bear,

Bonaparte, the Corsican, the knight without fear and reproach. Achimas Welde – Aksahir, which means White Sorcerer, Athanasius Petrovich Welde, count of Santa Croce. Governor-General of Moscow Prince Dolgoruky - Yuri Dolgoruky, Volodya the big Nest, Vladimir the Red Sun. These names contain references either to the real history, or to the author's own texts, sometimes to both. The characters with hidden identification are often given suggestive or ironic code names: Mr. Nemo, Clonov, monsieur NN, etc.

F. Playful references to modernity

In addition to numerous references to historical facts, cultural heritage and literary monuments in the novel, B. Akunin systematically make references to modernity, any attentive reader can surely notice them. For example, Achimas spent two years in Roulettenburg, the fictional town from the novel by F. Dostoevsky “The Gambler”; Fandorin repeatedly quotes the sayings of Confucius; When the Governor-General got into a traffic jam consisting of wagons and carts on the Sabbath, he discusses the possibility of building metro in Moscow on the model of London and make a modern habitual remark: “We're barely crawling” [1]. No less recognizable is the passage about schemers, embezzlers and the necessity to bribe policeman, exciseman, and sanitary doctor, just to open a shop: “and none into the Treasury! The pants worth no more than a ruble and a half, but 3 rubles is the price” [1]. Another “dramatic” story referring to modern times is about how “merchants in violation of all divine and human laws buy official stamps from excisemen and paste them on the bottles of poor quality moonshine, which will be sold as certified products” [1].

References to modern society in *The Death of Achilles* are quite diverse, sometimes ironic. Already in 1882, when the detective story is set, the chief police officer gained information by tapping a telephone. During the chase for the German spy Erast Fandorin, quite like a science fiction writer, dreams of how good it would be to have a “mobile” telephone in the carriage to call the gendarmerie office and coordinate an intercept. Later, Erast Petrovich makes a phone call, pretending to be someone else, to find out the information he needs. According to him, “telephone hoax” is extremely easy, because of the imperfection of communication it's difficult to recognize the voice of the person you're talking to. Then Fandorin, a prankster of the XIX century, thinks about the need to take this into account for the future, a solution may be to come up with passwords for contacts, “so as not to get tricked” [1].

G. Stylization and the theme of history

In this retro-detective fiction of B. Akunin, historical reality as such is absent. However, certain historical events are brought in to give the text sufficient “credibility”. The repeated mention of the construction of Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which was consecrated a year after the events described, creates a specific historical reference for the reader to attach to. Other details reinforce the effect: the insatiable August fires, two-headed Golden eagle,

description of the dueling code, etc. Names of the disappeared Moscow hotels, like “England” and “Dussaut” and other historical objects, e.g. the Khitrov market, along with the ones that survived to this day (Stoleshnikov lane, Okhotny Ryad, Red gate, Theatric driveway, Lubyanka) give the reader solid landmarks to immerse himself in historic Moscow. Fandorin reads in “Moscow provincial Gazette” the news about the works of Turgenev and Saltykov-Shchedrin, the journey of Miklukho-Maklay. It is the combination of historical certainty with many small details drawing supposedly authentic scenes of the last quarter of the XIX century that allows the author to create a stylized game reality from different kinds of components (quotes, allusions, reminiscences, established genre formulas, stylistic techniques, carnival masks, names and renamings), which all fit into the historical framework.

Importantly, history itself and such derivative motifs as the perception of history, the relationship between man and history, the significance of historical knowledge, etc., which are invariably present in other books by B. Akunin, manifest themselves here too. Fandorin begins the investigation with the words “...the death of Mikhail Dmitrievich Sobolev is an event of national scale, and even more than that, of historical significance.” [1]. Wanda as a suspect thought about her punishment in this way: “You see, I’ll go down into history in the manner of a new Delilah. What do you think, Monsieur Fandorin, will they write about me in the school textbooks?” [1].

B. Akunin draws attention to history as well as other themes not only through the mouths of his characters, but also in a more interesting and effective way: with the help of cleverly arranged situations and interactions of images within the fictional world, which lead the reader to the right questions. Via these questions the reader may spontaneously join the game with the author and the text.

H. The game of mirroring hero and villain

One of B. Akunin’s constant techniques is the external or internal similarities between protagonist and antagonist, which in turn highlights the key difference between them. In *The Death of Achilles*, for example, the criminal Sasha the Little resembles Erast Fandorin in his flawless mustache, sweetness and agility. As the plot develops, the reader realizes that it’s cowardice that distinguishes Sasha from the courageous protagonist, and this decisive trait is physically expressed in Sasha’s frail physique. As for the main antagonist Achimas, he and Fandorin are alike in their nature, life experience, analytical mind, and the fact that they are both “ninja” (literally translated as Man of patience). Consequently, the game around this pair is much more complicated, and there’re many interesting facts to be found. For example, Fandorin is characterized as invulnerable to bad luck, and Achimas takes pleasure in defeating randomness with his prudence.

The iconic feature of Achimas, extremely bright eyes, is most likely related to the Chinese proverb “White-eyed Wolf”. Wolves are widely considered the symbol of coldbloodedness and pragmatism due to their hunting

strategy of patiently exhausting the prey and a complete lack of moral attitudes like gratitude or loyalty. Since these traits are more observed in the wolves with white eyes, “White-eyed Wolf” became a synonym of inhuman. Achimas Welde is portrayed exactly as a merciless, immoral beast, whose soul is disfigured by the helplessness of his father, the violent actions and indifference of people, also by the rapacity and cruelty of his uncle. On the opposite side stands Fandorin, a Confucian nobleman, by definition striving for the ideal of the highest morality and opposing “worthless man”, “little man” (Sasha Little), the embodiment of egoistic pragmatism (Achimas and the others). In this way, the opposition of the hero and the anti-hero tackles the motif of morality, its formation and development in an individual.

IV. CONCLUSION

The provocative text created by B. Akunin is built on the interactive principle. With the help of game poetics, the text not only engages the reader in the process of perception, but also generates outspread associative links, thus extends its semantic field. The attractiveness of *The Death of Achilles* (and other novels by the writer) derives from the fact that it constantly reminds the reader of something familiar (e.g. historical and literary allusions) and helps him overcome the unfamiliar without breaking the stylistic unity or the substantial outline of the text. Despite the fact that the complex design sometimes inevitably encumbers the text, weakens its artistic integrity and aesthetic power, B. Akunin’s literary projects stand out with their divertingness and innovative experimentations with forms.

Utilizing the concept of postmodern game, B. Akunin actively involves precedent texts and plot devices, imitates someone else’s style to create his own self-sufficient artistic world. The organic fusion of the game elements and the historical background enlivens the narrative, it gives the detective, adventurous core of the novel the necessary authenticity, compels the reader to accept the author’s fantastic versions of the historical events and to immerge.

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