
The Noise of Time: Shostakovich in Biofiction

Li Jin

Department of Foreign Languages, College of Zhongbei, Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, China

Email address:

jeanneli@163.com

To cite this article:

Li Jin. *The Noise of Time: Shostakovich in Biofiction*. *English Language, Literature & Culture*. Vol. 5, No. 3, 2020, pp. 107-111.

doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20200503.15

Received: August 29, 2020; **Accepted:** September 11, 2020; **Published:** September 21, 2020

Abstract: The life of Dmitri Shostakovich, a Soviet composer and Russian intellectual who was censored under the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin, features in many bio-works. Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time* is a reconstruction of the well-known composer's life story, and it confronts the readers with the deconstruction of biographical conventions. In the novel, Barnes uses biographical and fictional techniques in portraying a person's life to reflect on the relationship between art and history, artist and power, and shows that historical truth is reconstituted, reordered, or reconstructed in a selective way. This article is focused on the narrative modes and re-presentation of the historical subject in *The Noise of Time*. By emphasizing formal features and their impact upon perception and interpretation of history, this analysis considers the genre of biofiction as a narrative for achieving a sense of "poetic truth" of Shostakovich's time. By relating history with the theory of neo-historical biofiction, Barnes reminds us that history might have been concealed in totalitarian society but could also be restored among the many stories by and about the individual—to connect the histories with his stories. Thus, we should regard *The Noise of Time* as an amphibious art form, which ideally has both to obey the constraints of evidence and to respond creatively to the challenge of making literary form and meaning.

Keywords: Julian Barnes, *The Noise of Time*, Narrative, Biofiction

1. Introduction

Perhaps there is no other composer's life stories fascinate us in history as Dmitri Dmitriyevich Shostakovich (1906-1975) who has been at the center of so much controversy. This Russian composer was hailed by his Russian comrades as a great nationalist patriot. And few had started to question his public persona as a faithful socialist supporter. The life of Dmitri Shostakovich has appeared in many bio-works, raising many questions of larger implications of the relation between art and history, artist and the power. Julian Barnes's 2016 publication of a book called *The Noise of Time* adopts a narrative form: biofiction, which combines the traditional biographical forms with many modern or postmodern concepts. Laying disputes of music, politics, and life of the artist aside, Barnes's portrait of Shostakovich tweaks historical truth with fiction to offer greater explicitness: that Shostakovich is indeed a secret dissenter, an ambiguous hero:

"My hero was a coward. Or rather, often considered himself a coward. Or rather, was placed in a position in which it was impossible not to be a coward. You or I would have been

cowards in his position, and had we decided to be the opposite of a coward – a hero – we would have been extremely foolish. Those who stood up to power in those days were killed and members of their family, friends and associates were disgraced, sent to camps, or executed. So being a coward was the only sensible choice" [1].

Researchers mainly agree that Barnes's book operates from biography to fiction and is meant to suggest the idea of art silencing the "noise of time". And many reject the authenticity *The Noise of Time* and consider it an experiment in life-writing because the author makes liberal use of the non-referential (imaginary) elements and fictional techniques in picturing a person's life [2]. Dorrit Cohn says in *The Distinction of Fiction*, fictional narratives do contain real-world references, but they "cannot refer to the real world" once they enter in the fiction [3]. Barnes's narrative configuration would certainly be difficult to be read as biological fictions which are wholly composed of real-world facts. Techniques as discrete fragments of truth, free indirect discourse, and intertextual parody clearly mark his text as fiction [4]. So, is *The Noise of Time* still a valuable representation of Shostakovich's life and beliefs? If it is, what kind of "truths" do novelist want to give

to readers? How do they challenge or support particular historical narratives? And how does literary form contribute to the contemporary understanding of a figure from the past? Therefore this study will analyze Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time* in hope to offer possible answers to these questions.

2. Biofiction and Its Narrative

Biofiction emerges from the urge of many postmodern writers and artists to bring historical figures of the past onto the page. Biofiction is an essential part of contemporary literary culture because it provides a creative way for authors to offer a simulacrum of a real person's life. The study of biographical fiction/biofiction is more commonly called life-writing studies [5]. Researches on popular works like J. M. Coetzee's *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace: A Novel* (1997), Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (2000), and David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004) have drawn a great deal of attention and interest in academe. And there is undoubtedly a need for more researches on famous figures who appears in multiple biographical works.

Biofiction combines the traditional biographical knowledge with the strong desire to create something spectacular when narrating the lives of people who existed in history [5]. It is a narrative product that relies less on historical necessities and contributes more to the reversal in our historical thinking. Biographical fiction writer like Barnes resists categorization because he thinks his work blurs genre and transgress the boundary between fact and fiction. He claims that "I'm a trans-genre writer; I don't think when I'm writing: 'What category does this fall into? What sort of novel is it?' It's just the sort of novel I want to write." [1] Unlike biographers, biofiction writer may go beyond the historical facts and meditate historical events with his own perception. In other words, they fictionalize facts from the past to construct the tale they wish to tell. As they use imaginative speculation to create a sense of their "biographee", the narrative is, therefore, a discourse that consistently represents an effort to reconstruct, or reinvent a past [5]. There is no longer one truth, but there are other truths that generated from the subjective perception of the narrator. And the reader can compare historical events with the contemporary interpretation of them. What biofiction writer always does is using some of the same names and narratives (fictional and nonfictional) to forge a permeability between his or her text and other past texts, such as auto/biographies, memoirs, letters, documents, and so on.. The novel and historical sources are intersexual. For the author, constructing a text means a process of selection, manipulation and interpretation of various historical sources.

In terms of the writing of Shostakovich, Julian Barnes admits that this novel is completed with reference to two main sources: Elizabeth Wilson's *Shostakovich: A Life Remembered* (1994) and Solomon Volkov's *Testimony: The Memoirs of Shostakovich* (1979), the latter of which caused huge debate over its authenticity [6]. Barnes says in the Author's Note, "I have treated it as I would a private diary: as appearing to give

the full truth, yet usually written at the same time of day, in the same prevailing mood, with the same prejudices and forgettings" [7]. This reveals, then, historical facts recorded or reconstituted by the author in the novel are highly subjective. Readers have to compare the author's subjective perception of the event with the historical event of its "pretexts" constantly. The book offers readers, of course, an opportunity to doubt the ontological status of characters and the conventional discourses. As a result, the intersexual structure of biofiction calls the readers for their surging interests—not in a biographical truth, but a higher truth value about life.

The Noise of Time starts with a Russian proverb in italics in the opening section: "one to hear, one to remember and one to drink" [7]. The character with these qualities seems unlikely to become a hero. No ambitions, no hopes. The prelude suggests author's salute metaphorically to Shostakovich as a hero of great moral complexity [8, 9]. Being the main preoccupation of author's imagination, Barnes chooses to construct the subject in silent detachment from outward, turning inward upon the "self". Compared with the external "noise of time", Shostakovich's voice is made from the silence and pain. The whole of his struggle, pain and shame at his musical compromise marks him off many conventional pattern writings of a tragic hero [10]. Barnes's selection of this narrative mode makes a very emotional sense of the subject's life. Or let's say, distinction and mobility of biofiction might go beyond any fate and touch onto the same concept of a person suffering under his or her political system.

3. Narration in Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time*

Barnes writes *The Noise of Time* with a third-person point of view and frequent use of internal focalization. The novel consists of three parts which describe three critical moments of Shostakovich's life. In particular, Barnes mentions three leap year, 1936, 1948, and 1960, to emphasize how Shostakovich seeks compromise with power and with art. Internal focalization are used throughout the story to show what is thinking [10]. This type of restriction of narrative information allows readers to see the suffering of a humanized character "Dmitri Dmitrievich", rather than a distant historical figure. The first part of the novel entitled *On Landing* starts with the scene in front of the lift where Shostakovich prepares for his arrest, having his luggage ready to be taken away. Though mentally and physically prepared, Shostakovich's sense of fear and intense panic of losing his family, wife and two children, are shown in the following passage:

"They always come for you in the middle of the night. And so, rather than be dragged from the apartment in his pyjamas, or forced to dress in front of some contemptuously impassive NKVD man, he would go to bed fully clothed, lying on top of the blankets, a small case already packed on the floor beside him. He barely slept, and lay there imagining the worst things a man could imagine. His restlessness in turn prevented Nita from sleeping. Each

would lie there, pretending; also pretending not to hear and smell the other's terror. One of his persistent waking nightmares was that the NKVD would seize Galya and pack her off—if she was lucky—to a special orphanage for children of enemies of the state. Where she would be given a new name and a new character; where she would be turned into a model Soviet citizen, a little sunflower lifting her face towards the great sun that called itself Stalin" [7].

Such fearful and the threatening scene happened everywhere in 1936. Shostakovich is "like hundreds of others across the city, waiting, night after night, for arrest" [7]. Following the stream of consciousness mode, the narrative brings out Shostakovich's upbringing. Backstories of his mother, his first love Tanya and Nina provides background information relevant to the Bolshevik government. Narration digresses a little to put out the topic of Shostakovich against his mother, "he knew that she used to read his diary. So he would deliberately write into it, for a date a few weeks ahead, 'Suicide'" [7]. While going wildly, his memory is his only weapon against political power and its principles. Barnes narrates Shostakovich's mental state and actions in an ironic way, leaving hilarious images of the Stalin period of time. When his thought is interrupted by the noise from the real world, he is "empty of memory," clumsily "knocking over" the suitcase that rested against him [7]. The technique of free indirect discourse, suggested by Dorrit Cohn, which is in contrast to the psycho-narration typical of biography, marks a text as fiction [3].

The Narrator later mentions the incident that Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* offends the Stalin government. Criticism gets to his music that is soon described as "muddle instead of music", "non-political and confusing", "fidgety, neurotic" [7]. Shostakovich becomes then "the enemy of the people". In 1936, Shostakovich had his first encounter with Power, whose name is Zakrevsky. Zakrevsky's threat pushes Shostakovich into a state of restlessness and influences his entire life. Barnes chooses to depict this interrogator with a different version in his novel. Ironically, after the interrogation, "Zakrevsky had himself fallen under suspicion. His interrogator interrogated. His arrester arrested" [7]. However, Zakrevsky's disappearance does not relieve any anxiety for Shostakovich. He spent his whole life waiting for the landing of the noise.

The second part entitled *On the Plane* writes about Shostakovich's journey to America in 1949, where his music enjoys great success and where he is asked to make political speeches written by other representatives of the Soviet Union. "Anyone with an ounce of political understanding would know that he hadn't written the speeches he gave" [7]. It is a humiliating experience, and it is Shostakovich's second encounter with Power, "it was commonplace to say that tyranny turned the world upside down, and yet it was true" [11]. In the creation of the hybrid form of facts and fiction, Barnes selects jumping points to outline the tyranny of the Soviet Union and the living conditions of thousands of Soviet artists. Under the political pressure, Shostakovich tries to save his music from "the noise of time", and in doing so he has no

choice but to sell his soul, following Stalin's invitation to be a Party delegate of the Soviet Union attending the conference. The narrative voice of Shostakovich's inner self overcomes him: "part of him was conscious that the slightest wrong syllable might land him in a labour camp, while another part of him, to his surprise, was beyond fear" [7]. Unable to reject Stalin's order, he tries to make a bargain for his musical work over the phone:

"The fact is, you see, that I am in a very difficult position. In America, my music is often played, whereas over here it is not played."

"What do you mean, Dmitri Dmitrievich, that your music is not played?"

"It is forbidden. As is the music of many of my colleagues in the Union of Composers."

"Forbidden? Forbidden by whom?"

"By the State Commission for Repertoire."

"And who gave such an order?"

"It must have been one of the leading comrades."

"No", the voice of Power replied. "We didn't give that order."

He let Power consider the matter, which it did" [7].

The conversation is written in the direct form of dialogues so as to underline the textual world's similarity to the external world. Thus readers are inclined to believe the conversation happens in a real-world, and accept the textual history as objective history unconsciously.

The story of this phone call is a famous Shostakovich lore, and it appears in *English in Shostakovich: A Life, Shostakovich: A Life Remembered, and Testimony: The Memoris of Shostakovich*. Barnes shows in the writer's note that the novel is completed wholly with the help of Solomom Volkov's *Testimony*. But the phone call to Shostakovich, one most frightening event in the composer's life, has its different versions in the fiction and memoirs [12]. Just as the story being interpreted differently, history presented in the text serves to contribute the understanding on complexities of the dialogue between the artist and Power, on admissible limits for an artist to look for compromises with the power and with himself.

The last chapter, titled *In the Car* recounts the Shostakovich's hopeless later life and the loss of all his insistence. Due to the compromises he constantly made with the regime, Shostakovich feels more and more torn between fear of getting arrested, social commitment, and the claim of artistic autonomy. When he feels that he owes back freedom to compose, Power continues to hold interests in him. The third and last conversation Shostakovich had with Power happens in 1960. Although Power becomes "vegetarian" in Nikita Khrushchev's period, it still functions "by the traditional methods of the old meat-eating days" [7].

Barnes makes efforts to show Shostakovich's secret dissent. Pospelov tries to persuade Shostakovich to join the Party. Shostakovich shows resistance against his demand at the beginning. For example, he says that he "would never join a party which kills" [7]. However, Power overwhelms him again and again: "perhaps it is not for you to judge your worthiness"

[7], and so he submits to Power's demand at last as a dying man. Afterwards, he blames himself for lacking self-respect, and for being a coward, "under the pressure of Power, the self cracks and splits" [7]. The narrative brings up the topic suicide again, "he thought of suicide, of course, when he signed the paper put in front of him; but since he was already committing moral suicide, what would be the point of physical suicide?" [7]. In this way, he becomes in elderly years what he despised in youth, a coward:

"But to be a coward was to embark on a career that lasted a lifetime. You couldn't ever relax. You had to anticipate the next occasion when you would have to make excuses for yourself, dither, cringe, reacquaint yourself with the taste of rubber boots and the state of your own fallen, abject character. Being a coward required pertinacity, persistence, a refusal to change – which made it, in a way, a kind of courage. He smiled to himself and lit another cigarette. The pleasures of irony had not yet deserted him" [7].

The narrator tells readers that the third and final conversation with Power is the hardest attack on composer's freedom of faith. Shostakovich is forced to sell out in the worst possible ways for an artist, "They had promised to leave him alone. They never left him alone. Power continued speaking to him" [7]. In *The Noise of Time*, Barnes arranges a long-span process of essential disclosure for the negative aspects of Soviet past. In fact, Barnes's irony is direct: whether it is political centralization in 1930s or decentralization in 1960s, no artist can have freedom of belief and creation. Dmitri Dmitrievich Shostakovich's whole life and music career has been threatened by the Soviet communist regime, which uses discursive advantage to fabricate fantasies about "engineering the human soul" and fake stories of the past.

"It had never happened, of course, but the story was repeated often for its veracity to be accepted. This was a nonsense: it wasn't true—it couldn't be true—because you cannot lie in music. [...] What could be put up against the noise of time? Only that music which is inside ourselves – the music of our being – which is transformed by some into real music. Which, over the decades, if it is strong and true and pure enough to drown out the noise of time, is transformed into the whisper of history" [7].

The regime will rewrite one's story unless one survives and preserves one's truth. This fact echoes the same statement each chapter of the novel starts with, "All he knew was that this was the worst time" [7]. The only way one can approach historical truth is to keep his memories in stories, keep history alive. Not only can history be open to our interpretation, but so is Shostakovich's identity. Barnes's version might or might not give a sensible "truth" of history [13, 14]. But like Shostakovich's music, it encapsulates all of Shostakovich's life experiences and moments, hinting at subject's fictive inner identity and speaking the last word.

4. Conclusion

Julian Barnes's *The Noise of Time* is a creative representation of the well-known Russian composer Dmitri

Shostakovich. It is written in the genre of biofiction which helps establish a sense of poetic truth of Shostakovich's time. In this novel, formal techniques and thematic content are combined in the exploration and representation of varying discourses of history [15]. We can find Barnes's attempt to construct a model of hero that is suited to the fearfulness of his own time. We are shown that how does an artist and man struggle with the power and how does he compromise yet achieve an expression of his personal voice. However, the analysis of the text realizes that both the preservation of fact and the celebration of fiction are not easy tasks. By relating history with the theory of neo-historical biofiction, Barnes also repeatedly reminds us the multiple facets of history that might have been concealed in a totalitarian society.

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (SFLEP) of China under *grant number 2019JS0044B*.

References

- [1] Preston, Alex. The Noise of Time review—Julian Barnes's masterpiece. *The Guardian*, 17, Jan. Retrieved January 30, 2017, from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/jan/17/the-noise-of-time-julian-barnes-review-dmitri-shostakovich>.
- [2] Jeremy, Denk (2016). "The Noise of Time, by Julian Barnes Book Review". *The New York Times*, (5): 9.
- [3] Cohn, Dorrit. *The Distinction of Fiction*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999, 26-35.
- [4] White, H. "The historical text as literary artifact" of R. Geoffrey *The History and Narrative Reader*. London: Routledge (2001): 221-236.
- [5] Middeke, M. & H. Werner. *Biofictions: The Rewriting of Romantic Lives in Contemporary Fiction and Drama*. New York: Camden House, 1999.
- [6] Volkov, Solomon. *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich: As Related to and Edited by Solomon Volkov*. London: Faber and Faber, 1979, 48.
- [7] Barnes, Julian. *The Noise of Time*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2016, vii, 15, 23, 63, 80, 123-135, 165-184.
- [8] Nikil, Saval. (2016). Julian Barnes and the Shostakovich Wars. *The New Yorker*, (5): 26-28.
- [9] Pateman, Matthew. *Julian Barnes*. Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002.
- [10] Childs, Peter. *Julian Barnes*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011.
- [11] Lasdun, James. (2016). How Shostakovich Survived Stalin. *The Guardian*, (1): 9-11.
- [12] Michael H. M. Ng. "Is Julian Barnes Reliable in Narrating the Noise of Time?" *English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1: 2019.

- [13] Herman, David. *Basic Elements of Narrative*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 2009.
- [14] Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: UP of Columbia, 1980.
- [15] White, Hayden. *The content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987.