

NABOKOV’S IDIOMS:  
TRANSLATING FOREIGNNESS

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Symposium Overview,  
18-19 February 2016

*A two-day symposium hosted by the Department of Germanic and Slavic Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara in honor of Donald Barton Johnson.*



**Sara Pankenier Weld and Donald Barton Johnson  
Special Collections, Davidson Library**

The “Nabokov’s Idioms: Translating Foreignness” symposium held at the University of California, Santa Barbara honored Professor Emeritus Donald Barton Johnson, the founder of the journal *Nabokov Studies* and a central figure in the field of Nabokov studies, whose generous contributions to all things Nabokov illuminate the complexities of Vladimir Nabokov’s works and the polyglot author’s many intellectual pursuits. As Zoran Kuzmanovich, the Vice-President of the International Vladimir Nabokov Society and the current editor of *Nabokov Studies*, expressed it when he offered introductory remarks to honor Don, “Don seems to have dropped the kind of scholarly crumbs that when consumed and thoroughly digested lead us to an appreciation of the mysterious, the marvelous, and the truly enigmatic in Nabokov’s work.”

True to the title of the symposium, the theme that brought the Nabokov scholars and enthusiasts together in Santa Barbara was translation. Translation was an inalienable part of Nabokov’s artistic experiments. His uncompromising stance on “literalism,” as expressed in the act of creating a foreign-language version of such a work as Pushkin’s novel in verse, *Eugene Onegin*, has invited much scrutiny. As works in their own right, however, many of Nabokov’s translations are delicate and replete with footnotes that reveal his unequaled self-assurance, his ruthlessly concentrated feelings toward his ideas about a given subject, and his unrelenting individualism.

The symposium “Nabokov’s Idioms: Translating Foreignness” proposed to investigate Vladimir Nabokov’s writerly practice as a broadly conceived effort of translation. Much more than the mere transposition of a literary text from one language into another, translation amounts to a creative principle in Nabokov’s work. This symposium investigated Nabokov’s translational poetics—a comprehensive effort to relate to foreignness and the “Other” as a powerful contribution to literary modernism, its media, and its critique.

On the first day of the symposium, the Mind Readers, a graduate and undergraduate student theater group, put together a creative production called “Devising Nabokov” that captured Nabokov’s many sides as a devoted translator. Excerpts from *Lolita*, *Bend Sinister*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *Pale Fire*, *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, and Nabokov’s translations of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Eugene*

*Onegin* were juxtaposed in a performative collage that still depicted a coherent whole which emphasized Nabokov's insistence on literalism. Butterflies, tip-of-the-tongue utterances, and "footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers," were some of the highlights of this innovative production that set the spirit of the symposium on the evening preceding the presentations.

The conference part of the symposium was divided into various sub-themes exploring Nabokov's translations and re-translations, Nabokov as a translator and a novelist, Nabokov's contentious translation of the epic poem *Slovo o polku Igoreve* (*The Song of Igor's Campaign*), and Nabokov's poetics of translation. The question of achieving "faithful" representations and whether such a task is possible continues to be debated in translation studies, and that argument is not likely to fade anytime soon. However, the symposium treated the debate with nuance: though being loyal to the source text is a view that many translators share, including Nabokov, what the presentors of the symposium focused on was Nabokov's extreme creativity and care in translation, his love for verbal patterns, and the remarkable quality of his translations of rhymed verse and prose.

The symposium opened with remarks by symposium co-organizer Sven Spieker for whom "Nabokov was what the Greeks called a *kosmopolite*, a 'cosmopolitan,' a citizen of the world." Spieker was, however, careful to note that the kind of cosmopolitanism attributed to Nabokov is to be understood through the Stoic philosopher Hierocles's use of the term, that as individuals we consist of series of circles, and that our task is to draw these circles in towards the center—ourselves—transferring people to our inner circles, making all human beings part of our concern. Drawing on this metaphor, Spieker's assertion was that translation is not merely about assimilating the foreign, but that we ourselves partake in foreignness, as the various circles overlap with our own. "And here," Spieker stated, "we are right at the very center of Nabokov's poetics, a poetics based on an essential strangeness in what appears most familiar."

In the earlier sessions, translation was construed both literally and more broadly. Yuri Leving and Galina Rylkova examined specific textual traces of Nabokov's own ideas of translation preserved in the archival record, while papers by Sara Pankenier Weld and Didier Maleuvre examined translation also more broadly and creatively, including Nabokov's later novels in their scope. As Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya and Julia Trubikhina demonstrated in their presentations, Nabokov's ambivalence toward translating verse stems from the dilemma of whether to translate words, or to translate sense without literalism through paraphrase. Despite

the feuds that some of Nabokov's translations, namely his translations of *Eugene Onegin* and *Slovo* have engendered, Nabokov's translations and his unmatched technique reveal a translator who is concerned with the particulars of the art; for Nabokov, such an effort gives one an understanding and appreciation of the individuality of things, a perspective which R. Dyche Mullins, in his analysis of Nabokov's engagement with iambic verse in Russian and English, has aptly called Nabokov's "prosodic lenses."

To gain a fuller appreciation of Nabokov the novelist and the translator, the symposium organizers included a visit to examine the Vladimir Nabokov Collection in the Special Research Collections at the newly redesigned Davidson Library, which took place during an extended lunch break. The multifaceted display featured manuscripts of translations of Nabokov's works, personal letters between Nabokov and his translators, letters written and signed by Vladimir or Véra Nabokov, and letters that tell the tales of the couple's perennial adventures in Europe and America, as well as first-edition novels by the author himself. The letters reveal Nabokov's meticulous nature, while they also shine a light on Nabokov's personal drama with its varied acts, the setting of which was in constant flux, and was key to his artistic inspiration. The carefully chosen collection on display revealed the interplay between external phenomena and intensely felt subjective sensations, set against the shifting lights and colors that give each of his works and translations a uniquely Nabokovian hue.

Arpi Movsesian,  
*University of California, Santa Barbara*

## OVERVIEW OF PAPERS



Sven Spieker, Didier Maleuvre, Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya, Arpi Movsesian, Yevgeniy Runkevich, R. Dyche Mullins, Annie Platoff, and Irina Tolpygo  
*Special Collections, Davidson Library*

**Julia Bekman Chadaga (Macalester College)**

***Faith, Doubt, and Deception: Nabokov's Translations of The Song of Igor's Campaign***

This paper, first, reminded the audience of the ongoing debate over the authenticity of the *Slovo o polku Igoreve*. Bekman Chadaga argued that a new voice needs to be heard, which the paper proposed that of a translator, and one uniquely suited for the task: Vladimir Nabokov. This paper examined the stylistic, structural, and semantic differences between Nabokov's two translations and interprets their significance. Furthermore, the paper argued that Nabokov's work on the *Slovo* translation informed the conception and composition of his novel *Pale Fire*. Bekman

Chadaga maintained that through the character of Kinbote, *Pale Fire* thematizes the desire for an epic of one's own that underlies the unshakable faith of so many in the authenticity of the *Slovo*. Nabokov structures the *Slovo* commentary as a fiction — the creation of a distant fantasy land: Kievan Rus / Zembla. Bekman Chadaga claims that here, however, as translator, it is not *his* fiction Nabokov is conveying, but that of countless others who want to believe.

**Yuri Leving (Dalhousie University)**

***From Dar to The Gift: Nabokov's Revisions of Michael Scammell's Translation***

Leving's paper traced the journey of *Dar* to *The Gift* and the role of the translators that contributed to the final product, which was praised by various media and authors. The writer's son, Dmitri Nabokov, completed the first chapter in English, and Michael Scammell translated the four remaining ones. Leving maintains that Nabokov tried to make it easier for Anglophone readers to understand certain scenes and allusions. As a result, in the process of translation of *The Gift*, whose narrative landscape was deliberately strewn with elaborate traps and decoys, Michael Scammell faced unprecedented challenges and there were moments when the young translator seriously doubted his ability to cope. Using unpublished examples from Scammell's copy bearing Nabokov's editorial remarks in red pen (Berg Collection, New York Public Library), Leving argued that the writer's commentaries, both stylistic and semantic, on the margins of the typescript of the English translation elucidate his general practice as a translator of literary texts – in this case of his own.

**Didier Maleuvre (University of California, Santa Barbara)**

***On a Translation Entitled Lolita***

Maleuvre's paper argued that Nabokov's famous description of *Lolita* as his love affair with the English language, perhaps means it is also a farewell letter or, as it were, a confession of infidelity to the author's beloved Russian tongue. However, Maleuvre also argues that if Humbert Humbert embraces his new love and dives gluttonously into its new continent of poetic possibilities, the old tongue keeps worming its way into the courtship. The old linguistic baggage used by Humbert is the shimmering decoy under which he steals into the unguarded heart of

plainspoken America. Maluevre claims that while this is the case, in a nagging sense his magnificent English remains a translated tongue. Almost on every other page, French — the cocky Gallic half of Humbert’s brain — keeps butting into the text. ‘These French clichés are symptomatic,’ Nabokov/Humbert says in passing. But what are they symptomatic of? Are they punctual reminders that Nabokov is writing in a foreign tongue? If so, what for? Is it to remind the reader that whatever Humbert says is not what he means, not what his native tongue would say, that we are but listening in on the vicissitudes of a mind translating or (as H.H. reminds us so often) mistranslating itself? These were the questions explored in Maleuvre’s paper, the conclusion of which was that Dolores Haze is of all the untranslatable things, the most untranslatable. She it is, stated Maleuvre, whom Humbert’s formidable tongue, even as it wraps itself around her syllables; cannot consume; she it is who humbles Humbert, exposing the gap between the ideal novel and its glorious approximation, its simultaneous translation.

**R. Dyche Mullins (University of California San Francisco)**

***Conjuring in Two Tongues: Mimicry and Camouflage in the Prosody of Vladimir Nabokov’s English-language Poems***

Mullins’s paper examined the rules that Nabokov wrote by which he engaged with both Russian and English iambic verse. In Mullins’s view, Nabokov admired critics who read poems the way naturalists dissect butterflies: examining their internal structures for *individuating details* that separate one species from another. In *Notes on Prosody*, Nabokov proposed six prosodic features capable of distinguishing English and Russian iambic rhythms. Mullins’s paper argued that the six individuating details are as important for understanding Nabokov’s own poetry as for appreciating his translations. Using his own prosodic lenses, Mullins claims, we see how Nabokov associates Russian rhythms with themes of exile and dislocation, and how he uses them to create an unsettling sense of otherworldliness. To better understand Nabokov’s rhythm, Mullins argues we ought to dissect Nabokov’s poetry using his own instruments, in the way he carefully explained to us in his *Notes on Prosody*.

**Galina Rylkova (University of Florida)**

***Vladimir Nabokov as a Teacher, Translator and Commentator***

This paper discussed Nabokov's marginal comments on the English editions of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, Kafka's *Metamorphoses*, Flaubert's *Madam Bovary*, and Proust's *Swann's Way*, to name but a few. He used these editions to prepare for his famous lectures. In his marginal notes Nabokov primarily complained about the inadequate translations and suggested his own versions. Rylkova discussed in detail some of Nabokov's comments, and maintained that Nabokov's zealous editorial exercises had the nature of self-therapy. Rylkova argued that not daring to criticize the works themselves, Nabokov directed his critical ardor toward their imperfect doubles. Once the relationship between Nabokov and the text (any masterpiece) had been established, he would advance with his editorial efforts suggesting certain changes and omissions in the original texts themselves. Examining another important aspect, the intended audience of Nabokov's re-translations, Rylkova claimed that the retranslations were meant to be read out loud by Nabokov and heard by his students rather than read, and as a result, Nabokov often opted for somewhat simplified syntax and vocabulary, making Tolstoy and Proust sound like a contemporary American writer.

**Julia Trubikhina (Hunter College, CUNY)**

***Translating Eugene Onegin: Nabokov's Ambivalent Relationship With Translation***

Tribukhina's paper analyzed Nabokov's relationship with translation, which, Tribukhina claimed, is the philosophical core of Nabokov's creativity—adherence to the “true” but “lost” metaphysical language alternating with profound metaphysical uncertainty. Tribukhina spoke of this philosophical oscillation between the stability and instability of meaning, as well as the gap that as a result opens up between theory and practice, by closely addressing Nabokov's poem “On Translating *Eugene Onegin*.” Tribukhina claimed that the poem accurately conveys Nabokov's ideas as they evolved over his more than thirty years of activity as a literary translator of which his *Onegin* translation was the result. With this poem providing a metaphoric springboard, Tribukhina used examples of the three types of translation as defined by Jakobson



(interlingual, intralingual and intersemiotic): Nabokov’s early translation of *Alice in Wonderland*, *Eugene Onegin*, the pinnacle of Nabokov’s literalism, and his screenplay of *Lolita* in conjunction with two cinematic versions by Kubrick and Lyne.

**Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya and Robert Romanchuk (Florida State University)**

***How La Geste du Prince Igor’ led to The Song of Igor’s Campaign: Nabokov’s Lessons in Philology***

This paper treated the “philologization” of Nabokov’s practice of translation. Based on new manuscript collations and findings in the Roman Jakobson Papers at MIT, the Vladimir Nabokov Papers at the Library of Congress and the Berg Collection at the NYPL, it examined multiple early variant manuscripts of Nabokov’s translation of *The Song of Igor’s Campaign* to elucidate the lessons in philology Nabokov assimilated from his years of collaboration with Roman Jakobson as they worked to produce an edition of the *Igor Tale*. The authors claimed that despite Nabokov’s and Jakobson’s much publicized break during their collaboration on the *IT* project, the “philologization” of Nabokov’s translation advances a text and a model of scholarly activity and intellectual sparring that owes much to Jakobson. It was argued that Nabokov “performs” philology, in that he draws from existing editions of the *IT* for his translation rather than producing his own recension. Ryoko Wakamiya and Romanchuk argued that it is precisely translation that allows Nabokov to adapt philology to a performance that is at once “reverent” and “ironic,” terms that Nabokov used in the introduction to a 1951 MS variant of his *Song* to describe the relationship between the anonymous author of the *Song* and its bard Boyan, Pushkin and Derzhavin, and perhaps, his own relationship with Jakobson.

**Sara Pankenier Weld (University of California Santa Barbara)**

***Nabokov’s Translations of Alice from Ania to Ada***

This paper treated issues of translation, transposition, and transfiguration aroused by Vladimir Nabokov’s translations of *Alice* from *Ania* to *Ada* by focusing attention primarily on early and

late works that bookend his career. Opening with a comparison of key passages in Lewis Carroll's original and Nabokov's translation, Weld argued that Nabokov's emphasis on transfiguration and slippages of identity set the stage for Nabokov's continued transfigurations of Alice, as he spirited away Alice from Carroll's clutches, beginning with his 1923 translation *Ania v strane chudes* and continuing through many decades of his authorship, where he continually transfigured Carroll's original into a distinctly Nabokovian form, as evident again in his 1969 novel *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. Although a number of scholars have studied Nabokov's translation of *Alice* before and explored its delightful verbal intricacies, as well as its occasional youthful failings, Weld instead considered Nabokov's transfigurations of Alice more broadly, examining it in the context of his evolving implicit and explicit theories of translation, and considering the lasting impact of Nabokov's act of translation upon its translator.

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