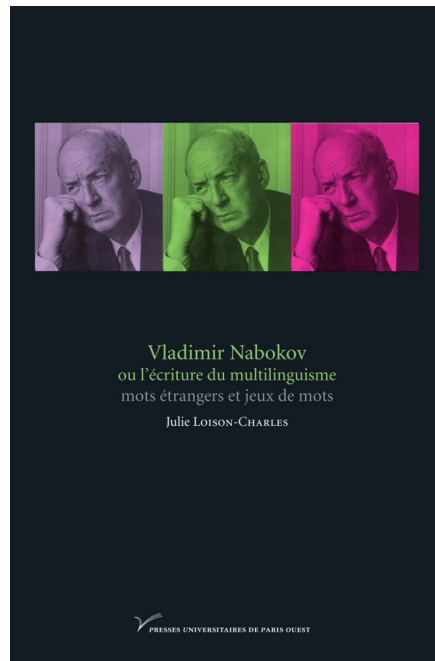


*Vladimir Nabokov ou l'écriture du multilinguisme: mots étrangers et jeux de mots*, by Julie Loison-Charles. Presses universitaires de Paris Ouest, 2016. ISBN : 978-2-84016-243-8. Index des notions clés. Index des mots étrangers nabokoviens étudiés. Index des jeux de mots (ou calembours). 338 p. [*Vladimir Nabokov or Multilingual writing: Foreign words and wordplay*, by Julie Loison-Charles. Index of key notions. Index of Nabokovian foreign words in the study. Index of puns]



This forceful study by Julie Loison-Charles, who teaches at the universities of Nanterre and Lille, is dedicated to the use and function of foreign words in the English novels of Vladimir Nabokov, a bilingual author *par excellence*. Nabokov's prose, in whatever language he wrote, is full of elements borrowed from other languages. English, Russian and French, "the three greatest [languages] in all the world," as Nabokov himself qualified them, dwell in his prose and form the writer's unique style.

Of aristocratic origin, he spoke all three fluently since his early years. Having spent some fifteen years in Berlin, he claimed not to have learnt German, by aversion; we nevertheless detect German elements in his writings, as well as Latin ones, due to his studies of lepidoptery. The question posed by Julie Loison-Charles is as follows: who is Nabokov's

reader? Does one have to be a polyglot mastering all Nabokov's languages to understand what he says, or is a partial comprehension enough?

Indeed, the readers of Nabokov's novels are divided between those who do understand all Nabokovian tongues and those who don't. One must investigate, Loison-Charles suggests, the relation maintained by the text with its reader, to determine whether the use of foreign words aims to exclude a monolingual reader to the benefit of a Nabokov-style polyglot, or whether explicative strategies such as *ad hoc* translation or contextual explanation allow an English-speaking person to understand the text.

If there is any elitism, it resides not in a fluency in several languages but rather in the fact that the reader must go deep into the text to find its sense: a good reader is a re-reader, says Nabokov. In any case, the reader of Loison-Charles's book is required to have mastered both French and English: its numerous and often long quotations are not translated. Some familiarity with Russian is also warmly welcome.

Yet, more insightful is the question, *what is*, properly, a French, Russian or German word in the body of Nabokovian English prose? Loison-Charles explores at length the different facets and aspects of the phenomenon: reader's access to foreign words, various kinds of pleasure they provide, the hybrid nature of the grammar and vocabulary of invented languages, the function of wordplay and puns. The specific pleasure provided by the foreign word lies both in its intellectual and sensorial dimensions. A strange element can create complicity between the author and the reader: I've understood a French word in the English text and this makes me feel intimately close to the author. But Nabokov's language, being synesthetic, is eminently physical. Its pleasures, to no less a degree, are those of mouth, tongue, skin and sex. It has the capacity to evoke in the reader something which is beyond semantics and intellect. Not surprisingly, it is French that is mostly used for the sexual, erotic side of the story, while German is tightly related to psychoanalysis, which Nabokov constantly mocked.

Loison-Charles perceptively analyses the "Creole", and not cosmopolitan, nature of Nabokov's language. The difference is essential: a cosmopolitan is someone who switches easily between the existing and distinct cultures, while a "Creole" creates a new culture out of his/her native one, as well as that of his/her new homeland. Arguably, Nabokov to a great extent adhered to the American culture, having adopted the U.S. citizenship and supporting

politically the American government in most of its decisions. His language is a Creole-type mixture of his Russian and European (French and German) heritage and his American environment. The hybrid nature of his language is especially obvious in *Lolita* and *Ada*.

Nabokov employs various types of wordplay, for example, spoonerism, when letters are permuted within or between the words: *Show, wight (sic) ray*; verbal golf, when new words appear by deleting letters: *crown – crow – cow* (which, astonishingly, has a kind of parallel in Russian: *korona – vorona/korova*, not deleting but replacing one letter in the second and third word; Nabokov has an extremely sharp eye for such linguistic occasions). He invents languages, e.g. the “vernacular” in *Bend Sinister* and the “Zemblan” in *Pale Fire*. Those are hybrid languages which mix elements from various tongues, mostly French and Russian, sometimes deforming them to the point of complete obscurity. Thus, a murky phrase in *Bend Sinister*: “*Donje te zankoriv*” appears to be a deformation of Mallarmé’s verse “[le sanglot] dont j’étais encore ivre” (“[the wail] by which I was intoxicated still”) in *L’Après-midi d’un faune*. In *Ada* we encounter enigmatic phrases in a cryptic language, like “*klv zdB AoyvBno wkh gwzxm*”, which do not give us even a slightest hint as to what they could mean. The author does provide a key for decrypting it, but only several pages later, and we must then go back to decipher finally the words “making *his way through the brush*”: the passage reveals its erotic content, which could not be expressed in plain English words.

The ultimate stage of verbal expression is silence. Gestures can form a language, too. Loison-Charles refers at this point to Heidegger, who considered silence to be one of the highest forms of speech. Indeed, the unspeakable is often expressed through body movement: “Elbow in palm, puff, smile, exhaled smoke, darting gesture”. If Humbert makes Lolita gesticulate in silence, it is because the pain her words inflict upon him is ineffable. The reader is once more confronting an opaque language and can only rely upon the suggestive power of the words.

Foreign words have multiple functions: producing the reality effect, playing its ludic aspect, creating complicity with the reader, contributing to a diegetic revelation... This last one is crucial. First, the question is whether a definite function can be attached to each language, which surges in Nabokov’s English writings. It may be tempting to ascribe to each language a unique and specific function, but it rather seems that using foreign words is by itself revealing. A foreign word has the capacity to reveal something in the narration. Nabokov makes an allusion to it in *Ada*: “‘Please, note everybody,’ said Ada, ‘how *voulu* that

slip was!” Nevertheless, in some cases, a particular signification can be associated with a language: that is what we call a connotative function. For example, the themes of homosexuality and pedophilia are developed by Nabokov by means of the French language. Women’s manipulation in his novels also makes use of French, while Russian plays a significant role in revealing the pathology of the Russian-American narrator in *Look at the Harlequins!*

Often, it is not easy to establish the source of a revealing foreign word, whether it comes from the narrator owing to his lack of control over the language, or from the author himself. In fact, it is all about the tyranny of the author, the concept coined by Maurice Couturier who studied the utter control exerted by Nabokov upon his own texts, and the over-determined nature of Nabokovian writing. When we analyze Nabokov’s text, Couturier says, taking notes of allusions and intertextual elements, of encyclopedic facts about either butterflies or chess play, or painting, or cinema, we have an impression that we master the text – up until the moment when we suddenly realize that all our understanding has been thoroughly prepared by the author who was waiting for us at the turning point. Such an over-determined nature of Nabokovian text is in sharp contrast with, for example, the much more aleatory Joycean one.

This tyranny can be extended to the narrator. In *Look at the Harlequins!* Vadim does not realize that he is but a personage, and his “life”, a story invented by a superior creature – the author. The narrator appears to be a victim of the author who manipulates him, and this manipulation is perceived by Vadim as a sign of folly.

Moreover, Vadim’s insanity is related to multilingualism. It was his linguistic situation that “almost killed” him during the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. A relation between bilingualism and mental disorder – in particular, the personality split – had been often advanced by psycholinguists at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is precisely this kind of folly that Vadim suffers from: his double personality makes him insane. “Russian and English had existed for years in my mind as two worlds detached from one another”, he admits. In particular, it appears difficult for him to operate a mental movement in space, to figure out a displacement.

A hypothesis about the link between multilingualism and the difficulty of mental spatial localisation has been suggested more recently by some linguists. Schneiderman and

Desmarais wrote in 1988: “[T]he talented second-language learner may exhibit mild to severe visuo-spatial disabilities such as would be evidenced in tests of mental rotation of figures, figure-ground relations, and orientation in space.”

The almost systematical presence of mentally ill or perverse characters in Nabokov’s novels may incite a psychoanalytical reading. Nabokov himself often insisted upon the pain provoked by his abandonment of Russian as the language of writing, namely because this language was tied for him with his happiness as a child. At the same time, he constantly derided psychoanalysis on the very basis that it strove to find in one’s childhood the roots of every pathology or dysfunction. One can recall Humbert’s juggles when he was interned: “I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists: cunningly leading them on; never letting them see that you know all the tricks of the trade; inventing for them elaborate dreams [...] teasing them with fake ‘primal scenes’”. The pleasure that Humbert took out of it suggests that Nabokov perhaps experienced the same delectation when planting in his texts the hidden traps for the reader. Nabokov-the-tyrant creates opportunities for a psychoanalytical reading in such a manner that it is impossible to state, which of them reveal the author’s intentions and which are the lapses of the bilingual writer.

An important place is accorded by Loison-Charles to Nabokov’s “sexual” games. In fact, she says, his own polyglottic idiolect can be perceived as a scripture of desire. This language may be qualified as incestual as well. Indeed, incest is abundantly present in *Ada*, *Lolita*, and *Look at the Harlequins!* When asked about incest, Nabokov denied his interest in the matter itself but emphasized its linguistic aspect: “Actually I don’t give a damn for incest one way or another. I merely like the “bl” sound in siblings, bloom, blue, bliss, sable,” he says in *Strong Opinions*. (Let’s note here quite a limpid “bl” of the Russian *lublu* – “I like” or even “I love”). In an anthropologist’s guise, the writer makes a liaison between language and sexual interdict. Indeed, following Claude Lévi-Strauss, the taboo on incest is as universal as language. Another tie between incest and language resides in the fact that it is a supreme unspeakable. This verbalization of an interdict is apparent in *Lolita* and *Ada*. Namely, in *Ada*, we find the following scene of playing scrabble: “Nicest!” – “Incest,” said Ada instantly. “I give up,” said Grace. “We need a dictionary to check your little inventions.”

What could be a conclusion of these and many other analyses of Nabokov’s multilingual wordplay? Loison-Charles ends by stating that Nabokov’s place in the English

language was made not by respecting it but, on the contrary, by making violence to it, following Proust's counsel: "The only manner to defend the language is to attack it". Nabokov's aim would be to create a new English language, as he defined it himself in *Look at the Harlequins!*: "not the dead leaden English of the high seas with dummies in sailor suits," – here he makes an ironical allusion to his multilingual rival Joseph Conrad – "but an English I alone would be responsible for, in all its new ripples and changing light".

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