Marijeta Bozovic,

Guest Editor

INTERNATIONAL NABOKOV STUDIES IN TRANSLATION

INTRODUCTION

When we issued a call for papers for a special translation issue of the *Nabokov Online Journal* over a year ago, our goal was simple: to collect published articles on Nabokov's work from around the world hitherto unavailable in English, and to make the findings of a diverse range of international scholars accessible to a wider public — and to one another. The theme seemed especially apropos given the centrality of translation and self-translation to Nabokov's own literary practice: as one of our authors, Irina Marchesini, reminds us, citing George Steiner's felicitous insight, "the multi-lingual, cross-linguistic situation is both the matter and form of Nabokov's work."[1]

What we encountered was often a logistical nightmare but a productive or instructive experiment. The pragmatic difficulties of working with so many different

[1] George Steiner, "Extraterritorial." In *Nabokov. Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*, edited by Alfred Appel and Charles Newman. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970; 123.

languages — in this block of articles, ranging from the more predictable Russian and French to Italian, Polish, Serbian, Hungarian, Persian and Japanese — are on the one hand foreseeable: the author of the "original" must agree with the translator's interpretation and approve of edits in an English she may or may not entirely comfortably command (excepting self-translations, also represented here); in turn the translator must approve the author's and editors' interventions in a text now multiply authored. Who then has full command of the text, in the sense of both comprehension and authority (so to speak)? Gholam Reza-Shafiee's and Atefeh Rabei's intervention into Persian translations of Nabokov serves as a sharp reminder of the extraordinary difficulties (nigh impossibilities) of transferring meaning and style across very different language systems.

More slippery still are the translated texts cited in the original essays, to be translated (in some cases, "back") into English. Should the faithful translator (or editor) insert into her own work the original English-language text? What if the quoted translation was crucial to the interpretation, or inspired the scholar's imagery and terms? Should one then re-translate freely, joining in the Nabokovian game with "shadows of shadows" — imagery present in both Mikołaj Wiśniewski and Ferenc Takács's essays? Does the academic practice of referring to the final Englished texts as "by" only their authors participate in making the translator invisible, in the words of Venuti, thereby undermining the profession and practice our issue was surely means to celebrate?[2] Our imperfect solution is to follow the working decisions reached by our translators and authors, allowing the degree of necessary inconsistency that comes with such a choice.

Subtler still are the effects of regional differences in scholarly style and expectations (citation systems even aside), raising questions of how to evaluate or edit divergent practices. Those of us who work in Slavic Studies in the Anglo-North American world are well aware of the different expectations for article structure in English and, for example, in Russian: scholars working in both languages routinely comment that a "Russian-style" article troubles or confounds North American peer review, while an "American-style" piece will hardly meet the expectations of Russian readers. Does translating scholarship entail fundamentally changing the writing, structure,

[2] See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (Routledge: 2008).

research methods and critical framework of a piece? Is imposing Global English in thought as well as language not a terrifying prospect? Is it inevitable?

We chose once again to maintain the differences in style among our diverse group of authors (and translators). An added goal of our special issue is thus to demonstrate some of that diversity of approach. As readers, writers, translators and editors, we find ourselves asking afresh questions not only of what and how to translate, whose is the translated text, but also what range of approaches constitutes legitimate or productive original research in the humanities.

In a sense, Nabokov is the perfect choice of contrarian to lead us into this tangle of thorns. He appears to be written about nearly everywhere, although this cannot be true; it would be an interesting study to determine which regions of the world have not produced scholars, essayists or bloggers interested in Nabokov's work. His status as a World Literature author is unrivalled by any other twentieth-century Russian.[3] But as a writer "after theory" and infamously hostile to Marxist, feminist, and psychoanalytic literary analysis, he also challenges us that much more to think about what constitutes research in literary studies in the first place.

Nabokov's own anti-historicist stance, his ferocious attempts to avoid categorization as a product of his time, prompted some strains of cultural studies scholarship to step around him.[4] What he allows or invites are exegetic readings that presume the integral unity of the text and authorial oeuvre as a whole; but we also increasingly encounter positions the maestro may not have thought to parry (for example, through the lenses of media theory, as in Maria Malikova's essay on photography), as well as bold interventions, reframings, and readings against the grain.[5] The dichotomy of "with us or against us" may already be a ghost of Nabokov scholarship past.

Yet the (relative) autonomy of literature is so often what we write about when we write about Vladimir Nabokov, whether it is verbalized as such or not — and about the ethics of that stance, itself always already political, left or right, present in avant-garde

---

[3] Cf. Gavriel Shapiro, *The Sublime Artist's Studio: Nabokov and Painting* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009); Rachel Trousdale, Nabokov, Rushdie, and the Transnational Imagination: Novels of Exile and Alternate Worlds (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

[4] Notable exceptions include Will Norman's *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

[5] I think of Eric Naiman's *Nabokov Perversely* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

and minoritarian praxes as in obfuscated ideology. Thus the very different Vladimir, Sorokin, describes reading Nabokov in illegal *samizdat* in 1980 in the following extraordinary scene:

> Close the book, carefully put it on the grave and quietly leave the cemetery. I behaved in this exact manner in May 1980. Having gone to the maternity clinic to visit my wife, who was preparing to cast out into our contradictory world two twins, I left to aimlessly wander Moscow, warm and reeking of gas and asphalt, with a Xeroxed copy of Nabokov's novel *King, Queen, Knave* under my arm. I don't remember, how and why I ended up in Vagankovskoye Cemetery. The cemetery, not yet ruined by the tasteless tomb for Vysotsky, humbly lay in the shade of the lindens and poplars, spots of sunlight dancing in unpretentious crosses, young grass pushing up on the mounds of the graves. Having sat on a bench next to someone's well-kept grave, I read Nabokov until dusk and, not having read to the end, all of a sudden stood and walked off between the graves, not really thinking about anything. Why did I leave the book on the grave? "It's hard to explain," as that same porter would say.[6]

Within, Agnès Edel-Roy (France) in "Going Beyond: Nabokov's French Exile," suggests that Nabokov builds his autobiographical practice around the story of his governess Mademoiselle, to flip the experience of the Russian émigré into a French, universal, specific and poetic condition.

Irina Marchesini (Italy) in "*Mise en Abîme* and Self-translation: Vladimir Nabokov through the Mirror of his Words in *Sogliadatai / The Eye*" traces how Nabokov's self-translation across 1930 to 1965 dramatically changes the work, despite his insistence on literal translation for the work of others. More compact Russian novels turn meta- or post- in English defamiliarization, allowing insight into the author's changing literary priorities.

Two of the essays in current selection deal with Nabokov's *Pale Fire*. Jens Juhl Jensen (Denmark) in "The Case of the Missing Line: Nabokov's Mathematics in *Pale*

[6] Vladimir Sorokin, "The Eros of Moscow," online translation at http://eagleandthebear.wordpress.com/tag/vladimir-sorokin/

Fire" reads Nabokov's most game-like novel through the lens of number composition or number poetry. His search for the missing line 1000 of John Shade's never-completed poem leads back in time and languages to Virgil and the New Testament's Luke. Ferenc Takács (Hungary) in "'Shadow' and 'Substance': *Pale Fire* and *Timon of Athens*" pursues shadows and light stolen from Shakespeare to argue that that which is most false — art itself — may be the most true. Nabokov's poetics juxtapose unexpectedly with Jacques Derrida's insights:

> There are [...] two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology — in other words, through the history of all of his history — has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.[7]

In his "Revisiting Nabokov's *The Defense* as a Moral Game: What Made Luzhin Commit Suicide?," Shun'ichiro Akikusa (Japan) turns to ethics and the forbidden theme of fathers and sons. The chess theme in *The Defense* lures and distracts most readers, but does it obscure the importance of Luzhin Sr.? Is not the real chess game between reader and writer — with grave moral consequence?

Gholam Reza-Shafiee and Atefeh Rabei (Iran/Canada) in "The Problems of Translating Nabokov's *Pnin* into Persian" foreground the problem of transfer and the difficulty of finding translators on Nabokov's level of linguistic mastery in both their own and the foreign tongue. The case study is a translation by Bahman Khosravi, but the distance traveled by the text hints at pitfalls and precipices pertinent to the entire issue.

Mikołaj Wiśniewski (Poland) contributes an article titled, "*Ada*: Make-believe Stories," which explores Nabokov's insistence on the autonomy of art in readings of Lev

[7] Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man,* ed. Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (1970) (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 264-65.

Tolstoy and in the literary auto-eroticism of *Ada, or Ardor* alike.[8] We search for truth but uncover a series of displacing gestures, artifice of artifice and reflections of reflections.

Maria Malikova (Russia) in "Nabokov's Photo-biography" argues that Nabokov's resistance to photographs stemmed from what he perceived as their false realism, lacking the charm of the artist's life. His arrogant rejection of the rival art explains the plain presentation of the photographs in *Speak, Memory*; likewise the public genre of the pictures selected suggest the private self remains hidden behind the public persona.

Evgeny Soshkin (Israel) in "The Origins of 'The Potato Elf'" discovers a precursor for Nabokov's 1924 Berlin short story in Wilhelm Hauff's "The Dwarf Nose" (1826). Continuing the leitmotif of family relations, Soshkin concludes that in both texts, the mother fails to recognize her lost son in the small human being before her.

Alexander Dolinin (Russia/USA) in "Art of the Executioner: Notes on the Theme of Capital Punishment in Nabokov" concludes the volume's selected scholarship in Russian with an essay on the execution, steeped in literary and cultural history. Vladimir Nabokov *père* was a noted opponent of the death penalty, as was doubtlessly *fils*, but the theater of the gallows block runs through the entire body of work — of our always particular, sometimes universal subject.

Finally, Violeta Stojmenović (Serbia) in "Nabokov's Duels with Literature" runs through the many duels of Nabokov's oeuvre. We encounter again fathers and sons (*Ada*'s duelists and dueling Van and Demon Veen) and changes in Nabokov's practice. The de-romanticized duel of early Nabokov offers insight into character; over time it transforms from device to self-referential game, *about* the literary tradition of writing duels.

[8] See again Naiman, *Nabokov Perversely*.