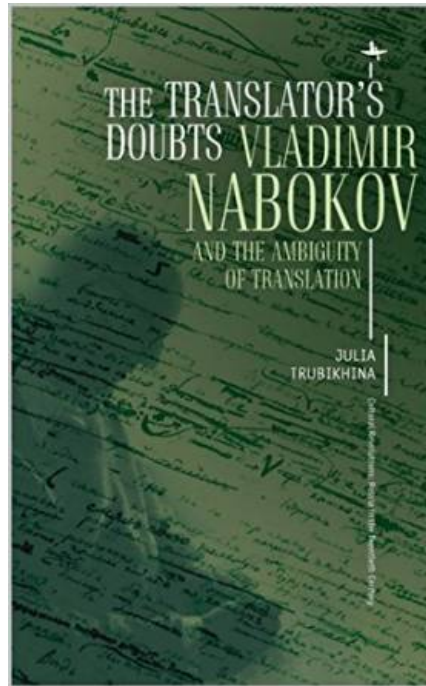


The Translator's Doubts: Vladimir Nabokov and the Ambiguity of Translation, by Julia Trubikhina. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2015; ISBN 9781618112606. Selected bibliography. Index. 247 pp.



A fresh appraisal of Nabokov's approach to translation is long overdue. Yet readers previously unfamiliar with Julia Trubikhina's work may be surprised when they come to examine the contents of *The Translator's Doubts: Vladimir Nabokov and the Ambiguity of Translation*, an astonishingly mature book that grew out of the author's PhD thesis. As Trubikhina herself points out in the Introduction, "one could easily envision a comprehensive monograph focused entirely on Nabokov's career as a translator, from his translations of others <...> to his self-translations into French and English and back into Russian" (12-13). This, however, is not Trubikhina's aim here. Consciously casting aside the curriculum vitae of translations that one might have expected to see in such a study, Trubikhina offers the reader a work of scholarship and criticism devoted to a narrow sampling of Nabokov's oeuvre as a translator. Nevertheless, this sophisticated and finely wrought study weaves together several essays on Nabokov's handiwork as a translator using an impressive array of methodological approaches.

Setting out from the premise that Nabokov can be viewed as a 'translator' not only in linguistic and literary terms, but also in geospatial (*émigré*), temporal (memory) and even metaphysical terms (his 'otherworld'), Trubikhina treats him as a 'case study' to investigate translation in the fullest sense of the word: not just interlingually, but intralingually and intersemiotically. The crux of the author's argument can be formulated thus: that while Nabokov's praxis as a 'translator' — in all the aforementioned senses — oscillated wildly throughout his career, an adherence to the Romantic notion of a 'true but elusive metaphysical language' endured, with

translation providing ‘a vehicle for expressing [his] own strongly held ideas about art’ (207).

The book is laid out in three principal chapters. In her first chapter, Trubikhina has selected Nabokov’s 1923 translation of Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) as her point of departure. In what is primarily a philological study of Nabokov’s second major translation into Russian, Trubikhina situates Nabokov’s *Anya* within its literary–historical context, providing an excellent examination of the various translators’ sources for their versions of Carroll’s verse parodies. The main thesis of the chapter, however, is Nabokov’s heavily Russianising and often ambivalent methodological approach to translating Carroll: while on the face of it a world away from the literalism of *Eugene Onegin*, Trubikhina skilfully demonstrates that it in fact sets the tone for his understanding of translation as a transcendental, transformative process, chiming with Pushkin’s own definition of translation as a ‘re-creation’.

The deeply theoretical second chapter draws on *Pale Fire* and Nabokov’s translation of Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* as two examples of what Trubikhina terms ‘über-translation’. Reading *Pale Fire* as commentary on the hermeneutic possibilities of intralingual translation through Kinbote’s ‘vampiric’ appropriation of Shade’s poem, Trubikhina considers the work as an ‘allegory’ of translation with great insight. Asserting that Nabokov’s notorious anti-utilitarianism implies a motivation other than that of providing a mere ‘pony’ or ‘crib’, Trubikhina comparatively suggests that the *Onegin* translation may also be viewed as allegorical or, more accurately, mimetic — not in aesthetic terms, of course, but rather in that the accompanying apparatus and addenda are functionally designed to bridge the gap between the Russian and English versions. Trubikhina’s thesis offers a much-needed corrective to the pedestrian though still prevalent charges of mulish literalism that are so often laid against Nabokov, and her riposte is as vigorous as it is dynamic.

In her final chapter, Trubikhina trains her critical lens on the three cinematic translations of *Lolita*: Nabokov’s own screenplay, as well as Stanley Kubrick’s and Adrian Lyne’s ecranisations. In considering the fidelity (or otherwise) of *Lolita*’s silver-screen incarnations, Trubikhina melds methodological approaches drawn from both film studies and translation theory to point to the metaphysical tensions seated at the heart of them. Kubrick’s *Lolita*, she contends, in spite of restrictions on the extent of visual representation, remains essentially faithful to the metonymic nature of Nabokov’s text, while Lyne’s version, which enjoyed a greater degree of artistic freedom and is more textually tied to the work, ultimately betrays it, castrating the work not only of its inherent ambiguity, but also in terms of Nabokov’s ambiguous metaphysical standpoint.

The Translator’s Doubts is a striking departure from the traditional studies of Nabokov’s work as a translator. Not only does it mark a significant shift in critical perspective, but it also uses Nabokov as a means to a greater end — a meditation on “literary history and theory, philosophy and interpretation” (11) — with value far beyond the world of Nabokov criticism. One might have liked to see included in Trubikhina’s study at least one section dedicated to what Jane Grayson termed

Nabokov's 'auto-translations', although admittedly the chapter dealing with Nabokov's screenplay for *Lolita* achieves this to a certain extent — if on a more abstract level. While at times the sheer scope of theoretical background can prove a challenge to the reader, it is, by the same stroke, precisely this multifaceted approach that gives Trubikhina's work such broad appeal and wider significance. Each chapter, even taken separately, adds hugely to the corpus of Nabokov criticism, from philology and archival scholarship to new theoretical perspectives. And while there may still be room for the book Trubikhina explicitly set out not to write, her sophisticated and insightful work will surely become one of the touchstone texts on Nabokov and translation for years to come.

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