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MISE EN ABÎME AND SELF-TRANSLATION:
VLADIMIR NABOKOV THROUGH THE MIRROR OF HIS WORDS
IN *SOGLIADATAI* / *THE EYE*

What is translation? On a platter
A poet's pale and glaring head,
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,
And profanation of the dead.

—Vladimir Nabokov, “On
Translating *Eugene Onegin*” (1955)

In his 1969 essay “Extraterritorial,” George Steiner called on scholars to take account of the influence of Russian on Vladimir Nabokov’s writing in English:

We need really detailed study of the quality and degree of pressure which Russian puts on Nabokov’s Anglo-American. How often are his English sentences ‘meta-translations’ of Russian? To what extent do Russian semantic associations initiate the images and contour of the English phrase? [...] We also require careful analysis of the local and literary background of Nabokov’s English. [...] All these would be preliminary lines of inquiry toward getting right the “strangeness,” the polysemic nature of Nabokov’s use of language[s]. They would clarify not only his prodigious talent, but such larger questions as the condition of multilingual imagining, of internalized translation, of the possible existence of a private mixed idiom “beneath,” “coming before” the localization of different languages in the articulate brain. (125–26)

These questions brought to light the problem of self-translation in Nabokov, an author who, nearly midway through his creative path, chose a language other than his mother tongue in which to compose his novels, and who many times ventured into the translation of his own works from Russian into English.¹ The study of Nabokov's trilingualism as it bears on the practice of self-translation is considered a topic of fundamental importance especially in the Anglo-American sphere, yet within the Italian context there is a surprising lack of commentary.² However, gaps can still be found even in the former, more prolific critical context, where there is almost a total absence of studies on certain novels, such as *Sogliadatai* (1930) / *The Eye* (1965),³ or on the subject of Nabokov's co-translations with his son, Dmitri.

Taking as my point of departure Steiner's appropriate statement that "the multi-lingual, cross-linguistic situation is both the matter and form of Nabokov's work" (123), I aim to show how the analysis of "Nabokese"⁴ can lead us to methodological considerations in the study of self-translation – observations that can, in turn, enrich the lively debate on Nabokov's work.

INTRODUCTORY NOTES

Before moving on to my analysis, it is crucial to point out that Nabokov did not learn a second language as an adult, but rather had English from a very young age⁵ and began studying French, the most common second language in upper-class Russian families, at the age of five.⁶ The presence of English was thus a constant for him in a domestic setting characterized by the encounter and fusion of several languages and cultures⁷; consequently, his childhood in Russia was of an "essentially polyglot" nature, as noted in Beaujour (1989: 90). Nabokov's natural propensity to use multiple languages developed further at school, where his teachers accused him

¹ For a complete picture, we must also consider his only self-translation from English into Russian, *Lolita* (1955, 1967).

² See Pranić (2011), Marchesini (2007), Osimo (1999), Pavan (1990), Possamai-Banzato (1995).

³ Here, I follow the definition Nabokov uses in his foreword to the American edition of *The Eye*, where the author calls the work a "little novel" (Nabokov 2010: I). The Russian original places it within the genre of the *povest'*.

⁴ This technical term, which has become standard in Nabokov studies, was succinctly described by Steiner: "Nabokese" [is] the Anglo-American interlingua in which Nabokov has produced the bulk of his work since the early forties. There are those who regard the language of *Lolita* and its successors as a wonder of invention, elegance and wit [...]. To other ears Nabokov's prose is a macaronic, precious, maddeningly opaque and self-conscious piece of candy-floss. It is alien not only in details of lexical usage, but in its primary rhythms which go against the natural grain of English and American speech" (124).

⁵ As Brian Boyd notes, before attending school Nabokov's English was superior to his Russian: "[T]hough not for long, Vladimir spoke English better than Russian" (47).

⁶ On French influences in Nabokov's work, see Couturier (2009).

⁷ In addition to using Russian, Nabokov's parents spoke to their children in English (Nabokov 1989: 79). Also, we should not forget the formative role of the foreign governesses who worked for the Nabokovs, including the English woman Rachel Home, who came to the family in 1902. English was part of Vladimir's life throughout his childhood, especially in terms of his reading. In this regard, D. Barton Johnson (2011) claims that the imagery of English fairy tales was a major influence on Nabokov, with characteristically English themes such as the knight errant clearly traceable throughout his work.

“of not conforming to [his] surroundings; of ‘showing off’ (mainly by peppering [his] Russian papers with English and French terms, which came naturally to [him])” (Nabokov 1989: 185).

The concept of multilingualism, as used by Zhanna Nikolaevna Maslova to describe the bilingual condition of Brodsky and Nabokov, is helpful here. According to Maslova, multilingualism “подразумевает создание автором художественного текста с использованием двух и более языков, а также макаронической речи, и взаимодействие языков в тексте” (3).⁸ Even in Nabokov’s Russian prose, we find an element of multilingualism; – characteristic of his idiolect, and later accentuated in his English writing. Indeed, throughout his entire literary oeuvre, prismatic hybrids of cultural systems and interrelated imaginaries emerge within the linguistic play that marks his dense prose and makes it so rich.

This conflicting yet dynamic combination of inextricable linguistic levels may explain a certain disinterest on the part of Russian readers. His novels were received rather coldly; some did not even consider them authentically Russian. Critic Gleb Struve wrote in the early 1930s: “Неоднократно указывалось на ‘нерусскость’ Сирина. Мне это указание представляется неверным в общей форме. Но у Сирина есть ‘нерусск[ие]’ черты, вернее, черты, не свойственн[ые] русской литературе”⁹ (3).

During that same period, Nabokov was by no means unaware of the limited audience for his novels in Russian, which were circumscribed to a small circle of émigrés who had fled the momentous upheaval of the October Revolution. As Nabokov recalled in *Strong Opinions*, the number of copies sold per novel might reach 1000, 2000 was seen as a great success (1973: 36).¹⁰ Beyond that, each copy sold would be loaned out to other readers; on average about twenty readers for each purchased volume. Of course, the circulation of his works in Soviet Russia was “absolutely banned” (Nabokov 1973: 36).

When he began translating himself, instead of neutralizing the presence/absence of his mother tongue, Nabokov exploited its potential within the new idiom. Through self-translation, the interplay of various linguistic components was strengthened and stressed. If we examine Nabokov’s literary oeuvre, we cannot help but notice his interest in self-translation, developed on three essential levels:

⁸ “implies the creation of a text by an author through the use of two or more languages, including macaronic speech, and the interplay of languages within the text.” If not otherwise stated, all translations are mine (IM).

⁹ “There has been frequent mention of Sirin’s ‘non-Russian.’ To me, this observation seems incorrect in its basic formulation. But in Sirin there are some ‘non-Russian’ traits, or rather, traits that are not characteristic of Russian literature.” For more on this, see the remarks in Osorgin (1928) and Adamovich (1929).

¹⁰ For additional information on the circulation of literary works in the context of Russian emigration, see Raeff (1990).

1. *Thematic*: the act of self-translation is an activity common to many characters in Nabokov's novels, such as *Pnin* (1957).

2. *Metaliterary*: metaliterary reflection on the problem of translation/self-translation can be found in the comments of the narrator or the interjections of the implied author, as happens in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941).

3. *Linguistic*: self-translation is contained *en abîme* within the individual words. Each word is created as a hybrid, with *at least* two linguistic and semantic layers contained in its structure; numerous examples of this can be found in *Ada, or Ardor* (1969).

In his self-translations, Nabokov turned away from his stated principle that translation should adhere as closely as possible to the original, instead obliging a sort of “unfaithful” translation that at times allowed him to rethink and remake the work completely.¹¹

Sogliadatai / The Eye is one of Nabokov's Russian novels profoundly altered in the process of self-translation; – evidently “a way to reactivate the author's creative process” (Beaujour 1995: 719). It is no coincidence that Jane Grayson's *Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose* (1977) includes this brief text among his major reworkings. Although the text is almost ignored in both discussions of self-translation¹² and criticism more generally,¹³ *Sogliadatai / The Eye* is actually of great interest as an example of the elegant solutions Nabokov devises in translating his complex interlingual play.

THE FUNCTION OF THE PARATEXT IN SELF-TRANSLATION

¹¹ This, however, is not the case with *Lolita*. In fact, in the afterword to the Russian edition of the novel, the author himself claims to follow a principle of very close fidelity to the original. Yet, despite the author's declarations, several critics, such as Alexander Dolinin (1995) and Gennady Barabtarlo (1988), have shown that Nabokov actually preferred creative solutions.

¹² Of course, an exception would be Grayson's *Nabokov Translated*, which is the first, and fairly detailed, comparison of the Russian and English versions of *Sogliadatai*. Yet, besides being clearly dated, the study contains several imprecisions which often turn out to be misleading. Take, for example, the following: “Weinstock's mistress, for instance, is described [...] as a ‘little pink-faced, red-haired lady with plump little hands, who smelled of eucalyptus gum’ [...]. In the Russian version there is no mention of the gum—the lady is simply *крепко надушенная*” (Grayson 84). This is a deceptive point, as the Russian sentence is abruptly cut off instead of being quoted in full: “Партнершей Вайнштока в этих играх была маленькая розово-рыжая дама с пухлыми ручками, крепко надушенная и всегда простуженная” (Nabokov 1978: 35). “Weinstock's partner in these games was a little woman with a pink face and red hair, with plump hands, heavily perfumed, and always ill”. Grayson's statements disregard that the failure to mention the eucalyptus gum can be justified by the rhythm of the sentence. In the Russian version, symmetry between cases is followed religiously. We should also note the repetition of certain sounds that the word *evkalipt* (eucalyptus) does not have. The addition of that detail would have certainly broken the musicality of the line.

¹³ A review of the criticism quickly reveals that the most important contributions to this topic came out around the 1970s and 1990s. More recent remarks can be found solely in the form of encyclopedia entries, as in Dolinin (2005) and Rodgers (2009).

Originally published in Russian in issue 44 of the magazine *Sovremennye Zapiski* (late 1930),¹⁴ *Sogliadatai* was subsequently included in an eponymous collection of thirteen stories published by the Parisian publishing house *Russkie Zapiski* in 1938. The English translation was the initiative of Nabokov's son, Dmitri, who produced a first draft which was later corrected and heavily edited by Nabokov senior. *The Eye* was first published in serial form in *Playboy* from January to March of 1965, and then later that year as a book with Phaedra Publishers in New York.

Sogliadatai can thus be considered a particular case of self-translation; from a methodological point of view, in fact, we must acknowledge the substantial difference between the process of self-translation and the radical editing of a translation drafted by someone else. Drawing on several occasions in which he espoused theories about translation, it is clear that for Nabokov, the ideal translator is the author himself. Yet we can infer, taking a comment from a letter that he wrote to Zinaida Shakhovskaya, that translating was also a source of great suffering, described as “sorting through one's own innards and then trying them on like a pair of gloves” (Shakhovskaya 25). In order to obviate the traumatic nature of the self-translation process, Nabokov turned to collaboration with other select translators, including his son Dmitri, to whom he entrusted the task of producing an initial draft that he later edited himself.

As Dmitri recalls, Nabokov saw works of art as “alive and fair game for updating by the author as long as he, too, lived” (Dmitri Nabokov 1984: 150). Like a living organism, the novel can continue to undergo changes and evolve as its author wishes. In this process, the intervention of external yet *authorized* figures should be understood as assistance for self-translation; the author always remains the catalyst and primary agent who can intervene with absolute authority, in a more or less substantial manner impressing the work with his distinctive mark.

Although the narrative framework remains quite similar, the English version of *Sogliadatai* contains significant shifts from the Russian; though in respect to the overall structure, these modifications are undoubtedly minor and are primarily changes in format. While the Russian version is divided into six chapters, with additional internal divisions typographically marked by double spacing and line breaks (though not systematically¹⁵), the English version has no chapter divisions and only the spacing (double or triple) is maintained. These internal divisions in the English, on the other hand, do not mark the sequence of the action

¹⁴ *Sovremennye zapiski* 44 (1930), 91–152. It is also useful to know that the first public reading of the novel took place on March 3, 1930 (Johnson 1985a: 328).

¹⁵ In the Russian edition consulted for this essay, paragraph divisions are found only in the first and the sixth chapters.

with dramatic emphasis but simply indicate the shifts in narrative focus. In such a short novel, the most obvious effect of similar changes, as Grayson notes, is that they “streamline the narrative and give it greater movement and cohesion” (83).

The most meaningful alterations, however, take place not so much on the architectural level of the work as on a deeper level of language. Worries over appropriate translations begin even before the novel proper, as in Nabokov’s foreword to the 1965 American edition:

The Russian title of this little novel is SOGLYADATAY (in traditional transliteration), pronounced phonetically ‘Sugly-dart-eye,’ with the accent on the penultimate. It is an ancient military term meaning ‘spy’ or ‘watcher,’ neither of which extends as flexibly as the Russian word. After toying with ‘emissary’ and ‘gladiator,’ I gave up trying to blend sound and sense, and contented myself with matching the ‘eye’ at the end of the long stalk (2010: i).¹⁶

Essentially, *соглядатай* [sogliadatai] is an archaic military term that denotes precisely the concepts Nabokov clearly states here,¹⁷ with the additional meaning of “investigative agent.” Sight and the act of spying derive directly from the lexical base of the word, which is composed of the prefix “co-” [“so-”], the root “гляд” [“gliad”] (as in the verb “*глядеть*,” “to observe”), and the suffix “-атай” [“-atai”].¹⁸ Although he admits the futility of rendering into English the complex morphological and semantic structure of the word in his flexible mother tongue, Nabokov proposes a humorous anglicized variant of the pronunciation of this archaic term: “[s]ugly-dart-eye” — a “phonetic” transcription that reveals the circuitous process by which Nabokov reached his self-translational choice. The prefix “co-” [“so-”], melding with part of the root “гляд” [“gliad”] (“гля”, “glia”),¹⁹ becomes “sugly,” clearly evoking the adjective “ugly.”

¹⁶ It is also worthwhile to briefly consider the word “stalk.” While the noun refers to the botanical object, the verb “to stalk” has the meaning of “to pursue,” “to prey stealthily,” thus referring back to the element of espionage in the novel’s Russian title.

¹⁷ The *Русско-Итальянский словарь* (786) reports the same meanings, with the parenthetical “уст.” indicating an archaic word or expression. The same is also found in the *Толковый Словарь Русского Языка* (Vol. 4, 350) and the *Словарь Русского Языка* (Vol. 4, 249).

¹⁸ *Словообразовательный словарь русского языка* (Vol. I, 226). It is interesting that we find an expression using the word *sogliadatai* in the *Толковый словарь великорусского языка* (1882), 4:259: “Соглядатай дорогъ на часъ, а тамъ - не знай насъ!” (“A spy is precious for an hour, but then that’s it”). This old Russian saying fits particularly well with the novel’s central theme—the narrator becomes a spy with some ease, but once he has achieved his aims, within a short time he has gone back to being the person he was before. In ancient times, *sogliadatai* were sent, sometimes at the czar’s behest, to blend in with the crowd and gather useful information. In order to go unnoticed, these spies often had to go in disguise and very attentively listen to the various views expressed. It was not uncommon for them to be killed at the end of a mission.

¹⁹ Nabokov’s primary goal was to pull out a grouping of words from the Russian expression that would make sense in English. In order to privilege the semantics of the target language, he relied on the phonetics of the original term. By taking apart the root “gliad” he obtained “glia” to form the first word in English. Since “glia” is atonal in

The rest of the Russian root, along with the first part of the suffix “-атай” [“-atai”] (“at,” “at”) becomes “dart,” a term whose full meaning is equivalent not only to the noun (in the sense of “arrow”) but also to the verb, not incidentally used in the expression “to dart a glance,” and is thus particularly apt in this context. Finally, the remainder “ай” [“ai”] (which is phonetically identical, on a visual level, to the first person singular pronoun in Russian, “я,” but reversed, as if reflected in a mirror) is associated, homophonically, with the noun “eye,” which carries the meaning of the Russian noun “гляд” [“gliad”]. The noun “eye,” in turn, is a homophone of the English first person singular pronoun “I”. Thus the assonances and similarities that dominate both the Russian variant and the seemingly less malleable English come full circle. Despite the apparently greater simplicity of the English title, it conserves the semantic nucleus of the short novel: the problem of identity and the element of the gaze. As Sweeney observes, “[it] neatly expresses the split in his narrator’s psyche between ‘I’ (his self) and ‘eye’ (his acute self-consciousness) (257).”

The paratext,²⁰ therefore, is assigned a crucial explanatory role that previews the narrative itself. Examining the tail end of the semantic threads connecting the original title with its English variant reveals the interconnectedness of discourse types in the mind of the bilingual writer—a phenomenon described by Wallace Lambert in 1981:

There is [...] an impressive array of evidence accumulating that argues plainly against the commonsense notion that becoming bilingual — having two linguistic systems within one’s brain — naturally divides a person’s cognitive resources and reduces his efficiency of thought or language. Instead, one can now put forth a very strong argument that there are definite cognitive and language advantages to being bilingual [...]. Bilingual young people relative to mono-lingual controls show definite cognitive and linguistic advantages as these are reflected in measures of “cognitive flexibility,” “creativity,” “divergent thought,” “problem solving,” etc. [...]. My own working hypothesis is that bilingualism provides a person with a comparative, three-dimensional insight into language, a type of stereolinguistic optic on communication that the monolingual rarely experiences. (10-12)

SELF-TRANSLATING THE TEXT: THE WEIGHT OF A SINGLE WORD

“*sogliadatai*” (/sə.ɡli.ˈda.təj/), it is pronounced /ɡli/, hence its perfect match with the pronunciation of “sugly” (/sʰʌɡli/), and the absence of the “a” in the new version.

²⁰ For more on the concept of paratext, see Genette (1997). For the specific case of Nabokov, see Edelstein (29–43).

If Nabokov came to a pleasing solution for the translation of the title through a process of reduction, so to speak, he adopted the opposite approach with the body of the text. Lexical choices, in some cases, become more *recherché*. For example, instead of the more common word “image,” which is usually the novella’s translation for the equally common Russian “*образ*” [“*obraz*”] (i.e. “image,” “aspect,” “character”), Nabokov used the word “eidolon” (Nabokov 2010: 56) in one prominent instance in the story’s development, which likewise appears in the Italian translation as “*immagine eidetica*” [“eidetic image”], (Nabokov 2006: 60): “Больше ничего нельзя было из нее вытянуть, и *образ* получался довольно бледный, малопривлекательный” (Nabokov 1978: 48, italics mine). The English version became: “[t]here was nothing more to be wheedled out of her, and the resulting *eidolon* was rather pale and not very attractive” (Nabokov 2010: 54, italics mine). The English “eidolon,” a highly literary term undoubtedly not in current use,²¹ referring to the senses of an “ideal person or thing” as well as “apparition,” follows the ancient Greek word *εἶδωλον* (*eidōlon*), meaning “figure,” “representation,” “mental image,” “apparition,” “bodiless form,” “fantasy,” “simulacrum,” or “simulacrum of a god.” However, for the purposes of analyzing Nabokov’s text, the most relevant meanings are “an image reflected in a mirror” (Plato uses it in this sense) and “an image reflected in water.” Nor can we leave out the fact that *eidōlon* is derived from *εἶδος* (*eidōs*), “sight,” and *εἶδω* (*eidō*), “I see.”²² The sense of sight, or seeing, and the object of perception — that is, the image, whether mental or material — are all contained within this single term, “eidolon,” used by Nabokov in his English version of a novel that constitutes a magisterial variation on the theme of the mirror, or double.

In addition to this semantic layering of such meanings as “image,” “representation,” “sight,” “mirror,” and “apparition,” we must also consider the taxonomical use of “species” or “type” referenced by the author in another part of the passage cited above.²³ The context provides a clue of fundamental importance: the narrator is trying to figure out a “classification of Smurovian masks [...] as [a] scientist [...] interested only in taxonomic characters” (Nabokov 2010: 54). Indeed, this section describes his first, unsuccessful attempt to discover the true identity of the mysterious Smurov. This endeavor has notable affinities with the method of *eidetic reduction* developed by philosopher Edmund Husserl. Within the discourse of

²¹ The word appears in few dictionaries. The *Hazon Garzanti*, for instance, reports the word as “non com.” [i.e., not common] (391); the *Oxford Dictionary of English* marks the term as “literary” (563).

²² Not to mention the morphological similarity between the “*ei*” in “*eidō*” and “*eye*.”

²³ The concept of species is further thematized in the long digression on entomology in the middle of the novel (Nabokov 2010: 53–54).

phenomenology, this process indicates reducing the idea of a phenomenon to its primary, original, perceptual essence, without any complementary or secondary elements:

“In” der reduzierten Wahrnehmung (im phänomenologisch reinen Erlebnis) finden wir, als zu ihrem Wesen unaufhebbar gehörig, das Wahrgenommene als solches, auszudrücken als “materielles Ding” [...]. Alles, was dem Erlebnis rein immanent und reduziert eigentümlich ist, was von ihm, so wie es in sich ist, nicht weggedacht werden kann und in eidetischer Einstellung eo ipso in das Eidos übergeht, ist von aller Natur und Physik und nicht minder von aller Psychologie durch Abgründe getrennt [...].²⁴ (Husserl 1913: 184)

To reach the eidetic object, Husserl proposes the method of variation: taking all perceived aspects of a given phenomenon and submitting them to variation. Any aspect that when changed does not alter the phenomenon’s significance is part of its invariable nature, whereas anything that does alter its significance when changed is bracketed as contingent and accidental. The narrator of *Sogliadatai* / *The Eye* expresses a similar desire to determine Smurov’s true essence. In order to do so, he begins to “collect” the often vastly different impressions that the other characters have of him.

It should also be noted that in neuroscience and psychology, the eidetic image refers to “the perception of something that is not present, [which is] clear like a vision, but of whose purely mental nature the subject is aware.”²⁵ Similarly, in the field of psychiatry, eidetic memory defines a certain type of memory commonly referred to as photographic or visual, characteristic of childhood and pre-adolescence — a type of memory which, moreover, is associated with Asperger’s syndrome, a not uncommon disorder for those with learning and developmental disabilities.²⁶ It seems no coincidence that the symptoms of this illness correspond exactly to the behavioral traits of the narrator, who eventually is revealed to be Smurov himself.

Therefore, like a jewel case, the English word “eidolon,” an exact calque of the Greek, seems to enclose the protean key to *Sogliadatai* — which can be considered a *roman-à-clef*. The English self-translation’s tendency toward a more sophisticated formal rendering, semantically

²⁴ “‘In’ the reduced perception (in the phenomenologically pure mental process), we find, as indefeasibly belonging to its essence, the perceived as perceived, to be expressed as ‘material thing’ [...]. Everything which is purely immanent and reduced in the way peculiar to the mental process, everything which cannot be conceived apart from it just as it is in itself, and which eo ipso passes over into the Eidos in the eidetic attitude, is separated by an abyss from all of Nature and physics and no less from all psychology [...]” (Husserl 1982: 216–17).

²⁵ *Dizionario Garzanti della lingua italiana* (2010a) (Trans. JR).

²⁶ For more on Asperger’s syndrome, see Attwood (2007).

denser and more evocative (with richer intertextual allusions), is thus demonstrated *en abîme* by this small but significant polysemic term.²⁷

OPEN CONCLUSIONS

The topic of Nabokov and self-translation opens a window onto a series of questions that have remained at least partially unresolved. On a general level, we might, like Steiner, call for a detailed, updated study of Nabokov's self-translated prose.²⁸ Particular attention should be paid to the works in Russian, given the overt critical bias for the English-language works, often discussed without any knowledge of Russian. Many novels and stories still await the careful investigations that will exhaustively clarify the type, techniques, and role of self-translation in Nabokov's literary oeuvre. Shun'ichiro Akikusa has lucidly observed that "the original Russian works tend to be comparatively economical, polysemic and difficult to translate, while the English translations tend to be comparatively defamiliarizing but translatable" (90-91). We can partially agree with this statement: the use of idiomatic expressions and allusions specific to Russian culture make the original text (L1) highly dense and compact, difficult to translate (as in the case of the word *sogliadatai*). It is thus not surprising that Nabokov would make these references explicit in self-translation. When he translates himself into English (L2), as we can also see from the example of "eidolon," Nabokov unquestionably aims to defamiliarize standard language; at the same time, his solutions are not always easily translatable or semantically consistent.

The fragile relationship between L1 and L2 texts, generated by the reactivation of the creative process, constitutes another area of investigation that ought to be explored in Nabokov studies. Maurice Friedberg makes a step in this direction, observing that "[i]t is possible [...] that Nabokov regarded his self-translations not as translations at all, but as similar works by the same author, which he thus felt free to rewrite" (152). This interpretation, according to Friedberg, significantly distances Nabokov's theories of translation from his practice when translating himself. Dmitri Nabokov furthermore remembers that, "[m]eticulous as VN's insistence was on literalness in translation, he deliberately allowed himself authorial license when dealing with his

²⁷ Some critics, however, maintain that self-translation was actually an impoverishment compared to the original. Regarding certain literary allusions that may have been clear to Russian readers of the time, Johnson speaks of the "loss of one of the novella's original dimensions" (Johnson 1985b: 402). In fact, he claims that "[t]heir effectiveness has been badly eroded with the passage of time and by the translation of the novella into a new language with a readership of very different cultural background. These factors account for some of the obscurity into which the book has fallen" (402).

²⁸ This need has become even more pressing with the recent publication of the posthumous *The Original of Laura* (2009), as well as the public opening of the Vladimir Nabokov Collection archives at the Library of Congress (2009).

own works” (D. Nabokov: 150).²⁹ The legitimacy of authorial versions may be placed as a corollary to the considerations I have made here. Self-translation, as Beaujour reminds us, is:

[n]ot only [...] unpleasant, [but] also dangerous, since it undermines the status of the L1 work. When a book is translated by someone else, the fact of translation in no way diminishes the stature of the original. [...] But when a writer self-translates, it may happen that the L2 text is not merely a facsimile, a replica, or even an equivalent but an improvement, even a replacement for the first text. [...] If, on the other hand, the L2 version is not accepted as canonical, then self-translation threatens the writer’s self-image of his artistic particularity; self-replication is schizophrenic. (Beaujour 1995: 719)

The analysis of Nabokov’s translational choices, as evidenced in the case of “eidolon,” also calls for more reflection on the reception of his self-translated works. Which readers are capable of grasping the linguistic and cultural subtleties woven throughout the self-translated text? Are texts self-translated by bilingual authors somehow different than those produced by “monolingual” authors? If so, can this difference be perceived by the reader? Which readers? As far as Nabokov is concerned, the situation is undoubtedly difficult to address. His works are quite rich even at the moment they are created. If we consider, as many have noted, that the author’s style becomes even more complicated in the act of self-translation — as does, in some cases, the narrative architecture itself — we will see the urgency and interest of this topic.

Translated by Jamie Richards

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²⁹ Similarly, Beaujour notes that “when he self-translated, Nabokov habitually violated his own strictures about fidelity to meaning in order to retain certain underlying principles of stylistic organization, including the frequent sacrifice of sense for sound” (1995: 720).

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