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Review of Vladimir Nabokov as an Author-Translator

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SUMMARY

Is writing a form of translation? Is translation a form of writing? How do the two underpin and reinforce each other in the creative output of a bilingual writer? These questions are fundamental to Julie Loison-Charles's book "Vladimir Nabokov as an Author-Translator", which seeks the answers through in-depth immersion into three related themes: Nabokov's relation to pseudotranslation, the practice and theory behind his translation of Eugene Onegin into English, and his role as co-translator of his novels into French. Each theme forms the subject of a separate, self-contained part of the book.

Part 1 examines Nabokov's relation to pseudotranslation, a literary technique which consists in disguising the originality of the author's work by presenting it as a translation (e.g., from a lost original in another language). The issue is approached from a variety of angles: Nabokov's teaching of well-known pseudotranslated literary texts (e.g., his lectures on Quixote), his translation of literary texts containing pseudotranslations (such as Tatyana's letter to Onegin), and pseudotranslations present in his novels (e.g., Pnin) are all brought to bear. Loison-Charles argues that the function of pseudotranslations in Nabokov's oeuvre is "to reaffirm his attachment to the Russian literature of his own past and its main figure, Pushkin" (p. 79). The main thrust of the discussion is summarized in the title of the closing chapter: "Are Nabokov's Novels in English 'Pseudotranslations'?". In it, Loison-Charles tackles the intriguing (and unresolvable) issue of the precise nature of the composition process engaged in by bilingual writers, in general, and Nabokov, in particular.

Part 2 focuses on Nabokov's dual role as an author and translator in his translation of Eugene Onegin into English. The overarching question that informs this part of the book is whether the two roles are separable; or, in the author's words, "where Nabokov's faithful translation of Pushkin's idiosyncratic language stops and where his own brand of English, as an author, starts" (p. 100). The discussion unfolds against the backcloth of Nabokov's lifelong reflection and changing views on the practice of translation, which evolved, over the course of his life and literary career, from an insistence on free (domesticating, target-text oriented) translation to a preference for literal (foreignizing, source-text oriented) one. Nabokov's translation of Eugene Onegin is designedly faithful to the source text, with the attendant consequences for the English-language version. Loison-Charles illustrates, with a breadth of examples, two translational strategies which end up rendering awkward the English of the translation: Russification of the syntax and Gallicization of the vocabulary. While the former aims to achieve the "line-by-line fit" between the original and the translation, the latter performs the subtler function of

replicating in English "the Gallic dimension of Pushkin's language" (p. 110). With this aim in mind, Nabokov occasionally employs French loanwords in preference to native equivalents, or uses different words in the translation where the same word appears in the original. His justifications for these translational choices, ranging from literary to linguistic and to cultural-historical, are discussed at length.

The last part of the book takes a close look at Nabokov's collaboration in the French translations of his novels. It is broken down into two substantive chapters. In the first, Loison-Charles scrutinizes Nabokov's published and unpublished correspondence with his translators, with an eye to understanding his working procedures when collaborating on the translation of his work, as well as his interpersonal relationships with the translators as individuals. Given this focus, the errors, mistranslations and "little careless mistakes" themselves, mentioned in Nabokov's letters are, tantalizingly, not discussed. In the second chapter, Loison-Charles examines the four types of elements whose translations into French were supplied by Nabokov himself: botanical and zoological terms, puns, poetry and foreign-language incrustations. Unlike the previous chapter, this one presents a number of examples, such as the word for hickory in *Pale Fire*, the French in *Ada* and the puns in *Lolita*. The closing chapter, "Should Nabokov Be Retranslated?", makes an argument for the validity of multiple translations as a way of accessing the original text.

The brief conclusion is devoted to the state of translation within the ambit of Nabokov studies and the teaching of Nabokov's work.

EVALUATION

Reflecting on his translation of Josep Pla's "Quadern gris" [The Gray Notebook], the Spanish writer Dionisio Ridruejo described the translation process essentially as one of rewriting: each language has a structure of its own, says Ridruejo, and what is thought in one needs to be rethought in the other ("las lenguas tienen su estructura, y lo que se piensa en una hay que volver a pensarlo en otra") (Ridruejo 1983: 24).

The quotation above is just one of the many attempts to analyze and theorize the relationship between writing and translation, which, in spite of its enormous interest, continues to remain elusive. In the case of bilingual writers actively engaged in both, this relationship acquires additional layers and dimensions of complexity. By exploring it in one of the twentieth-century's most original, least classifiable authors, who is regarded as a superb stylist in both his major languages, this book contributes data, discussion and insights to a range of specialist fields, from translation studies to literary theory and to linguistics.

For the linguist reader, perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is the discussion of Nabokov's actual translational solutions. Aspects of interest include, among others, language-contact effects in Nabokov's translation of Eugene Onegin, where his conscious striving for literalism of the translation has as a surface by-effect Russification of the

syntax and Gallicization of the vocabulary; the use of synonyms to render different shades of meaning of the original word (p. 117); rendering archaisms in the original with archaisms in the target language, in some cases “to revive a nuance of meaning present in the ordinary Russian term but lost in the English one” (p. 134); translational equivalents when the original contains foreign material, such as calques or outright loans; and the rendering of puns.

In some of Nabokov's translational choices, readability for the present-day reader takes second place to historical accuracy, as when Pushkin's *сладкие мечты* <sladkie mečty> and *сладостные мечтания* <sladostnye mečtanija> are rendered not with ‘sweet dreams’ but rather with ‘delicious reverie’ or ‘sweet delusions’: Nabokov explains that, just as the Russian phrases, these collocations of eighteenth-century English poets were calqued on “[t]he ‘douce chimères’ of French elegies” (p. 105; Nabokov 2000: 75).

“[T]he Gallic dimension of Pushkin’s language” sometimes becomes more explicit in the translation due to rendering of what in Russian are merely French calques with straightforward French loanwords in English. One example of this is the rendering of *черты* <čerty> (“Мне нравились его черты” <Мне нравилis’ jego čerty>) with ‘traits’ rather than features (“I liked his traits”): the phrase *его черты* <jego čerty> is calqued on the French <ses traits>, hence the choice of ‘traits’ over ‘features’ (p. 109). “Кувшины с яблочной водой” <kuvšiny s jabločnoj vodoj>, similarly, become in translation ‘pitchers of eau-de-romme’, *яблочная вода* ‘apple water’ being a calque from the French (p. 113).

Some of the translational choices have arguably more idiosyncratic justifications, as, for instance, when *малиновый* <malinovyj> as a color term is rendered in English with ‘framboise’ rather than ‘raspberry’ because, for Nabokov, the French term is closer to the Russian one in that it “seems to convey a richer, more vivid sense of red than does English ‘raspberry’” (p. 115).

In the French translations of his novels, Nabokov occasionally added English words not present in the original to reference items that are alien to the target culture; a by-effect of these additions is greater explicitness of the target-language text. For example, the sentence from *Lolita* “All she wanted from life was to be one day a strutting and prancing baton twirler or a jitterbug” becomes in French “Elle n’avait d’autre ambition dans la vie que de danser le jitterbug et être une des drum majorettes de l’équipe locale de rugby” (p. 207). Here, the added English term ‘drum majorette’ is clarified by an explicit reference to the sport.

Loison-Charles’s unhurried discussion of these translational conundrums and their surrounding cultural, critical and historical context, with an occasional glimpse of the agonizing process by which Nabokov arrived at his final choices, will no doubt offer many a pleasant moment of discovery to both experts and aficionados.

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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Natalie Operstein's research interests center on language contact, phonology and language change. Her publications include "The Lingua Franca: Contact-Induced Language Change in the Mediterranean" (2022), "Zaniza Zapotec" (2015), "Consonant Structure and Prevocalization" (2010), "Valence Changes in Zapotec", ed. with A.H. Sonnenschein (2015) and "Language Contact and Change in Mesoamerica and Beyond", ed. with K. Dakin and C. Parodi (2017).