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TRANSLATING 'THE OTHER': NABOKOV AND THEORIES OF TRANSLATION

Vladimir Nabokov was not only a conventional translator of other writer's writings, such as Pushkin and Lermontov and the anonymous old Russian *Song of Igor's campaign*, but also both a theorist (though he would have rejected this appellation) of translation and a translator of his own early Russian work into English. But his *magnun opus, Ada or Ardor. A Family Chronicle* written in English, Russian and French (and in roughly that order of priority), defies thinking in terms of translation, or at least in the terms in which translation is usually thought–the putting into one language what was previously in one other language–as it contains three languages and so the partial translation of itself into French and Russian. But if it were (if it has not already been) translated into French (or Russian), the English would be translated into French (or Russian), the French into Russian (or the Russian into French) or some other language, and the Russian (or French) into another Language altogether (perhaps English), unless the French (or Russian) was also translated into another language, in which case the Russian (or French) could remain untranslated, but would it then be a translation? The excessive complication of this description of what it would be like to translate *Ada* merely reflects the difficulties the translator would face. But it also provides a productive entry into thinking through a number of important issues about translation, particularly the sort of exchange it sets up between languages, and the sort of relations it implies between nations.

Nabokov's most explict statement about translation is his prefatory poem to this translation of *Eugene Onegin* written, Nabokov says, "after the meter and rhyme of the EO stanza":

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.
The parasites you were so hard on
Are pardoned if I have your pardon,
O Pushkin, for my stratagem.
I traveled down your secret stem,
And reached the root, and fed upon it,
Then in a language newly learned,
I grew another stalk and turned
Your stanza, patterned on a sonnet,
Into my honest roadside prose–
All thorn, but cousin to your rose.

Reflected words can only shiver
Like elongated lights that twist
In the black mirror of a river
Between the city and the mist.
Elusive Pushkin! Persevering,
I still pick up your damsel's earring,
Still travel with your sullen rake;
I find another man's mistake;
I analyze alliterations
That grace your feasts and haunt the great
Fourth stanza of your Canto Eight.
This is my task: a poet's patience
And scholastic passion blent–
Dove-droppings on your monument[1]

Translation is here figured as decapitation (the translator as Salome to the poet's St John the Baptist), profanation (the translation as heresy to the sacred 'original' text), parasitism (the translator as parasite to the poet's host), grafting (the translation as stalk to the 'original's' root), consanguinity (the translation as cousin to the 'original'), distorted reflection (the translation as shivering reflections in the river to the 'original's' solid city), and excretory besmirching (the translator's product as dove-droppings on the poet's monument, undecidably the work or the statue). Translation here borders on the evil and the outlawed. Decapitation of the poet is allowable because the poet refuses to be seduced by the translator's pyrotechnic display; profanation of the dead is allowable but necromancy

[1] Vladimir Nabokov: 'Translator's Introduction,' in. *Eugene Onegin*: A Novel in Verse by Aleksandr Pushkin. Rev. ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 9, 10 and 'On Translating Eugene Onegin' in. *Poems and Problems*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 175.

isn't; parasitism is allowable but plagiarism isn't grafting, but not cloning; consanguinity, but not incest; distorted reflection, but not undistorted reflection; dove-droppings, but not brass polish or white-wash. Translation for Nabokov should mediate, is the mediation between the same and the other without translating the other into the language of the same, but allowing the other its otherness. Translation should set up dialogic exchanges between races and nations as Nabokov did.

Nabokov was perhaps well-qualified to reflect on translation or what he called "the queer world of verbal transmigration"[2] because he was verbally transmigratory. Although Nabokov explicitly refers to Russian as 'one's mother tongue"[3], Nabokov's biographer claims that "English is actually his first language"[4]–presumably because English was, Nabokov says, "the language of my first governess,"[5] and of "a bewildering sequence of English nurses and governess... [who] come out to meet me as I re-enter my past."[6] Nabokov thus says that "I was bilingual as a baby (Russian and English) and added French at five years of age."[7]

Nabokov was not only verbally transmigratory but also spatially transmigratory as a result of the Russian revolution and the rise of Nazism which entailed a displacement from Russia to Berlin with a brief educatory sojourn in Cambridge, and then from Berlin to America via Paris. Nabokov's language is a polyglot language which is the language of the emigré which cuts across the demarcation of languages as national, and nationalising unities.

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[2] Valdimir Nabokov: 'The Art of Translation,' in. *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), p. 315.

[3] Vladimir Nabokov: *Poems and Problems*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 14.

[4] Andrew Field: *Nabokov. His Life in Part*, (New York: Viking, 1977), p. 5.

[5] Valdimir Nabokov: 'On a Book Entitled Lolita,' in. *Lolita*, (1959; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 310.

[6] Valdimir Nabokov: *Speak Memory: An Authobiography Revisited*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), p. 68.

[7] ibidem, pp. 5, 111.

The society of the emigré with their own mother tongue, the language of the country of their birth, is a counter-society within the society of their immigration. Their language is an antilanguage within that society, which constitutes them as the other within it.

Nobokov later recounted his emigré past: "As I look back at those years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russians, leading an odd but by no means unpleasant existence, in material indigence and intellectual luxury, among perfectly unimportant strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more or less illusory cities we, emigrés, happened to dwell. The aborigines were to the mind's eye as flat and transparent as figures cut out of cellophane, and although we used their gadgets, applauded their clowns, picked their roadside plums and apples, no real communication, of the rich human sort so widespread in our own midst, existed between us and them. It seemed at times that we ignored them the way an arrogant or very stupid invader ignores a formless and faceless mass of natives; but occasionally, quite often in fact, the spectral world through which we serenely paraded our sores and our arts would produce a kind of awful convulsion and show us who was the discarnate captive and who the true lord."[8]

Emigrés constructed the native inhabitants of their place of exile as natives and themselves as colonists in an imaginary relation of exclusion between their antisociety in which communication occurred and the natives outside with whom communication did not occur, certainly not at the same level. But this relation could be readily inverted to show that the emigrés were the natives, were the other, and their hosts the colonists, the same, on which émigrés were parasites. But in Nabokov's text the emigrés' host is the other which mediates between the otherness of their hosts as colonised natives and as colonists. Nabokov's text disrupts the pivotal inversion of otherness, but at the same time constructs the emigré's hosts as other.

Nabokov's polylingualism entailed another displacement when the Russian emigré immigrated to America where he wrote in Engilsh and of which he bemoaned that "my private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not be anybody's concern, is that I had to

[8] ibidem, pp. 211, 212.

abandon my natural idiom, my untrammelled, rich and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of these apparatuses the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied association and traditions–which the native illusionist, frac-trails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his one way."[9] Despite his 'woe is me' rhetoric with his public display of his private tragedy, Nabokov's deterritorialisation from 'Russia' to 'America' via Cambridge and Berlin, did produce a displaced English which bears the traces of its Russian conception, old-world rearing, prewar European maturing, American transplantation, and final European return and roosting. Take this passage chosen randomly from *Ada*: "As if she had just escaped from a burning palace and a perishing kingdom, she wore over her rumpled nightdress a deep-brown, hoar-glossed coat of sea-otter fur, the famous *kamchatskiy bobr* of ancient Estotian traders, also known as 'lutromania' on the Lyaska coast: 'my natural fur,' as Marina used to say pleasantly of her own cape, inherited from a *Zemski grandam*, when, at the dispersal of a winter ball, some Lady wearing vison or coypu or a lowly *manteau de castor* (beaver, *nemetskiy bobr*) would comment with a rapturous moan on the *bobrovaya shuba*. 'Staren'kaya (old little thing),' Marina used to add in fond deprecation (the usual counterpart of the Bostonian lady's coy 'thank you' ventriloquizing her banal mink or nutria in response to polite praise–which did not prevent her from denouncing afterwards the 'swank' of that 'stuck-up actress,' who, actually, was the least ostentatious of souls)."[10] Not only does this passage read like an entry from a trilingual dictionary (Russian-English, Russian-French, French-English), it is also a translation in progress. Nabokov pursues a fur coat across two continents and three languages, setting up a dialogic relationship between them, investing a banal item of clothing with all the exoticism of other times and places, beginning the auto-translation of *Ada* into French and Russian, and leaving implicit instructions as to how the task is to be finished (if it can be done).

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[9] Nabokov: 'On a Book', p. 315.

[10] Vladimir Nabokov: *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, (1969; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 307, 8.

In Benjamin's terms *Ada* is 'a great text' because "to some degree all great texts contain their potential translation between the lines; this is true to the highest degree of sacred writings. The interlinear version of the Scriptures is the prototype or ideal of all translation."[11] But Ada is a kind of super-sacred writing because it contains its potential translation in its lines, not between them. And it is not only intralinear in two lines of languages like the Scriptures are interlinear between two lines of languages–Hebrew or Greek and English or German or whatever–but intralinear in three languages–French, Russian and English–as if *Ada* is trying to be the whole of theScriptures, Old and New Testament, and their translation at the same time withing itself.

Ada operates at what Derrida calls "one of the limits of theories of translation: all to often they treat the passing from one language to another and do not sufficiently consider the possibility for languages to be implicated more than two [*sic!*] in a text. How is a text written in several languages at a time to be translated?... And what of translating with several languages at a time, will that be called translating?"[12] But is it possible for a text to be written equally in several languages at a time? *Finnegans Wake* is probably the closest such text, but can it be said to be written in a language at all when it is written in several languages at a time? *Ada* is written in several languages at a time, but English is the predominant language which frames the French and Russian. A translation of *Ada* into French or Russian would translate the English into French or Russian and the French into Russian or the Russian into French or some other language and leave the French or Russian as it is. This would not be a translation in the strict sense because Ada has partly translates itself. Nabokov's work on and of translation is a beginning to rethinking translation outside the nationalistic constraints of the symmetrical and equivalent exchange between languages–a kind of linguistic balance of trade which reduces languages to a fundamental sameness, a common core of meaning.

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[11] Walter Benjamin, 'The Task of the Translator,' Illuminations trans. Harry Zohn, (Glasgow: Collins, 1973), p. 82.

[12] Jacques Derrida: *'Des Tours de Babel,' Difference in Translation*, ed. Joseph F. Graham, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1935), p. 171. (See: Babel. 1986. No. 3. pp. 177-178.)

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