

UNIVERSITE MARC BLOCH  
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DEPARTEMENT D'ETUDES ANGLAISES ET NORD-AMERICAINES

TRANSLATING MULTILINGUAL  
WRITERS: THROUGH THE LOOKING-GLASS  
OF NABOKOV'S FICTION



MEMOIRE DE MAITRISE

Par

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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....  
Reflected words can only shiver  
Like elongated lights that twist  
In the black mirror of a river  
Between the city and the mist.

Vladimir Nabokov. "*On translating Eugene  
Onegin*".

## Introduction

Translation has traditionally been viewed as a derivative activity as opposed to writing. Thus, translation, seen by Florio, the translator of Montaigne, as a secondary and ‘female’ activity, has little status compared with the ‘original’ creation<sup>1</sup>. Although today the status of translation is seen quite differently. For instance, Peter France, discussing ‘the paradoxical situation of translation’ in his introductory note to *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation*, says: “Translation is, or can be, both absorbing and rewarding. As a translator I know that there is a fascination in living at such close quarters with a writer, engaging with every word they wrote, trying to make another text which is worthy of the original. But there is also a melancholy of translation. Compared with other writers, translators feel undervalued. It is not so much that they are badly paid (this is a problem they often share with those they translate) as that they are downgraded, damned with faint praise, criticized in passing and, unkindest of all, ignored. All are aware, and if they weren't critics would remind them, of the inadequacy of their efforts – ‘the translator is a betrayer’ goes the old refrain, unthinkingly. It often seems that the translator’s best role is that of self-effacing servant, a transparent glass through which the original is

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Eyquem De Montaigne, *Essays*, Translation by John Florio (1553-1625); Preface. Found in Online Renaissance Editions of The University of Oregon <<http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/montaigne/>>.

viewed”<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, stressing the fact that ‘good translations are good books in their own right, not just reflections of good books [...] and that [translations] [...] are an essential part of culture,’<sup>3</sup> he establishes the main aim of his work as ‘to bring translation out of the shadows’ that is, to see the work of translators as a resource for concrete linguistic and literary study.

The present study focuses on the French translations of Nabokov’s novel *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. This choice is not random. *Ada* is one of Nabokov’s most complex novels, on both linguistic and thematic levels. Its dazzling style and astonishing use of languages, the unsuspected depth of various allusions and the spellbinding reading experience makes *Ada* the ‘lushest’<sup>4</sup> of all Nabokov’s novels. But *Ada* is more than a novel: it becomes the readers’ special way of thinking in between languages; it invites to see simultaneously the stained glass pieces scattered throughout the novel; it’s also an approach to feeling, to dreaming and to resisting its absorbing universe. Translating *Ada* into French was a true challenge; not only because of the mere linguistic trials of translation, comparable to those of *Ulysses* or *Finnegan’s Wake*, but also because translating *Ada* meant translating the most rigorous of writers and translators, the

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<sup>2</sup> France, Peter, *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), ii-iii.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, iii.

<sup>4</sup> A term used by Brian Boyd in *Nabokov’s Ada: The Place of Consciousness* (Michigan: Ardis, Ann Arbor, Ardis Publishers, 1985), 9.

‘Continental dandy who feels truly at home only in the free international realm of imagination’<sup>5</sup>. One of the French reviewers wrote about the French version of *Ada*: ‘Traduire *Ada* c’est enfileur un corset sur un corps de liane, c’est faire entrer la souple langue anglaise de Nabokov dans un couvent janséniste de la langue de Pascal. C’est aussi se heurter à l’érudition et à la légèreté stylistique du père de *Lolita*’<sup>6</sup>. *Ada*’s translation took six years to complete, and finally was rather a result of the joint efforts of Gilles Chahine, Bernard Blandenier and Nabokov himself. Erik Orsenna, who wrote a novel about the adventures of *Ada*’s translation, remembers Nabokov’s reaction on the first attempts made by Gilles Chahine to translate *Ada* into French: “Il stigmatisait son ‘ignorance stylisée,’ son ‘incapacité spectaculaire pour la poésie,’ allant jusqu’à écrire ce type d’aménités: ‘La traduction? Sur un plat/La tête pâle et grimaçante d’un poète, /Cri d’ara, jacassement de singe, /Profanation des morts.’”<sup>7</sup>.

Nabokov paid a special attention to the French translation of his writings: ‘I am able to control and correct only the French translation of my novels. That process entails a god deal of wrestling with booboos and boners, but on the other hand allows me to reach my [...] final stage, that of rereading my own book a few months after the original printing. What judgement do I then pronounce? Am I still satisfied with my work? Does

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<sup>5</sup> Fowler, Douglas, *Reading Nabokov* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 23.

<sup>6</sup> Gazier, Michèle, “Cocktail Nabokov” (*Télérama*, n 2475, 18 juin, 1997), 42.

<sup>7</sup> Payot, Marianne, “Les îliens et le traducteur” (*Lire*, Juin 1997), 12.

the afterglow of achievement correspond to the foreglow of conception?<sup>8</sup>. As any translation always implies evaluation, interpretation, and selection, it appears to be interesting to probe whether and how the French *Ada*'s 'afterglow of achievement' corresponds to 'the foreglow' of Nabokov's conception. It would be also interesting to try and see which main direction the translation takes, to find its felicitous parts and perhaps its weaknesses. The main focus will be on the sparkling 'surface' of Nabokov's looking-glass world (linguistic mirror reversals, alliterations, and asymmetric structures) which very often turns out to possess and introduce levels much more profound and vertiginous. A special emphasis will be placed on the problem of annotation of translated texts written by multilingual writers.

The first part of this thesis examines the multilingual background of Nabokov's biography, the role of translation in his work and life and the close link between his multilingualism and 'the otherness' of his literary style.

The second part offers a concrete study of 'the two surface features of Nabokov's style: the acuity of visual detail and the insistent phonic play'<sup>9</sup> and focuses on the problems of perception and translation of those features.

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<sup>8</sup> Nabokov, Vladimir, Strong Opinions (New York: Mc Graw Hill Book Company, 1973), 111. Henceforth references to this work will be made directly in the body of the text, using the abbreviation SO.

<sup>9</sup> Boyd, Brian, *op. cit.*, 3.

The third part deals with translation problems of 'Antiterran' language that Nabokov creates in *Ada*. The main focus of the study is on the means of translation of neologisms and wordplay. This part also examines the issue of annotation of translated texts.