

## **Nabokov's selftranslations: interpretation problems and solutions in *Lolita's* Russian version\***

*Bruno Osimo*

Following Harold Bloom's logic, according to which every interpretation is a misinterpretation, and every reading is a misreading, one could infer that any translation is a mistranslation. According to Bloom, however, misreading is caused by the unconscious wish of the author to overshadow her/his predecessors, her/his literary "fathers"<sup>1</sup>. Mistranslation, on the other hand, is not necessarily caused by unconscious wishes, but rather by conscious impotence: it is impossible **to understand** all that an author wants to transmit with her/his text, and it is impossible to **transfer** all that you have understood into another language leaving the T.L.<sup>2</sup> reader with the same opportunities of comprehension/incomprehension and interpretation as the S.L.<sup>3</sup> reader.

In this sense Nabokov's work has a double function: first, it is useful to show the subjectiveness and imperfection of the literary translation process; its second, more constructive, function is to help to find a translational method able to earn acceptable solutions.

Nabokov has translated some of his own works, mainly from Russian into English and vice versa. *Lolita*, in particular, was translated into Russian. This novel therefore has two original draftings. This material was analyzed to verify, in the light of the most important

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\* This article is the abstract of a dissertation held at the IULM University of Milan in March, 1996.

<sup>1</sup> Bloom 1974 and 1975.

<sup>2</sup> Target language.

<sup>3</sup> Source language.

authority (the author), the interpretative hypothesis of Nabokov's translators into other languages.

Literary translation, or "poetic" translation in a broad sense, forces the translator to draw arbitrary and not always verifiable interpretative hypotheses. It is the very exceptional fact that a writer did translate himself, and the verification consequently possible, that allows to infer that usually, when such a test is impossible, the translator's choices are arbitrary.

### **Nabokov's translations and his method**

Beginning from 1940, after the first twenty — Russian — years of Nabokov's life, and after the second twenty years, at Cambridge, Berlin, and Paris, begins the third period of twenty years, in the United States. This move brings about a fundamental change: the use of English, instead of Russian, for literary production.

This is a painful change: «My private tragedy, which cannot, indeed should not, be anybody's concern, is that I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English».<sup>4</sup> The laceration caused by this separation, which brought about also the writing of some of the best Nabokov's works, and of course of the by far most famous one, **Lolita**, was a constant trait of the whole second part of the writer's life: of the American period and the of the Swiss period. Still in 1966, in an interview with Herbert Gold published on «The Paris Review» in October 1967, to the question about his worse flaw as a writer, he answered:

The absence of a natural vocabulary. An odd thing to confess, but true. Of the two instruments in my possession, one — my native tongue — I can no longer use, and this not only because I lack a Russian audience, but also because the excitement of verbal adventure in the Russian medium has faded away gradually after I turned to English in 1940. My English, this second instrument I have always had, is cannot conceal poverty of syntax and paucity of domestic diction when I need the shortest road between warehouse and shop. An old Rolls-Royce is not always preferable to a plain Jeep<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Nabokov 1973, p. 15.

<sup>5</sup> Nabokov 1973, p. 106.

Nabokov's style colouring, his vivid metaphors explain very well how he lived the trauma of the adoption of a new language for the creation of fiction and poetry. It's self-evident that all self-disparaging references to his English style are exaggerated. Nabokov is very demanding, to himself and others alike, and unmercifulness guiding his literary judgement and criticism is but the other face of this medal.

This "transport", "translation" of himself into America was a process not lacking an accurate methodologically painstaking preparation: in the Forties and in the Fifties he published many articles **on** translation. Nabokov's conception of reality expands to literature and translation: in both cases it's fundamental scientific interest in the detail.

During my years of teaching at Cornell and elsewhere I demanded of my students the passion of science and the patience of poetry. As an artist and scholar I prefer the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam. [...] in a work of art there is a kind of gradual merging between the two things, between the precision of poetry and the excitement of pure science<sup>6</sup>.

This precision of the detail, if applied, would produce dramatic terminological confusion, with effects on hermeneutics too. Let's take as example the well-known Čehov's drama *Višněvyj sad*, widely known as "The cherry-tree garden". The "višnja" after which the drama is named is *prunus cerasus*, or "sour cherry", a sort of wild cherry, not the usual cherry-tree (*prunus avium*), which in Russian is called "čerėšnja". It's not a negligible detail: unlike cherries, sour cherries are *wild* fruits, they're sour and are used only for jams and syrups, a fact referred to by the very text of the drama<sup>7</sup>. Both the Italian "visciolo" and "višnja" derive from the Greek word "byssinos", meaning "crimson". In the drama, one could argue, trees and men are alike made wild, and men have lost memory of old-time ways to prepare and preserve sour cherries, but they didn't learn any other method, they can appreciate the beauty of this sour-cherry tree plantation, but they can't keep its property, and abandon it to the axes

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<sup>6</sup> Nabokov 1973, P. 7–10.

<sup>7</sup> Čehov 1978, Vol. 13, P. 206.

of emerging capitalists. The way the drama is analysed is very different.

In the 1959 article **The Servile Path**, Nabokov concentrates on the “Problems of Flora”, explaining the importance of precision when a translator has to do with plant names. Whenever a T.L. word is not misleading because it points to many different plants, «the translator is entitled to use any available term so long as it is exact»<sup>8</sup>.

It follows a long dissertation on **čerēmucha**, a tree present in Puškin’s work for which Nabokov coins a word, “racemosa”, from the scientific name *Padus racemosa*, because in English there’s not a term indicating precisely that tree.

It is from this attention to the detail, from this aversion towards generalisations, towards trivializations that the distant attitude towards any social or political message present, more or less explicitly, in a literary text is born. In the original language, however, the reader can easily avoid didactic literature. It’s more difficult with translated literature. In this case the original text is transfigured in such a way that it becomes unrecognizable, even if «The only object and justification of translation is the conveying of the most exact information possible and this can be only achieved by a literal translation, with notes»<sup>9</sup>.

In 1955, in an essay named **Problems of translation**, it is formulated the Nabokovian definition of “literary translation”. The only translator’s aim has to be «to produce with absolute exactitude the whole text, and nothing but the text». «The term “literal translation” is tautological, since anything but that is not truly a translation but an imitation, an adaptation or a parody»<sup>10</sup>. Nabokov believes that generally speaking translators are inaccurate and embellish and insert their own material without any justification<sup>11</sup>. Moreover, they don’t know «Russian life of the 1820s»<sup>12</sup>. The time indication is evidently aimed at the translators of Puškin and Lermontov.

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<sup>8</sup> Nabokov 1959, P. 104.

<sup>9</sup> Nabokov 1959, P. 104.

<sup>10</sup> Nabokov 1955, Pp. 506–507.

<sup>11</sup> The Russian term is **otsebjätina**, deriving from **ot sebjà** [from one’s self], with the derogatory suffix **-tina**. It means «one’s words inserted in another’s text».

<sup>12</sup> Nabokov 1955, P. 506.

In 1958 Nabokov prepared an English version of Lermontov's classic **A Hero of Our Time**. His Foreword is an opportunity to state his view of translation.

In the first place, we must dismiss, once and for all, the conventional notion that a translation 'should read smoothly', and 'should not sound like a translation' (to quote the would-be compliments, addressed to vague versions, by genteel reviewers who never have and never will read the original texts). In point of fact, any translation that does **not** sound like a translation is bound to be inexact upon inspection; while, on the other hand, the only virtue of a good translation is faithfulness and completeness. Whether it reads smoothly or not depends on the model, not on the mimic<sup>13</sup>.

From this statement the radical new conception of the author-reader relationship is clear: if the standard reader is not enough equipped to digest a literary text, that's not a good reason to feed him/her on homogenized food with a "literary flavour". On the contrary, the translator has to help him/her taste the real thing thanks to copious footnotes and explanations.

It is possible to describe in a series of footnotes any modulations and rhymes of the text as well as all its associations and other special features [...]. I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity.<sup>14</sup>

A good translator, in Nabokov's opinion, shouldn't show courage just in not sticking to the "imbecile reader"'s tastes, as postulated by some publishers: he/she must be brave enough even with respect to the educated reader, to the purist, to the critic. In fact, as he underscores in Lermontov's foreword, to the requirements of precision he «must sacrifice «a number of important things — good taste, neat diction, and even grammar (when some characteristic solecism occurs in the Russian text)»<sup>15</sup>.

The translation, or we'd better say the edition, for which Nabokov hoped to be remembered is Puškin's *Evgenij Onegin*. It was hard work, lasting from 1958 to 1964. Even in this case the foreword is a

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<sup>13</sup> Nabokov 1955, P. 506.

<sup>14</sup> Nabokov 1955, P. 512.

<sup>15</sup> Lermontov 1984, P. xiii.

precious theoretical document. The fatal question whether poetry can be translated is posed, and answered, stating that there are three types of versions: paraphrastic versions, unusable to scholars; lexical or constructional versions, useful as a parallel text; and literal versions, consisting in «rendering, as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Only this is true translation»<sup>16</sup>.

When Nabokov wonders whether it is possible retain rhymes while translating poetry, «The answer, of course, is no. To reproduce the rhymes and yet translate the entire poem literally is mathematically impossible»<sup>17</sup>. The translator's role is humble, he can't dare to correct, embellish, edit anything. «Pushkin has likened translators to horses changed at the post houses of civilization. The greatest reward I can think of is that students may use my work as a pony»<sup>18</sup>.

In the Foreword to *Onegin* Nabokov analyses the role of Russian translations from English, German, and French at the end of the XVIII-beginning of the XIX century in the reception of Western culture and literature by the Russian reader. In most cases translations are the only link to Western culture, and for that reason their heavy unfaithfulness influences Russian literature so much that quotations, references and hints are based on the Russian version, in total ignorance of the original. «The ignoble Russian adaptations of popular European novels were read only by the lower classes, while, on the other hand, the admirable melodies of Žukovskij's versions of English and German poems won such triumphs for Russian letters as to make *negligible* the *loss* Schiller or Gray *suffered* in adaptation»<sup>19</sup>.

Of course, the «suffered loss» is «negligible» to the eyes of the XIX century reader, not to Nabokov's, as can be clearly understood by his hyper-literal view of translation. Nabokov calls them «adaptations» rather than translations. Everybody, from the country lady to the hus-sar, used to read English and German texts in French. The various influences, bad and good, are thus rather to be ascribed to the authors of these free versions. «In consequence, Shakespeare is really Letourneur, Byron and Moore are Pichot, Scott is Sufauconpret, Sterne

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<sup>16</sup> Pushkin 1964, Vol. 1, P. viii.

<sup>17</sup> Pushkin 1964, Vol. 1, P. ix.

<sup>18</sup> Pushkin 1964, Vol. 1, P. x. There's a pun: «pony» means «small horse», and, in American English, «crib».

<sup>19</sup> Nabokov 1959, P. 97. Italics added.

is Frenet, and so on. In *Eugene Onegin* there are numerous references to foreign books; but one should constantly bear in mind that what Pushkin and his Tatiana Larin read is not the real Richardson but the French versions by the monstrously prolific Abbé Antoine François Prévost [...]»<sup>20</sup>.

The problem posed by Nabokov is complex and serious. While it is clear that the translator, with his interpretations and mistakes, influences the reader of his/her translation, it's not as much clear that sometimes he/she influences literary production too. «Thus a paraphrast, while betraying one poet, misleads the other»<sup>21</sup>. A paraphrast (as Nabokov calls “free” translators) betrays the poet he translates, thus misleading the poet quoting from the translation. In the melting pot of literary influences, translation-paraphrase has the same status as the original. However, being different from the original while stating its equivalency, it results in a funny phenomenon: a text's influences are ramified, and on some authors mistranslations have an influence higher than the original.

In the same edition there is a practical example of the “Eugene Onegin” Stanza. Nabokov himself composed a poem that, in its rhythmic and rhyming structure, is a model of Onegin's stanza, while its content reflects his work on the translation:

What is translation? On a platter  
A poet's pale and glaring head,  
A parrot' screech, a monkey's chatter,  
And profanation of the dead. [...]»<sup>22</sup>

## Lolita

How the idea — or perhaps we should say the need — to translate “Lolita” into Russian was born is explained in an interview given in 1964:

I trained my inner telescope upon that particular point in the distant future and I saw that every paragraph, pockmarked as it is with pitfalls, could lend itself to hideous mistranslation. In the hands of a harmful drudge, the

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<sup>20</sup> Nabokov 1959, P. 98.

<sup>21</sup> Nabokov 1959, P. 100.

<sup>22</sup> Pushkin 1990, Vol. 1, P. 9.

Russian version of *Lolita* would be entirely degraded and botched by vulgar paraphrases or blunders. So I decided to translate it myself<sup>23</sup>.

We have analysed four versions: 1) the English original, published in 1955 (E); 2) the Russian version by the author, published in 1967 (R); 3) Bruno Oddera's Italian version, published by Mondadori in 1959 (I<sub>1</sub>); 4) Giulia Arborio Mella's Italian version, published by Adelphi in 1993 (I<sub>2</sub>). Giulia Arborio Mella, as she explained in a lecture given on October 25, 1995 at the Scuola Superiore per Interpreti e Traduttori del Comune di Milano, could consult both Dmitrij Nabokov and Serena Vitale, who helped her in resolving some ambiguities of the English text comparing it to the Russian one. However, this comparison was not regular.

### **Lolita (English text)**

1.

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, My soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue making a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, a certain initial girl-child. In a pryncedom by the sea.<sup>24</sup> Oh, when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the

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<sup>23</sup> Nabokov 1973, P. 37–38. If you consider the scandal caused by the publication of *Lolita*, considered for years a pornographic, nearly incestuous novel, it might be interesting Nabokov's attitude towards his *Lolita*, very similar to the attitude of a father preoccupied by his daughter initiation to life: he's worried that his creature might end up in unreliable hands, and be «degraded and botched by vulgar paraphrases».

<sup>24</sup> In E. A. Poe's poem *Annabel Lee* more than once there appears a «kingdom by the sea» and «winged seraphs of heaven». *Poems*, London, Penguin, 1975, P. 89.



misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns.

2.

I was born in 1910, in Paris. My father was a gentle, easy-going person, a salad of racial genes: a Swiss citizen, of mixed French and Austrian descent, with a dash of the Danube in his veins. I am going to pass around in a minute some lovely, glossy-blue picture-postcards.

He owned a luxurious hotel on the Riviera. His father and two grandfathers had sold wine, jewels and silk, respectively. At thirty he married an English girl, daughter of Jerome Dunn, the alpinist, and grand-daughter of two Dorset parsons, experts in obscure subjects — palaeopedology and Aeolian harps, respectively. My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three, and, save for a pocket of warmth in the darkest past, nothing of her subsists within the hollows and dells of memory, over which, if you can still stand my style (I am writing under observation), the sun of my infancy had set: surely, you all know those redolent remnants of day suspended, with the midges, about some hedge in bloom or suddenly entered and traversed by the rambler, at the bottom of a hill, in the summer dusk; a furry warmth, golden midges.

### **Lolita (ruskij tekst)**

1.

Lolita, svet moej zhizni, ogon' moih chresel. Greh moj, dusha moja. Lo-li-ta: konchik jazyka sovershaet put' v tri shazhka vniz po něbu, chtoby na tret'em tolknut'sja o zuby. Lo. Li. Ta.

Ona byla Lo, prosto Lo, po utram, rostom v pjat' futov (bez dvuh vershkov i v odnom noske). Ona byla Lola v dlinnyh shtanah. Ona byla Dolla v shkole. Ona byla Dolores na punktire blankov. No v moih ob''jat'jah ona byla vseгда: Lolita.

A predshestvennic-to u neě byli? Kak zhe — byli ... Bol'she skazhu: i Lolity by ne okazalos' nikakoj, esli by ja ne poljubil v odno

dalëkoe leto odnu iznachal'nuju devochku. V nekotorem knjazhestve u morja (pochti kak u Po)<sup>25</sup>.

Kogda zhe èto bylo, a? Priblizitel'no za stol'ko zhe let do rozhdenija Lolity, skol'ko mne bylo v to leto. Mozhete vseгда položit'sja na ubijcu v otnoshenii zatejlivosti prozy.

Uvazhaemye prisjazhnye zhenskogo i muzhskogo pola! Èksponat Nomer Pervyj predstavljaet soboj to, chemu tak zavidovali Èdgarovy serafimy — hudo-osvedomlennye, prostodushnye, blagorodnokrylye serafimy ... Poljubujtes'-ka na ètot klubok ternij.

## 2.

Ja rodsijsja v 1910 godu, v Parizhe. Moj otec otlichalsja mjagkost'ju serdca, lëgkost'ju nrava — i celym vinegretom iz genov: byl shvejcarskij grazhdanin, polufrancuz-poluavstrieц, s Dunajskoj prozhilkoj. Ja sejchas razdam neskol'ko prelestnyh, gljancevito-golubyh otkrytok.

Emu prinadlezhala roskoshnaja gostinica na Riv'ere. Ego otec i oba deda torgovali vinom, brilliantami i shelkami (raspredel'ajte sami). V tridcat' let on zhenilsja na anglichanke, dochke al'pinista Dzheroma Dunna, vnuchke dvuh Dorsetskih pastorov, èkspertov po zamyslovatym predmetam: paleopedologii, i Èolovym arfam (raspredel'ajte sami). Obstoatel'stva i prichina smerti moej ves'ma fotogenichnoj materi byli dovol'no original'nye (piknik, molnija); mne zhe bylo togda vsego tri goda, i krome kakogo-to tëploho tupika v temnejšem proshlom u menja nichego ot neè ne ostalos' v kotlovinah i vpadinah pamjati, za kotorymi — esli vy eshchë v silah vynosit' moj slog (pishu pod nadzorom) — saditsja solnce moego mladenchestva: vsem vam, navernoè, znakomy èti blagouhannye ostatki dnja, kotorye povisajut vmeste s moshkaroj nad kakoj-nibud' cvetushchej izgorod'ju, i v kotorye vdruk popadësh' na progulke, prohodish' skvoz' nih, u podnozh'ja holma, v letnih sumerkah — gluhaja teplyn', zolotistye moshki.

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<sup>25</sup> «Nearly» as in Poe, for the difference between «princedom» and «kingdom».

## Lolita (Italian version by Bruno Osimo)

1.

Lolita, luce della mia vita, fuoco dei miei lombi. Peccato mio, anima mia<sup>26</sup>. Lo-li-ta: la punta della lingua compie un percorso di tre passetti<sup>27</sup> giù per il palato, per battere, al terzo, contro i denti. Lo. Li. Ta.

Era Lo, semplicemente<sup>28</sup> Lo,<sup>29</sup> di mattina, alta<sup>30</sup> cinque piedi (meno nove centimetri e<sup>31</sup> con un calzino solo). Era Lola in pantaloni lunghi<sup>32</sup>. Era Dolly a scuola. Era Dolores sulla linea tratteggiata dei moduli<sup>33</sup>. Ma tra le mie braccia era sempre:<sup>34</sup> Lolita.

Ce n'erano state prima di lei?<sup>35</sup> Eccome, se ce n'erano state ... Dirò di più<sup>36</sup>: non ci sarebbe stata nessuna Lolita, se in una lontana estate<sup>37</sup> non avessi amato una primigenia ragazzina. In un principato sul mare (quasi come in Poe).

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<sup>26</sup> In R, the inversion of the standard adjective-name order («grech moj») suggests a similar inversion in the T.L.

<sup>27</sup> R: «tri šažka», diminutive reproducible in Italian but inexistent in English.

<sup>28</sup> E: «plain», interpreted by I<sub>1</sub> as «null'altro che» (nothing but). Russian «prosto» suggests «semplicemente» (simply), as I<sub>2</sub> does.

<sup>29</sup> This comma, blocking the reading, is present both in R and in E, and is therefore reproduced in I. (I<sub>1</sub> la riporta, I<sub>2</sub> no.)

<sup>30</sup> E: «standing». I<sub>1</sub> translates «diritta nella sua statura di...», while I<sub>2</sub> «ritta nel suo metro ...». But R has «rostom v ...», a direct indication of height.

<sup>31</sup> The conjunction was added on the basis of the Russian text. The comma in I<sub>1</sub> is an addition not justified by the originals.

<sup>32</sup> E: «slacks», but R has «v dlennyh štanah», suggesting «lunghi» (long) in the T.L. too, differently from I<sub>1</sub> and I<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>33</sup> E: «on the dotted line»; I<sub>1</sub> translates «sulla linea punteggiata dei documenti». I<sub>2</sub>: «sulla linea tratteggiata dei documenti». From R it's clear that they're «blanki», “blanks”.

<sup>34</sup> The colon was added on the basis of the Russian original.

<sup>35</sup> Russian text suggests a plural subject.

<sup>36</sup> R: «Bol'she skažu»: R is therefore different from E. In Italian we opted for the Russian expression, very similar to the Italian one.

<sup>37</sup> R: «v odno dal'ekoe leto»: this addition, lacking in E, can be expressed in the T.L.

Questo, quando? All'incirca tanti anni prima della nascita di Lolita, quanti ne avevo io quell'estate. Potete sempre contare su un assassino per quanto riguarda una prosa intricata. Signore e signori della giuria<sup>38</sup>, il reperto numero uno è ciò che invidiavano i serafini di Edgar, i malinformati, semplici<sup>39</sup> serafini dalle ali nobili. Osservate questo intrico di spine.

## 2.

Sono nato nel 1910, a Parigi. Mio padre si distingueva per il cuore tenero, i facili costumi — e tutt'un'insalata di geni<sup>40</sup>: era<sup>41</sup> cittadino svizzero, mezzo francese e mezzo austriaco, con una venatura di Danubio<sup>42</sup>. Ora distribuirò alcune deliziose cartoline celeste lucido<sup>43</sup>.

Possedeva un albergo di lusso sulla Rivière. Il padre ed entrambi i nonni commerciavano in vino, brillanti e sete (metteteli in ordine voi)<sup>44</sup>. A trent'anni si è sposato con un'inglese, figlia dell'alpinista Jerome Dunn, nipote di due pastori del Dorset<sup>45</sup>, esperti in materie astruse<sup>46</sup>: paleopedologia e arpe eoliche (mettetele in ordine voi). Le

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<sup>38</sup> E: «Ladies and gentlemen of the jury». I<sub>2</sub> translates only «Signori della giuria», but in Russian the rhetorical emphasis on the listing of the two sexes is self-evident: «Uvažаемые присяжные женского и мужского пола!».

<sup>39</sup> E: «simple». I<sub>1</sub> and I<sub>2</sub> translate «ingenui», but the Russian «prostodušnyj» has a more positive connotation: literally «simple soul».

<sup>40</sup> E: «a salad of racial genes». I<sub>1</sub> has it literally: «una insalata di geni razziali». I<sub>2</sub> prefers a milder metaphor: «una macedonia di geni razziali». But the author in R keeps the English metaphor: «celyj vinegret iz genov», allowing the omission of the redundant «razziali».

<sup>41</sup> The verb was added on the basis of R.

<sup>42</sup> E: «with a dash of the Danube in his veins». R is instead «s Dunajskoj prožilkaj», with a pun based on «prožilka» that, as in Italian, means both «nuance» and «vein».

<sup>43</sup> E: «some lovely, glossy-blue picture-postcards». I<sub>1</sub> translates: «alcune belle cartoline illustrate, dai cieli di un turchino lucido»; I<sub>2</sub> adheres more to both originals: «alcune splendide cartoline di un azzurro smaltato». R is: «neskol'ko prelestnyh, gljancevito-golubyh otkrytok».

<sup>44</sup> The English «respectively» becomes in Russian «raspredel'ajte sami».

<sup>45</sup> E: «two Dorset parsons». I<sub>1</sub>: «ecclesiastici del Dorsetshire» I<sub>2</sub>: «parroci del Dorset»; R: «Dorsetskich pastorov».

<sup>46</sup> As rightfully chooses I<sub>2</sub>: R is in fact «zamyslivatye».

circostanze e la causa della morte della mia fotogenicissima madre furono piuttosto originali (picnic, fulmine); allora avevo solo tre anni, e, a parte qualche caldo anfratto nel passato più buio, di lei non mi è rimasto nulla<sup>47</sup> negli avvallamenti e nelle cavità della memoria, dietro i quali — se ve la sentite ancora di sopportare il mio stile<sup>48</sup> (scrivo sotto sorveglianza<sup>49</sup>) — tramonta<sup>50</sup> il sole della mia infanzia: conoscerete senz'altro tutti<sup>51</sup> questi resti aromatici<sup>52</sup> del giorno che stanno sospesi insieme ai moscerini sopra una qualche siepe in fiore, e nei quali ti imbatti<sup>53</sup> d'un tratto passeggiando, ci passi attraverso, ai piedi di una collina, nel crepuscolo estivo — un tepore vellutato, moschini dorati.

### Comparison of the texts

In many cases comparing the English with the Russian text allows to determine the correct interpretation of some English expressions. For example, «the tip of my tongue taking a trip of three steps **down** the

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<sup>47</sup> I<sub>1</sub> proposes «più nulla rimane di lei», a nearly literal translation of E like in R, while I<sub>2</sub>, with «nulla di lei persiste», lifts the register. «Subsists» is not an everyday word, of a low register, but «ostalos'» is very simple, compared with other possibilities: uderžalos'; sochranilos'; sbereglos'. In this case it's possible that Nabokov meant to make a slight style change in the Russian version.

<sup>48</sup> In I<sub>1</sub> and I<sub>2</sub> the hint to the intricate prose style is lost, and the reader is therefore puzzled by this meta-narrative comment, difficult to understand.

<sup>49</sup> «sotto sorveglianza» exists in the same form both in English and Russian, therefore, being used in both originals, it's a forced solution in Italian too. I<sub>1</sub> has «in osservazione»; I<sub>2</sub> «sono guardato a vista», elegant but not literal.

<sup>50</sup> R has a historical present, possible in Italian too.

<sup>51</sup> I<sub>1</sub> and I<sub>2</sub> use the indicative form: «certo, conoscete tutti» and «certo voi tutti conoscete». The R adverb «naverno» suggest a less certain chance, a probable possibility, similar to the one expressed by «conoscerete senz'altro».

<sup>52</sup> I<sub>1</sub> chooses «olezzanti», I<sub>2</sub> «odorosi»; but «redolent» means «having a pleasant odor», and the validity of this definition in the context is confirmed by «blagouchannye».

<sup>53</sup> As in English you don't appreciate the difference between singular and plural «you», while in Russia this difference is clear, the Italian version can treasure that information.

palate». I<sub>1</sub> translates the latter as «**sul** palato», and I<sub>2</sub> does the same. The hypothesis is that the preposition «down» here means «along», movement through a place, along a surface in this case. Checking with R, we find «**vniz** po něbu», indicating the Nabokovian interpretation of «down» as «below».

In the case of «four feet ten», from the Russian text we learn an author's preference: R doesn't convert into centimetres or other units, leaving the measure in feet («pjat' futov»), even if in Russian they are one more, minus two **veršok**, a Russian measure worth 4,4 cm. (For precision's sake, the total is 143,6 cm, versus 147,32 of the English original. I<sub>2</sub> gives this measure («nel suo metro e quarantasette»), while I<sub>1</sub> miscounts («un metro e cinquantotto»). It's not clear what were Nabokov's intentions as to the new height. Maybe, after counting, he has removed an extra **veršok**.

The phrase «there **might** have been no Lolita» is translated in I<sub>1</sub> «**forse** Lolita non sarebbe esistita affatto», while I<sub>2</sub> prefers «non ci sarebbe stata **forse** nessuna Lolita». In both cases, «might» is interpreted as eventuality, which induces both Italian translators to insert «forse» to mitigate the firmness of «non ci sarebbe potuta essere». But R is: «i Lolity by ne okazalos' nikakoj», that is to say, «might» has a conditional, not eventual, meaning.

It can happen that a willingly non-standard expression by the author is unwillingly standardised by the translator. It' what happens with «a certain **initial** girl-child»; I<sub>1</sub>, maybe owing to the harsh combination of «iniziale» and «fanciulla», prefers «una prima fanciulla»; I<sub>2</sub> on the contrary “restores” the literal meaning, resulting in «una certa iniziale fanciulla»; consulting R, both interpretations result different from Nabokov's: «odnu iznacial'nuju devočku»; the adjective translated as «primigenia» is much more imposing than «iniziale», thus giving much more importance and solemnity to the phenomenon-girl-child.

The presence of a comma is sometimes enough to change the meaning of a sentence. The inner narrator exclaims: «Oh when?» Without any comma between the two words. Both I<sub>1</sub> and I<sub>2</sub> translate: «Oh, quando?». However, the Russian text, creating a new paragraph, explains: «Kogda že èto bylo, a?», from which we infer that we have to do with a, albeit inner, dialogue. «Oh, quando?», sounds a little bit

artificial in comparison, difficult to imagine pronounced by a real speaker. We opted for a more clear-cut: «Questo, quando?»

The answer to this rhetorical question is rather complex (as later confirmed by the narrator): E: «**About** as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer». **About** was translated: I<sub>1</sub> «Press'a poco» ..., but I<sub>2</sub> completely omits the sense of approximation, interpreting maybe «about» as a state in time, as «in»: «Tanti anni prima ...» The R version however proves that the author is not willing to omit this nuance: «Priblizitel'no ...»

The word «fancy» is a very interesting example of semantic ambiguity: «You can always count on a murderer for a **fancy** prose style». In a common Webster's dictionary, looking up the entry «fancy» as adjective, you find 6 definitions: 1. «based on fancy; capricious; whimsical; fanciful; 2. higher than real value; extravagant; 3. made or added to please the fancy; ornamental; decorated; not plain; elaborate; 4. of superior skill; intricate and difficult; 5. of superior quality and therefore more expensive; 6. bred for some special feature or excellence of type: said of animals. Let's see how Italian translators have chosen their sense. I<sub>1</sub> speaks of «stile fantasioso», maybe choosing the definition 1. I<sub>2</sub> speaks instead of «prosa ornata», where «ornato» is obviously meant as «elegant», closer to the definition 3. R solves the puzzle: «v otnošenii zatejlivosti prozy»: in other words not a positive quality, but a metanarrative self-ironical comment by the narrator, a typical example of Nabokov's playful attitude towards the reader.

A translator may be doubtful about the original register of a statement. But «darkest» and «temnejšem» don't have any «fancy prose» connotations: they are common and neuter adjectives. We therefore opted for «buio», differently from I<sub>1</sub> who has «nelle più fitte tenebre del passato» and I<sub>2</sub> who has «nel passato più tenebroso». These two solutions belong to a decidedly higher register.

«Hollow» literally means «cavity», as «vpadina», while «dell» means «small valley», like «kotlovina». It's a further prove of the narrator's willingly intricate style. I<sub>1</sub> reacts with «tra le vallette e le colline dei ricordi», a literal version, however with a misunderstanding as to the word «colline» [hills]. I<sub>2</sub> decidedly simplifies: «negli anfratti della memoria». R has: «v kotlovinah i vpadinah pamjati», that is a

word-by-word version of the English text, so it is justified an extreme literality in another T.L. too.

Even in the case of «furry», as before with «fancy», the comparison with the Russian text is extremely telling. Being translated into Russian as «gluhaja», meaning «deaf» also in an acoustical sense, the only semantic intersection of the two words lies in the acoustical-tactile sphere: hence «vellutato». The two preceding Italian versions read «un tepore di pelliccia», which doesn't make much sense in a summer sunset.

As to the various references to Poe, the Russian version gives a neat indication that Nabokov wants to help the non English-speaking reader to understand them, explicating them. That indication is therefore applicable to the Italian reader too.

Having examined the first two pages, it emerges clearly that the comparison with the Russian version by the author offers much more clues, very useful to prepare a translation into another language. The comparison with  $I_2$  is very important because this translation — apart from the constant consultation of the Russian version — was prepared in optimal conditions: with Dmitrij Nabokov's assistance, by a very competent and motivated translator, by a publisher well-known for its precise preparation of the texts. It is therefore meaningful that the comparison with the Russian version gives nonetheless further elements to solve the various puzzles. A similar comparison was done with the translations of **Camera Obscura — Laughter in the Dark**, but we haven't enough space to relate about that here.

Many interesting elements have emerged. The possibility to consult **two** originals has meant many differences:

**Denotative meaning of a word:** The comparison allowed to improve the approximation with which the denotative meaning of a word is interpreted in a given context. The translator, having two words both chosen by the author to mean the same, examines their semantic spectra and looks for semantic intersections: his/her interpretation can therefore be more accurate.

**Connotative references:** the system of connotative references of the original text was already transposed in another language by the author. In doing so, some links were lost, and new links were created. The author's method gives rise to a set of clues that are useful to the translator to enact her/his translating strategy.



**Syntax:** the two S.L. sentences, with their construction, were examined to find out whether they were standard constructions or had dislocations or upsettings of any kind. The presence of the same syntactic structure in both S.L. sentences has justified its re-construction in Italian.

**Register:** sometimes Italian literary translators' style tends to elevate the S.L. register. Having two original texts, we could verify the author's choices as far as register is concerned, not being influenced by those solutions which sound more obvious in the cultural context of the T.L.

**Elements typical of the source culture:** the cultural competence of the S.L. reader is different from that of the T.L. reader, and the translator should fill the gap between these differences, either in the text or in the metatext. When the author himself translates his own text, this allows the translator into another T.L. to follow a cultural mediation strategy similar to the one chosen by the author. We saw that, for example, in the case of the references to E. A. Poe: for the English-speaking reader there is no facilitation, while for the Russian one it is deemed necessary.

The presence of two original texts changes the way the translator perceives the text. A literary text, «open» by definition, is transferred into another language, in which some semantic «doors» are shut, while others, not present in the original text, are opened. A new text is born, which in common with the original text has a part inversely proportional to the quantity of meanings not caught by the translators.

Literary translation is a continuous and continuously verified challenge, an unperfectible process of approximation. The bigger the approximation, the best the translation. Translations meant as creative transpositions are obsolete and have provoked much damage and Babel's confusion. We saw that examining, through Nabokov's eyes, the literary influences on Puškin, who happened to read the English Classics in French «transfigurations».

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**Автоперевод Набокова:  
интерпретационные проблемы и решения  
в русской версии "Лолиты"**

Статья посвящена проблемам набоковского автоперевода.

Отмечается, что русский вариант "Лолиты" зачастую уточняет и дополняет английский текст, поэтому перевод "Лолиты" на другие языки должен осуществляться на основе дополнительного анализа двух оригинальных текстов: их денотации (исследование пересечений семантических спектров эквивалентных слов), коннотации, синтаксиса, стилистических регистров, стратегии культурной медиации, избранной писателем при автопереведе. На основе подобного скрупулезного анализа автор статьи вносит свои коррективы в имеющиеся итальянские переводы "Лолиты".

**Nabokovi autoritõlge:  
interpretatsiooni probleemid ja  
lahendused “Lolita” venekeelses versioonis**

Artikkel käsitleb Nabokovi omatõlke probleeme. Rõhutatakse, et “Lolita” venekeelne variant tihti täpsustab ja täiendab ingliskeelset, seetõttu tuleb “Lolita” tõlkimisel teistesse keeltesse tugineda *kahe* originaalteksti võrdlevale analüüsile. Tekstidevahelisi seoseid lahatakse kirjaniku poolt omatõlkes tehtud valikute põhjal nende denotatsiooni (ekvivalentsete sõnade semantiliste spektrite lõikumised), konnotatsiooni, süntaktika, stilistika, kultuurilise mediatsiooni aspektidest lähtuvalt. Taolise analüüsi põhjal pakub artikli autor välja omapoolsed täiendused ja parandused olemasolevatele “Lolita” itaaliakeelsetele tõlgetele.