Estudios de Teoría Literaria
Revista digital: artes, letras y humanidades
Año 6, Nro. 12, septiembre 2017. ISSN 2313-9676

Raguet, C. (2017). "*El arte de la traducción* de Vladimir Nabokov. Problemas de recepción y transmigración en la traducción".
Estudios de Teoría Literaria. Revista digital: artes, letras y humanidades, 6 (12), 25-37.

El arte de la traducción de Vladimir Nabokov Problemas de recepción y transmigración en la traducción

The Art of Translation, by Vladimir Nabokov
Questions of Reception and of Transmigration in Translation

Christine Raguet[1]

Recibido: 17/08/2017
Aceptado: 30/08/2017
Publicado: 08/09/2017

Resumen
Los propósitos de este artículo son: i) analizar las relaciones de Vladimir Nabokov como autor multilingüe con la traducción al enfrentarse al exilio, y con la publicación de una de sus novelas en una lengua en que sabía escribir; ii) explorar las actitudes de Nabokov hacia la traducción en uno de sus libros, sus deseos de ser reconocido como autor y de pulir su estilo en la nueva lengua-cultura; iii) presentar factores como la identidad personal y cultural, y también las necesidades financieras de manera ligada al exilio y como elementos significativos en el proceso de traducción; iv) discutir el impacto de la reescritura en un autor alerta al reconocimiento internacional y en una búsqueda obvia de nuevos valores estéticos. Nabokov no es un caso único, pero su situación y sus reacciones son suficientemente representativas de las dificultades que surgen al escribir en una lengua ajena.

Palabras clave
Traducción; autoría; recepción; transmigración.

Abstract
The aims of this article are: i) to analyze the relations of Vladimir Nabokov as a multilingual author with translation when faced with exile and with the publication of one of his novels in a language in which he could write; ii) to explore Nabokov's attitude towards the translation of one of his books, his desires to be recognized as an author and to polish his style in the new culture-language; iii) to present factors like personal and cultural identity, and also financial needs as linked to exile and as significant elements in the translating process; iv) to discuss the impact of rewriting in an author seeking international recognition and in an obvious quest for new aesthetic values. Nabokov is not a unique case, but his situation and reactions are quite representative of the difficulties raised when changing one's language of composition.

Keywords
Translation; authorship; reception; transmigration.

[1] Profesora Emérita por la Universidad Nueva Sorbona París 3 (Francia). Es especialista en Traductología y se desempeña también como traductora literaria. Ha traducido obras de Vladimir Nabokov y Henry James, y autores contemporáneos como John Williams y Graham Parker, y a los escritores caribeños Oliver Senior y David Chariandy. Dirige la revista Palimpsestes, y fue durante años directora del centro de investigación de la Nueva Sorbona, y del grupo TRACT. Contacto: christine.raguet@univ-paris3.fr

Esta obra se encuentra bajo una Licencia Creative Commons Atribución-NoComercial-CompartirIgual 4.0 Internacional.

In "The Art of Translation",[2] an essay published on 4 August 1941 in *The New Republic*, Vladimir Nabokov characterizes translation as the queer world of transmigration. Having arrived in the United States a year earlier, he had himself effected a transmigration from one continent to another, fleeing Adolf Hitler's troops to protect his family and to preserve his use of language. But for the shift to be complete, the Russian author would have to give way to the American author. The move had been initiated in France a few years earlier with the rewriting of the translation of his Russian novel *Camera Obscura* into *Laughter in the Dark.*[3] The central question was then that of authorship in its connection to authority. And his choice to re-write *Camera Obscura* into a new novel is quite characteristic of the author's determination to control the reception of his productions in a new international language.[4] At the beginning of the novel, the character Udo Conrad,[5] an exiled writer, echoes the metamorphosis Nabokov had to undergo between 1935 and 1939 to become an English writer and be received as such. Nevertheless, Conrad's aesthetic preoccupations diverge from Nabokov's, but several declarations in chapter XXVIII bring forth some of the expected difficulties exiled artists have to face, like the central question of the mother-tongue's muse, which crops up throughout Nabokov's life: "I'd gladly write in French, but I'm loath to part with the experience and riches amassed in the course of my handling our language"[6] (Nabokov 1989: 215); but Conrad also raises the opposite question: "It is a queer thing: the more I think of it, the more I feel certain that there comes a time in an artist's life when he stops needing his fatherland. Like those creatures, you know, who first live in an aquatic state and then on dry land" (Nabokov 1989: 217). As a multilingual speaker, Nabokov composed in Russian, French and English, but even before migrating to the United States in 1940, he had chosen English to reach a wider readership.

Having left Russia in 1919, the family settled in Berlin. Nabokov studied in Cambridge and in 1922 he joined his family in Berlin after his father's assassination. In 1925, he married Véra Evseevna Slonim, a young Jewish girl and in 1934 their son was born.[7] In Nazi Germany, not only was his family in danger, but he also realized that to survive –that is to offer a wider circulation to his works– he also had to abandon his mother-tongue. The

---

[2] "The Art of Translation". *The New Republic* (Washington, D.C.), August 4th 1941, pp. 160-162. This article was reprinted in *Lectures on Russian Literature* (1981, pp. 315-321).

[3] *Laughter in the Dark*, 1938. London: Penguin Books, 1986. *Camera Obscura*, London: John Long, 1936, translation of *Kamera obskura* [in Russian], Paris: Sovremennye zapiski, 1933.

[4] Nabokov was born in 1899 in Saint Petersburg. He spoke fluent Russian, English and French from a very early age.

[5] Dietrich von Segelkranz in *Camera Obscura*.

[6] Conrad, like Albinus, the protagonist in *Laughter in the Dark*, is a German speaker.

[7] These personal elements show that Nabokov's transfer from one language / culture to another must have been somehow accelerated by political events. According to Henri Meschonnic (1973), the language / culture is the tool, which has its origin in a mother tongue, moreover it is influenced by elements coming from the type of education, environment, social organization of the country of origin, which all influence the language and are reflected in writing. He applied this notion to the concept of decentering: "Le décentrement est un rapport textuel entre deux textes dans deux langues-cultures jusque dans la structure linguistique de la langue, cette structure linguistique étant valeur dans le système du texte. L'annexion est l'effacement de ce rapport, l'illusion du naturel, le commesi, comme si un texte en langue de départ était écrit en langue d'arrivée, abstraction faite des différences de culture, d'époque, de structure linguistique" (308). (Decentering corresponds to a textual link established between two texts in two language / cultures even as far as between their linguistic structures, this linguistic structure being a reference in the system of the text. Annexation corresponds to erasing this link, creating an illusion of the natural, the "as-if", as if a text in the original tongue was written in the receiving tongue, irrespective of the differences between cultures, times, linguistic structures) [my translation].

question of the circulation of his works became urgent.[8] As a matter of fact, Nabokov's concern with reception was mainly based on the reader's potentially biased interpretations of his works: he admittedly disapproved of any social or political reading of his works and insisted on their aesthetic dimension. Moreover, he felt that what he regarded as his innovative novels were meant for a very strictly limited number of readers, as he stated in 1968 in an interview with Pierre Dommergues: "The only true reader, the best reader, the model reader, is the author of the book" (1968).[9] Thus he clearly acknowledged the author's control of his text. In this perspective, "reception" is to be understood as the study of a writer's relation to the international circulation of his creations, of his motives for being translated and his response to the translations produced regarding the future reception of this new production.

In the 1930s various other preoccupations, mainly financial needs, prompted Nabokov's decision to have his novels put into English. In May 1934, Otto Klement, a British literary agent, was interested in two of his novels *Otchayanie* and *Kamera Obskura*. On 16th December 1934, Nabokov signed a contract involving the total transfer of the English copyrights of these two novels, which were to be published in English as *Despair* and *Camera Obscura*.[10] Interestingly, Nabokov was somehow getting prepared for his physical, intellectual and linguistic move since he wrote to his French agent in Paris, Mme. Clairouin on 13th February 1935:

> You were saying that you had in view an American publisher who would agree if an English colleague shared the risk. Are you still in touch? Is it Simon & Schuster? Are his intentions quite serious? I'm asking you because I think I may have found an English publisher for this book (*Nabokov Archives*).[11]

The novel was finally brought out in London by John Long in January 1936, in Winifred Roy's translation, and signed Nabokoff-Sirin, an in between identity. Though several of his works had already been translated into various languages,[12] Nabokov was experiencing neither fame nor wealth. In these circumstances, he obviously expected a lot from these translations into English, but was somehow worried when he received the first extracts of Roy's work: "It was loose, shapeless, sloppy, full of blunders and gaps, lacking vigour and spring, and plumped down in such flat English that I could not read it to the end"

[8] This point needs to be debated in a study about the reception of translated works of art.

[9] My translation of: "Le seul vrai lecteur, le meilleur lecteur, le lecteur modèle, c'est l'auteur du livre." (Dommergues 1968). Nabokov's reader could be compared to Iser's ideal reader: "The ideal reader, unlike the contemporary reader, is a purely fictional being; he has no basis in reality, and it is this very fact that makes him so useful: as a fictional being, he can close the gaps that constantly appear in any analysis of literary effects and responses. He can be endowed with a variety of qualities in accordance with whatever problem he is called upon to help solve" (Iser 1978: 21).

[10] For further information, see my commentaries and notes on *Rire dans la nuit*, in Nabokov's *La Pléiade* vol. 1, 1591-1605 & 1609-20. Laure Troubetzkoy's notes and commentary on *Chambre obscure* can complement information.

[11] Nabokov Archives, Berg collection, New York Public Library, typed letter, written in French; my translation of: "Vous me disiez, il y a quelque temps, avoir un éditeur américain, qui marcherait, si un collègue anglais partageait son risque. L'avez-vous encore? Est-ce Simon & Schuster? Ses intentions sont-elles vraiment sérieuses? Je vous le demande parce que je crois pouvoir trouver un éditeur anglais pour le même livre".

[12] *Mashenka* and *Korol', Dama, Valet* into German respectively in 1928 and 1930; *Zashchita Luzhina* and *Kamera Obskura* into French respectively in 1933 and 1934; in 1935, *Kamera Obskura* was translated both into Czech and into Swedish.

(1989: 13).[13] Still, he approved the publication of this translation as he badly needed an opening onto the Western World.[14]

Unfortunately, the novel did not encounter the expected success. There were just a few reviews:[15] the only positive commentary was in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and spoke of "A fine, strikingly original novel".[16] Of this British edition of the novel only four copies have survived since the John Long archives were destroyed in the December 1940 London Blitz.[17] As a result, despite his fervent wish, in 1936 Nabokov was still regarded as a Russian writer; the scope of his readership was still very limited. Consequently questions of reception were confined to a Russian identity, both that of the text and that of the writer –even though Nabokov had a Nansen passport and no identity to speak of.[18] If we regard all the intentional criteria which convey a book's textuality, as representative of and necessary to the making of the so-called identity, and the said identity as a reflection of the author's, then the very essence of the text may be deemed essential to the text's and the author's recognition. If works of art are regarded as symbols within symbolic systems as Nelson Goodman (1968) attempted to define them, they also pertain to the making of a work of art and may also reflect the author's personality, because the semantic and syntactic organizations which constitute his symbolic worlds are personal and differentiated.[19] Consequently, they bear the stamp of his stylistic traits. The passage into translation implying the intervention of a reader-translator, who will interpret in his / her own way the original in his / her hands, plus the use of another tongue to express this fundamental act of reception, may entail a new semiotic dimension. Understanding or interpreting partially corresponds to tinkering with some of the original traits of a work of art to make them fit into one's frame of reading. All this is a question of interaction. In terms of translation, it then raises the question of the identity / faithfulness link.[20] Beyond this, lies the question of authorship and literary creation: who is the author of a translation? Is translating a creative act, and can a translation be received as a creation?[21] Moreover the question of exile and translation is also linked to the question of authorship:

---

[13] Letter to Hutchinson & Co, dated 22 May 1935.

[14] When he accepted the text, he assigned the responsibility to the publisher with these words: "if you think it fit for publication in its present condition." (Letter to Hutchinson & Co, dated June 1935, in *The Russian Years*, 419).

[15] *The Daily Mirror* on 2nd January, in *The Daily Telegraph* on 3rd January.

[16] Saturday 28th December, 1935, Issue 1769, 895.

[17] See Martin J. Haywood's, John Long's director, 2nd January 1947 letter to Nabokov. "Nabokov Archives", Berg Collection, NYPL. The copies of *Despair* were also destroyed. The remaining copies are: Nabokov's copy (which happens to be the palimpsestic partial manuscript of *Laughter in the Dark*) at the Berg Collection, NYPL; a copy at the British Library; a copy at the national Library of Scotland; a copy at the Library of the University of Austin, Texas.

[18] Nabokov defined his identity in art, as he expressed some thirty years later, when an American citizen for over twenty years: "The writer's art is his real passport" (Interview with Alfred Appel, Jr., conducted on 25th-29th September 1966, at Montreux, first published in Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, vol. III, n°. 2, spring 1967. Nabokov 1990: 63).

[19] This stance, which echoes many Nabokovian declarations in defense of his authoritativeness, corresponds to Nelson Goodman's aesthetics, especially in *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*, 1968.

[20] As Eugene Nida summed up in a 1991 article: "In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Europe the philological orientation in translating focused on the issue of *faithfulness*, usually bound closely to the history of interpretation of the text, something which was especially crucial in the case of Bible translations. For the most part, arguments about the adequacy of translations dealt with the degree of freedom which could or should be allowed, and scholars discussed heatedly whether a translator should bring the reader to the text or bring the text to the reader" (21-22).

[21] See Lance Hewson's article in *Palimpsestes Hors Série* (Raguet 2006: 53-63).

> The literature of exile is peculiarly conscious of the ambivalent capacities of translation to authorize publication; to challenge the authority of both "original" and "secondary" literary traditions; to guarantee and, at the same time, undermine "authenticity"; to double, defer, or displace authorship (Allen 2006: 167).

At this turning point in his creative life, all the above remarks and questions apply to Nabokov's attitude towards the reception of his works in a language other than the original language of their composition. Yet a further set of points needs to be discussed here before we delve any further into the Nabokov case.

Some theorists, like Ernst-August Gutt (1990), have attempted to demonstrate that translation can be accounted for within the relevance theory of communication, pointing to a difference between "direct translation" as "translation of meaning", and "interpretive translation", which would show looser degrees of resemblance. The weak point of such a demonstration, like many studies about or mentioning "faithfulness", is centered on "meaning". This would imply that novels, stories, poems, and drama have a social, moral, historical or didactic function, or at least operate as vehicles for ideas, a point which denies the artistic dimension of writing and translating. To illustrate his demonstration, he tries to prove that "(the) presumption of faithfulness is a derived notion. It follows from the nature of interpretive use on the one hand and the principle of relevance on the other" (Gutt 2000: 12), and he states that "resemblance with the original" is at the core of the debate and that "the interpretation offered will be adequately relevant", finally concluding that "(t)hus we see that relevance theory comes with a ready-made notion of faithfulness, that exists independently of translation". The point to be made is to show that translators present their "interpretation as adequately resembl(ing) the original in respects relevant to the target audience" (Gutt 2000: 15). In other words, if we get back to the notions of "adequacy" or "freedom" as outlined by Eugene Nida (1991), or the notion of "relevance" mentioned by Gutt (2000), we reach the conclusion that some schools see translations as acts of adaptation to a specific readership. These propose equivalences carefully selected to fit in with an imagined horizon of expectation. This is a practice where the result is the adjustment of the translation to reception norms with a view to pleasing publishers and readers. With such practices, cross-cultural and foreign elements are absorbed, simply because they disturb identity, system and order (Kristeva 1988), thus bringing the translator to discard the concrete iconicity of the superimposition of languages and voices.

If translators naturalize, they appropriate the "Other" and discard any form of exchange. They just propose their own conception of the original text. Thus, they privilege transmissibility and horizon of expectation, each taking as referent a mysterious and undefined addressee, constituted from the "adapting-I" according to criteria preconceived in the cultural space of reception. From this perspective, one of transmissibility's pre-requisites would certainly be efficiency. Consequently, their view of translation shrinks and limits the original since it favors a message construed within the frame of the linguistic system of rules in the receiving language and does not take into consideration its cultural characteristics. Such a stance deprives the act of reception of all aesthetic emotions.

Now, if a first reader (e.g. the translator) interprets the original and passes on a specific meaning, worked out in a unidirectional movement, s / he both dispossesses the reader of the translation of an aesthetic discovery and encloses the work of art in a bounded pattern thus forbidding further discoveries. "Foreignizing" thus constitutes a daring opening since by sticking to the author's idiosyncrasies and language / culture and not resorting to equivalence and adaptation, translators invite the foreign into the culture of reception.

To come back to Nabokov, he may, by being too directive, deprive the receiver of the pleasure of creative reading, which, when accomplished, manifests itself by a "tingle in the

spine": "you read an artist's book not with your heart… and not with your brain, but with your brain and spine. "Ladies and gentlemen, the tingle in the spine really tells you what the author felt and wished you to feel" (Nabokov 1990: 41).[22] In this quotation, the central word is "wished": it reflects Nabokov's deep desire to have a hold over his readers' reactions. From this perspective, linguistic identity must not be mistaken for discursive identity, which means that language does not display aesthetic specificities, only discourse does. To put it differently, neither the morphology of words, nor the syntactic rules are in close connection with the style of a work of art. We would agree with Nabokov and Wolfgang Iser (1978) that a work of art does not only exist in its textuality, it comprises the effect produced on the reader, the share in creativity dispensed to the reader: "Effects and responses are properties neither of the text nor of the reader; the text represents a potential effect that is realized in the reading process" (Iser: 1). Hence the problems associated with translation since the translator transfers an original into a lexis, a syntax and with images pertaining to another tongue; thus, the text is not only transported from one language / culture to another, but it discards its original language / culture. With this latter coinage of "language / culture," I imply that each author and each translator has his / her own language / culture, which mainly depends on his / her habitus, as Pierre Bourdieu (1980) would have defined it: "The habitus is a system of abilities acquired through implicit or explicit learning, which functions like a system of generative schemes, and generates strategies which can objectively correspond to the objective interests of their authors without having been deliberately conceived with this aim in mind".[23] Style is obviously at the core of the problem in Nabokov's case of transmigration.

Despite his concern with the stylistic / literary quality of his novel in translation, Nabokov's opinion fluctuates when he refers to the translations of *Kamera Obskura*; he can be very critical:

> *Camera Obscura* which, in Russian, was meant as an elaborate parody, lies limp and lifeless in John Long's and Grasset's torture-houses, (Nabokov 1989: 29)[24]
> *Camera Obscura*, the translation of which did not satisfy me –it was inexact and full of hackneyed expressions meant to tone down all the tricky passages– (Nabokov 1989: 15).[25]

or he can be rather conciliatory:

> I am returning the agreement with my signature. At the same time I am sending you a copy of the very precise French version of my novel *Camera Obscura* (Nabokov Archives).[26]

Quite interestingly his opinions must have varied with his desire to see his book published. Nevertheless, as a multilingual speaker, he could react to the French or English versions of his texts, as if he were an external reader, but as the author of the first text, he was

[22] Interview with Alvin Toffler, Jr., conducted in mid-March 1963, at Montreux, first published in *Playboy*, January 1964.
[23] My translation of: "L'*habitus*, système de dispositions acquises par l'apprentissage implicite ou explicite qui fonctionne comme un système de schèmes générateurs, est générateur de stratégies qui peuvent être objectivement conformes aux intérêts objectifs de leurs auteurs sans en avoir été expressément conçues à cette fin" (Bourdieu 1980: 120-1).
[24] Letter to Altagracia de Janelli, 16th November 1938?
[25] Letter dated 28th August 1936.
[26] Typed letter, dated 22nd May 1935, addressed to A. M. Heath & Co, Ltd., London agents interested in the film rights for the novel, in answer to their letter dated 10th May 1935 (Nabokov Archives).

deeply biased. One of the consequences of his dissatisfaction is his decision to tackle the English translation of *Otchayanie* in 1936. It was published in London in 1937 and still signed Nabokoff-Sirin, an identity assuming both the role of first author and second author – authorship and authority obviously being mingled. Yet, this translation was not a commercial success either and Nabokov was not pleased with it as a work of art according to his principles, though once again, and according to circumstances, he held opposing viewpoints: "Despair which is something more than an essay on the psychology of crime turns out to be a half-baked thriller, even when I translate it myself" (Nabokov 1989: 29),[27] or self-assurance: "I switched to English after convincing myself on the strength of my translation of Despair that I could use English as a wistful standby for Russian" (Nabokov 1990: 88-89). What is there to be drawn from these declarations?

Exile, translation and international recognition are linked at this point in Nabokov's history and imply his metaphysical transmigration, or symbolic death. To be received as an English author of Russian descent, he will have to cast off his former identity. In *Laughter in the Dark*, the Nabokov version of *Kamera Obskura* / *Camera Obscura*, this is exemplified in the character of Conrad, the exiled author, and in the way death finds a parallel in bare facts in fiction, as introduced in the second paragraph of the Nabokov English version: "Although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged version of a man's life, detail is always welcome", and in the allusion to "the old conjuror who spirited himself away at his farewell performance" (Nabokov 1989: 7). Faced with two existing texts, one directed at a Russian-speaking audience and one directed at an English-speaking audience, Nabokov had two options: translating from scratch or revamping the English translation. As a matter of fact, his final choice was different as he produced a new and much modified palimpsestic version of Roy's translation,[28] thus erasing the translator's style to finally imprint his own style in another language / culture. Consequently, to claim his authorship and authority, he changed the title and signed Nabokov. If we consider that the act of interpretation is part and parcel of the act of reception, Nabokov was then assuming the two roles of interpreter and receiver. Moreover, if faithfulness is to be equated with transparency, it negates the presence of the translator, except if the translator is the same person as the author and is ready to take responsibility for the second text, in which case an original creation can be maintained and reception can be controlled.

This brings us forth to his 1968 declaration about the model reader and helps us understand how he could equate re-writing –and perhaps self-translation– with an attempt at promoting self-reception, as if an author could work out a twice-removed self-projection. Nabokov aimed to cast his Russian muse and his tri-lingual personality, made up of three different language-cultures, onto the culture of adoption, with the help of a new language / culture that he was acquiring during the process of transferring *Kamera Obskura* / *Camera Obscura* into *Laughter in the Dark*. Even though this second novel can be regarded as a new composition,[29] Nabokov did sign a "translation" contract with Bobbs-Merrill, an American publisher at Indianapolis, Indiana, on 27th September 1937. It stipulated the author was to translate the novel himself and hand over his manuscript for 1st January 1938. For the work, he was to receive a monthly advance of a hundred dollars for the first three months, to be followed by a balance of three hundred dollars when he delivered the manuscript. But the

[27] Letter to Altagracia de Janelli, 16th November 1938.

[28] He partially wrote this new version on his copy of *Camera Obscura*, the only remaining manuscript; all additions and heavily transformed passages are missing.

[29] In French, the two versions are published by Grasset, *Chambre obscure* in Doussia Ergaz's 1934 translation, *Rire dans la nuit* in my translation (1992).

terms of the work itself were ambiguous since Nabokov was expected to translate a text already in English.[30]

In accepting to "translate" this novel, Nabokov became a conjuror in his own right operating an act of metamorphosis.[31] His new version demanded as much self-investment as the writing of the first version:

> I wrote this book[32] in Berlin. First I composed it completely in my mind, which is a very exhausting business, but quite indispensable in my case. This took me about half a year after which I had the book so that I felt every page of it much as a botanist feels the flora of a given place mentioned in his presence – a compound impression which he knows he can at once put down in full detail. The actual writing of the book I did by hand, as I always do, […]. All this refers of course to the Russian original. When translating it, I again had to rewrite it by hand, changing a lot, because I saw it all in another English rhythm and color.[33]

As Ada declared, it can be termed a "transversion", that is a personal version of an existing text.[34] Nabokov's transversion of *Kamera Obskura* / *Camera Obscura* is not only prompted by language questions since complete sections of the English translation of the Russian original are deleted, but by aesthetic and cultural reasons. And funnily enough, though its characters have lost their German or Russian names, which were quite representative of the Berlin emigration, and though the setting has not changed –it is still the Berlin of the early 1930s–, the American text is at once more internationalized and more rooted in the Russian literary tradition. This obviously enables the Russian author to establish his new authority as Nabokov, but also to evoke Russian literature, mostly Leon Tolstoy, his favorite Russian author along with Alexander Pushkin. Why should this be so? It is so with a view to orientating reading and to make sure he will be recognized as a stylist and not as a storyteller. This is the reason why in *Laughter in the Dark* the original first chapter of *Camera Obscura* is deleted to be replaced by a totally new introduction to the story. The incipit offers a five-line long paragraph summarizing the plot, followed by a similar paragraph proposing a short reflection on the act of writing and the "profit and pleasure in the telling." In addition, the new first chapter is placed under the authority of art. Tolstoy is introduced in the early pages in an oblique evocation of his funeral: "(1910, a brisk, jerky funeral procession with legs moving too fast)" (Nabokov 1989: 12). With this cryptic reference to the film presentation of Tolstoy's funeral procession, Nabokov indirectly introduces the cinematic world, which is

---

[30] "1. The Author thereby grants to the Publishers the sole and exclusive book and publishing rights in the English language in the United States of America and in the Dominion of Canada, in and to the novel entitled *CAMERA OBSCURA*. 2. The author shall translate the said novel into the English language and deliver to the Publishers a complete working text of the same on or before 1st January 1938." (Nabokov Archives).

[31] We are reminded of William Shakespeare's lines about metamorphosis in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act III, sc. 1, 118-20:

> Quince: Bless thee, Bottom! Bless thee! thou art / translated.
> Bottom: I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me;
> The link between transmutation and ridicule highlights the risk of being translated, an argument under discussion here.

[32] *Kamera Obskura* (1931), published in instalments in Sovremennye Zapiski, 49-52, May 1932-May 1933.

[33] Declaration published in several American newspapers, among which the *Time-Dispatch, Richmond, Va.* And the *Times*, Portsmouth, Ohio, on 1st May 1938.

[34] "Oh, cried Ada, I can recite *Le jardin* in my own transversion" (Nabokov 1996: 56). Ada is then referring to Andrew Marvell's passage in *The Garden*, which reads *How vainly men themselves amaze / To win the palm, the oak, or bays,* which she "transverses" into French as: *En vain on s'amuse a gagner / l'Oka, la Baie du Palmier*.

central to the novel; he places his work under the sign of literature, choosing as a tutelary figure an undisputed artist, for whom he had unbounded admiration.

Moreover, he places his work under the sign of death, an important theme in the plot, but also essential in its symbolic dimension: death of his Russian past, if not its literature; death of his Russian language as his first language of composition, though he will never part with it. Above all death is to be read as not final: certainly, because art survives physical death, but mainly because, as a distinguished entomologist, Nabokov knew quite well that the larva makes its chrysalis and only dies to give birth to a butterfly. Such a view of things shows the author's interest in rebirth, as a natural renaissance, a mutation of the self, but not as a duplicate –which most translations are supposed to be. Somehow a kind of transmigration.

Now, when an author is fighting for the recognition of his identity in another language / culture, how can he agree to the production of another creator bearing his name and being read as his when it is no longer his? Or at least, when he no longer recognizes his style. If Russian literature (and particularly *Anna Karenina*) is very subtly present throughout *Laughter in the Dark*, it is meant to anchor the text in the universal, to evoke works which transcend time, cultures and tongues, a status to which Nabokov aspires. Thus, to make sure he would be received not as an exiled author, but as an international artist, Nabokov thought it best to be the translator-author of this new text. The passage from Nabokoff-Sirin, the Russian author, who added Sirin to be distinguished from his father, to Nabokov, a new international English-producing author, to be read as such, required a linguistic metamorphosis.

The main variations between the first original and the second original, since Nabokov himself is the author of these two versions of the same text, are above all structural. If the plot is summed up in two sentences, it proves that this is not what matters. As a matter of fact, the two stories are identical but in *Laughter in the Dark* the *dénouement* is revealed: in the introduction, the reader is presented with a prologue, epilogue and summary of events, and if s / he continues reading, s / he does so for mere enjoyment, as suggested in the second paragraph. When Nabokov justifies his intervention as author / translator and re-teller. What is to be underlined here is his very early interest in the reader, his awareness of the importance of reception for the survival of a work as a work of art. Furthermore, in this novel, Nabokov has a very ironical approach to the reception of his own work, and works of art in general. He bases his plot on the confusion between real works of art and fakes: his protagonist, Albinus (who happens to have become blind…) is an art collector and expert; his mistress's second lover, Axel Rex, and fake-friend is a forger who managed to sell Albinus some of his fakes. In other words, as the author of the original, Nabokov tries to justify his act of re-translating / re-writing, which should prevent any forgery from disfiguring his creation. By doing so, he was attempting to adhere to the views of a new culture, the culture of his new receivers, and to address them directly –a mere linguistic mutation was not deemed enough for him, because "linguistic identity must not be mistaken for discursive identity. It means that language does not display cultural specificities, only discourse does.

To put it differently, neither the morphology of words, nor the syntactic rules convey the cultural" (Charaudeau 2001: 343).[35] He also intended to control the interaction at work between reader and text, somehow limiting the span of possible multiple readings and forbidding the spontaneous act of communication and production of aesthetic effect, thus negating what Iser (1978) introduced as the phenomenology of reading. As a matter of fact, Nabokov's is a profoundly rooted stylistic stance since style scholars differentiate stylistic effects (or facts) –which have an individual rhetorical status and are not necessarily

[35] My translation.

representative of an author's style–, from stylistic traits, which are recurrent and reveal an author's style. Apparently, at this stage in his own creative history, Nabokov was not ready to accept wide interpretations of his texts; his main concern was to define his horizon of expectation and to impose his new identity.[36] After having re-written *Camera Obscura* into *Laughter in the Dark*, Nabokov composed all his subsequent works of fiction in English, though he still composed poems in Russian.

The other issue at work for Nabokov, was to be regarded as a politically committed author in exile, even though he strongly rejected communism and Nazism. To decide to control his first translations for having a hold on their local interactions is also to position himself outside the world of reception:

> There is no way a translation could share the same systemic space with its original […] a translation would never be in a position to bear on the source culture again […] Texts, and hence the cultural systems which host them, have been known to have been affected by translations of theirs (Toury 1995: 26).

This helps us understand why Nabokov may have refrained from writing in German; his sticking to Russian was a debt to his forsaken language / culture –the one he had known before his exile. At this new turn in his personal history and in History, his personal commitment aimed at tackling different issues, including that of his identity as a writer, which became central. Altogether Nabokov worked out his rejection of all form of tyranny through style: his sentences are shorter in this second version and slightly jerkier. Juxtaposition is almost the norm, conjunctions are reduced to the minimum, as if to produce a rather chaotic and suffocating rhythm. Figuratively, he also introduces a web of subdued hints, which evoke the local situation in Nazi Germany, as in this description of Axel Rex, Albinus's torturer: "He was stark naked. As a result of his daily sunbaths his lean but robust body with, on his breast, black hair in the shape of a spread eagle, was tanned a deep brown" (Nabokov 1989: 276). His transmigration through rewriting shows how *Laughter in the Dark* functions as a hinge-point in his life and art since it retains thematic specificities of the works dealing with tyranny and it also opens out on to new perspectives with a new artistic life in view.

Nabokov's second exile takes on another dimension because of the sense of loss imposed by the change of mode of expression which was devised without any nostalgia with a view to preventing "style and subject" from undergoing "a horrible bleeding and distortion": "I am not writing this in defense of my novels. They belong to Russia and her literature, and not only style but subject undergoes a horrible bleeding and distortion when translated into another tongue" (Nabokov 1989: 29).[37]

When the book came out in the United States in 1938 some critics received the novel as a "Political Parable?" as the title of an article in the Chicago News, dated 15th June 1938, ran:

> In an age when forthright narrative becomes increasingly dangerous to any author, European writers show a tendency to resort to allegory, parable and double *entendre*. […] Substitute for Albinus middle-class Germany. Substitute for Margot the alluring idea of national socialism. Substitute for Rex (Margot's lover) the bronze, sadistic athletic type. […] but even at the time it was written the effects of Hitlerism were obvious.

[36] Funnily enough, at the same time, he was writing *Dar* in Russian, his great Russian novel, as a farewell work and homage to his past Russian culture.

[37] Letter to Altagracia de Jannelli, his New York agent, dated 16th November 1938?

Yet, Nabokov's passage from one language-culture to another and one continent to another[38] was certainly not founded on a desire to assert any political commitment. At the time, his main concern was reception in at least two senses of the word: to be received in a new country and be received as a writer. When Nabokov introduced images of despots and excessive authority, he not only referred to political power as such, but also had, deep in mind, ideas of interrelations within the artistic world. He had witnessed how artistic creation could be thwarted in tyrannies –he even devoted one of his later books, *Bend Sinister*, to the subject.[39] Perhaps one of the keys to this can be found at the end of the palimpsestic manuscript of *Laughter in the Dark*, where a poem, dated 1937, written in Russian and signed Marina Tsvetaeva, but in Nabokov's hand, deals with the figure of Joseph Stalin.[40] This pastiche, a hoax, dwells on the interaction of theme and style and echoes the author's preoccupations at the time: by leaving Germany, which combined territorial and cultural expansionism with a self-satisfied artistic withdrawal into Germanness, thereby aiming to found a larger "closed world", he abandoned the "closed world" of the Russian emigration and its linguistic confinement.

As his undertaking of the retranslating / re-writing of *Camera Obscura* proves, he was distrustful of the role of translation in this process. Being translated into the language of a foreign country is one thing, but being translated into a language you can speak and read, for a readership, which may become the principal readership of your future books is another thing. Therefore, it is easy to observe how the issue of authority in connection to authoritativeness tallies with the themes developed in the new version of the novel. Furthermore a "good" translation, or one which is satisfactory in the author's eyes and mind, has not only to meet synchronic criteria –that is a necessary adequacy between the various versions of a text aimed at reproducing semantic and aesthetic correspondences–, but also diachronic criteria. In the present situation, the latter relate to a need to leave behind the Russian universe of emigration, frozen in time and History because of the Revolution, and to provide this "German" novel with a greater scope in a new linguistic time-space relation.

When Nabokov deemed *Camera Obscura* unsatisfactory, his reading conveyed an aesthetic experience, equivalent to the gap between the work of art and Hans-Robert Jauss's "horizon of expectation." Here, the judgment passed by Nabokov reader differs from the criteria fixed by Nabokov-author as to what is to be expected of his work once transferred into another language / culture. This type of expectation common to author and receiver would be of a trans-subjective nature. As a matter of fact, this issue is invalid since in the present case, author and receiver are one and the same person, and they will even have recourse to another self-same duplicate, the author / translator. Such a superposition of copies of the same identity can be considered as an endogamous approach to reception. Nabokov's intervention on the translation prevents it from gaining its independence; he re-appropriates the text for moving out from the tight space of the literature of exile to enter the wide world. To control the power of words author / first reader, author / translator and author /second reader will unite to proceed to "trans-stylisation": an act, which will enable Nabokov to adapt his new style to a

[38] He left France for the US in 1940 on the last ship to cross the Atlantic, when the Nazi armies were invading France in May.

[39] Published in the US in 1947.

[40] Joseph the Red, –not Joseph / the Fair: most fair, fair- / est of all– with one gaze cast / Planting orchards! Boar mount– / ainous! Towering over mounts! Better than five-score of Lin– / dbergs, brighter than fifteen-score/of poles! The sun of Russia, from under / Thick moustaches: Stalin! (trans. Gennady Barabtarlo) I owe the explanations, which helped me understand this poem to the late Pr. Simon Karlinsky from the University of Berkeley. The enjambment between line 6 and 7, 'five-score Lin– / dbergs', reads in Russian as 'sta Lin / dbergov'. The poem can be accessed on: https://listserv.ucsb.edu/lsv-cgi-bin/wa?A0=NABOKV-L (16-08-2017).

new tongue on an already existing English version of his novel –a form of aesthetic enrichment. Robert Scholes (1989) presents the relation between reading and writing as a kind of rhetorical act, founded on a specific form of textual economy:

> Under the heading of rhetoric, we shall consider reading as a textual economy, in which pleasure and power are exchanged between producers and consumers of texts, always remembering that writers must consume in order to produce and that readers must produce in order to consume (90).

The unusual association of pleasure and power as a relation of reciprocity between the producer and the consumer is meant to remind us that the power of economy over a text and the value of aesthetic pleasure are closely related. Besides, in Scholes's remark, the notion of pleasure is close to Nabokov's in the second paragraph of *Laughter in the Dark*, a pleasure to be repeated ad infinitum as in the reading of fairy tales – his novel's incipit opens with "Once upon a time…". Paradoxically, if Nabokov took over control of his novel in English, it was not meant to exclude the readers as such: it was more to invite them to follow the author-reader-translator game than to enter the reading game as creators. He reflected on this attitude much later, in 1963, in an interview with Alvin Toffler, in which he underlined the fact that writer and reader share the same happiness in the presence of a good text, but they are of a different kind: to the author's satisfaction corresponds the reader's gratitude:

> the felicity of a phrase is shared by writer and reader: by the satisfied writer and the grateful reader, or –which is the same thing– by the artist grateful to the unknown force in his mind that has suggested a combination of images and by the artistic reader whom this combination satisfies (Nabokov 1990: 40-41).[41]

So, the reader has no other choice but to attempt to recreate the impressions and feelings the author wanted to convey in his new language / culture, and to understand that the author is master. He is the master of a framed masterpiece in a chosen environment, a masterpiece, which cannot be taken out of the new frame and / or new environment, and which needs to be received in the same way as the author / translator wanted his art and identity to be recognized. Nabokov expressed it at the beginning of his trans-stylized *Laughter in the Dark*: "What a tale might be told, the tale of an artist's vision, the happy journey of eye and brush, and a world in that artist's manner suffused with the tints he himself had found!" (Nabokov 1989: 9).

Bibliographic reference

Allen, S. L. (2006), "Transposition, Translation, Translingualism, and the Transformation of Novel". Revue des Littératures de l'Union Européenne, 4: 167-186.

Bourdieu, P. (1980), *Le sens pratique*. Paris: Minuit.

Boyd, B. (1990), *The Russian Years.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Charaudeau, P. (2001), "Langue, discours et identité culturelle". *Revue de didactologie des languescultures,* 3-4 (123): 341-48.

Dommergues, P. (1968), "Entretien avec Nabokov". *Les langues modernes,* 62: 92-102.

[41] Interview initially published in *Playboy* in January 1964.

Goodman, N. (1968), *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
Grayson, J. (1977), *Nabokov Translated. A Comparison of Nabokov's Russian and English Prose*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Gutt, E-A. (2000) [1991], *Translation and relevance: cognition and context*. Manchester and Boston: St Jerome Publishing.
________ (1990), "A theoretical account of translation–without a translation theory". *Target: International Journal of Translation Studies* 2/2: 135-164. http://cogprints.org/2597/1/THEORACC.html (28-04-2009).
Husserl, E. (1983) [1913], *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*. Trans. F. Kersten. The Hague, Boston, Lancaster: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
Hewson, L. (2006), "The Vexed Question of Creativity in Translation". En Christine Raguet (ed.), *Traduire ou "Vouloir garder un peu de la poussière d'or"*. Palimpsestes Hors Série, 53-63.
Iser, W. (1978) [1976], *The Act of Reading. A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. London & Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
Kristeva, J. (1988), *Étranger à nous-mêmes.* Paris: Fayard.
Leving, Y. (ed.) (2010), *The Goalkeeper: The Nabokov Almanac*. Boston: Academic Studies Press.
Meschonnic, H. (1973), *Pour la poétique II*. Paris: Gallimard.
Nabokov, V. [Vladimir Sirin] (1933), *Kamera Obskura*, roman. Berlin: "Sovremennye Zapiski" i "Parabola".
___________ [V. Nabokoff-Sirine] (1934), *Chambre obscure*. Trans. Doussia Ergaz. Paris: Bernard Grasset.
___________ (1936), *Camera Obscura*. Trans. Winifred Roy. London: John Long.
___________ (1989) [1938], *Laughter in the Dark*. New York: Vintage.
___________ (1992), *Rire dans la nuit*. Trans. Christine Raguet-Bouvart. Paris: Grasset.
___________ (1996) [1969], *Ada*, New York: The Library of America.
___________ (1991) [1970], *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel. Jr., New York: Vintage.
__________ (1999), *Œuvres romanesques complètes I*, ed. Maurice Couturier. Paris: Gallimard, coll. La Pléiade.
__________ (1981), *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
___________ (1989), *Selected Letters 1940-1977*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
___________ (1990), *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage.
___________ (without date), *Nabokov Archives*, Berg collection, New York Public Library.
Nida, E. (1991), "Theories of Translation". *TTR* [Montréal], 4 (1): 19-32.
Raguet-Bouvart, C. (1993), "Textual Regeneration and the Author's Progress". Cycnos [Nice], 10 (1): 91-98.
Raguet-Bouvart, C. (1995), "*Camera Obscura* et *Laughter in the Dark* ou la confusion des textes". *Palimpsestes* 9, La lecture du texte traduit, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris: 119-134; 48-53.
Scholes, R. (1989), *Protocols of Reading*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
Toury, G. (1995), *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond*, Amsterdam. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.