

# SELF-TRANSLATION IN NABOKOV'S FICTION: THREE PARADIGMATIC CASES

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The article examines Nabokov's theory and practice of self-translation in three paradigmatic cases: the novel *Invitation of a Beheading*, the short story "Vozvrashchenie Chorba", and the autobiography *Invitation of a Beheading*, self-translated into Russian as *Drugie berega* (1954), re-written in English in a revised and extended edition in 1966, and somehow completed in a fictional text titled *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974).

*L'auto-traduzione nella narrativa di Nabokov: tre casi esemplari*

L'articolo esamina la teoria e la pratica dell'autotraduzione di Nabokov in tre casi esemplari: il romanzo *Invitation of a Beheading*, il racconto "Vozvrashchenie Chorba" e l'autobiografia *Invitation of a Beheading*, autotradotta in russo come *Drugie berega*, riscritta in inglese in una versione rivista e ampliata nel 1966, in modo romanzato nel testo *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974).

## Introduction

Languages are the 'instruments' that Nabokov employs to lead the readers within his intertwined cultural-linguistic map. The settings of his works include real and imaginary places that represent his plurilingual itinerary and are suitable narrative devices to question the semantic and phonic features of his source and target languages. In this context, self-translation serves Nabokov's purpose to address foreign readers and Russian émigrés in the western world, to go beyond the borders of his homeland and carry out a contrastive analysis of the cultures he was in contact with. Although the latest studies have focused more on the plurilingual and translation perspective of his works, Nabokov's *oeuvre* still remains a wide container of different transnational elements, whose analysis discloses new critical horizons<sup>1</sup>. Plurilingualism, as

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<sup>1</sup> Trousdale points out «Nabokov's central place in an emerging transnational canon» and states that «For writers who want their work to transcend the limits of national or ethnic groups, Nabokov provides both a model and a point of reference, an ancestor in an affilia-

known, characterizes his works, in that they mingle voices and echoes from other languages; as a result, the reader experiences steady references to other cultures and languages. Self-translation, instead, is less static than plurilingualism. The reader does not 'lie' along the linguistic borders of the pages, but is taken from the context of L1 to L2 and, sometimes, vice versa, by the act of self-translating. This allows the writer to introduce the audience to his source text, thus becoming aware of the semantic changes and losses that the process of self-translation entails.

### ***Kamera obskura* (1932) and *Laughter in the Dark* (1938)**

Apart from the well-known novel *Lolita* (1955), one of the most remarkable examples of Nabokov's self-translation is *Laughter in the Dark*, written in Russian in 1932 with the title *Kamera obskura*, then translated into English by Winnifred Roy in 1936 as *Camera obscura*, and finally self-translated into English by Nabokov in 1938 as *Laughter in the Dark*, as a result of Roy's imperfect translation<sup>2</sup>. Nabokov's approach to translation in *Laughter in the Dark* reveals some differences, not only in the structures, but also in the characters' names and in the loss of some diegetic details. Although proper names are not translatable, as some scholars suggest, it soon turns out that most of the characters in the target text have different names (Newmark 70). The protagonist's Russian name is Krechmar, which becomes Albinus in English, and his wife, Anneliza (Anneliese, in English) in the source text, becomes Elisabeth in the target text<sup>3</sup>. Magda, Albinus's lover, is Margot in the English text, and the painter Robert Gorn (Horn, in English), the villain of the story and Margot's lover, is

tive intellectual family whose boundaries are marked not by geography or language but by a shared approach to self-invention and playful communication» (Trousedale 7).

<sup>2</sup> Nabokov was not satisfied with Roy's English translation, considered «a superfluous translation of his Russian *Kamera obskura*», and retranslated it into English (Hetényi 49). A comparison between Roy's and Nabokov's English translations of the book could be discussed in another paper, as I mean to compare, in this work, Nabokov's self-translation of some of his novels and short stories. However, it is worth quoting what Naiman states about the two English versions of *Kamera obskura*: «A comparison of the two translations and the original makes clear that Nabokov did not retranslate the novel himself from scratch but took Roy's text and reworked it» (Naiman 555).

As regards Nabokov's comments on the English translation of *Kamera obskura*, see Nabokov. *Letters*: 309 and Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian*: 419.

<sup>3</sup> All Russian words are transliterated according to the Anglo-Saxon transliteration system.

called Axel Rex in the target text<sup>4</sup>. The author changed the proper names in order to carry out a process of “cultural translatability” and to decrease the sense of foreignness conveyed by the use of Russian names in the English translation (Russo 93). At the same time, the employment of English proper names boosts the ‘domesticating’ function of self-translation, with the consequence of ‘transplanting’, within the same background, typical Russian names into the English text, so as to make the western audience more familiar with the actors of the story<sup>5</sup>.

The two versions narrate the same story, whose structure, however, is developed by means of a different expository approach. The *incipits* of the two texts are different; in particular, the beginning of *Laughter in the Dark* shows the simpler style of the English translation (Naiman 557), as compared with the Russian narration. Nabokov provides the reader with a short and linear summary of the plot; he sums up the whole story in the first four lines and soon introduces the reader into the core of the text: «Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; he was not loved; and his life ended in disaster» (Nabokov. *Laughter*: 1). After the summary, the first chapter of *Laughter in the Dark* depicts Albinus, an art-critic, who contacts the painter Axel Rex to ask him to animate some Flemish masters’ seventeenth-century paintings. Unlike the English translation, the beginning of *Kamera obskura* does not provide the main information of the plot; it introduces the reader to a creature, Cheepy, a guinea pig, and to Horn. The latter has a conversation with a physiologist about vivisection and laboratory experiments on alive animals and, thanks to his suggestion, earns money with the Cheepy cartoon<sup>6</sup>.

The two *incipits* follow different diegetic routes, but share the ekphrastic element of the picture (Rampton 118), which leads to the issue of the protagonist’s mental problems. Even when the two texts converge on the same narrative elements, the Russian version turns out to explicate further details, often omitted or reduced in the English translation. In *Kamera obskura*, at the end of

<sup>4</sup> As to the symbolic meaning of Axel and of the title of the story see Dobbin 35-38.

<sup>5</sup> As Roper writes, Nabokov «intuited as best he could American readers’ desires, changing German names (Magda to Margot, Anneliese to Elisabeth, etc.) and sharpening the novel’s theme of cinematic clichés that are colonizing people’s brains» (Roper 19).

<sup>6</sup> The animation of the painting in *Laughter in the Dark* and the conversation about vivisection between Horn and the physiologist in *Kamera obskura* are connected with Nabokov’s interest in evolutionary science and insects. They are the expressions of evolution which «like many biological processes, is motion in time and, therefore, requires a sequential visualization of change» (Babaian 2018).

the first chapter, the writer dwells more on Krechmar's marriage and faithfulness: «It was really incredible, – in particular, it was incredible because Krechmar, during the nine years of his marriage, had never cheated on his wife, – at least, he had never cheated on her» (Nabokov. *Kamera*: 11. My translation)<sup>7</sup>. The English version reads: «Certainly it was incredible – the more so as in all the nine years of his married life he had curbed himself, had never, never» (Nabokov. *Laughter*: 5). The sentence in *Laughter in the Dark* is interrupted by a caesura, which increases Albinus's unvoiced fears and foreshadows his sad destiny due to his lover's betrayal.

Other comparisons between the Russian and English versions disclose Nabokov's approach to translation, characterized by the tendency to re-write the target text in a simpler and concise way. The passage about Margot is relevant in this regard. Nabokov writes in the Russian text: «Three days went by. Magda kept on coughing and, being exceptionally hypochondriac, did not go out, – [...]. Krechmar was working in his study» (*Kamera*: 124). In *Laughter in the Dark*, the time reference is more indefinite, «A few days passed» (104) and the information about Krechmar working in his study is omitted. Furthermore, the Russian text offers more information about Magda: «Her name was Magda Peters, and she was actually only sixteen. Her parents made a living by means of Swiss business» (Nabokov. *Kamera*: 19), whereas Nabokov mentions neither Margot's age nor her parents' job in *Laughter in the Dark*, and focuses on her father's story at once: «She was called Margot Peters. Her father was a houseporter who had been badly shellshocked in the war» (Nabokov. *Laughter*: 11). However, it is interesting to point out that the writer quotes in English, in the source text, what an English tourist says to her husband on the beach, when she mistakes Albinus for Margot's father: «Look at that German romping about with his daughter» (Nabokov. *Kamera*: 86)<sup>8</sup>. The English sentence in the source text has the effect of preserving the authenticity of the setting. Although Nabokov claimed that literal translation «is true translation» (Nabokov. *Eugene*: viii)<sup>9</sup>, he adopts, in this context, a different approach, aimed at re-modelling the original text and adapting it to the cultural features of the target audience. Nabokov forges the source text and transposes it into the target language

<sup>7</sup> Owing to the limited amount of space, I will quote my English translation of the excerpts from Nabokov's Russian texts, without including their Russian version, whose page will be parenthetically given in the text.

<sup>8</sup> In the source text, Nabokov translates into Russian the sentence uttered by the tourist in a footnote.

<sup>9</sup> Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* was first published in 1964 with later revisions. The translation of the volume cited in this article is from the 1975 edition.

in order to avoid the danger of creating an estranging interlanguage, as Steiner would claim, originated by an obsessive literal approach, that would make the target text artificial, rigid and overwhelmed by the boundaries of the lexical, syntactical and phonetic rules of the source language (Steiner 376). As a consequence, to put it with Boyd, «As translations, the English versions of Russian originals are inevitably compromises, unable to exploit the phonic, lexical, idiomatic, syntactic, associational, and allusive resources that partly shaped the content of the originals» (Boyd. *Stalking*: 189)<sup>10</sup>. Nabokov tames the complex structures of his native language and transposes his story into the target text by using simpler constructions, more suitable both for an immigrant and for the synthetic phrasing of the target language: «It is as though Nabokov teased out the potential for stylistic simplicity from the subject matter as he eased himself into English» (Naiman 555).

### The Two English Translations of “Vozvrashchenie Chorba” (1929)

Among the numerous short stories, the English translation of “Vozvrashchenie Chorba” represents an interesting case study, since Nabokov shows a different approach. Published in 1929, it was translated into English by Gleb Struve in 1932 with the title “The Return of Tchorb”. After about forty years, Nabokov self-translated and published it in 1976 in his fourth collection of short stories, *Details of a Sunset* (Mayer), owing to his dissatisfaction with Struve’s translation<sup>11</sup>. The story, set in an unnamed German town, is about a Russian émigré writer, Chorba, and his concern about informing his wife’s parents of her death on their honeymoon. He then tries to relive the moments he had spent with his wife in a hotel room, and goes back there with a prostitute where, in the end, he is discovered by his parents-in-law. Although the two works do not differ in the content, Nabokov’s version is characterized by the attention to the details and vocabulary overtones of the source text, so as to avoid any interpretative ambiguity and to amplify the artistic substrate of the target text. Once again, the *incipit* shows different lexical choices. The word «teatra» (no page number), the

<sup>10</sup> In the same book, Boyd claims: «In composing his original texts Nabokov had a consistent system of artistic intentions; in translating them he had to balance what he could retrieve of those intentions against the incommensurate intention of appealing to a different audience – two different audiences, indeed, a specifically Anglophone and a generically non-Russian audience» (189).

As regards Wilson’s comments on Nabokov’s English translation of *Kamera obskura*, see Karlinsky 25, 320.

<sup>11</sup> The transliteration of the protagonist’s name in Nabokov’s translation is Chorba.

genitive case of the noun *teatr* (Nabokov. “Vozvrashchenie”) in the source text, is translated as «theatre» (592) by Struve and «opera house» (147) by Nabokov, which is more appropriate to the formal aspect of the circumstance, as Wagner’s performances (which the Kellers went to see) were presented in an opera house. In the Russian text, Nabokov refers to the German town with the demonstrative adjective, thus taking for granted that the reader is familiar with the setting: «In this quiet German town» (“Vozvrashchenie”)<sup>12</sup>. Struve does not employ the adjective and his reference to the town is made more generic by the use of the definite article: «In the quiet German town» (592), whereas Nabokov maintains the specificity conveyed by the demonstrative adjective and uses «city» (147), instead of «town» (592), in order to lessen the provincial aspect of the context: «In that pacific German city» (*The Stories*: 147). Nabokov’s attention to ‘particularize’ and to represent every description in the guise of a painting is evident in the reference to the town’s air and river. In his translation, he writes: «where the very air seemed a little lustreless and where a transverse row of ripples had kept shading gently the reflected cathedral for well over seven centuries» (147). Struve’s version reads: «with its somewhat opaque air, where the ripples athwart the river have been faintly blurring the reflection of the cathedral for more than seven centuries» (592). Nabokov’s lexical choice aims at reproducing an immediate depiction of the background, by means of such a straightforward adjective as «lusterless» (147), leaving behind the blurry and indefinite overtone of ‘opaque’. At the same time, the descriptive segment «a transverse row of ripples» (147) reproduces the romanticized image of the setting in the source text owing to the idea of gradation that «row» (147) recalls, whereas Struve’s translation, «the ripples athwart the river» (592), seems to lessen that effect, with the sense of suddenness that the adverb “athwart” creates. Just after the Kellers had left the theatre, they went to «a smart tavern» (592). Such an expression, used by Struve to render the Russian «kabachok» (no page number) (Nabokov. “Vozvrashchenie”), small restaurant, would not please an English ear, as it matches an adjective and a noun with different semantic references. The Russian-American writer chooses «a smart nightclub», and «hotels» (Nabokov. *The Stories*: 147-148) instead of «inns» (Struve 594), thus decreasing the sense of provincialism of the more archaic «tavern» (592) and «inns» (594).

Nabokov’s increased attention to the style and setting emerges in the translation of Mrs Keller’s name. In the Russian text, Nabokov refers to her as «Varvara Klimovna» (“Vozvrashchenie”) which Struve maintains in his English version (Struve 593), while the ‘English’ Nabokov prefers «Frau Keller» (*The*

<sup>12</sup> The word *gorod* in the source text can be translated both as town and city.

*Stories*: 147), more in compliance with the formal situation of the context. Nabokov avoids using Mrs Keller's name and addresses her as «Frau» (147), Mrs, in the English translation as a result of the different context he experienced when translating his story. Since each word produces different meanings according to the context and time it interacts with, Nabokov's increased maturity as a translator, after about forty years from the composition of "Vozvrashenie Chorba", led him to think it more appropriate to use «Frau» (147), instead of the woman's name, in a German context<sup>13</sup>. The artistic nuances stand out in the translation of the main moment of the story, that is when Chorb has to tell his parents-in-law of their daughter's death. Struve sticks to the passage from the source text and makes use of a direct and essential vocabulary, more understandable to any foreigner: «How could they understand that he had wanted to possess his grief alone, and not smirch it with anything alien, not share it with anybody?» (593). Nabokov's different lexical choice slightly expands the source text and conjures up the artistic sphere of the passage: «How was he to explain that he wished to possess his grief all by himself, without tainting it by any foreign substance and without sharing it with any other soul?» (*The Stories*: 148). The use of «tainting» and «substance» (148) increases the artistic overtone, emphasized, in turn, by the semantic field of spirituality of «soul» (148), instead of «anybody» (593). Struve's approach to the translation of the text addresses the émigrés living in the West, while Nabokov means to enhance the stylistic and lexical quality of the translation in order to address the Anglophone audience. Another example of Nabokov's attention to the peculiarity of the context can be found in the passage describing Chorb's arrival at the hotel with the prostitute. Struve renders the protagonist's first arrival as follows: «As they went along the corridor, a bed creaked heavily and rhythmically behind one of the doors» (600). Nabokov's detailed version, which is more similar to the Russian version, aims at making the background more realistic: «While Chorb and she walked along the corridor, they could hear, from behind one of the doors, a bed creaking, rhythmically and weightily, as if a log were being sawed in two» (*The Stories*: 152). The added metaphor increases the moral decadence of the place and, at the same time, preserves the stylistic refinedness of the description. As a consequence, the author of the story tends to employ more extended sentences, unlike Struve, who turns out to be more 'lapidary' and 'faithful' to the original text. When describing Chorb's awakening from his bad dream while sleeping beside the prostitute, Struve offers a

<sup>13</sup> In his study about text and context, Marrone claims that every text creates a different meaning according to the context it interacts with. A crucifix, for example, is a religious object in a church, but it acquires an artistic value in a museum (162).

more literal and concise version: «An hour later she was awakened by a shriek. It was Tchorb. He had woke up, turned over, and seen, as he imagined, his wife beside him» (Struve 601)<sup>14</sup>. Nabokov rephrases the sentence as follows: «Her sleep lasted not more than an hour: a ghastly deep-drawn howl roused her. It was Chorb screaming. He had woken up sometime after midnight, had turned on his side, and had seen his wife lying beside him» (*The Stories*: 153). Nabokov adds adjectives and coordinate clauses with the effect of ‘dramatizing’ the scene and maintaining a more elaborate style, with the aim of making it suitable for Anglophone readers.

Last, but not least, Nabokov and Struve use different present tenses to conclude the story. When the lackey, who stands outside Chorb’s hotel room with the prostitute, eavesdrops on Chorb and the Kellers, who have just entered the room to look for their daughter, he says, according to Struve’s translation, «They are not saying a word» (602), whereas Nabokov uses the present simple: «They don’t speak» (*The Stories*: 154). Struve highlights the temporariness of the action, the transience of something that might or might not happen, leaving the reader unfulfilled, while Nabokov’s use of the present simple, with its sense of regularity and steadiness, underscores the impossibility of any dialogue between the Kellers and the protagonist, as well as between the latter and the world, thus making the unvoiced eternal. Nabokov, therefore, carries out a paraphrastic translation, in that he re-writes, starting from Struve’s plain version, the target text by forging and readjusting it, to meet the potential Anglophone readers’ needs. Unlike in *Laughter in the Dark*, in which he adapts the source text to the linear and shorter structures of the target language, he makes use of an «intralingual translation or *rewording*» (Jakobson 233), by rephrasing and extending Struve’s version into a more artistic and elevated style, as he addresses a supposedly learned audience.

### **The Two English Versions of the Russian Autobiography *Drugie berega* (1954): *Conclusive Evidence. A Memoir* (1951) and *Speak, Memory: an Autobiography Revisited* (1966)**

Nabokov’s first autobiography, *Conclusive Evidence. A Memoir*, was written in 1951, then he self-translated it into Russian as *Drugie berega* in 1954, which, in turn, re-translated back into English, with some revisions, as *Speak, Memory: an Autobiography Revisited* in 1966. The ‘final’ autobiography is the result, as

<sup>14</sup> «She had woke up» appears like this in the source text. One might wonder whether «woke» (601) is a mistake of transcription, an archaic use or the author’s ‘translation licence’.

known, of the assemblage of different autobiographical stories and memories mostly written after his migration to the USA. The writer explains, in the foreword to *Speak, Memory*, that «The essay that initiated the series corresponds to what is now Chapter Five. I wrote it in French, under the title of “Mademoiselle O”, thirty years ago in Paris, where Jean Paulhan published it in the second issue of *Mesures*, 1936» (*Speak*: 9). He then goes on illustrating, in the foreword, the process of recollection of his different autobiographical stories that resulted in *Conclusive Evidence*. And yet, the philological task does not end in the first English version in that, as Nabokov writes:

I revised many passages and tried to do something about the amnesic defects of the original – blank spots, blurry areas, domains of dimness. I discovered that sometimes, by means of intense concentration, the neutral smudge might be forced to come into beautiful focus so that the sudden view could be identified, and the anonymous servant named. For the present, final, edition of *Speak, Memory* I have not only introduced basic changes and copious additions into the initial English text, but have availed myself of the corrections I made while turning it into Russian. This re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English re-telling of Russian memories in the first place, proved to be a diabolical task (*Speak*: 12-13).

A comparison among the three texts seems to disclose few differences, as «there is very little present in *Conclusive Evidence* that is not also present in the two later versions, which are less new endeavours, more significant developments of the first text» (Cooper 43). However, even the limited differences are relevant to comprehend the extent to which the writer meant to manage his «total command of the past» (Boyd. *Vladimir Nabokov. The American*: 153), so as to improve and ‘update’ his autobiography, after the further research he did and the family documents he consulted during the time span covering the composition of the first and the final English version<sup>15</sup>. When Nabokov wrote *Speak, Memory*, he had returned, in the meantime, to Europe, where the family reunions and the comments on his autobiography with his relatives had unearthed different inaccuracies about his family’s facts contained in *Conclusive Evidence*, which he corrected in his final version. However, I mean to focus on the different time references and the rephrased passages that emerge after comparing the two English texts, instead of emphasizing their different diegetic organization, and pinpoint how much they differ from the Russian version. Although *Speak, Memory* is often more in compliance with the Russian text

<sup>15</sup> As García de la Puente claims, «*Speak, Memory* is a revised version of *Conclusive Evidence* that in some instances incorporates materials added in *Drugie berega*» (590).

than with *Conclusive Evidence*, structural and vocabulary differences often stand out between the former and *Drugie berega*. This rephrasing occurs more often at the beginning of a sentence.

When the writer dwells, for example, in the third chapter of *Speak, Memory*, on his uncle Ruka, a diplomat, he writes: «When Uncle Ruka died, at the end of 1916, he left me [...] his country estate [...]. The house, I am told, still stood there in 1940, nationalized but aloof, a museum piece for any sightseeing traveler» (Nabokov. *Speak*: 72). Apart from the time reference, the first English version is almost identical and reads: «When he died, in 1916, he left me [...] his country estate [...]. The house, I am told, still stood there fifteen years ago, nationalized but aloof, a museum piece for any sightseeing traveler» (Nabokov. *Conclusive*: 40). In *Drugie berega*, the passage recounts similar information, with structural changes: «After 1914 I did not see him [uncle Ruka] anymore. He then went abroad for the last time and died after two years, after leaving me [...] his birth estate. [...] I do not know as it is today, but, until World War II, according to travellers' accounts, everything still stood as an artistic-historical piece to any foreign tourist's sight» (57). The time 'scanning' is more accurate in *Speak, Memory*, but the Russian text, which does not lack the time coordinates, presents a more descriptive style, with particular attention to the estate and to what passers-by related about it. As to the two English autobiographies, the later one presents different sentences, often re-written with more details and not literally translated from *Conclusive Evidence*. When Nabokov evokes, for instance, his affairs as a teenager, he writes:

I was nearing eighteen, then was over eighteen; love affairs and verse-writing occupied most of my leisure; material questions left me indifferent, and, anyway, against the background of our prosperity no inheritance could seem very conspicuous; yet, upon looking back across the transparent abyss, I find queer and somewhat unpleasant to reflect that during the brief year that I was in the possession of that private wealth, I was too much absorbed by the usual delights of youth-youth that was rapidly losing its initial, non-usual fervor-either to derive any special pleasure from the legacy or to experience any annoyance when the Bolshevik Revolution abolished it overnight (*Speak*: 73-74).

In *Conclusive Evidence*, Nabokov's claimed age is eighteen sharp; the passage presents a different structural organization and includes fewer words on the family's wealth:

I find it queer-queer and a little unpleasant-to reflect that during the brief year that I, a lad of eighteen, was in possession of that wealth, I was too deeply absorbed by love-making and verse-writing either to derive any special pleasure from the legacy or to experience any annoyance when the Bolshevik Revolution abolished it overnight (41).

As it starts, the excerpt from *Conclusive Evidence* emphasizes Nabokov's fondness for love stories and his lack of time to enjoy his family legacy, whereas, in *Speak, Memory*, he spends more words when he recalls his legacy and underlines the decreasing 'fervor' of his youth. In *Drugie berega*, whose excerpt reads like the source text of the one from *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov changes his age, as he writes «I was seventeen years old» (59). Therefore, in the passage from the first English version to the final one, *Drugie berega* adds more details and information, that Nabokov later 'readjusted' in *Speak, Memory*. The concern with the time coordinates and the different time references are detectable throughout the texts. The final paragraph of the third chapter is the same in the two English versions, but quotes different time references. In *Speak, Memory*, when Nabokov recalls the stories for children from the "Bibliothèque Rose" collection that his uncle finds at his house, he writes: «Once, in 1908 or 1909, Uncle Ruka became engrossed in some French children's books that he had come upon in our house» (76). The passage does not change in *Conclusive Evidence*, but the time reference is still vague: «Once, when I was twelve or so» (43). In *Drugie berega*, Nabokov refers to his uncle by name and the time reference changes: «And here again what I remember. I was eight. Vasilij Ivanovich picks from the sofa our school book from the series "Bibliothèque Rose"» (62). The following lines from the same paragraph still show "time disagreements" between the English versions and the Russian text. Both *Speak, Memory* and *Conclusive Evidence* read: «and many years later, my moan echoed his, when I rediscovered, in a chance nursery, those same "Bibliothèque Rose" volumes, with their stories about boys and girls who led in France an idealized version of the *vie de château* which my family led in Russia» (*Speak*: 76; *Conclusive*: 43). In the Russian version, the author provides a more specific time reference: «and after forty years I moaned too, when I found by chance in another children's bedroom that same book about boys and girls, who one-hundred years ago lived in France that stylized estate life, into which M-me de Ségur, born Rastopchine, meticulously resettled her Russian childhood» (*Drugie*: 62).

In *Speak, Memory*, the time expression «one-hundred years ago» (62) is directly associated with the Russian-French writer: «in writing them the sentimental and smug Mme de Ségur, née Rostopchine, was Frenchifying the authentic surroundings of her Russian childhood which preceded mine by exactly one century» (76). In *Drugie berega* it refers to the «boys and girls» (62) of the story, and in *Conclusive Evidence* «a hundred years ago» (43) is placed in the 'background', as it is in parenthesis: «but in writing them (a hundred years ago) the sentimental and smug Mme de Ségur, nee Rostopchine, was Frenchifying the surroundings of her Russian childhood» (43). Owing to their different sentence construction as compared with *Drugie berega*, the English versions

explicate Mme de Ségur's process of frenchification, used by Nabokov as the emblem of his narrative experience, characterized by the transposition of his narrated life into different cultural contexts. In the Russian version, Nabokov carries out the opposite process and 'traces back' Mme de Ségur's literary route to her Russian origins, 'passing' through the literary experience of her French stories: «for this reason she got used to, in spite of the vulgar sentimentality of all these stories, *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, *Les Petites Filles Modèles*, *Les Vacances*, the close link with the Russian estate life» (62). In the two English versions, the writer, who parenthetically gives the titles of the stories, stresses, more than in *Drugie berega*, the bad quality of the stories themselves: «The stories themselves (all those *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, *Les Petites Filles Modèles*, *Les Vacances*) are, as I see them now, an awful combination of preciousness and vulgarity» (*Speak*: 76; *Conclusive*: 43).

Other disagreements about time figures appear in the subsequent chapters. In chapter six, which describes Nabokov's life in the countryside house in Russia, the writer claims that «'...the only specimen so far known...' '...the only known of *Eupithecia petropolitanata* was taken by a Russian schoolboy...' '... by a young Russian collector...' [...], in 1910...1911...1912...1913...'» (*Speak*: 136). In the first English version, he postpones the dates to «1912...1913...1914» (*Conclusive*: 90); *Drugie berega* preserves, with some changes in the sentence structure, the same dates as *Conclusive Evidence*. In addition, in this chapter Nabokov remembers his explorative walks in the marshy lands around the Oredezh river on «a July day-around 1910» (*Speak*: 137), while it is simply «a June day» (*Conclusive*: 90) and «a still June day» (*Drugie*: 118) in, respectively, the first English text and the Russian one. In the third section of chapter ten, Nabokov goes back to his stay in Germany and, once again, *Speak, Memory* provides more information about the Nabokovs' itinerary and the time setting: «In August 1910, my brother and I were in Bad Kissingen with our parents and tutor (Lenski); after that my father and mother traveled to Munich and Paris, and back to St. Petersburg, and then to Berlin where we boys, with Lenski, were spending the autumn and the beginning of the winter» (*Speak*: 204). The equivalent passage in *Conclusive Evidence*, which is literally translated in the Russian text, is more 'straightforward' and concise: «That Autumn, 1910, my brother and I, accompanied by a Russian tutor, were sent to Berlin for three months» (*Conclusive*: 143).

The three autobiographical works seem to be located «on a three-step ladder» (García de la Puente 591), where *Speak, Memory* stands on the upper one and represents the final expansion of the two previous autobiographies. The evolution of Nabokov's autobiographical work can be represented by Chomsky's concept of 'internal fusion' (Chomsky 29). According to his linguistic theory, a

sentence, Z, would form by merging two syntagmas, X and Y, such as two phrases or pieces of writing, which are still not endowed with a sense of their own but share some words. Z would be composed of the words that X and Y have in common and would be, therefore, the result of an 'internal fusion', characterized by the combination of two linguistic elements with similar words or concepts. Likewise, *Conclusive Evidence* and *Drugie berega* stand for two moments of Nabokov's linguistic 'journey'. The translation and revision of the two macrottexts paves the way for their 'internal fusion' into a final one. Although the two previous versions are written, as known, respectively, in Russian and in English, *Speak, Memory*, the extended final autobiographical macrottext, includes, in between the lines, numerous phrases and words in Nabokov's source language. The interaction and the clash of the two linguistic composites in the revised autobiography generates an explosion of meanings and senses, to use Lotman's words, that re-establishes a new linguistic order. Following Chomsky's theory about the process of transposition into the source language, the natural language (that is the same process that Nabokov carries out to self-translate *Conclusive Evidence* into *Drugie berega*), X and Y are utterances that are received in a place, but are then reinterpreted in another context. Similarly, *Speak, Memory* is the result of the interpretation and the revision of the two previous macrottexts and their settings. In it, the author re-reads and re-elaborates the linguistic and cultural references and the interference of the earlier autobiographies, and re-settles them by following both the more accurate information that he collected over the years and the peculiarities of his final *ambience*.

## Conclusions

The translations presented in this work reconstruct the process of sedimentation of the writer's past, which is analyzed through the revisited translations in different moments of his life. In his autobiographies, in particular, Nabokov illustrates his linguistic geography and the connections between the latter and the diachronic dimension of the texts. The exploration of his past requires, in fact, not only the use of different linguistic codes, like French and Russian, but also the investigation into the narrative and linguistic readjustments to the different times of composition of his autobiographical texts. However, Nabokov's arbitrary manipulation of the time network produces divergences in his source and target texts, with the consequent increased sense of loss, timelessness and displacement. Such disagreements create, especially in the autobiographical texts, a 'blurred' dimension, whose 'assuaging' function is «to *numb* the trauma

of his subjective experiences» (Ponomareff 412) and is the suitable narrative setting of his metaphors. As Nabokov meant to write another volume about his life, he published, in 1974, a fictional autobiography, *Look at the Harlequins!*, representing the most significant expression of his planned final autobiography. The metaphorical dimension of *Speak, Memory* and its sequel partly find their collocation in this work: the writer re-imagines and re-maps his life from Russia to the USA through Western Europe, and repetitively crosses the borders of his places of emigration. *Look at the Harlequins!* is the conclusive act of a long planned autobiography, it is the novel that employs the fictional architecture to illustrate the writer's entire route and its influence on his plurilingual formation.

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