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***“Pozhalsta bez glupostey (please, no silly things), especially devant les gens”:*
Nabokov’s code-switching and
monolingual readers**

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Vladimir Nabokov was born in Russia into an aristocratic family who spoke fluent French, as was often the case in pre-Revolution Russia. What was less common was that his family were also Anglophiles. Therefore, Nabokov had a multilingual education with French *institutrices* and English governesses, and he could read English before he could decipher Cyrillic letters. After the Revolution, Nabokov emigrated to Europe and wrote nine novels in Russian; when Hitler’s growing influence in Europe became a danger for Nabokov’s Jewish wife, Nabokov realized he would have to move to an English-speaking country and decided to start writing in English: the first of his eight finished novels in this language, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, was already completed when Nabokov and his family moved to America in 1940.

In his novels in English, many Russian and French words are inserted in the midst of his English prose and this overwhelming use of code-switching can be a strong impediment for readers who do not share Nabokov’s idiolect, so much so that some critics have felt that Nabokov was an elitist author writing for polyglots but not for the average monolingual reader. Indeed, the intrusion of so many foreign words could make the native reader reject them, just as a body would reject a transplant coming from another person. However, Nabokov resorts to many devices that enable the monolingual reader to have access to his texts; indeed, he prepares the arrival of the foreign word (also called “xenism”) with

typography or verbal warnings, but he also provides her with a semantic explanation or a translation. The consequence of those strategies is that Nabokov's multilingual texts become a kind of palimpsest.

Announcing foreign words: a cushion of precaution for the monolingual reader

According to linguist Jacqueline Authier-Revuz (2002, 151), the speaker has two ways of signaling the heterogeneity of a word she uses. The first one is to incorporate a non-verbal modalization: when speaking, one can use a different intonation or "visual" inverted commas, and when writing, one can resort to specific typography. The second one is to verbalize the alien origin of a word: this is what she calls autonymic "modality" (Authier-Revuz 2002, 147).

Typography

As far as typography is concerned, Authier-Revuz explains that one can either superimpose this warning onto the word with inverted commas, or incorporate it through italics (Authier-Revuz 2002, 151). The latter is the most common way, as the rules of typography demand that foreign words be written in italics.

In Nabokov's novels, foreign words are written in italics in quite a systematic way, but the first novel he wrote in English, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, betrays its transitional status by hovering between different types of typography. Sometimes, in the very same passage, Nabokov puts one French expression in italics while he uses Roman for the other, as in the following excerpt which takes place in a French hospital:

"*Non, c'est le docteur Guinet qui le soigne.* You'll find him here tomorrow morning."

"You see," I said, "I'd like to spend the night somewhere here. Do you think that perhaps..."

"You could see Doctor Guinet even now," continued the nurse in her quiet pleasant voice. "He lives next door. So you are the brother, are you? And tomorrow his mother is coming from England, **n'est-ce pas?**" (Nabokov 1941a, 159)

Here it can be suggested that the tag "n'est-ce pas" is not in italics because it is more understandable in English than "*Non, c'est le docteur Guinet*

qui le soigne". However, after examining Nabokov's work, it appears that this is not consistent with his practice in his later novels and it seems to be only a sign of his uncertainty in this new linguistic medium. Still in his first novel, Nabokov uses inverted commas on words which, in later novels, will be written in italics, which confirms that the bilingual writer was still unsure about how he should integrate the foreign words of his idiolect into his prose, now that it was written in English. We can compare the use of the expression "biographie romancée" in Nabokov's first novel and in his last one, *Look at the Harlequins!*:

But if I should try this with Sebastian the result would be one of those **"biographies romancées"** which are by far the worst kind of literature yet invented. (Nabokov 1941a, 15)
 "We witness here the admirable phenomenon of a bogus *biographie romancée* being gradually supplanted by the true story of a great man's life." (Nabokov 1974, 656)

Interestingly enough, there is one word which, throughout Nabokov's work, is written in a non-systematic way. The word "émigré" is sometimes spelt with or without its first French accent, and is sometimes used in italics or in Roman. Thus, in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the word is written "emigré" and is not italicized:

He seemed to think that I had been vegetating in Paris since *maman's* death, and I have agreed to his version of my **emigré** existence, because [*eeboh*] any explanation seemed to me far too complicated. (Nabokov 1941a, 145, Nabokov 1941b, 156)

However, in the novel *Pnin*, the word is written in italics and has both of its accents in the Penguin edition:

It was the custom among *émigré* writers and artists to gather at the Three Fountains after the recitals or lectures that were so popular among Russian expatriates. (Nabokov 1957b, 150)

When the same novel was published in the collected works of Nabokov with the Library of America, it lost its italics (Nabokov 1957a, 426). What's interesting is that the *émigré* is precisely a foreigner who has a liminal status: she comes from abroad but tries to assimilate into her adopted country, or, on the contrary, she provokingly affirms her foreign identity, as some Russian *émigrés* of the intelligentsia did when they still thought that one day they could return to Russia. The variation of

typography seems to reflect this instability of identity, felt or projected for others to see.

It needs to be said however that I could not have access to Nabokov's manuscripts to see how the author wrote this word himself, so that this variation may be due to publishing policies. Actually, it is noteworthy that, in the same collection, publishers do not always resort to the same typography for the word when it appears in different novels: Penguin spells it "émigré" in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* but "émigré" in *Pnin*; The Library of America has "émigré" for the former and "émigré" for the latter.

Verbal autonymic modalisation

In Nabokov's novels, most narrators are not native speakers of English. Sometimes, the foreign narrator announces what language he is about to use. In this example from *Ada*, "Doc Fitz was what Russians call a *poshlyak* ('pretentious vulgarian')" (Nabokov 1969, 255), the translation follows the Russian xenism, whereas in *Pnin*, the original French expression is not given but its literal translation makes it very peculiar, as many idiomatic expressions are for foreigners: "'I want a last piece of advice from you,' said Liza in what the French call a 'white' voice.')." (Nabokov 1957a, 429)

Through these two types of modalization, the arrival of a foreign word is prepared for the reader, who will not stumble upon this foreign intrusion unawares but will grow used to it thanks to this cushion of precaution. The presence of xenisms is therefore made acceptable, but the reader still needs to find what those words mean, because too many semantic blanks would be a hindrance in a text supposedly written in the tongue of the monolingual reader. Nabokov uses two ways to grant her access to the meaning of those foreign words: either he translates them or he explains them within the text, or outside it.

Giving access to the meaning of foreign words

Providing a translation, or not

Very often, the translation is juxtaposed to the xenism, as in the example from *Ada*, "Doc Fitz was what Russians call a *poshlyak* ('pretentious vulgarian')" (Nabokov 1969, 255); sometimes, there are a few words between the foreign word and the translation, but it is still clear that a translation is provided, as in this passage from *Look at the*

Harlequins!: “The step I have taken, Vadim, is not subject to discussion (*ne podlezhit obsuzhdeniyu*).” (Nabokov 1974, 674) More often than not, Russian words are provided with an English translation, whereas it is less systematic for French xenisms. But there are still many examples of French expressions that are translated for the reader, as in this excerpt from *Lolita*: “I loved you. I was despicable and brutal, and turpid, and everything, *mais je t'aimais, je t'aimais!*” (Nabokov 1955, 268) This type of translation is the clearest way to help the reader understand the meaning of a xenism. But in many cases, no clear translation is given and the reader has to decipher the text or, more specifically, in the context (in terms of plot and vocabulary).

In the following example from Nabokov’s last novel *Look at the Harlequins!*, the narrator conjures up his memories of a man who was an acquaintance of his mother’s. The French word is not translated but an English word belonging to the same semantic field is provided:

The exquisite woman whom once upon a time he had handed into a *calèche*, and whom, after waiting for her to settle down and open her parasol, he would heavily join in the springy vehicle. (Nabokov 1974, 573)

No direct translation is given for “*calèche*” but the context can help the reader guess what the French xenism hides since the place the woman is helped into is somewhere she can sit. The hypernym “vehicle” helps us understand that the French signifier points to a mode of transport.

Sometimes, no English equivalent is given at all. But again, it is often French that is not translated. In the following example from *Ada*, a Russian xenism is given with its English translation to illustrate the language used by the Russian woman, whereas a long segment is not translated when the same character resorts to French to say something she dares not utter in her native language:

“The Zemskis were terrible rakes (*razvratniki*), one of them loved small girls, and another *raffolait d’une de ses juments* and had her tied up in a special way – don’t ask me how’ (double hand gesture of horrified ignorance ‘— when he dated her in her stall.” (Nabokov 1969, 185-186)

It is quite rare for Nabokov to leave such a long segment without a translation, but the power of suggestion of the foreign language is crucial here (it is actually reinforced in this quote by the use of body language). This power of suggestion is to be seen in one of the longest passages left

without a translation in Nabokov's oeuvre; the following sentence is taken from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*:

"She was so full of life, so ready to be sweet to everybody, so brimming with that *vitalité joyeuse qui est, d'ailleurs, tout-à-fait conforme à une philosophie innée, à un sens quasi-religieux des phénomènes de la vie*. And what did it amount to?" (Nabokov 1941a, 125)

Here, what is important is not so much the content of the woman's words but the fact that the overflow of her speech (announced by "brimming") hides its emptiness, as underlined by the final expression "And what did it amount to?"

Explaining the foreign word

When a translation is not provided, an explanation is sometimes given to the reader in the paratext. For example, in *Ada*, a character cannot come to a family event and this is how it is explained: "Colonel Erminin, a widower, whose liver, he said in a note, was behaving like a *pecheneg*." (Nabokov 1969, 66) In the notes that Nabokov prepared under the pseudonym Vivian Darkbloom – an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov and a character from *Lolita* – and that were meant to help translators understand the complexity of his language, it is explained that a *pecheneg* is a kind of savage, but he leaves out one crucial detail: within the word "*pecheneg*", a Russian-speaking reader will recognize *pechen'* (печень), or liver, which is specifically the organ that prevents Erminin from coming. This double entendre will be lost on the monolingual reader.

Sometimes, the explanation is given in the text itself. In the following example from *Ada*, a Russian woman prepares a meal with many Russian dishes. The guests include her former lover:

Tonight she contented herself with the automatic ceremony of giving him what she remembered, more or less correctly, when planning the menu, as being his favorite food – *zelyoniya shchi*, a velvety green sorrel-and- spinach soup, containing slippery hard-boiled eggs [...]. (Nabokov 1969, 202)

Just after "*zelyoniya shchi*", the text provides an explanation of the content of the soup but also a sensual description of it: the sense of touch is conjured up with the texture of the soup (velvety) and of the eggs (slippery); "green" evokes sight and the alliterations in V and S bring euphony to the description. In many other cases, especially in *Ada*, the

foreign word is associated with sensations, even with eroticism. In the following passage describing the kind of relationship Marina has with Demon, her twin sister's husband, French is clearly connoted with physical pleasure:

Marina, with perverse vainglory, used to affirm in bed that Demon's senses must have been influenced by a queer sort of "incestuous" (whatever that term means) pleasure (in the sense of the French *plaisir*, which works up a lot of supplementary spinal vibrato) when he fondled, and savored, and delicately parted and defiled, in unmentionable but fascinating ways, flesh (*une chair*) that was both that of his wife and that of his mistress, the blended and brightened charms of twin peris, an Aquamarina both single and double, a mirage in an emirate, a germinate gem, an orgy of epithelial alliterations. (Nabokov 1969, 20)

The end of the passage insists on this pleasure found in kisses and caresses through the use of alliterations in M and L, both very soft sounds when pronounced or heard. It thus adds to the sense of touch that of hearing and the presence of the mouth, the organ that enables the lovers to speak and to kiss.

The monolingual reader is therefore granted intellectual and sensual access to the text, but the overwhelming presence of foreign words also requires her to resort to non-traditional approaches: the multilingual text will need to be apprehended as a text in relief, with several layers or strata.

The several layers of the multilingual text: the text as palimpsest

In Nabokov's novels, foreign words are often connoted with sensations. The fact that they are written in italics implies that there is a visual signal in the text that attracts the eye of the reader. This word stands out as a relief in the text, like a visible seam or hem on the fabric of the text and, as such, it is also to be felt on the surface, like scar tissue or a "suture". Therefore, sensations and vision are particularly crucial in apprehending Nabokov's multilingual texts, which become palimpsests.

Originally, the term "palimpsest" designates the parchment where the old writing was scraped so much that it disappeared; it could then be replaced by a new inscription. However, those different pilings and layers enable one to have access to the ancient text in spite of the new one, through the new one. Like other specialists of multilingual texts, I find this term very fitting to illustrate the different strata of languages in Nabokov's

code-switching: when a foreign word is used in the English text, a monolingual reader will mainly see the first, upper layer, but a bilingual reader will read through it, behind it, her own translation of the word; likewise, beneath an English word on the surface, one could find the corresponding, and maybe original, word in the writer's mother tongue, if we are to think that a novelist writing in a language different from his mother tongue still thinks in his first language when writing in a second language; as for Nabokov, he insisted he did not think in any language but in images.

Xenism: from foreign to familiar, through the layers

For the same foreign word, the monolingual reader can have access to deeper and deeper layers of meaning as she reads on: sometimes, in Nabokov's works, the same words come back regularly, which means that their repetition will lead to a decreasing feeling of alienation. It is especially the case when those recurring words are used close together. In *Lolita*, Humbert marries the little girl's mother to have access to the nymphet he fantasizes about, and when she dies in an accident, Humbert hastens to take Lolita on a road trip across America during which he will abuse Lolita. In the following example, he starts each of the paragraphs describing their discovery of America by a French expression that underlines the sexual dimension of their trip. The first time he uses it, he starts by translating it into English, but then there is no more need to do so since the reader will remember its meaning:

We came to know – *nous connûmes*, to use a Flaubertian intonation – the stone cottages under enormous Chateaubriandesque trees, the brick unit, [...].

Nous connûmes (this is royal fun) the would-be enticements of their repetitious names [...].

Nous connûmes the various types of motor court operators, the reformed criminal, the retired teacher and the business flop, among the males [...]. (Nabokov 1955, 135-136)

The more those foreign words are used, the better the reader understands them or incorporates them in her own language, and what was Nabokov's *parole* becomes gradually a *langue* that can be shared. This also means that, for the same reader, new readings will start from deeper levels on the palimpsest of the text: indeed, the re-reader will start each new reading with a certain sum of linguistic knowledge acquired in previous readings.

The variety of Nabokov's readership

There is also a palimpsest if one takes into account the variety of the readers and that of the languages used by Nabokov. This is the case in the sentence used in the title of my paper and taken from *Ada*, “*Pozhalsta bez glupostey* (please, no silly things), especially *devant les gens*” (Nabokov 1969, 198). Of course, there will be some readers who master English, French and Russian, but others will be English and French bilinguals, or Russian and English bilinguals, or monolingual English readers. Therefore, if the trilingual reader has full access to this sentence, the Russian and English speaker is confronted with a blank when she reaches the final bit of French, “*devant les gens*”. On the other hand, the French-speaking reader having no knowledge of Russian will stumble on a similar blank when she sees the Russian segment “*Pozhalsta bez glupostey*”. Therefore, the text is an alternation between words which are full of meaning and others which are semantically empty, with varying positioning, for the reader, on the several layers of the palimpsest.

The foreign word: a space of freedom for the monolingual reader

In this palimpsest, the foreign word plays a crucial role and, paradoxically enough, it is a privileged place where the reader can inscribe her presence in a text since she can become the mistress of how those words are to be understood. This is what Adorno (1991, 198) suggested:

In the hesitation the word gives rise to, all the concepts it calls to mind and nevertheless avoids flash by. [...] One can put into a foreign word things that a seemingly less esoteric word would never be capable of, because it drags along too many of its own associations to be capable of being completely gripped by the will to expression.

Therefore, it is only the subjectivity of the reader, depending on her linguistic past, that will give a fixed meaning to a word, and this meaning will vary from one reader to the next. Which reveals yet again that the multilingual text is a palimpsest whose high and low number of layers changes from one reader to the next but also, for one reader, within one reading and from one reading to the second or third one.

Conclusion

There is much evidence to show that Nabokov was not an elitist writer who only meant his English novels to be read by polyglots. First, Russian words were not written in Cyrillic letters but were transcribed in Latin letters, which means that English readers could have – partial – access to them. Then, his frequent use of so many languages (Russian, French, and sometimes Latin, German, Italian, Danish or Ukrainian) corresponds to his strategy of alluding to a large encyclopedia made of many *recherché* references to literature, botany and entomology: it seems unlikely that anyone could share all of his vocabulary, be it within English itself, or in Russian and French; therefore Nabokov was not writing for trilingual people like himself but he only jeopardized his readers with challenging words and references: foreign words are just a specific example of this broader strategy. And finally, the best proof is that, in several of his novels, Nabokov used languages that he had invented and, therefore, could not have expected to find any native speaker in his readership.

However, it is true that Nabokov was an elitist writer because to read his *oeuvre*, the reader must embark on a challenging experience in which she needs to resist the temptation to drop the book when Nabokov becomes too self-indulgent and shows off his linguistic prowess; she needs to struggle with the text if she wants to enjoy his books which do hide linguistic treasures. Nabokov did acknowledge that he was a demanding writer and that what he considered to be a good reader had to be a hard-working one: "a good reader is bound to make fierce efforts when wrestling with a difficult author, but those efforts can be most rewarding after the bright dust has settled." (Nabokov 1990, 183)

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