

“THIS DOUBLE ANGLE HAS BEEN PRESENT IN EVERYTHING I HAVE WRITTEN” – AN INTERVIEW WITH OLGA VORONINA, THE TRANSLATOR OF VLADIMIR NABOKOV’S *LETTERS TO VÉRA* *

The Editor: *You have recently edited and translated from the Russian, with Brian Boyd, Vladimir Nabokov's Letters to Véra. This beautiful English translation, much awaited by Nabokov's fans of all languages, is about to come out in Romanian. (It has already appeared in Spanish; editions in German, French and Chinese are also in the works). The corpus is covering half a century of the novelist's correspondence with his wife, from 1923 to 1977, and its interpretations are likely to reignite talks about Nabokov's biography as a source and context of his art. You have an academic background in Russian literature, ideology analysis and literary discourse of the Cold War and you are also much interested in different relationships between the rhetoric of power and literary discourse in totalitarian societies, especially in Soviet and post-Soviet context, but also in children's literature or visual poetics. How do all these come together? Do you feel that one is informing the other or they are separate fields of interest in your life?*

Olga Voronina: Your summary of my academic background may, indeed, seem baffling to Nabokophiles and Nabokov scholars who will soon be reading *Letters to Véra* in many languages. Those who have familiarized themselves with Nabokov's interviews, essays on literature and introductions to novels translated from the Russian, have most likely adopted his “strong opinion” about good writers' obligatory detachment from politics. I, too, went through a phase of pure Nabokov scholarship, when all I wanted to do as a researcher was to analyze the intricacies of the master's style, study the complexities of his narrative structures or dig into the fertile allusive soil of his prose for references to literary works by his obscure – or illustrious – predecessors. I wrote a M. A. thesis on Nabokov's artistic reality and published a number of essays on *Lolita*, *The Gift*, and *Bend Sinister* as self-contained literary masterpieces. But as soon as I began my doctorate work at Harvard, I realized that I could no longer remain under the sway of Nabokov's

professed indifference towards politics. My Ph.D. research focused on the relationship between mass media and literature in the early years of the Cold War – a multidisciplinary field that is still open to curious investigators. I finally refused to follow Nabokov in separating ideological criticism from thorough literary scholarship, and yet I remained his disciple by keeping true to his scholarly and authorial credo: be attentive to details. When writing about Ilya Ehrenburg's essays in *Izvestiya* c. 1946 or about Anna Akhmatova's transformation, in *Poem Without a Hero*, of the iron curtain into the wall of mirrors that divided Russian culture from that of the west, I tried to be as attentive to textual details and authorial approaches to fiction-building as I was in my interpretation of Nabokov's novels. Since then, this double angle has been present in everything I have written. My interests may seem diverse, but they have a common denominator. In my analysis of cultural discourse, I interpret even the most inelegant, politically motivated or propagandist texts as literary works that have a depth and rhetorical complexity to them.

The Editor: *One can see from your researcher profile that rhetoric analysis is something you find useful in more than one of your themes of interest. Is the editing of letters that weren't originally conceived for publication connected in any way to the responsibilities of rewriting the intimacy/privacy rhetoric? Is this dialectic peculiar in Nabokov's case?*

Olga Voronina: The edition of Nabokov's *Letters to Véra* in English was conceived a long time ago, when I was still working as a deputy director of the Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg and representing, as a literary agent, the Nabokov Estate in Russia. I was happy to accept Dmitri Nabokov's and Brian Boyd's invitation to co-edit and translate the previously unpublished correspondence, not only because I found the Nabokov's dedication to one another endearing, but also because I had become aware of many violations of Nabokov's copyright in the post-Perestroika Russia and wanted to prepare the letters for publication in agreement with Dmitri's wishes. He insisted that our translation were both accurate and artistic, and that we were as scrupulous as possible when working on our commentaries and introductions. In fact, "rewriting" these very intimate letters was out of question. We were engaged with the author whose own attitude to translation included "utter disgust with the general attitude, amoral and Philistine, towards literalism." For Nabokov as the translator and commentator of Pushkin's *Eugene*

Onegin, honesty, skill and exactitude were the key principles of textological work. We followed his lead and do not regret this approach.

That said, I should also add that we wanted to be true not only to Nabokov's letter, but also to his spirit. We were aware of the playfulness of his love epistles, their overwhelming tenderness and vivacity. He invented whimsical endearments for Véra, calling her, for example, her little mosquito or his darling skunk. In Russian, with its rich flexive base, suffixes perform the role of mollifiers, allowing native speakers to turn an ordinary word into an assortment of sweet nothings. In English, we had to use other resources, such as research animal classification. Thus when Nabokov addressed his wife as "tushkan" (from "tushkanchik," literally, "jerboa"), we compensated for the missing suffix in the Russian with the reference to the family of rodents to which jerboas belong – Dipodidae. The letter in question, of June 10, 1926, begins with the appellation "Dipod" and ends with another one – "my fabulous dipodikins." This kind of volte-face would have been impossible without rhetorical analysis – or without our assuming responsibility for our choices in translation.

The Editor: *Do you feel translators receive sufficient credit (from public, but also from critics) for works such as this one, where so much work is to be done beyond the already huge task of translating the text? Most probably your comparative literature scholarship or – more precisely – your constant training in reading structures beyond forms and in self-reflexiveness of discourses made a difference. Was it important that you were also capable of theoretic reflection and analytic attention during translating such a complex writer? Could you see Nabokov's proverbial attention to language at work in his letters, in spite of their very different audience?*

Olga Voronina: I believe there are two questions here, not one. Let me start by answering your first question, about the credit translators receive or do not receive for their work. Indeed, even such well-known translators as Edith Grossman and David Bellos object the lack of academic or artistic recognition professionals receive for their translation work. And yet, their books, as well as works by other luminaries in the field of translation studies, such as Lawrence Venuti, J. C. Catford, Katharina Reiss, James S. Holmes, George Steiner, and Gideon Toury, testify to the enormous gratification translators receive from their work. Finding equivalents for the words

of great masters in one's native tongue is a pleasure that is difficult to match. It is an enlightening, liberating, and almost transcendent experience. In spite of the low remuneration translators often get and the critics' frequent failure to notice their contribution to literary evolution and cultural exchange, their labor may be a reward in itself.

Answering your second question, I could only say that my scholarship benefited from my translation work because ten years of working on the letters allowed me to explore the biographical, historical, and literary background of Nabokov's oeuvre at the unprecedented level of minutiae that I had not previously anticipated as meaningful or influential. I am especially indebted to Brian Boyd and Gennady Barabtarlo, with whom we deciphered and tried to solve the crossword puzzles and verbal riddles Nabokov created for Véra in 1926, for the chance to see how much could be hidden even in those spontaneous-looking bits of verbal encoding and wordplay. Working on the riddles led me to a discovery of Véra Nabokov's unpublished essay on Dmitri's childhood, which is kept at the Henry W. and Alfred A. Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, and, from there, to a new reading of verbal puzzles embedded in Nabokov's unfinished novel, *Solus Rex*. The essay that came out of this research will come out in *Nabokov's Women: The Sisterhood of Textual Nomads*, a collection edited by Elena Sommers soon to be published by Lexington Books.

The Editor: *How do you see Véra beyond Nabokov's life? It appears clear that she was his all-supporting, self-effacing wife, but is there something for the researcher and translator to see about Vera's probable literary projects of her own? Have you ever imagined a complete edition of their letters, had Vera not destroyed her share? Of course, there is only room for speculation, but even so, how would you see her as an autonomous creator?*

Olga Voronina: Véra Nabokov influenced her husband in many ways. In their biographies, both Brian Boyd and Stacy Schiff demonstrated that her role in his life went beyond that of a typist, secretary or chauffeur. From Nabokov's letters to her, the reader will see that she was the first to hear about his creative plans and the first to pass judgment on every piece – great or small – he intended to write. Moreover, the letters make it clear that Nabokov often wrote to Véra in order to preserve the fleeting moments of his existence away from her in quick and pithy sketches,

vignettes, poetic drafts, puns and snippets of absurdities of émigré life. He returned to this correspondence when working on his prose and even cited some of the letters' passages, almost verbatim, in *Conclusive Evidence / Speak, Memory*. For example, the description of his return to Cambridge from the letter of February 27, 1937, is now part of the autobiography, while some of the letters from 1942, telling of Nabokov's misadventures during his lecture tour of university campuses in the American South, are mirrored in *Pnin*, the novel about a blundering Russian professor teaching at an American university. In my opinion, the Nabokovs' intimacy was such that his experience was not complete without his running it against her perception of the world they shared. She was not only his muse, but also his eyes and his memory. It is not accidental that at the end of the autobiography, where the narrator addresses his lifelong companion as "you," Véra's portrait appears on the inset. She destroyed her letters to Nabokov, but it is her voice that we hear in Chapter 15 of *Speak, Memory*, because in one of its most memorable places – the episode about a completed design of a broken bowl – Nabokov cites her essay on Dmitri's childhood which ends with exactly the same image.

The Editor: *The idea that researchers and translators are passionate about things that touch them beyond pure professional interest is commonly shared. It seems to be valid in your case, as well: you yourself live between cultures and languages, having left your place of birth in Russia to make a life, a career and a living in the United States. Do you think this gives you a particular insight in both what it means to translate and in what it meant for Nabokov to reinvent himself as a writer in a language different from his maternal one?*

Olga Voronina: I am inspired by Nabokov's virtuosity in English, the language he had to re-acquire when beginning a new literary career in the United States, as well as by his tenacity in appropriating several literatures and, broader, cultures, and gradually becoming the leading figure in at least two of them. He took the British-American letters not only by sheer force of his genius, but also by his hard work on his English, by accepting the help of his editors, such as Katharine White of the *New Yorker*, and by bringing in a whole new world of literary references – Browning, Shakespeare, Poe, Carroll, Ruskin, Tennyson, Sir Thomas Malory and on and on. It is also important to note that he conquered the Russian literature, contemporaneous to him as well as contemporary, even though he lived in exile and

wrote in the beautiful, pure, rich, but still émigré version of the Russian language, which, year after year, was becoming farther and farther removed from the Russian spoken in the Soviet Union. I find both of these accomplishments very stimulating. Neither writing in English nor translating this sly, inventive, jesting and demanding master stylist from Russian to English are easy tasks for me. I persevere because I want to succeed as an American academic, a translator, a scholar writing for both Russian and Western audiences. Walking in Nabokov's footsteps is very humbling, but it is also exhilarating. And it definitely allows me to understand some of the aspects of Nabokov's creativity and scholarship – especially his desire to demonstrate that his linguistic feats were effortless, like the rest of the magic tricks he played on the reader. The magic is all there, but the facility and confidence are earned, not granted.

The Editor: *Thank you very much for your answers and for your willingness to be a part of the first issue of the academic venture that is the Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory!*

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