The Bilingual Muse

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The impulse for writing this book came from an invitation to give a keynote at a conference in Uppsala in June 2014. The theme of the conference, which was organized by Julie Hansen and Susanna Witt, was translation and translingualism in Russian contexts. Searching for a topic, I settled on self-translation among Russian-American poets. This subject had the advantage of engaging the two conference themes of translation and translingualism. I had worked on translation and translingualism before, but never in combination with each other, and an additional advantage of this choice was that it allowed me to indulge my love for poetry. Over the years that followed, the project continued to grow and eventually morphed into a more comprehensive study of Russian poets of the past 200 years who translated their own works not only into English, but also into German, French, and Italian, the languages I grew up with in Switzerland.

In hindsight, the Uppsala conference has acquired the status of an almost legendary event. Many of the participants have become regular presenters in the translation panels that have sprung up at the conventions of the Association of Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies and the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. A related phenomenon, which has begun to overlap with the former group, are the panel streams on translingualism at the meetings of the American Comparative Literature Association organized by Steven Kellman and Natasha Lvovich, who also hosted, together with Ilan Stavans, a symposium entitled “Writing in the Stepmother Tongue” at Amherst College in October 2015. All of these events gave me inspiration for my project. During a sabbatical leave in 2016–17, I presented aspects of this book at conferences and symposia in New York, Oslo, Uppsala, Tartu, and Utrecht. A workshop on the Russian Literary Diaspora organized by Maria Rubins at University College London in May 2018 provided a welcome opportunity for additional helpful feedback.

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Earlier versions of chapters 4 and 6 have appeared in Slavic and East European Journal (“Poems and Problems: Vladimir Nabokov’s Dilemma of Poetic Self-Translation,” Slavic and East European Journal 61, no. 1 [2017]: 70–91) and in Translation Studies (“The Poetics of Displacement: Self-Translation among Contemporary Russian-American Poets,” Translation Studies 11, no. 2 [2018]: 122–38). I thank Irene Masing Delic, the former editor of Slavic and East European Journal, and the two anonymous reviewers for their careful and detailed engagement with my article. I am also indebted to the two readers of Translation Studies and the two peer evaluators of Northwestern University Press for their constructive feedback.


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