Vladimir Nabokov’s Dilemma of Self-Translation

VLADIMIR VLADIMIROVICH NABOKOV (1899–1977) is known as a master of Russian and English prose. The fact that he began his literary career as a poet and continued to write poetry throughout his life has received comparatively little attention. Nabokov’s poetic oeuvre, much of it unpublished, is in fact of gigantic dimensions. In the preface to his 1970 bilingual volume Poems and Problems, Nabokov claimed that the thirty-nine Russian poems collected in this book “represent only a small fraction—hardly more than one per cent—of the steady mass which I began to exude in my early youth.” Overall, somewhat more than 500 of his Russian poems have appeared in print. Nabokov’s poetic oeuvre in English is much smaller in scope. Some of it was written during his student years at Cambridge, but the bulk of it belongs to Nabokov’s American period, when he continued to write occasional poetry both in Russian and English.

In addition to 23 published poems written directly in English, Nabokov self-translated 39 of his Russian poems. While the translations he made of his novels and memoirs have attracted a fair amount of critical attention, almost nothing, aside from a few cursory remarks, has been written about his self-translated poetry. This neglect is all the more puzzling since these translations postdate his controversial edition of Alexander Pushkin’s novel-in-verse Eugene Onegin. Nabokov made it quite clear that the literalist method of translation he championed in the preface to Eugene Onegin and other related publications did not only apply to his English rendition of Pushkin’s verse, but was meant as a prescription for the translation of poetry tout court. One might wonder, then, to what extent Nabokov adhered to his literalist credo when it came to translating his own work.

A closer look at Nabokov’s self-translated poetry reveals a rather inconsistent picture. Many of these translations deviate from his publicly proclaimed literalist doctrine by retaining vestiges of rhyme and meter. Clearly, translating his own poetry was different for Nabokov than translating Pushkin. “Killing” the original text and replacing it with a hypertrophied commen-
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tary, as he did with *Eugene Onegin*, was not a viable solution when his own work was at stake. Instead, he resorted to a somewhat haphazard approach, with the decision to reproduce or ignore the formal features of the original poem determined on a case-by-case basis. With their mixture of rhymed and unrhymed lines and with the presence or absence of meter, Nabokov’s self-translated poems differ markedly from his originally composed poetry in Russian and English. They also differ from the translations he did of the work of other poets—not surprisingly, perhaps, if we maintain that the fidelity of the translator is primordial only when the translator is translating someone other than himself. By reaching a sort of compromise between his literalist theory and the method used in his earlier translations, where he closely adhered to form, Nabokov was tacitly stepping back from the extreme position that he had embraced in his *Onegin* writings when, relatively late in life, he began to self-translate his own poetry from Russian into English.

**FROM “RIGID FIDELITY” TO “RUGGED FIDELITY”**

The majority of Nabokov’s poems in English (39 out of 62, to be exact) are self-translations of texts that he had originally written in Russian between 1917 and 1967. The English versions of these poems first appeared in the 1970 volume *Poems and Problems*. This rather strange book is a collection of 39 Russian poems with English self-translations *en face*, 14 poems that Nabokov wrote directly in English, and 18 chess problems (hence the title, *Poems and Problems*). The word “Problems” could also hint at the difficulties Nabokov faced in transposing his poetry from Russian into English. In his preface, Nabokov drew an explicit connection between his method of self-translation and the literalist theory he developed while preparing his English edition of *Eugene Onegin*, which had appeared six years earlier. As he put it:

> For the last ten years, I have been promoting, on every possible occasion, literality, i.e., rigid fidelity, in the translation of Russian verse. Treating a text in that way is an honest and delightful procedure, when the text is a recognized masterpiece, whose every detail must be faithfully rendered in English. But what about faithfully englishing one’s own verse, written half a century or a quarter of a century ago? One has to fight a vague embarrassment; one cannot help squirming and wincing; one feels rather like a potentate swearing allegiance to his own self or a conscientious priest blessing his own bathwater. On the other hand, if one contemplates, for one wild moment, the possibility of paraphrasing and improving one’s old verse, a horrid sense of falsification makes one scamper back and cling like a baby ape to rugged fidelity. (14)
Nabokov’s remarks reveal the ambivalence and uneasiness that frequently accompany the process of self-translation. When translating his own novels and memoirs, Nabokov alternated between relative fidelity and creative rewriting. However, taking liberties in the rendition of verse is a risky procedure in Nabokov’s theory of translation. It exposes the translator to charges of “paraphrase,” a method defined and dismissed in the preface to *Eugene Onegin* as “offering a free version of the original, with omissions and additions prompted by the exigencies of form, the conventions attributed to the consumer, and the translator’s ignorance.” According to Nabokov, when it comes to the translation of poetry, only the “literal method,” which strives to preserve the “exact contextual meaning of the original,” deserves to be called a “true translation.” Nabokov is nothing less than absolute in his condemnation of alternative approaches. As David Bethea put it, “the mere thought that anyone would consider the prosodic structure of the work as worthy of transposition drives him into a smoldering rage.”

One wonders, however, whether the “rigid fidelity” demanded for the translation of *Eugene Onegin* is really identical with the “rugged fidelity” that Nabokov applied in his self-translated poetry. The shift from “rigid” to “rugged” seems to open the door to a certain flexibility. Nabokov’s approach to rhyme offers a case in point. In discussing previous translations of *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov categorically condemned “poetical versions,” which he castigated for being “begrimed and beslimed by rhyme.” However, in the preface to *Poems and Problems*, he states that “whenever possible, I have welcomed rhyme, or its shadow.” He goes on to qualify this statement by assuring the reader that he “never twisted the tail of a line for the sake of consonance; and the original measure has not been kept if readjustments of sense had to be made for its sake.” To be sure, the absolute primacy of sense over form had not always been Nabokov’s credo—it constitutes a kind of conversion that he underwent in late middle age. Earlier in life he had no qualms about producing the kind of “poetical” translations that he later so vehemently attacked in others. By the time he published *Poems and Problems*, however, having proclaimed his literal approach to be the only legitimate way to translate poetic texts, Nabokov had no choice but to declare his allegiance to this method, since any other public stance probably would have opened him up to charges of inconsistency, if not hypocrisy.

Contemporary reviewers were aware of Nabokov’s literalist theory of translation and blamed it in part for the shortcomings of his self-translated poems, which contributed to the lukewarm critical reception of *Poems and Problems*. Richmond Lattimore, the celebrated translator of Homer, noted in his review that Nabokov’s insistence on “strict fidelity” led to various “oddities” such as inverted phrases or, in the poem “To Russia,” a bumpy meter that feels like “driving on a flat.” It should be pointed out that the bumpi-
ness criticized by Lattimore (who did not know Russian) is not the result of semantic, but of metrical fidelity, namely the decision to retain the original anapests in English. Konstantin Bazarov, a reviewer who did know Russian, opined that Nabokov’s “translations often turn moving Russian poems into banal and embarrassing English ones” whose “obscurity can often only be clarified by reference to the original lucid Russian,” thus implying that Nabokov’s literal method not only did a disservice to Pushkin’s poetry but to his own as well. Echoing similar criticism voiced about the Onegin translation, reviewers complained about Nabokov’s predilection for rare and obscure English vocabulary to render commonplace Russian expressions. For example, both Bazarov and John Skow, who reviewed Poems and Problems in Time magazine, took Nabokov to task for translating the ordinary Russian noun “zhimolost’” (honeysuckle) in the opening poem of the volume with the incomprehensible word “caprifole.”

Nabokov’s framing of his self-translated poems steered the critical reception in a specific direction. Publishing the poems together with a collection of chess problems was an unusual decision and looked like an attempt to dazzle the public with a display of technical virtuosity in an arcane discipline accessible only to specialists. The inclusion of the Russian original poems must have had a similar effect—as something of an unfathomable riddle encoded in an illegible script—given that most readers of the book had no knowledge of this language. The spatial arrangement of the Russian and English versions en face presents the Russian poems as “problems,” so to speak, to which the English translations offer the “solution.” In his preface, Nabokov draws an explicit analogy between the creation of chess problems and poetry:

Chess problems demand from the composer the same virtues that characterize all worthwhile art: originality, invention, conciseness, harmony, complexity, and splendid insincerity. The composing of those ivory-and-ebony riddles is a comparatively rare gift and an extravagantly sterile occupation; but then all art is inutile, and divinely so, if compared to a number of more popular human endeavors. (15)

Statements such as these could only reinforce the notion of Nabokov as an aloof formalist given to self-referential games, or, to quote Bazarov’s review once more, a “player whose approach to writing is that of an intellectual puzzle-maker producing artifacts which are all clever construction and stylistic acrobatics, an aesthete trapping glittering bejewelled butterflies in his lepidopterist’s net.” Surely, though, the referential function of language makes writing and translating poetry a more complex phenomenon than composing chess problems devoid of semantic content.
Let us come back to the question, then, of how faithful Nabokov remained to his self-proclaimed theory of translation when translating his own poetry. Rather than relying on Nabokov’s comments about his own practices (which always have to be taken with a grain of salt), this question is best approached with a systematic survey of the thirty-nine self-translated poems in *Poems and Problems*. First of all, it has to be noted that there is no consistent, generally applicable method in Nabokov’s self-translations. He uses a variety of approaches between individual poems and even within a single poem. Contrary to the principles outlined in Nabokov’s *Onegin* writings, this can include the reproduction of the original meter and rhyme scheme. Overall, fourteen translations (36 percent of the total) show evidence of systematic rhyming, even though the rhyme scheme is not always completely realized—sometimes only the “b” rhyme is preserved in an “abab” stanza, and occasionally Nabokov resorts to slant rhymes and assonances instead of exact rhymes. Individual rhymed lines also occur in otherwise unrhymed translations.

The rendition of meter presents a similarly inconsistent picture. Twenty-five translations (64 percent of the total) show regular metric patterns. Sometimes the translation preserves the meter, but not the exact line length of the original, for example by replacing iambic hexameters with pentameters (a sensible solution, given the shorter average word length in English), or by using iambic lines of varying length. An effort to preserve the original meter is particularly visible in the poems “Vecher na pustyre”/“Evening on a Vacant Lot” (68–69) and “Slava”/“Fame” (102–13), which are the only two known polymetric works in Nabokov’s canon. The English translation replicates the trajectory from trochees to iambics to anapests back to iambics in the first poem, and the switch from mixed ternaries to alternating anapestic tetrameter and trimeter in the second. A total of nine translations (23 percent) are metered and rhymed. It becomes evident, then, that Nabokov’s translational practice in *Poems and Problems* deviates from the principles promulgated in his *Onegin* writings, which proscribe preserving formal features in translation aside from a vague adherence to Pushkin’s iambic meter.

A more interesting question is whether the decision to reproduce or ignore the prosodic features of the original poem was a matter of randomness or whether there was a method to Nabokov’s inconsistency. In his preface to *Poems and Problems*, Nabokov states that he welcomes rhyme (and presumably meter) in those instances when they can be realized without “readjustments of sense.” This would suggest that the preservation of rhyme or meter is only permissible if it occurs more or less “naturally” as the byproduct of a literal translation. In reality, though, the relative frequency of rhyme and meter in Nabokov’s self-translations is far too high to be explained as a random effect. Clearly, it is evidence of a conscious effort. At the same
time, there is no attempt, in most cases, to achieve a complete reproduction of the original’s formal features. The result is a sort of halfway solution, a compromise, perhaps, between the conflicting goals of preserving semantics and form in translation. To be sure, such a compromise violates the absolute primacy of sense over form proclaimed in Nabokov’s *Onegin* writings.

The footnotes appended to individual poems in *Poems and Problems* almost never address the issue of translation. The only exception is “K Rossii”/“To Russia” (96–97), where Nabokov provides the following comment:

The original, a streamlined, rapid mechanism, consists of regular three-foot anapests of the “panting” type, with alternating feminine-masculine rhymes. It was impossible to combine lilt and literality, except in some passages (only the third stanza gives a close imitation of the poem’s form); and since the impetus of the original redeems its verbal vagueness, my faithful but bumpy version is not the success that a prosy cab might have been. (99)

As can be seen, Richmond Lattimore’s disparagement of the “bumpy” anapests in this translation was lifted from Nabokov’s own self-critical footnote. Nabokov does make an exception for the third stanza, however, which he singles out for successfully combining “lilt and literality.” This stanza reads as follows in Russian and English:

Навсегда я готов затаиться
и без имени жить. Я готов,
чтоб с тобой и во снах не сходиться,
отказаться от всяческих снов;

I’m prepared to lie hidden forever
and to live without name. I’m prepared,
lest we only in dreams come together,
all conceivable dreams to foreshow;

The English translation is indeed quite close to the original both in semantics and form, reproducing not only the original anapestic trimeter, but also the syntax of the Russian source text. The “AbAb” rhyme scheme with its alternation of feminine and masculine endings is preserved as well, albeit with slight imperfections. However, as Nabokov correctly points out, this quatrain has no real equivalent elsewhere in the poem. The other six stanzas are also written in a three-beat ternary meter in English, but in at least one line of each stanza one or more syllables are missing from the anapestic scheme, making the meter more akin to a Russian *dolnik* than to an anapestic trimeter. Similarly, some rhymes are replaced by assonances or are
missing altogether, even though the alternation of feminine and masculine endings is carried through.

Presumably it was this lack of formal perfection that prompted Nabokov’s musings that a “prosy cab” à la Eugene Onegin might have been a more successful English rendition of this poem. Are Nabokov’s poetic self-translations a tacit admission and illustration of the theoretical impossibility of translating poetry, which, aside from an occasional “lucky break,” can in practice only result in a half-baked muddling through? Why, then, one might wonder, did he not render his own poetry as a “prosy cab” in English?

“LOSS” AS “GAIN”: NABOKOV’S USE OF STRATEGIC IMPERFECTIONS

While an element of sheer randomness or compromise cannot be ruled out, a closer study of Nabokov’s self-translated poems reveals a more complex and interesting picture. In some cases, Nabokov uses the inevitable differences between the Russian original and the English translation and the formal irregularities of the English verse as a means to illustrate and reinforce the semantics of the original. Seen from this angle, the translation is not necessarily always an inferior, deficient copy of the source text, but a creative rewriting that can even be, in some respects, “richer” than the original Russian poem.

“Neokonchennyi chernovik”/“An Unfinished Draft” (66–67) offers a simple example of a poem where the English translation embodies the idea of the original more closely than the Russian source text. Written in Berlin in 1931, the poem launches an attack against opportunist “litterateurs” who are motivated by lust for gain and glory. By contrast, the speaker presents himself as someone who has weighed his “life and honor on Pushkin’s scales, and dared to prefer honor.” While the Russian poem ends with a rhymed couplet, the English version breaks off after the first word of the final line, thus creating a concrete, if rather obvious, visualization of the “unfinishedness” announced in the title of the poem. Significantly, the last word of the English text is “honor.” By breaking off the poem at this exact moment, Nabokov highlights this concept more prominently in English than he does in Russian with the terminal rhyme “chest”—“predpochest’” (“honor”—“to prefer”).

A similar, more subtle self-referentiality occurs in the poem “Nepravil’nye iambы”/“Irregular Iambics” (144–45), a nature scene written 1953 in Ithaca, New York, which equates the leaves shaken by an impending thunderstorm with the “foliage of art.” As Nabokov explains in a footnote, the irregularity alluded to in the title concerns the use of the word “esli” (if) in a “scudded” position. “Scud” (more commonly called a pyrrhic) is Nabokov’s term for an unfulfilled stress at a place in the verse line where the metric
scheme would call for a stressed syllable.\textsuperscript{16} Three lines in the final quatrain of the Russian poem begin with the words “esli b ne.” Since the word “esli” is accented on the first syllable, the iambic foot at the beginning of the line is inverted. Such an inversion is quite common both in Russian and English, but in Russian it is only permissible if the stressed position falls on a monosyllabic word.\textsuperscript{17} By using the disyllabic “esli” in such a position, Nabokov intentionally violates the conventions of Russian prosody. The English translation of the poem opens with the line “For the last time, with leaves that flow.” Since the stress in this sentence falls most naturally on the word “last,” the iambic rhythm is disrupted with an inversion in the second foot. Iambic verse in English generally exhibits a wider range of rhythmic variation than that found in Russian, which makes it debatable whether such a line really qualifies as “irregular.”\textsuperscript{18} Nevertheless, it seems reasonable to speculate that Nabokov intended the opening verse of his English translation to illustrate the title “Irregular Iambics.” Before criticizing Nabokov for his bumpy versifying, then, one would do well to consider whether the seemingly clumsy English prosody is not at times an intentional strategy.

“Nepravil’nye iamby” contains other irregularities aside from the unorthodox metrical use of the word “esli.” In two instances, Nabokov rhymes masculine with dactylic endings, a modernist technique that was virtually unknown before the twentieth century. Even though the English version is not rhymed, Nabokov creates a vaguely analogous effect by placing the last stress sometimes on the final and sometimes on the penultimate syllable of the line. Finally, both the Russian and English versions contain abundant enjambments. In the Russian text, which is divided into three quatrains, they create a striking lack of syntactic breaks at the borders of the stanzas. The English version is printed as one continuous twelve-line stanza, which makes the enjambments run more organically, perhaps in order to illustrate the “flow” mentioned at the beginning of the poem. The English layout of the text thus creates an analogy between the thunderstorm evoked in the poem and the stream of words on the page.

The examples provided so far may reinforce the impression of Nabokov as a master of clever, but ultimately sterile formal games. We should not forget, though, that Nabokov’s self-proclaimed goal in translating poetry was the preservation of “sense.” The manipulation of form merely serves an auxiliary function in this endeavor. Nabokov’s self-translated poems present multiple examples where the seeming technical irregularities or flaws of the English translation follow the semantic or narrative content of the Russian original.

The English version can not only become more self-referential than the Russian original with regard to formal criteria, it can also serve as a metacommentary on Nabokov’s own situation as a self-translator. The poem “My s toboiu tak verili”/“We So Firmly Believed” (88–89), written in Paris in 1938,
expresses the alienation of Nabokov’s current self from his younger persona, who now seems an entirely different person. This alienation, one assumes, became even more pronounced when Nabokov translated the poem into English thirty years later. The English version, unlike the Russian original, illustrates the idea of non-continuity in its very form. In the opening line of the poem, the translation faithfully replicates the anapestic tetrameter of the Russian original (“We so firmly believed in the linkage of life” corresponds to “My с тобоi так верили в связь бытия”), but already in the second line (“but now I’ve looked back—and it is astonishing”), the meter of the English text falls apart in mid-line. It is never recovered in the rest of the poem, except, in a somewhat weaker form, in line 9 (“You’ve long ceased to be I. You’re an outline—the hero”). The disappearing anapest illustrates on a formal level the illusionary nature of the presumed “linkage of life,” that is, the idea that a person’s identity survives intact through the flux of time. The Russian version keeps the anapestic meter throughout the poem and thus displays a constancy that is belied by the poem’s content. Moreover, in keeping with the absence of “linkage,” the English translation, unlike the Russian original, remains unrhymed. It is true that “linkage of life” has an alliteration absent in the Russian, but, significantly, this phonic “linkage” occurs in the opening line of the poem, which is written in flawless anapests. In the context of self-translation, this poem thus acquires an additional poignancy as a commentary on the situation of the aging Nabokov translating the work of his younger self and discovering in the process that he has become a different person than the author of the original poem, which makes the attempted “linkage” with the past a tenuous undertaking.

The strategic use of the presence or absence of rhymes, as well as a metafictional awareness of Nabokov’s situation as self-translator, can also be found in the long “Parizhskaiа poemа”/“The Paris Poem” (114–25). The lines “and I’m flying at last—and ‘dissolving’/ has no rhyme in my new paradise” become self-referential in the English translation. The word “dissolving” is paired with “straying” in a weak assonance, while in the Russian original “таiушchих” forms a perfect dactylic rhyme with “плуaiушchих.” At best, one could argue that the words “dissolving” and “paradise” create a sort of “eye-rhyme” in the English text. Later in the same poem, when talking about “this life, rich in patterns,” Nabokov inserts a passage that, especially when read in English, sounds like another metafictional gloss on his attempt to recapture the meaning and form of his previously written Russian text:

no better joy would I choose than to fold
its magnificent carpet in such a fashion
as to make the design of today coincide
with the past, with a former pattern (123)
By replacing the full rhymes of the original with assonances in which only the final consonant carries over, the English translation illustrates the difficulty of achieving the desired coincidence between the “former pattern” and the “design of today.” In the Russian text, the word “pattern” (“uzor”) rhymes perfectly with the word for “carpet” (“kover”). While recapturing the pattern of the former life seems still possible in the Russian poem, recapturing this recapturing in English proves to be highly problematic. The poverty of rhymes in this particular place is all the more conspicuous because the rhyme scheme is to a large extent preserved in the rest of this 136-line poem. Nabokov draws additional attention to this fact by segmenting the English version into quatrains, which are absent in the print layout of the Russian original.

An even more intriguing game with rhymes is played in the rather risqué poem “Lilith” (50–55), which anticipates the *Lolita* plot by several decades.20 The poem describes in explicit detail the sexual encounter of the speaker with an alluring underage woman. In the original Russian, all 62 lines are rhymed. In English, rhyme is only used sparingly, with a total of 14 rhyming lines, or a few more if we include half-rhymes such as “wind”—“in,” or “eye”—“trice.” The English rhymes are not distributed randomly, however—they predominate in the middle of the poem, which is devoted to the consummation of the relationship. This event is conveyed in three consecutive “abcb” rhyming sequences. Before the speaker can come to a climax, the girl withdraws, leaving him, frustratingly, “at half the distance / to rapture.” It is at this exact moment of coitus interruptus that the rhymes disappear from the English version. Only one more full rhyming pair appears later in the poem, tellingly linking “lust” with “dust.” In English, the penetration scene also stands out metrically because it is written in consistent iambic tetrameters, as opposed to a mixture of tetrameter and pentameter elsewhere in the poem, thus underlining the rhythmic intensity and regularity of the speaker’s thrusting movements. The Russian version, using rhymed tetrameters throughout the poem, provides no such differentiating effect.

Two poems in the collection *Poems and Problems*, “K muze”/“To the Muse” (56–57) and “Tikhii shum”/“Soft Sound” (58–61), deserve particular attention because of the self-reflective light they shed on Nabokov’s own poetic evolution and on his status as a Russian-language poet writing in English. “K muze” was written in Berlin in 1929. Nabokov identified it in the preface to the collection *Stikhotvorenia: 1929–1951* as a pivotal work in his poetic development, marking the end of his youthful art.21 The six stanzas of the poem draw up a sharp contrast between the past and the present. The first three stanzas describe the speaker’s youthful infatuation with the Muse, an enchanting female who appears to him on a moonlit balcony. This encounter results in lyrics that are said to be smiling with “red-lipped rhymes.”
The self-parodying nature of these clichéd images is reinforced with a subtle literary allusion: “Ia schastliv byl” (“I was happy”) in line 9 echoes Antonio Salieri’s monologue in Pushkin’s *Mozart and Salieri*. The second half of the poem presents the aging speaker at the present time. He has now become “experienced, frugal, and intolerant,” worries about ambition, produces “polished verse” that is “cleaner than copper,” and talks with the Muse only on rare occasions “across the fence, like old neighbors.” One suspects that the transition discussed here concerns not only the evolution of Nabokov’s poetry from youthful effusion to the “robust” style of his mature years, but also the larger shift from poetry to narrative prose.

The English translation of the poem follows the Russian original relatively closely, as the example of the two opening stanzas will demonstrate:

Я помню твой приход: растущий звон,
волнение, неведомое миру.
Луна сквозь ветки тронула балкон,
и пала тень, похожая на лиру.
Мне, юному, для неги плеч твоих
казался ямб одеждой слишком грубой.
Но была певуч неправильный мой стих
и улыбался рифмой красногубой.

Your coming I recall: a growing vibrance,
an agitation to the world unknown.
The moon through branches touched the balcony
and there a shadow, lyriform, was thrown.
To me, a youth, the iamb seemed a garb
too rude for the soft languor of your shoulders;
but my imperfect line had tunefulness
and with the red lips of its rhyme it smiled.

The inverted syntax, which does not always reflect the actual word order of the Russian original, and the use of the passive voice in the first stanza convey to the English version a certain stiffness. In terms of form, the translation preserves the iambic pentameter of the original and, at least in the first stanza, reproduces the “b” rhyme of the Russian quatrain. This, however, turns out to be a deceptive maneuver calculated to create false expectations similar to the beginning of “We So Firmly Believed.” Even though the English version, just like the Russian original, is segmented into quatrains, at the end of the second stanza the reader’s anticipation of another rhyme is frustrated: “Smiled” does not rhyme with “shoulders.” At best, it hints at the
missing rhyme with the repeated letters “s,” “l,” and “d.” This effect is all the more surprising, or ironic, since the absence of an expected rhyme occurs at the precise moment where the poem brings up the phenomenon of rhyme.\textsuperscript{22} It is as if the poet, rather than living up to the promise of a rhymed ending created by the previous stanza, and teasingly alluded to in the assonance of “rhyme” and “smiled,” instead decided to provide a retroactive illustration of an “imperfect line.”\textsuperscript{23} Clearly, the English translation engages in a formal self-parody that has no equivalent in the Russian original. In this connection, one wonders whether the word “lyriform,” seemingly another example of Nabokov’s eccentric predilection for obscure or nonexistent English vocabulary, was not prompted by the same strategy of exposing the implied author of the poem as a pretentious blunderer.

In the remaining four stanzas of the English translation, rhyme disappears. The verse remains a consistent iambic pentameter—with one notable exception. The crucial lines 17 and 18 (“Ia opyten, ia skup i neterpim. / Natertyi stikh blistaet chishche medi”) are translated as “I am expert, frugal, intolerant. / My polished verse cleaner than copper shines.” The first of these lines is devoid of any discernible metrical structure in English. Had it been Nabokov’s intention to reproduce the iambics of the Russian original, the line could easily have been “fixed” with an elision and word-for-word translation (“I’m expert, frugal and intolerant”). Surely, the lack of a metrical structure here cannot be caused by Nabokov’s difficulty in writing iambic verse in English, but must be the result of a deliberate decision. His design seems to illustrate the prosaic qualities evoked in the passage by switching to actual prose. Even by the more flexible standards of English prosody, “I am expert, frugal, intolerant” cannot possibly be read as an iambic line.\textsuperscript{24} The second line also makes a clumsy impression in English, with its unnatural syntax and the word “cleaner” awkwardly protruding from the iambic scheme. As in the first stanza, the syntax cannot be explained as an effect of literalism. The unnatural word order of placing the verb in final position is not dictated by the structure of the original, but seems to be chosen for its own sake. As a result, the “polished verse” alluded to in the poem turns out to be not at all that polished. One could add that while the phrase “polished verse” has a positive connotation in English, the Russian “natertyi stikh” seems more unusual. The word “natertyi” is more likely to appear in connection with a floor than with verse, and to a Russian speaker it sounds similar to “zatertyi” (trite, shopworn).\textsuperscript{25} The Russian expression has thus perhaps a slightly negative or ironic tone, which Nabokov manages to convey in English by making the line (and its predecessor) purposefully “unpolished.”

This discrepancy between content and form, that is, the evocation of formal perfection through an imperfect line that undercuts its own stated meaning, could be read as another subtle metacommentary. The enumer-
ation of simple objects in the final quatrain of the poem—“leaf of grape-vine, pear, watermelon halved”—indicating, in Paul Morris’s interpretation, Nabokov’s “heightened interest in the phenomenal specificity of the world and experience,” amounts to a programmatic statement about his goals as an artist. His novelistic work comes closer to his mature artistic credo than his poetry ever did. The inadequacy of the English translation perhaps reflects the inadequacy of poetry to capture Nabokov’s ultimate artistic ideal. This insight may have become clearer to him when he self-translated “K muze” many years after the poem’s original composition, and when narrative prose, rather than poetry, had become his preferred genre.

The experience of loss associated with the impossibility of creating a perfect self-translation can serve as an emblem of Nabokov’s own exilic condition. The unfathomable quality of the sound of his native language becomes the topic of the poem “Tikhii shum”/“Soft Sound,” written in 1926, which follows immediately after “To the Muse” in Poems and Problems. The speaker, presumably vacationing in a French coastal town, listens to the nightly roar of the sea. As in “To the Muse,” this poem is divided into two symmetrical halves. While the first four quatrains evoke the romantic communion of man and sea in rather traditional terms, the sound of the sea turns in the second half of the poem into a mysterious evocation of his native land. When the noise of the day recedes in the silence of the night, the speaker begins to hear a “soft sound” containing shades of dear voices, the singing of Pushkin’s verse, and the murmur of familiar pine woods. Pushkin’s poem “K moriu” (“To the Sea,” 1824) is of particular relevance here with its linking of the sound of the sea with the theme of exile. The “softness” of the sound also creates a thematic connection with Nabokov’s own 1941 poem “Softest of Tongues,” which is not included in Poems and Problems. In this poem, Nabokov laments the necessity of giving up his native idiom and being forced to “start anew with clumsy tools of stone.” The absence of this poem from Poems and Problems is interesting in itself—was it a moment of self-protection?

As Paul Morris has pointed out, Nabokov’s original Russian poem, “Tikhii shum,” which is replete with conspicuous alliteration and assonance, creates an “arrangement of whispering sibilants” calculated to “mimic the sound of the sea and to communicate the quiet though relentless intensity of the poet’s experience.” It goes without saying that the English translation can only provide a faint echo of this sonorous quality. “Shum moria, dyshashchii na sushu” becomes “the sound of seawaves breathing upon land,” with the English “s”-alliteration a poor substitute for the rich sound texture of the Russian original. One can imagine that the feeling of loss and alienation expressed in the poem became even more poignant when Nabokov was confronted with the task of translating it into an idiom that had little in common with the beloved “soft sound” of his native language.
The English version is also sonorously poorer because of the absence of rhymes. The original is written in aBaB quatrains, as was “K muze.” The translation retains only one pair of rhymes in the fifth stanza. The Russian iambic tetrameter is replaced in English with iambic lines of varying length. As in “To the Muse,” some of them are of questionable regularity. Once again, however, the distribution of “smooth” and “bumpy” lines is not random, but follows the semantic logic of the poem. Following a romantic cliché, Nabokov sets up a strong dichotomy between “day,” characterized by the distracting noises of hustle and bustle, and “night,” when the stillness allows for the perception of the roaring sea and the unfathomable sound of waves emanating from the Russian past. The passages pertaining to the diurnal world tend to be metrically “unruly,” as demonstrated by the third stanza:

Daylong the murmur of the sea is muted,
but the unbidden day now passes
(tinkling as does an empty
tumbler on a glass shelf);

The jarring enjambment separating adjective and noun (“empty / tumbler”) also occurs in Russian (“pustoi / stakan”), but the onomatopoetic effect created by the alliteration of “tinkling” and “tumbler,” disrupting the iambic scheme with a stressed syllable at the beginning of the line, is unique to the English text. By contrast, the nocturnal world is rendered in evenly flowing iambic lines, as shown by the stanza where the lost Russian past makes its mysterious appearance. The sequence of feminine rhymes, which appear at the end of the even lines and also internally in line 4 (“reverberation”—“respiration”—“pulsation”), conveys a sense of melodious “Russianness” to the stanza (even though they may not strike a native speaker of English as particularly felicitous):

Not the sea’s sound... In the still night
I hear a different reverberation:
the soft sound of my native land,
her respiration and pulsation.

Yet the apparition of the native land remains fleeting. In the subsequent stanzas, the diurnal world with its noise returns. As a result, the rhythm begins to lose its regularity and turns “unruly” again:

Repose and happiness are there,
a blessing upon exile;
yet the soft sound cannot be heard by day
drowned by the scurrying and rattling.
Chapter Four

The stresses at the beginning of the last two lines, announcing the return of the diurnal noise, replicate the rhythm of the earlier “tinkling” and “tumbler,” which now leads to a similar cacophony of “scurrying and rattling.”

In the final stanza, the poem returns once more to the nocturnal apparition of the homeland:

But in the compensating night,
in sleepless silence, one keeps listening
to one's own country, to her murmuring,
her deathless deep.

In the Russian original, the stanza has a changed rhyme scheme (aBBa instead of aBaB). The English translation gestures towards the BB rhymes with “listening” and “murmuring.” It also introduces alliterations that are absent in the Russian original (“sleepless silence,” “deathless deep”). The s-alliteration of “sleepless silence” echoes the earlier “sound of seaways” as well as the “Soft Sound” of the poem’s English title. The word “compensating” in the first line seems a rather strange choice (the Russian simply says “v polnochnoi tishine” [“in the silence of midnight”]). Perhaps it provides another metacommentary on the status of the English text: a translation can compensate for the inevitable loss of some of the original’s features by adding features that are unique to the target text, such as the alliterations present in English and absent in Russian.

It should be emphasized once more that the effects discussed here occur only in the English translation. The originals in Poems and Problems, like most of Nabokov’s Russian poetry, are written for the most part in a formally conservative style. Nabokov was not much given to modernist experimentation, possibly because he associated such an approach with left-wing politics. At most, he engaged in unconventional verse forms in an intentional parody, as he did, for example, in the poem “O praviteliakh”/“On Rulers” (128–33), which is written in the form of a Mayakovsky pastiche. Most of Nabokov’s poetic oeuvre in Russian, following the example of his beloved nineteenth-century classics, resorts to conventional meters, rhymes, and stanza forms, with a strong predilection for iambic tetrameter, exact rhymes, and AbAb quatrains. The poems that he originally wrote in English also gravitate toward conventional forms, with some occasional, but moderate use of slant rhymes and unusual stanzas.30 Formal experimentation is very rare in Nabokov’s original poetry. One of the few exceptions, discussed by Barry Scherr, occurs in the poem “Vecher na pustyre”/“Evening on a Vacant Lot” (68–73), where Nabokov resorts to approximate and heterosyllabic rhymes to highlight his agitated state while looking back on his youth and the death of his father. Scherr notes that “such occasional departures from nineteenth-
century norms in poetry are all the more striking for standing out against the background of [Nabokov’s] generally traditional versification.\textsuperscript{31}

Gerald Smith has come to a similar conclusion in his comprehensive formal analysis of Nabokov’s Russian poetry, where he notes that “Nabokov viewed departure from exactitude as a specific device, to be used to mark certain particular texts, rather than as a generally available formal resource which it became in Russian poetry during his time.”\textsuperscript{32} In Nabokov’s original poetry this strategic “departure from exactitude” remains very infrequent, and it mostly pertains to rhyme. The more radical stratagem of using a deliberately clumsy, broken, or disappearing meter is nowhere to be found in his original Russian or English work—it can only be observed in his self-translated poetry.\textsuperscript{33}

THE QUANDARY OF SELF-TRANSLATION

How can we explain the discrepancies between Nabokov’s originally composed poems and his self-translated ones? Possibly, he felt that he had “nothing to lose” when he translated his own work, given the impossibility of reproducing the same poem in a different language. The perceived hopelessness of the task may have given him a particular kind of experimental freedom. Julia Trubikhina, in her monograph on Nabokov and translation, argues that “pessimistic would be a mild way” to describe Nabokov’s attitude toward translatability.\textsuperscript{34} His literalist version of \textit{Eugene Onegin} is not just a utilitarian crib— it is ultimately meant to illustrate the impossibility of translating Pushkin, or any other poet. The translator assumes here—to quote Douglas Robinson—the role of an “angry, disgusted parent, using the T[arget] L[anguage] text to castigate the receptor for not having read the text in the original.”\textsuperscript{35} In a strange displacement, rather than the deliberately “ugly” translation, it is the hypertrophied commentary, with “footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page,”\textsuperscript{36} that attempts to replicate the digressive charm, wit, and metafictional self-irony of Pushkin’s original.\textsuperscript{37}

This is not the solution that Nabokov adopted in \textit{Poems and Problems}. Theoretically, following the model of the novel \textit{Pale Fire}, he could have become his own Kinbote by making his poetry the object of a monumental (pseudo-)scholarly apparatus. Although Nabokov does resort to footnotes in \textit{Poems and Problems}, some of them flippant, ironic, and digressive, they are infinitely more modest in scope than the gargantuan commentaries in \textit{Eugene Onegin} and \textit{Pale Fire}. It was not a viable option for Nabokov to treat his own oeuvre in the same manner as he did Pushkin’s. Although he never suffered from false modesty, framing his own poetry as a sacrosanct classic
of world literature would have smacked of narcissism or megalomania, to say the least. The strategy of what Trubikhina calls an “allegorical” approach to translation, in which “the violence done to the original by the process of translation is sublated by acknowledging the limitation of language and producing an allegorical model, the Other, the Commentary,” was not available to Nabokov when it came to the translation of his own poetry. Given his pessimism regarding the possibility of translating poetic texts, he was thus left in a dire predicament.

Nabokov tends to comment on translation with metaphors of violence and desecration. His programmatic 1955 poem “On Translating Eugene Onegin,” which he included in Poems and Problems, opens with the memorable image of the “poet's pale and glaring head” offered by the translator on a platter (175). If translating is tantamount to murdering the author of the original text, does this mean that self-translation becomes for Nabokov a form of self-mutilation, or self-beheading? The remarks he made about the translation of his own prose fiction indeed display a sense of physical violence and self-inflicted pain. In the 1930s Nabokov complained that translating his own work was like “sorting through one’s own innards and then trying them on for size like a pair of gloves.” Nevertheless, it would be problematic to conclude that Nabokov treated self-translation as symbolic suicide. Precisely because he dealt with his own work, “killing” the original text in translation, as he did with Pushkin’s Eugene Onegin, was not desirable when it came to the translation of his own poetry. This may explain why Nabokov refrained from eradicating “the last vestiges of bourgeois poesy and concession to rhythm” from his own self-translated poetry as radically as he claims he did with Eugene Onegin. Some of the English versions in Poems and Problems even look like a throwback to the old days when Nabokov still produced “poetical” translations. A perfect example can be found in the poem “Provans”/“Provence” (26–27), where the English translation faithfully replicates the meter and rhyme scheme of the Russian original. Not coincidentally, this poem describes a moment of unmitigated harmony and happiness, a sentiment otherwise rarely encountered in Poems and Problems. The speaker expresses his “bliss to be a Russian poet” in a Mediterranean landscape brimming with picturesque life and singing. Perhaps Nabokov felt that a traditionally rhymed equimetrical translation was the most adequate way to express the somewhat conventional and stereotypical character of the original Russian poem.

The prevalent emotional experience related in Poems and Problems is not one of happiness and bliss, but rather of anxiety, tedium, loss, and exilic alienation. One could argue, then, that the lack of conventional “poeticity” in the translation illustrates the original’s “sense” more aptly than the deliberate ugliness of Nabokov’s Onegin. The few conventionally rendered “beau-
tiful” moments in *Poems and Problems* stand out all the more starkly against a background of prosaic drabness. The ruined landscape of the English translation serves as a memento of the lost paradise of the original Russian poems with their rich euphony and elegant formal polish. The best that the English translation can do, in Nabokov’s pessimistic view, is to hint at the loss a reader inevitably experiences when an adulterated, coarse simulacrum takes the place of the unrecoverable splendid original.

**POEMS WRITTEN BY FICTIONAL CHARACTERS**

A consideration of Nabokov’s poetic self-translations would not be complete without taking into account, if only briefly, the poems written by his fictional characters. Nabokov took it upon himself to personally translate the poetry contained in his novels and stories even if the translation of the book was entrusted to an extraneous translator. His practice in rendering these fictional poems deviates even more strongly from his literalist principles than do the self-translated texts in *Poems and Problems*. For the most part, the poems in his narrative fiction keep the original meter and rhyme scheme in translation even at the cost of significant semantic reshuffling and alterations.

The only major exception occurs in the first chapter of the novel *Dar* (*The Gift*), where the poems of the protagonist Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev are given in an English prose rendition (although printed with line breaks). Joseph Schlegel, in an article devoted to Andrei Bely’s impact on Nabokov’s poetics, has analyzed the form of Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s poems cited in *Dar*. Using Bely’s method of plotting the graphic patterns resulting from skipped stresses, which had a huge impact on Nabokov’s own understanding of prosody, Schlegel shows that these poems display an unusually high level of rhythmical richness. Perhaps Nabokov felt that trying to reproduce the same effect in English would have been futile or too cumbersome. This is not to say that it was impossible: when Godunov-Cherdyntsev creates a poem that is deliberately designed to produce a particular diagrammed shape, Nabokov’s English translation retains not only the meter and rhyme scheme, but also the distribution of stresses in each line. Starting with the final poem in chapter 1, the poetic texts quoted in the novel, whether by Godunov-Cherdyntsev or other poets, are rendered in an equimetrical rhymed translation. The same is true for all the other occasional poetry encountered in Nabokov’s fiction.

This principle of formal fidelity also applies to Nabokov’s English-to-Russian translation of *Lolita*. The most extensive inserted poem in that novel is Humbert Humbert’s thirteen-stanza paean to the female heroine. Here are stanzas 3 and 4 in the English original and the Russian self-translation:
Chapter Four

Where are you riding, Dolores Haze?
What make is the magic carpet?
Is a Cream Cougar the present craze?
And where are you parked, my car pet?

Who is your hero, Dolores Haze?
Still one of those blue-caped star-men?
Oh the balmy days and the palmy bays,
And the cars, and the bars, my Carmen!

Где разъезжаешь, Долорес Гейз?
Твой волшебный ковер какой марки?
Кугар ли кремовый в моде здесь?
Ты в каком запаркована парке?

Кто твой герой, Долорес Гейз?
Супермен в голубой пелерине?
О, дальний мираж, о, пальмовый пляж!
О, Кармен в роскошной машине!

A literal English translation of the Russian translation would look as follows:

Where are you traveling, Dolores Haze?
What make is your magic carpet?
Is a cream-colored Cougar fashionable here?
In which park are you parked?

Who is your hero, Dolores Haze?
Superman in a blue cape?
O, distant mirage, o, palmy beach!
O, Carmen in a luxury car!

The Russian translation replicates the ternary rhythm and the aBaB rhyme scheme of the original. The only exception is the line ending on “pli-azh,” where the internal rhyme with “mirazh” takes precedence over the rhyme with “Geiz” (Cyrillic for “Haze”). Nabokov spends great efforts in re-creating the rather outré sound effects of Humbert Humbert’s poem. The almost comically melodious “balmy days—palmy bays” becomes an equally sonorous “dal’niy mirazh—pal’movyi pliazh” in the Russian translation. While Nabokov’s Russian version of the poem can certainly be enjoyed in its own right, it nevertheless falls short of the American original both with regard to sound instrumentation and the use of punning rhymes. Dissecting
“carpet” into “car pet” and extracting the words “car” and “men” from the name “Carmen” reveals a foreigner’s defamiliarizing glance at the English language.

As we can see, there is a vast discrepancy between Nabokov’s approach to translating the poems in *Poems and Problems* and those contained in his narrative prose. What explains this difference? There are cases where Nabokov had little choice but to reproduce the meter and rhyme of his fictional poems, of course. This is true for the typographically unmarked pieces of poetry “smuggled” into the prose fabric of *Dar*, such as Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s love poem to Zina in chapter 3 or the Onegin stanza hidden in the novel’s final paragraph. A translation without meter and rhyme would have made these poems indistinguishable from their prosaic surroundings.45

One wonders, though, why the work of a mediocre poet like Humbert Humbert receives the courtesy of a full-fledged “poetical” translation that is refused to Pushkin, or, for that matter, to Sirin (aka Vladimir Nakokov). The answer, probably, lies precisely in Humbert’s mediocrity. When it comes to the rendering of middling poets, fictional or real (we might also include here the poetic oeuvre of Nikolai Chernyshevsky quoted in *Dar*), a “paraphrase” exhibiting the otherwise derided qualities of “bourgeois poesy” might be what is called for in Nabokov’s theory. In other words, the effectiveness of a “poetical translation” seems to stand in inverse proportion to the poetic quality of the original text. The divergent approach in translation shows that Nabokov saw an essential difference between the poems that he published under his own name (or the pen name Sirin) and those that he attributed to his fictional characters. Unsurprisingly, he located himself closer to Pushkin than to Humbert Humbert on the scale of poetic greatness.

**“OTSEBYATINA” AND THE DISCONTENTS OF BILINGUAL WRITING**

Clearly, translating his own poems presented a different challenge to Nabokov than translating the work of other poets, whether they be real or fictional. Notwithstanding his claim that writing poetry is similar to composing chess problems, many of Nabokov’s poems are of an intensely personal nature, which made self-translation inevitably a dialogue with his own former self. As a result, the principles of fidelity proclaimed in his *Onegin* writings became problematic. How can one be “faithful” to one’s former self, if, as Nabokov himself points out in the poem “We So Firmly Believed,” the immovable nature of the self across time is an illusion? It is very possible that looking at his old verse made him uncomfortable because he felt it needed improvement. However, because, according to his own
theory, any improvement or paraphrase would amount to falsification, he had to fall back on “fidelity” if he wanted to remain consistent with his self-proclaimed ideal.

In reality, Nabokov had largely abandoned the principles embraced in his Onegin writings when he translated his own poetry in the late 1960s. Nevertheless, he remained insistent that he had not wavered in his allegiance to literalism, and he never retracted his polemical attacks against formal poetic translation. As a shorthand for his disdain for such practices, he resorted to the term “otsebyatina,” a pejorative used by Russian translation critics to denounce gratuitous insertions and alterations inflicted on a text by the translator. In his 1964 article “Pounding the Clavichord,” Nabokov translated the word “otsebyatina” into English as “come-from-oneselfer” or “from-oneselfity” and defined it as “the personal contributions of self-sufficient or desperate translators (or actors who have forgotten their speeches).” While meant as a club to hit Nabokov’s rivals in the “englishing” of Eugene Onegin, the notion of “otsebyatina” takes on rather peculiar overtones in the context of self-translation. One could argue that a “self-sufficient or desperate translator” is in fact a pretty apt characterization of Nabokov’s own role in Poems and Problems, given that self-translation inevitably involves a form of “otsebyatina.”

In considering Nabokov’s career as a bilingual poet and self-translator, we are left with a paradox, which can be put into sharper focus if we compare his theory and practice of translation with that of Marina Tsvetaeva discussed in the previous chapter. Nabokov’s English rendition of his own poems differs fundamentally from Tsvetaeva’s French self-translation of Mólodets, even though there are some obvious biographical parallels between the two poets. They were roughly the same age (Nabokov was born seven years after Tsvetaeva), and both grew up trilingually in Russia before being forced into exile after the Bolshevik Revolution. However, while Tsvetaeva is considered to be a monolingual Russian poet, Nabokov is celebrated for having successfully crossed the linguistic boundary. In their theoretical pronouncements, as we have seen, the two poets took diametrically opposed positions. Tsvetaeva embraced poetic creation outside the mother tongue and asserted a belief in the fundamental translatability of poetry, while Nabokov, even though he is considered a paragon of bilingual virtuosity, expressed skepticism on both of these accounts. His apprehension about writing outside the native tongue is captured in his well-known lament, in the afterword to the American edition of Lolita, of having to abandon his “untrammeled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian language for a second-rate brand of English.” Moreover, Nabokov exhibited a radical skepticism about the translatability of poetry. His literalist version of Eugene Onegin is ultimately meant to demonstrate the impossi-
bility of translating Pushkin. Not surprisingly, then, poetic self-translation becomes for Nabokov a form of self-torture.

The differences between Nabokov’s conflicted self-translations in *Poems and Problems* and Tsvetaeva’s virtuoso performance in *Le Gars* stem not only from a discrepancy in poetic talent. The two had very different styles, of course. As a Russian poet, Nabokov was a post-symbolist attached to classic forms. He was also in his bones a “pictorial” and visual image-oriented poet who cared about finding the “mot juste” or exact phrasing in the poetic line, rather than creating a sense of sweeping musicality. Unlike Tsvetaeva, he did not feel the “choric” movement of the poetic line or stanza. Nabokov’s translational efforts were also hemmed in by his theoretical rigidity and his pessimism about bridging the linguistic gap in poetic creation. His belief in the impossibility of translating poetry, which hardened with his long labor over *Eugene Onegin*, seems to have turned in *Poems and Problems* into a self-fulfilling prophecy, even though he couldn’t resist the temptation to deviate from his own literalist credo by smuggling vestiges of poetic form into the English text.48

Nabokov’s skepticism about bilingual creation does not mean that he was unable to write compelling poetry in English, of course. Nabokov’s biographer Brian Boyd even argues that “English poetry has few things better to offer than ‘Pale Fire.’”49 Perhaps the most remarkable English poem in *Poems and Problems* is not a self-translation, but a text written directly in English. “An Evening of Russian Poetry,” composed in 1945 in a semi-comical style that seems to mimic a lecture by Nabokov’s own Professor Pnin, offers a reflection on Russian poetry and the difficulty or impossibility of capturing its form and spirit in English. Nabokov’s English-language evocation of the shapes and sounds of his native language and his lost Russian past acquire here an elegiac and wistful tone:

Beyond the seas where I have lost a scepter,
I hear the neighing of my dappled nouns,
soft participles coming down the steps,
treading on leaves, trailing their rustling gowns,
and liquid verbs in *ahla* and in *ili,*
Aeonian grottoes, nights in the Altai,
black pools of sound with “l’s” for water lilies.
The empty glass I touched is tinkling still,
but now ’tis covered by a hand and dies. (159–60)

In a sort of “meta-self-translation,” Nabokov addresses the unbridgeable gap between Russian and English while at the same partially overcoming
it by imbuing the English lines with the lilting sounds of Russian past-tense endings. For a tantalizing moment, in a sort of spiritist performance, the two languages seems to fuse into one, rendering the “problem” of translation redundant, before the speaker himself brings the seance to an abrupt and willful halt.