



COLLABORATIVE SELF-TRANSLATION:

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, Dmitri Vladimirovich
Nabokov and Italian Language

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IMPOSTI

1. Introduction

There is a large body of critical literature on Vladimir Nabokov's translations and self-translations, mostly published in the Anglophone context (Grayson 1977, Cummings 1977, Holmstrom 1985, Beaujour 1989, Beaujour 1995, Besemeres 2002, Gallego Roca 2002, Teplova 2003, Oustinoff 2004, Díaz 2005, Bontila 2006, Boyd 2007, Hokenson, Munson 2007, Novosilzov, Sharvashidze 2007, Akikusa 2010, Anokhina 2014). Yet, at a closer look, there is still very little that has been said about his translations published in Italy (cfr. Pavan 1990, Possamai and Banzato 1997, Marchesini 2007, Imposti 2013, Montini 2022). In this regard, Nabokov owes much to his collaboration with his son Dmitri, who, in many cases, was the author of the first translation drafts into English, which Vladimir Nabokov later reworked (see D. Nabokov 1984). Although the writer did not know Italian, he greatly appreciated Dmitri's Italian translations. To fill this gap, the present paper will focus on the act of "collaborative self-translation" that saw Nabokov father and son work together even after the death of the former. Such an investigation also makes it possible to discuss, from a theoretical point of view, the phenomenon of self-translation under a new light. Usually conceived as an individual exercise, this activity through collaboration "opens up", thus becoming inclusive and, as we will see, going beyond the actual boundaries imposed by life.



2. Self-translation and collaborative self-translation

Traditionally, the concept of “literary self-translation” has been consistently associated with an act to be performed in solitude, when the author physically and metaphorically sits in front of the mirror of himself or herself. Popovič was the first scholar to theorize self-translation as «the translation of an original work into another language *by the author himself*» (1975: 19, emphasis mine). In a similar vein, in 1998 Grutman coined the term “auto-translation” for the same practice, that is to say, «the act of translating one’s own writings, or the result of such of an undertaking» (1998: 17), ten years later he switched to the term “self-translation” (Grutman 2009). Eva Gentes and Trish Van Bolderen have described this endeavor as «the phenomenon of *an author* producing an additional text by translating *their own* written work into another language» (2021: 369, emphasis mine).

While these academic definitions provide a comprehensive understanding of self-translation as a complex and multifaceted literary and linguistic phenomenon, incorporating elements of creativity, identity, and cultural adaptation, we feel that there are still specific aspects which could pose challenges and open new areas of discussion. Indeed, during the past decade, the very idea of “self-translation” has been criticized by some theorists in the field of Translation Studies, such as Susan Bassnet (2013) and Anthony Cordingley (2013), who see the product of self-translation rather as a form of rewriting that creates a new original. Such claims strengthened the idea that self-translations are freer than other translations. Menahem Perry stressed this as early as 1981: «[s]ince the writer himself is the translator, he can allow himself bold shifts from the source text which, had it been done by another translator, probably would not have passed as an adequate translation» (1981: 181). Furthermore, Fitch remarks that this is not just the opportunity to repeat the process of writing, but this degree of freedom can be explained with a better understanding of the author’s intention, because «the writer-translator is no doubt felt to have been in a better position to recapture the intentions of the author of the original than any ordinary translator for the very good reason that those intentions were, in fact, his very own» (Fitch 1988: 125). To sum up, using Tanqueiro’s fortunate expression, the self-translator is «privileged» because of her/his role of «model reader» who has an insight into the original purpose of the

text, of her/his double role as author both in the source language/culture and in the target language/culture (Tanqueiro 1999).

In this frame of reference, it is challenging to define exactly the practice of “collaborative self-translations”, while supporting those assertions leaning towards appraising it as a form of rewriting. Still «in its infancy» (Trzeciak Huss 2018: 399), this field of research has significantly widened the perspective on self-translation. Joanna Trzeciak Huss highlights the indeterminate, inclusive but also extremely elusive nature of the phenomenon:

The definition of collaborative translation is highly contested, and forms of collaboration are variously designated. When distinctions are drawn between, say, *co-translated by* and *translated in collaboration with*, rules and conventions for applying these epithets are often fluid, negotiable and subject to the discretion of various parties in the network of publication, and may change depending on the prestige of a given figure. Also, just because all translation is collaborative does not mean that all the collaborators are translating. Even in clear cases of collaboration, it may be that only one party – or even neither party – is translating in the strict definition of the word. When it comes to formulating a theory of collaborative literary translation, it is not clear how to synthesize the sociological aspects of processes of textual production with the aesthetic and literary nature of the translation as product (Trzeciak Huss 2018: 389).

In Trzeciak Huss’s view, genetic translation studies are an important first step to better understand the nature of this phenomenon and, we can add, the semantics of the expression “collaborative self-translation”.

3.

Collaborative self-translation à la Nabokov

Research on Vladimir Nabokov as a self-translator has highlighted the importance of his collaboration with other translators. For instance, in the first stage of his career as a self-translator he would look for a native speaker who could revise his self-translated texts in order to detect possible grammatical and syntactic mistakes. In 1936 he wrote to Gleb Struve asking for help with his translation of *Otchainie-Despair*: «would you perhaps know an English person with a beautiful literary style, who could scrupulously revise my translation of *Despair* and who would not ask to be paid, at least not in the short term. This business is very important and

very urgent for me, so I beg you to answer me without delay»¹ (quoted in Anokhina 2016: 112).

After 1940 Nabokov's practice for the translation of his Russian works into English changed: he no longer produced the first draft himself but chose collaborators who would provide him with a literal (interlinear) and "faithful" translation (Grayson 1977, Montini 2016, Montini 2022). Faithfulness to the original text was for him of paramount importance. Furthermore, the draft translator had to be very malleable and accept the fact that the author would correct, rework and refine, or, as he put himself "dragonize"², their draft translation. A clear example of a "docile" collaborator was Gleb Struve. In his letters to him, Vladimir Nabokov would stress the importance of his own «very active participation» in the translation of his works from Russian into English, «as this story [The Aurelian] features entomology which could prove to be a headache» (quoted in Anokhina 2016: 113, 124). A second strategy Nabokov adopted was choosing a translator from within his family. As Chiara Montini stresses in a recent book (2022), the Nabokovs formed a real "clan" in order to successfully manage the literary business of the "chieftain". Nabokov father officially appointed his son Dmitri as his own main translator and collaborator. Nabokov son, however, not always met his parents' expectations and left the work unfinished, as in the case of the novel *Dar* (The Gift), which had to be completed by Michael Scammel, who was a young student at the time. Despite this, Dmitri's name is mentioned as co-translator of the novel together with the author himself. In her book Chiara Montini provides an example of how Nabokov father worked on his son's draft translation of that very first chapter of *Dar*, replacing words sometimes with more archaic sounding or solemn terms, altering word order to achieve a more euphonic effect and, in the case of Mandel'shtam's "Acmeism", replacing this very specific literary term with a more general

1 The original is in Russian: «У меня к вам еще одна просьба, – серьезная и срочная: не знаете ли вы англичанина с хорошим литературным слогом, который мог бы тщательно проредактировать мой перевод Отчаяния и не требовал бы платежа, по крайней мере немедленно. Дело это для меня крайне важное и спешное, так что, пожалуйста, ответьте мне, не откладывая» (Nabokov Papers [LoC]: Box 22, Folder 6).

2 In a postcard to Pertzoff of 1941 he wrote: «Для меня главное – получить точный и грамотный перевод, который вероятно потом раздраконю» (The most important thing is to get a precise and competent translation, which I will probably dragonize) (quoted in Shrayner 1999: 57).

one, «neoclassicism» (Montini 2022: 217). «The mere fact that the difference between the chapter translated by Dmitri Nabokov and Scammel's later ones is imperceptible in the published version confirms that it was Vladimir Nabokov himself who reconstructed the stylistic coherence and unity of the text»³ (Montini 2022: 219). One could say that Vladimir Nabokov's practice of collaborative self-translation showed all the signs of an authoritarian approach, which demanded from his collaborators the acceptance of the author's absolute authority and complete control over the final result of this collaboration and sometimes even the effacing of their contribution. The collaboration with his own son was subjected to the same rules, as the disclaimer published in the collection of short novels *A Russian Beauty* (1973) clearly states:

Most of these thirteen pieces are / were translated by Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author. All are given here in a final English form, for which I alone am responsible⁴.

4. Dmitri Nabokov's Role

Nowadays, as well as during his lifetime, Dmitri Nabokov's name is linked to his role in preserving his father's literary legacy. However, he also distinguished himself as an accomplished translator in his own right. In fact, Dmitri's skill as a translator extended beyond his familial ties, as he translated several of Vladimir Nabokov's works into multiple languages not only in collaboration with the author, but on his own and with other translators. From Russian into English in collaboration with Nabokov father he translated: *Invitation to a Beheading* (1959); *The Eye* (1965); *King, Queen, Knave* (1968); *Mary* (1970); *Glory* (1971); *A Russian Beauty and other Stories* (1973, together with Simon Karlinsky who translated the first story of the collection). Other translations were performed alone or in collaboration with others: from Russian *The Enchanter* (1986); *Selected Letters, 1940-*

³ «Il solo fatto che la differenza tra il capitolo tradotto da Dmitri Nabokov e quelli successivi di Scammel sia impercettibile nella versione pubblicata, conferma che la coerenza stilistica e l'unità del testo le avrebbe ricostruite l'autore». Here and elsewhere my translations from the Italian text of Montini 2022.

⁴ Archive Nabokov, New York Public Library, Berg Collection, quoted in Montini 2016: 151.

1977, edited by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew Bruccoli (1989); *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, translated by Dmitri Nabokov (1995); from Russian or English into Italian: *Cose trasparenti* (1975); (from English and Russian) *L'incantatore* (1987, Guanda), (2011, Adelphi); from Russian and English: *Una bellezza russa e altri racconti* (2008, Adelphi) (see Montini 2022: 245-246).

Dmitri Nabokov's dedication to bridging linguistic and cultural boundaries through translation played a pivotal role in making his father's works accessible to a broader global audience, helping to ensure the success of his international legacy. His role as a translator occupies a significant position not only in the context of Nabokov's biography and heritage, but also in the general field of literary self-translation. Arguably, Dmitri's prowess as a translator emerges from his intimate knowledge of his father's literary oeuvre, which enables him to navigate the intricate web of linguistic playfulness and references that characterizes Vladimir Nabokov's writing. Being not just a translator, but the son of the artist, he is undoubtedly in a unique position, with clear repercussions on the translated text(s). His contributions, particularly in translating Nabokov's works into Italian, showcase a keen sensitivity to the nuances of language and the preservation of artistic finesse. A first exploit of Dmitri as translator from English into Italian was *Cose trasparenti* (*Transparent things*), published by Mondadori in 1975⁵. Apparently, Nabokov father greatly appreciated this translation, even if he did not master the Italian language (Montini 2022: 136).

Dmitri's almost "natural" skills are paired with a very strict code that he would follow every time he had to translate his father's works. The main features of his approach or, as he calls it, «the Nabokov rules» can be found in *On a Book Entitled The Enchanter*, his afterword to the English translation of *Volshebnik* (1939) (*The Enchanter*, 1986). This title clearly echoes his father's *On a Book Entitled Lolita*. In this afterward Dmitri explains his work on the text:

In both translation and commentary, I have tried hard to stick to the Nabokov rules: precision, artistic fidelity, no padding, no ascribing. Any conjecture beyond what I have ventured would violate those rules.

The translation itself reflects my intent to be faithful to VN in both the general and the specific, textual, senses.

⁵ A second, revised edition in cooperation with Serena Vitale was published in 1995 by Adelphi.

Many years of translation for and with Father instilled in me those categorical requirements of his. The only cases where he considered departures admissible were untranslatable expressions and revisions of the text itself, in the translated version, by the original author. It is possible that VN, were he alive, might have exercised his authorial license to change certain details of *The Enchanter*; I believe, though, that he would have chosen to leave intact this model of conciseness and multilevel meaning. The rare instances where I have taken the liberty of making minor adjustments occur precisely where the technique – as in the telescoped Little Red Riding Hood wordplays (p. 49, l. 16; p. 75, l. 26) or the high-speed imagery of the finale – would have made a totally literal rendering meaningless in English. Elsewhere, on occasion, the English may seem simply a bit unorthodox. But so, in such cases, is the Russian.

(D. Nabokov 1986: 81-82)

As this excerpt clearly shows, Dmitri Nabokov piously follows those «categorical requirements» about translation that his father instilled in him and which he continued to follow even after his father's death, therefore limiting to the minimum all the changes he would have to apply to the source text for the sake of clarity and comprehension in the target text. The possibility of re-writing whole chunks of text, then, becomes extremely limited. This, in turn, poses a reflection on the wider perspective of Nabokov's theories of translation and what his experience was in terms of self-translation. In fact, throughout his lifetime Vladimir Nabokov adopted very different strategies, even varying them according to his beliefs at a given stage (see Grayson 1977, Anokhina 2016). Finally, in Dmitri's comment on his translations "for and with" Nabokov a hierarchy is very evident, and so is the "fidelity" of the translator-son to the instructions of his father.

After his father's death, Dmitri seems to have repeated his pattern of "authoritarian" translation and demanded from his collaborators the same "fidelity" to the original text as his father did from the translators into other languages. As far as his own translations into Italian are concerned⁶, he had many collaborators. Some of them are known: the Italian Slavist and University professor Serena Vitale, who for a while was also his partner in life (Montini 2022: 133), Nicoletta Pallini Clemente, Count Piccolomini, Ugo Tessitore, and Adelphi's editor for Russian literature Anna Raffetto (Montini 2022: 190). Not all of his collaborators made it to the title page of his Italian translations, though. His signature on the translations was a sort of

⁶ See what he says about them in D. Nabokov 1984: 162-164.

“quality stamp” that had a nearly sacred value for him as it certified his being his father’s faithful and obedient son, who continued and disseminated his literary heritage according to a rigid canon (Montini 2016: 156-157, Montini 2022: 213). His attitude towards his collaborators tended to make them replicate his own role as a «bilingual scribe» («un amanuense bilingue») (a term suggested by Chiara Montini 2022: 191, 220) in his collaboration with his father. As Montini remarks

It seems that Italy was for him the privileged platform not only to launch new film projects and translations, but also to test himself and test his linguistic skills. Thanks to Italian, a language that he is the only one of the family to know, he follows in the footsteps of his polyglot father and at the same time stands out from him. Like his parent, who continues to use the Russian language from time to time to translate his texts, Dmitri Nabokov becomes a multilingual translator. Of one author only. And, like the father, the son also moves between contradictory, although less categorical, positions (Montini 2022: 188)⁷.

However, Dmitri’s knowledge of Italian is the object of some discussion, according to Serena Vitale’s e-mail to Montini (2022: 190) «Dmitri spoke Italian perfectly but there is a gulf between that and translating Nabokov!»⁸. Others confirm that his spoken Italian was much better than his written one (see also Montini 2016: 156-157), which is not surprising, if we think that he did not learn it systematically and in a specialized way, but mainly through his knowledge of Latin and as an opera singer⁹. From an analysis

⁷ «Sembra che l’Italia sia per lui la piattaforma privilegiata non solo per lanciare nuovi progetti cinematografici e traduzioni, ma anche per mettersi alla prova e sperimentare le proprie doti linguistiche. Grazie all’italiano, lingua che è il solo della famiglia a conoscere, segue le orme del padre poliglotta e al contempo si distingue da lui. Alla stregua del genitore, che continua a servirsi della lingua russa, di tanto in tanto, per tradurre i suoi testi, Dmitri Nabokov diventa traduttore plurilingue. Di un solo autore. E, come il padre, anche il figlio si muove tra posizioni contraddittorie, anche se meno categoriche».

⁸ «Dmitri parlava perfettamente l’italiano ma da qui a tradurre, a tradurre Nabokov!!! C’è di mezzo il mare!».

⁹ See Dmitri’s own remarks about his knowledge of Italian and his decision to translate into it (D. Nabokov 1984: 162): «Encouraged by my success in a language I had learned effortlessly because I loved to speak and sing it, and buttressed in approaching its literary niceties by secure foundations in Latin and other matters, I then undertook my own Italian translation of *Transparent Things* [...]».

of the Italian translation drafts of *The Enchanter* compared with the original Russian and his own English translation, many interferences from the English text can be found. In some cases, the comparison with the Russian text helps solve some difficult points (Montini 2022: 242-245), but it is clear that without help from a skilled native-speaking editor, Dmitri's Italian translations would not always have been acceptable for print. Therefore, in Dmitri's case the relationship between ghost translators and whoever holds the responsibility for the translation turns out to be reversed in comparison with what it was between Nabokov father and his collaborators. It is Dmitri who does need the collaboration of sometimes "transparent", as in "invisible", undeclared collaborators and editors to ensure a good standard. However, he acknowledged this in his preface to the Italian edition of a collection of Nabokov's early stories *Una bellezza russa* (2008):

I confess that, during the long gestation of this collection, I took advantage of comments and questions put forward by insightful translators and editors of recent versions in other languages, as well as the meticulous checks of those who are working on the publication of individual stories¹⁰.

5. *L'Incantatore*

In 1985 Dmitri announced that in his father's archive he had found the story *Volshebnik* written in Russian in 1939, which he presented as a sort of «forerunner of *Lolita*» (Montini 2022: 193)¹¹.

[Boyd] found in the Montreux archives first one, then two manuscripts of *Volshhebnik* (*The Enchanter*), the novella that we might now call "The Original of *Lolita*". [...] After writing *Lolita* itself, [Nabokov] thought he had destroyed its Russian precursor but then rediscovered it and considered translating and publishing it in the wake of *Lolita*'s international success. But the manuscript had again been misplaced for decades (Boyd 2011: 44).

¹⁰ «Confesso che, durante la lunga gestazione di questa raccolta, ho approfittato di commenti e quesiti avanzati da perspicaci traduttori e redattori di versioni recenti in altre lingue, nonché delle verifiche meticolose di chi sta attendendo alla pubblicazione di singole novelle.» (D. Nabokov 2008: 18).

¹¹ «Nella lettera a Bruccoli scrive che quella "sorta di pre-Lolita" rappresenta "un evento letterario di grande rilievo"».

In the event, Dmitri translates the story into English, publishing it with the title *The Enchanter* in 1986 with the publisher Putnam, with the addition of two short prefaces by Nabokov senior and his own afterword. He considers this his best translation to the point that it replaces the Russian text, becoming for him the *original* of the story from which all the translations into other languages are to be made. In this he follows his father's example, who «regarded the English-language versions with their minor glosses as textually definitive for non-Russian readers» (Boyd 1991: 484). Dmitri even defines his English translation of *The Enchanter* «*mon livre*», thus in a way “usurping” his father's authorship and perhaps enfranchising himself from his “servile” role in his relationship with his father (Montini 2022: 194).

Dmitri then proceeds to translating *his* own English version of *The Enchanter* into Italian and in 1987 his Italian translation *L'Incantatore* is printed by Guanda. In 2011 a new revised edition by Anna Raffetto is published by Adelphi. Her role in this and other Adelphi editions of Vladimir Nabokov's works is crucial to the point that, for instance, in 2010 Ugo Tesitore even renounced his role as a translator of *Speak, Memory* because of the heavy stylistic and linguistic corrections she imposed (Montini 2022: 184-186). In 2012 Dmitri Nabokov was even awarded the prestigious prize “Italia-Russia attraverso i secoli” (Italy-Russia through the centuries) for his translation of *The Enchanter* from Russian. As we have seen above, he did check the Russian text in case of doubt, but he translated, or better *self-translated* into Italian from his own English translation. Be that as it may, we can see in this appropriation of the story by Vladimir Nabokov's heir an interesting example of *self-translation by proxy*.

Dmitri's role as Vladimir Nabokov's preferred translator and collaborator also reflects the intersection of authorship, familial heritage, and cross-cultural communication, making him a very unusual figure in the domain of literary translation studies. Chiara Montini's above-mentioned recent study highlights the uniqueness of this case, framing it into the broader perspective of the family's strategy to manage, increase and maintain Nabokov's literary success. The uniqueness of Dmitri's position as a son, sole heir and favourite co-translator in Nabokov's life is definitely an element that should be taken into account in a theory of “collaborative self-translation”. In the event, Dmitri far from betraying his father, even in the decision to publish *The Original of Laura*, which Vladimir Nabokov would

have destroyed, he is faithful to him to the point of completely identifying and becoming one flesh with him (see Montini 2017).

6. Conclusions

The case of cooperation between Nabokov father and son, which continued even after the father's death, allows us to draw a series of conclusions about "collaborative self-translation" as an inclusive act.

- "Collaborative self-translation" plays a crucial role when the author who wants to self-translate his/her works does not have full command of the language of the Target Text.
- "Self-translation" can be collaborative in both directions: on the one hand the author can ask for linguistic support from a translator and at the same time, the author can give the translator rigorous indications, submitting their work to profound revision, adding final touches to the product.
- An important role is played by the proximity, or rather "promiscuity" (Montini 2017), between the translator and the author in terms of family background, education, and experience.
- Finally, the self-translator does not always openly and honestly acknowledge the contribution of his/her collaborators, as is the case of the Italian version of *The Enchanter*, where Dmitri Nabokov is the only one who signs the translation, barely mentioning the help he has received. In this case, as we have seen, Dmitri's English translation replaces the original text in Russian by his father, even though while translating into Italian, Dmitri refers to it when in need of clarification. In the case of *Una bellezza russa*, he assumes the ambiguous role of "editor" (a cura di)¹², in the "Foreword", however, he thanks Anna Raffetto for the «great contribution to this meticulous and complex enterprise», that is to say «the search for a style absolutely faithful to

¹² In the colophon of the book, we find the following statement: «Translations by Dmitri Nabokov, Franca Pece, Anna Raffetto, Ugo Tessitore. Editing by Anna Raffetto».

the original texts»¹³ (D. Nabokov 2008: 19). Furthermore, he accepts a prize for his translation of *L'Incantatore* into Italian from Russian, which, as we have seen, does not completely correspond to reality in every aspect. Finally, from translator-collaborator of his father, he then assumes the role of self-translating author. In the case of *The Enchanter*, he puts his translation on the same plane as those of his father, by first translating it into English, then adopting it as the source text, and imposing it as the source-text of translations into other languages and self-translating from it into Italian. He also self-translates his "Prefaces" and "Afterwords" into various languages. Therefore, on the basis of these observations, we would like to introduce the notion of "unreliable self-translator". I am afraid that this case is not limited to the Nabokov clan and that further research will uncover other interesting examples of "unreliable self-translators".

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¹³ «il suo grande contributo a questa minuziosa e complessa impresa [cioè] la ricerca di uno stile assolutamente fedele ai testi originali». To be sure, Dmitri Nabokov mentions Charles Nicol and Gene Barabtarlo for their translations that first showed him the path for this search.

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Abstract

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Collaborative Self-Translation: Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, Dmitri Vladimirovich Nabokov and Italian Language

There is a large body of critical literature on Vladimir Nabokov's translations and self-translations, mostly published in the Anglophone context. Yet, at closer look, very little still has been said about his translations published in Italy. In this regard, Nabokov owes much to his collaboration with his son Dmitri, who, in many cases, was the author of the first translation drafts which he later reworked. The present paper will focus on the act of "collaborative self-translation" that saw Nabokov father and son work together. We then proceed analysing Dmitri Nabokov's translations and self-translations into Italian, which are in turn based on forms of (disguised) collaborative-translation. Such an investigation makes it possible to discuss, from a theoretical point of view, the phenomenon of self-translation under a new light, introducing the notion of "unreliable self-translator".

Keywords: Vladimir Nabokov, Dmitri Nabokov, self-translation, collaborative self-translation, unreliable self-translator.