



2019

Review: *Between Rhyme and Reason: Vladimir Nabokov, Translation, and Dialogue*

Brendan Nieuburt

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj>



Part of the [Slavic Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nieuburt, Brendan (2019) "Review: *Between Rhyme and Reason: Vladimir Nabokov, Translation, and Dialogue*," *Russian Language Journal*: Vol. 69: Iss. 1, Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/rlj/vol69/iss1/17>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Russian Language Journal by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Shvabrin, Stanislav. 2019. *Between Rhyme and Reason: Vladimir Nabokov, Translation, and Dialogue*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 419 pages.

An ambitious study, *Between Rhyme and Reason* endeavors to synthesize two lines of inquiry concerning Nabokov's long and prodigious career as translator. First, how can we best characterize Nabokov's method of translation, especially since most of his translations do not follow the same "literalist" approach with which the author and his notorious *Eugene Onegin* (1964) are so closely associated? Second, how did the act of translating other writers contribute to Nabokov's own creative work? Stanislav Shvabrin locates the nexus of these concerns in Bakhtin's concept of dialogism. Against the performative author's posturing as an absolutely independent creative consciousness free of all influence, Shvabrin contends that Nabokov knowingly practiced a "collaborative, participatory, [and] mutually beneficial exchange" of utterances and ideas with other literary artists (17-18). It was this productive exchange that helped shape the writer's creative voice, provided him with the material for his profoundly allusive style, and informed his technique of translation—a technique, Shvabrin maintains, always and essentially was grounded in the Bakhtinian ideal of fully "empathizing into" the inner life of one's interlocutor.

Nabokov's first foray into literary production began at age eleven with his translation of Mayne Reid's *The Headless Horseman* into French, so Shvabrin starts there and proceeds with a chronological survey of the maturing artist's ongoing translation efforts. The approach is natural and effective. Mandelstam says that a Russian writer's biography consists alone of the books he has read. Especially as he attends to youthful translations and unpublished experiments, Shvabrin enriched this reader's sense of Nabokov's literary heritage. Through sensitive and meticulous readings of a great variety of his translations, Shvabrin further demonstrates that, as translator, Nabokov was keenly attuned to all the dimensions of diverse poets' expression—structural and sonic, as well as imagistic and semantic—and was careful to retain them all in his translations.

With the specter of *Eugene Onegin* always in the wings, the foundation Shvabrin ably establishes is especially important because it enables the scholar to argue that Nabokov's "Englishing" of Pushkin's

masterpiece was simultaneously anomalous from and consistent with his robust body of translation. Anomalous because almost nowhere else was Nabokov so militant in a “literalism” that sacrificed all poetic sensibility to the altar of meaning. Consistent because even that literalism was, in the end, merely an amplified iteration of the translator’s fundamental principal, namely, to respect and preserve the individuality of the original poet’s creative vision in the translated text.

This last point, the study’s ultimate contention, does promise to dovetail nicely with Shvabrin’s parallel investigation into the impacts of Bakhtinian dialogue on Nabokov’s work. And there are some very strong moments in this vein. Particularly illuminating are, for instance, the productive dialogues Shvabrin articulates between Nabokov and Vladislav Khodasevich and Fyodor Tyutchev. And I would have enjoyed even more about Nabokov’s interactions with and translations of Jules Supervielle, in whose *Le Voleur d’enfants* Shvabrin locates a potentially provocative foretaste of motifs important to *Lolita*.

However, if Bakhtin’s theory of dialogue suggests that one incorporates as “verbal vestiges” elements of the Other’s speech into one’s own utterances, Shvabrin needed to do more to trace, in concrete ways, those vestiges in Nabokov’s “original” works. Too often he suggests that we can find a certain image, idea, or expression throughout Nabokov’s work, but does not substantiate the claim with hard evidence. What is more, when even the young Nabokov “mistranslated” a given term or image, Shvabrin observes that he most often did so to make a poem reflect his own peculiar sensibilities. For instance, in regards to Nabokov’s 1921 translations of Rupert Brooke, Shvabrin remarks that Nabokov altered the poet’s vision of death and the afterlife in order to “cast Brooke’s metaphysical tentativeness into a mold of [Nabokov’s] own making” (100). Are not such manipulations rather more monologic than dialogic? Do they not reinforce the image of the tyrannical writer? (This point happens to introduce another of the study’s limitations. The imagery and themes that Shvabrin highlights in Nabokov’s creative dialogues overwhelmingly pertain to the writer’s “otherworldly” metaphysics, a foggy realm of his creative vision that is also the subject of hyperabundant scholarly commentary.)

The thorny matter of Nabokov’s approach to *Onegin* proves, as it must, troublesome. While Shvabrin offers a compelling argument for

Nabokov's change in attitude toward Pushkin—a change from passive worshipper of Pushkin to self-assured interlocutor with him—he remains quiet about why Nabokov's theory of translation changed so radically concerning *Onegin*. Shvabrin sets 1955 as the year of Nabokov's "literalist" turn, though he makes little matter of the date itself. I wonder about the potential influence of surrounding events. Before he adopted his literalist rhetoric, which presented the translator as a meticulous scholar, Nabokov claimed that a translator must be a "creative genius" on par with the original poet. In 1955 Nabokov also published the novel that he knew to be proof of his own genius. How might *Lolita*, and the attention it brought, have inflected his always histrionic self-presentation vis-à-vis Pushkin? And what of Nabokov's many recent years of teaching, during which time he also devoted himself with particular zeal to publishing his lepidopterological research? How might these experiences have shaped the ways the translator felt about scholarship's methods and objectives, about the responsibilities of enlightening an unfamiliar audience? Such questions likely do not have fast answers, but they merit consideration.

All told, by focusing on his extra-*Onegin* translations, Shvabrin unfetters Nabokov from the single work that came to define his reputation as translator to thus provide a more nuanced portrait of Nabokov's practice. And while I lament the depth to which Shvabrin traces other writers' "vestiges" in Nabokov's work, I do so appreciating the immensity of such a project. His gestures in this direction undoubtedly indicate many new paths for further inquiry. With these achievements, *Between Rhyme and Reason* will be a valuable resource for Nabokov scholars of all stripes.

Brendan Nieubuurt
University of Michigan

Rojavin, Marina, and Alexander Rojavin. 2019. *Russian Function Words: Meaning and Use*. London and New York: Routledge. 269 pages.

Function words, such as particles and interjections, are ubiquitous in authentic speech and texts and are often essential to fully grasping the author's or speaker's attitude, tone, and position. Yet most of the time —