Found in Translation:
Revision, Revisitation, and Rewriting
in the French Émigré Works of
Vladimir Nabokov & Milan Kundera

by

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Class of 2010

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Wesleyan University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
with Departmental Honors in French Studies

Middletown, Connecticut  April, 2010
Acknowledgments

This thesis is dedicated to my grandmother, Betty Maisin Gomory, who instilled in me a love of literature and language at an early age. Her translation of a Babar book from French to English, which she read to me as a child, was my first experience with French, as well as with translation.

Writing a thesis has been almost as exhilarating as it’s been harrowing. I would like to thank the following people (and department):

Susanne Fusso, who inspired my love for Russian literature. When I started college, I hoped to find a professor who I could talk to, about school and in general. Susanne has been this professor for me. Her insights, teaching, and advice have truly enriched my experience at Wesleyan, and her translation help for this project has been greatly appreciated.

Priscilla Meyer, who introduced me to the puzzling world of Nabokov. Her fascinating anecdotes, sharp editing skills, and thorough expertise on Vivian Darkbloom have been consistently challenging and enjoyable. I will always appreciate her vibrant approach to academics and to life.

The Department of Romance Languages and Literatures, for giving me the ability and the confidence to read, write, and speak French.

My friends, for perfecting the art of the “study break.”

My parents, Vincent and Randi, for their constant encouragement, and for being as intelligent as they are.

and Constantinos, who told me I could do it no matter what.

Finally, I would like to express how grateful I am for the potential to develop fully, securely, and successfully as a writer in my own country and language simultaneously, a privilege that Nabokov and Kundera did not have.
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If some day I make a dictionary of definitions wanting single words to head them, a cherished entry will be “To abridge, expand, or otherwise alter or cause to be altered, for the sake of belated improvement, one’s own writings in translation.”

Vladimir Nabokov 1

Alas, our translators betray us. They do not dare translate the unusual in our texts - the uncommon, the original. They fear that the critics will accuse them of translating badly. To protect themselves, they trivialize us. You have no idea how much time and energy I have lost correcting the translations of my books.

Milan Kundera 2

Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera are Eastern European émigré writers with two distinct similarities. First, both lived in France and wrote in French at points in their literary careers, looking to French as a beloved language of creative production. Second, they share a mutual preoccupation (indeed, obsession) with translation, seen in a marked tendency to revise, revisit, self-translate, and effectively rewrite their work over time.

But Nabokov and Kundera are neither contemporaries nor compatriots. The former was born in 1899 in St. Petersburg; the latter was born thirty years later in what was then Czechoslovakia. Nabokov eventually moved to America; Kundera relocated to France and still lives there today. The writers have been consistently linked by scholars and critics on two levels. Both were forced to leave their homes in

1 Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading (New York: Vintage, 1989), preface

Eastern Europe during the Soviet period (Nabokov following the Russian Revolutions of 1917, Kundera after the 1968 Russian invasion of Prague). Second, both write extensively about issues of exile, nostalgia, memory and language (strongly resisting autobiographical or “political” interpretations).

There have been quite a few scholarly works regarding these similarities, as well as each writer’s French connection. In *The Art of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov & Milan Kundera*, Hana Píchová focuses on the writers’ exiled condition, particularly how both deal with ideas of “personal memory” and “cultural memory” in their works. She highlights how Nabokov and Kundera have been “more than merely successful in dealing with the disadvantages of exile; they have showcased this apprehension brilliantly, to great acclaim.”³ Tijana Miletić’s *European Literary Immigration into the French Language* explores the work of select European writers, Nabokov and Kundera among them, who adopted French as a primary writing language, examining the psychological and artistic implications of abandoning one’s mother tongue.⁴ An essay by Maurice Couturier called “The French Nabokov” highlights how the French culture and language influenced the writer on several accounts.⁵

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translator, the works of Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour and Jane Grayson are indispensable, particularly surrounding Nabokov’s use of Russian and English. In *Nabokov Translated: A Comparison of Nabokov’s Russian and English Prose*, Grayson investigates the writer’s evolving translation theory, his “major reworkings” of Russian novels translated into English, and his endeavors in translating his own work (namely his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*). In *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Writers of the “First” Emigration*, Beaujour explores the neurolinguistic aspect of bilingual writing, arguing that self-translation is an “essential attribute” to the work of a polylinguistic author, as it enables him to unite his oeuvre across languages. Finally, Michelle Woods’ book, *Translating Milan Kundera*, offers a comprehensive study of Kundera’s modes of correcting and updating his translations, his ongoing conflicts with “unfaithful” translators, and his fixation on the meaning of authenticity.

But few critics and scholars, even those who compare Nabokov and Kundera, have attempted to synthesize the writers’ overlapping ideas on translation and rewriting, particularly regarding their use of the French language. This is what I aim to do. My project is not a work of literary criticism, nor does it focus on dissecting the writers’ fiction. In fact, I will barely delve into Nabokov’s novels at all, focusing primarily on the two short works he wrote in French, “Mademoiselle O,” an

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autobiographical story about his Swiss governess who taught him French, and
“Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable” (“Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible”),
an essay commemorating the 100th anniversary of Aleksandr Pushkin’s death. My
analysis of Kundera’s novels will be limited to a demonstration of his idiosyncratic
methods of revising and rewriting his work. In particular, I will be looking at the
French translations of his novels that, between 1985 and 1987, he revised and
considered to be “as authentic” (if not more so) than the Czech originals themselves.9

Vladimir Nabokov, “le célèbre romancier russe”

Nabokov was born in St. Petersburg in April 1899 to wealthy, intellectually
cultivated parents. An early student of English and French governesses (and parents
who spoke a mixture of Russian, French, and English in everyday affairs), young
Nabokov grew up trilingual, even learning to write in English before learning to write
in Russian. He was heir to the literary appreciation of his father, a lawyer and
political figure, whose library boasted over 5,000 books. By the time Nabokov was
ten, he enjoyed the works of Pushkin, Tolstoy, Poe, Flaubert, Rimbaud, and Verlaine,
among others. Soon after, he began experimenting with his own verse, even
publishing his own book of poems in 1916, at age seventeen.10

In March 1917, after Tsar Nicholas II was deposed, the Nabokov family
relocated to the Crimea, and in 1919, to avoid the advancing Red Army, fled to
England. Here, Nabokov enrolled in Cambridge University, originally choosing to

9  Michelle Woods, p.2.
study zoology (he was particularly passionate about butterflies), but eventually pursuing a degree in French and Russian literature. In England, separated forever from the Russia of his childhood, where his family’s property and riches had been confiscated, Nabokov began to “train his memory and his inner eye on the recall of the irrecoverable perfect past” – a technique that would come to dominate his writing.\footnote{Jane Grayson, Vladimir Nabokov, p. 51.} Meanwhile, his parents had moved to Germany, where Nabokov Sr., attempting to defend a liberal politician friend, was mistakenly assassinated by Russian extremists in 1922.

After completing his degree at Cambridge, Nabokov, too, relocated to Berlin, where he began establishing himself as a Russian writer under the pseudonym Sirin (so as not to be confused with his father, also Vladimir Nabokov, who had been the editor of a Russian émigré newspaper in Berlin called Rul’, The Rudder). He married Véra Slonim in 1925, and their son Dmitri was born in 1934. Between 1926 and 1938, Nabokov wrote nine books in Russian, among them Mary, Laughter in the Dark, and The Gift (his last Russian novel, which tells the story of Fyodor, a Russian émigré writer in Berlin, whom Nabokov urges us to not equate with the author).

While living in Germany, Nabokov occasionally traveled to France to deliver lectures. His “aventure française,” as Agnès Edel-Roy calls it, began as early as 1931, when Gleb Struve, a Russian poet and literary historian who had written anonymously about Nabokov’s work in the “long since defunct Paris monthly” Le Mois [Struve’s piece was called “Les ‘Romans-escamotage’” (“The Conjurer Novels”)

\footnote{Jane Grayson, Vladimir Nabokov, p. 51.}
de Vladimir Sirine”], commissioned Nabokov to write a French article for the same publication.12 13 The resulting short text (about three pages), which has gone virtually unnoticed in the major biographies on Nabokov, was called “Les Écrivains et l’époque” (“Writers and the Times”), published in April 1931. In the essay, Nabokov (rather, “Vladimir Sirine”) presents a question of perspective, of evaluating the past and imagining how future generations (“our great grand-nephews”) will imagine the present. Sirine wrestles with the notion that one can never possess “la vérité actuelle,” “the current reality,” since it is impossible to evaluate one’s era save in comparison to later ones.14 This idea of looking back, of attempting to render the past in all of its brightness, would be a continual theme in Nabokov’s work.

It resonates in particular with the writer’s two other French publications, on which I will be focusing: “Mademoiselle O” and “Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable” (“Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible”). The former was written in 1936 and delivered as a lecture in Brussels, Anvers, and finally in Paris, where it caught the attention of Jean Paulhan, who published it in the French periodical Mesures. Shortly after, it underwent a series of self-translations and transformations (from French to English to Russian to English again), making its final appearance in Speak, Memory. The 1937 essay on Pushkin was read in Brussels and Paris and

published the same year in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*. As well as paying homage to Nabokov’s favorite Russian poet, the piece deals with issues of poetic translation which are crucial to an exploration of Nabokov’s translation theory along with his tendency to revisit his work. The same year that *Pouchkine* was published, Nabokov and his wife, who was Jewish, settled in France with their son to escape Nazi influence in Germany. They lived there for three years, mainly staying on the Riviera (Nabokov, Couturier points out, found Paris to be unbearably “grey, inhospitable, and culturally arrogant”).\(^{15}\) In 1940, just weeks before the Nazis entered Paris, the family moved to America, where Nabokov had secured a teaching position.\(^{16}\)

Edel-Roy claims that Nabokov’s three years in France served as nothing more than an intermediary period between the writer’s Russian- and English- language writing careers, since he completed his last Russian novel, *The Gift*, in France and wrote his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, in the bathroom of his one-room Paris apartment, setting his valise on the bidet as a desk.\(^{17}\)\(^{18}\) To be sure, Nabokov only wrote one short story and two essays in French, and reached the peak of his literary success in America. Still, he was proficient in French since early childhood, sprinkled French into most of his work, taught the works of Proust and Flaubert at Cornell University from 1948-1959, and spent his last years in Montreux,  

\(^{15}\) Maurice Couturier, p. 135.  
\(^{16}\) Jane Grayson, Vladimir Nabokov, p. 77.  
\(^{17}\) Agnès Edel-Roy, p. 89.  
a francophone region of Switzerland, where he died in 1977. We cannot discount Nabokov’s intimacy with the French language or culture, nor can we ignore the overwhelming presence of French in his novels. V, narrator of *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, is a Paris-dwelling Russian who admits difficulties writing in English but is fully fluent in French. Humbert Humbert, the pedophilic prose stylist who narrates *Lolita* (which, incidentally, was first published in Paris), comes from a French background and indulges in constant allusions to French language, culture, and literary figures. In *Pnin*, the eponymous Russian professor at fictional Waindell College recalls his time spent among émigré intellectual circles in Paris in the 1920’s.

Therefore, even after adopting English as a primary language of expression, Nabokov continued to pay homage to the French tongue that Mademoiselle, his governess, had taught him as a child in St. Petersburg. The writer’s sojourn in France was not merely a mid-point in his career; it served to solidify his francophone interests and talents.

**Milan Kundera, “avid Francophile”**

Kundera was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia in 1929. The son of a prominent concert pianist, he developed an appreciation for music early in life, and eventually composed his own pieces (which he later rejected as the products of an “immature” phase). In 1947, “repulsed by Nazism,” Kundera, like most of his country’s “intellectual avant-garde,” joined the Czech Communist Party, which seized the
central government a year later. In 1950, he was expelled from the Party for “anti-party activities,” and readmitted in 1956. Throughout the 1950’s, Kundera published various works of poetry, which, like his musical compositions, he would later wish to remove from his bibliography (in Chapter Three, I will discuss the writer’s tendency to assume complete control over the presentation of his work, even decades after its publication).

In 1965, Kundera completed his first novel, *The Joke*, in Prague. Due to Communist censorship, it was not published until 1967. In the following years, the English and French translations of the novel were publicly rejected by Kundera, thus beginning his chronic mistrust of translators which would continue to haunt him as he developed his oeuvre. In August 1968, Soviet armies invaded Czechoslovakia, putting an end to the series of Czech Communist liberalization reforms known as The Prague Spring, in which Kundera was involved. During a Soviet-backed period of “normalization” beginning in 1970, all of the writer’s works were banned in Czechoslovakia, and he was expelled from the Party for the second time, losing his position teaching literature at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague. In the years that followed, Kundera’s wife Véra supported the couple by giving private English lessons (Nabokov’s wife Véra, coincidentally of the same name, had worked as a translator, tour guide, and secretary when her husband was a struggling artist in


When, in 1975, Kundera was invited to lecture at the University of Rennes, he was granted a travel visa to France, where he and his wife soon emigrated. The writer obtained French citizenship in 1981 and still lives in France today.

Throughout the 1960’s and 1970’s, Kundera’s novels had been subject to the whims of countless translators (particularly translating into French and English), all of whom had allegedly “betrayed” his work to some extent. Between 1985 and 1987, he revised the French translations, declaring them to be “as authentic as the Czech originals themselves,” thereby provoking an ongoing argument about the meaning of “authenticity” in his oeuvre. According to Woods, Kundera’s rewriting process “points to pathology rather than contingency,” since he displays a remarkable unwillingness to be candid about the obvious changes made between editions and translations.


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21 Fred Misurella, p. 10.

22 Jane Grayson, *Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 60.

23 Michelle Woods, p. 96.
translator and publisher) used the “authenticated” French versions of four of Kundera’s novels (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Laughable Loves, Farewell Waltz, and Life is Elsewhere*) as templates for brand new “definitive” English translations, which were revised and approved by Kundera, then published under Asher’s imprint at HarperCollins. Thus, by the late 1990’s Kundera had established himself as a Czech writer in France, but also as a French writer, regarding the French versions of his novels as more valid than his originals. In 1984, following the publication of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera told New York Times journalist Jane Kramer, “I’m a Francophile, an avid Francophile.” In an interview with Olga Carlisle a year later, when asked, “Do you feel like an émigré, a Frenchman, a Czech, or just a European without specific nationality?” Kundera answered simply, yet eloquently:

> When the German intellectuals left their country for America in the 1930's, they were certain they would return one day to Germany. They considered their stay abroad temporary. I, on the other hand, have no hope whatever of returning. My stay in France is final, and, therefore, I am not an émigré. France is my only real homeland now.

**Kundera and Nabokov, *Found in Translation***

When comparing writers with similar working patterns, artistic priorities, and thematic focus, there is always a question of influence – in this case, whether Kundera, thirty years Nabokov’s junior, was influenced by the latter. Kundera does,

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in fact, refer to Nabokov in his literary essays, once in *Testaments Betrayed* and twice in *The Art of the Novel*, in a section called *Sixty-three Words*, originally published separately. It had been conceived when Kundera was struggling with “unfaithful” translators, and an editor friend suggested that he develop a “personal dictionary” that would clarify the meanings of his commonly used words (sixty-three, to be exact), for the benefit of future translators and readers.26

The creation of a customized dictionary recalls my epigraph from Nabokov: “If some day I make a dictionary of definitions wanting single words to head them, a cherished entry will be ‘To abridge, expand, or otherwise alter or cause to be altered, for the sake of belated improvement, one’s own writings in translation.’” 27 Whether or not Kundera had been aware of Nabokov’s hypothetical desire to create a personal dictionary, the former references the latter under the headings of two “words.” The first is, “Novelist (and his life),” and Nabokov is quoted as follows: “I hate tampering with the precious lives of great writers, and no biographer will ever catch a glimpse of my private life” (the former part of this assertion will be disproved when we consider Nabokov’s fascination with fictionalized biography in Chapter Two).28 Then, Nabokov is mentioned under Kundera’s entry for “Repetition,” as having noted how Tolstoy, in *Anna Karenina*, repeats the word “house” eight times in six sentences, and that “the repetition is a deliberate tactic on the author’s part,” though not appearing in


27 Vladimir Nabokov, Preface to *Invitation to a Beheading*.

28 Milan Kundera, p. 144.
several French and English versions of the novel (we will consider Kundera’s fixation on literary repetition in Chapter Three). Finally, in Testaments Betrayed Kundera mentions Nabokov one more time, in a section on the difficulties of cross-linguistic, cross-cultural writing:

Vladimir Nabokov lived in Russia for twenty years, twenty-one in Europe (in England, Germany, and France), twenty years in America, sixteen in Switzerland. He adopted English as his writing language, but American themes a bit less thoroughly; there are many Russian characters in his novels. Yet he was unequivocal and insistent on proclaiming himself an American citizen and writer. His body lies at Montreux, in Switzerland. 

Judging by Kundera’s three mentions of Nabokov, it is clear that the former thinks of the latter, and arguably relates to him, on three key issues: an author’s right to have full control over his work (as well as his privacy), the importance of maintaining an author’s style in translation (including unseemly repetition), and the struggle to adopt a new culture, language, and literary identity. These, in turn, are all similarities that I will be discussing in my thesis: the first two in Chapter Three, and the last in Chapter Four.

From significant commonalities (both revered Tolstoy and disliked Dostoevsky) to the purely coincidental (both dedicate their books ‘To Véra’), Nabokov and Kundera have been united in my mind for many years, as in the minds of critics and scholars. But my main focus is on a similarity that surpasses all others: a mutual, enduring interest in translation and revisitation, and what it means to forge a

29 Milan Kundera, p. 146.
literary identity in a country and language that is not one’s own. For Nabokov and Kundera, translation functions not only as a means of forming a readership, but as an artistic process in itself, guiding the way a work develops and changes over time, becoming a mutable depository for the ever-evolving and maturing thoughts of the author. To the extent that both writers maintained control over presenting themselves through their work, their identities were formed –indeed, found – in translation.
Revisitation Across Language and Time: The Case of “Mademoiselle O”

I. Mademoiselle’s Beginnings

In January 1936, Nabokov was asked to give a reading at the Brussels branch of the PEN Club, an organization dedicated to the promotion (and defense) of work by “Poets, Essayists and Novelists.” At this time, he was still living in Berlin, where he had written nine novels – all in Russian and all under the pen name Sirin. Nabokov “dashed off” "Mademoiselle O," a fictionalized memoir about his Swiss governess, in two or three days in preparation for his lecture at the PEN club, and deemed it “second rate” because of how quickly it was completed. But the event proved enormously successful. He read the story again at the Russian Jewish club in Brussels and finally in Paris, at the salon of a certain Madame Ridel, where he was introduced as “Nabokoff-Sirine, le célèbre romancier russe.” Here, on February 25, “Mademoiselle O” made a striking impression on Jean Paulhan, then editor of the French periodical Mesures. Eager to offer his readers the work of a little-known but very talented Eastern European writer, he edited and published the story for the April

15, 1936, issue of his publication32 (See Appendix for a photo of Nabokov with the staff and friends of Mesures). According to Dmitri Nabokov, the author’s son, the story was “hailed as a paragon of French style.” Had Nabokov not been forced to leave France, where he lived starting in 1937, he might have become a “major writer” in the French language.33 But instead, he emigrated to America with his wife and son in 1940.

That same year, “Mademoiselle O” was translated from French into English by Hilda Ward, making its American debut in The Atlantic Monthly in January 1943. Soon after, Nabokov, in loose collaboration with Ward, completed an English translation of the story which he claims "initiated the series" that would become his autobiography. It first appeared in 1951, with fourteen other stories, as a collection entitled Conclusive Evidence. Nabokov translated the volume into Russian as Drugie berega (Other Shores) in 1954, and adapted it back into English in 1967 as Speak, Memory, 34 the last edition of his “linguistically chameleonic autobiography”35 before his death in 1977, and the final resting place of "Mademoiselle O." According to Grayson, Nabokov’s autobiography is his “most audacious venture into the field of auto-translation.” Speak Memory not only reworks Conclusive Evidence, but also

32 Brian Boyd, p. 422.
35 Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, p. 112.
incorporates the changes made in *Drugie Berega*.\(^{36}\) Some scholars have suggested that Nabokov began working on “Mademoiselle O” in English; if this is true, the work underwent even more transformations, both in the author’s notebook and on published pages. To quote Christine Raguet-Bouvart, the version of “Mademoiselle O” that appears in *Speak, Memory* is the “transposition into English of memories in French that occurred in Russia.” \(^{37}\) Nabokov himself wrote of *Speak, Memory*:

> This re-Englishing of a Russian re-version of what had been an English retelling of Russian memories in the first place, proved to be a diabolical task, but some consolation was given me by the thought that such multiple metamorphosis, familiar to butterflies, had not been tried by any human before. \(^{38}\)

At first glance, this passage is an example of Nabokov’s puzzling writing style. More importantly, it explains why *Speak, Memory* is subtitled "An Autobiography Revisited." Not only did Nabokov translate “Mademoiselle O” and his autobiography from French to English to Russian and back to English again, but he genuinely revisited them as well, adapting them not only for different linguistic audiences, but also as a different writer himself at a different point in his exile and career. "Mademoiselle O," which figures so importantly in his autobiography, serves as a prime illustration of Nabokov’s tendency to revisit, guiding the evolution of his work over time.

In the pages that follow, I will compare the original French version of

\(^{36}\) Jane Grayson, *Nabokov Translated*, p. 11.


\(^{38}\) Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 12.
"Mademoiselle O" (written in 1936 for a French audience) with the story as it appeared in English thirty years later, in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*. My goal is to explore how, while the basic themes of "Mademoiselle O" remain the same across barriers of language and time, there are significant differences in word choice that allow us to chart the evolution of the work over the thirty years between its first and final editions. Ultimately, I hope to understand why the story served as the inspiration and eventual “cornerstone” of Nabokov’s autobiography, which, like “Mademoiselle O,” would undergo a series of linguistic and thematic alterations. I will be relying heavily on Adam Thirlwell’s English translation of the original French text, using my own translations only when indicated.

Cécile Miauton, dubbed “Mademoiselle O” and more simply “Mademoiselle,” was the Nabokov family’s Swiss governess, hired to school the children in French. “During the nineteenth century there probably did not exist a single noble family throughout Russia which did not have its French governess, its fraülein or its Miss Jones,” Nabokov explains.39 Valued for their native mastery of languages such as French, German, and English, women like Mademoiselle stayed with Russian families for several years, and sometimes even decades. Though relatively integrated into the family, they often felt out of place, as their employers provided them with a life completely foreign to their own. Mademoiselle arrived in Russia in the winter of 1905, when Nabokov was six years old. Overweight and clumsy, she was an object of ridicule for young Vladimir and his brother. In both versions of his memoir, Nabokov

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describes Mademoiselle's unattractive physique, her lack of intellectual depth, and her inability to fit into the Russian-speaking, politically charged Nabokov household. He describes Mademoiselle's passive aggressiveness, her ever-changing sense of nostalgia for Switzerland, and her linguistic displacement, particularly her misuse of the Russian word "gdye," meaning "where." Still, Mademoiselle's story is imbued with a remarkable tenderness for her, or at least for the impact of her French ways on Nabokov's literary development. It is the way this tenderness is evoked, and how Nabokov reflects on Mademoiselle's importance in his life, that gives rise to the most dramatic distinctions between the French and English versions of the text.

II. O: The Name

In both versions, Mademoiselle arrives in Russia on a stormy snowy evening. Nabokov as narrator imagines how she must have felt upon getting off at the little country train station and clumsily mounting the sleigh that was sent for her. From this point on, his imaginary view of Mademoiselle begins to fuse with her own speech. While riding through the Russian woods, she perceives what she would later call “the steppe” (“le steppe”), and, prone to hyperbole, describes having felt frozen “to the center of her brain” (in the original French text, Mademoiselle speaks the words herself: “transie jusqu’aux moelles,” translated by Thirlwell as “frozen to the very marrow of my bones”). 40 In both texts, Nabokov imagines a bright moon to have illuminated Mademoiselle’s journey. In the English version, the moon is an

“incredibly clear disc that goes so well with Russian lusty frosts”; in the French, the “very large, very clear and completely round” moon embodies “the ideal aspect of Mademoiselle O’s name.” In fact, the French version continues to describe Mademoiselle’s name while the English does not. We learn that “O” is neither representative of her real name, Cécile Miauton, nor the abbreviation of a surname such as “Olivier,” “Orose,” or even “Oudinet.” Rather, “Mademoiselle O” is the “name itself,” a “round and naked name which, written down, seems to be off balance without a full stop to prop it up; a wheel that has come off and which remains upright, about to crash; an open mouth; a world; an apple; a lake.” 41 Nabokov explains that Mademoiselle did, in fact, grow up near a lake in Switzerland. By giving him and his brother the “power to speak her language,” she effectively gave them the means to manipulate her name and tease her with alliterative adaptations of it. A reader with knowledge of French pronunciation knows that the Nabokov boys derived “Mademoiselle O” from the middle sound of her name, Miauton (pronounced Mee-O-Tong – the latter part nasal). But in the original French text, in which Mademoiselle is “very stout, completely round like her name,” the moniker “O” is more than a childish rendering of Miauton. It is resonant of the lakes of her childhood, her physical roundness, and her stately Larousse dictionary, in which the first entry under “O” is the marquis d’O, who young Nabokov imagines to be Mademoiselle’s distant relative. In the French text, Mademoiselle’s identity – indeed, her essence -- is tightly wrapped in her name. But in the English version, her name is not discussed, because

it does not exist. Only in his introduction to *Speak, Memory* does Nabokov reveal that Mademoiselle’s section is from the original story entitled “Mademoiselle O.” In the text itself, Mademoiselle appears not under this title, but simply under a chapter heading – “5”. And in the text, she is never called “Mademoiselle O” but simply “Mademoiselle,” a title that can refer to any woman. The elimination of her name in *Speak, Memory* is just one of many examples of how the English text undermines Mademoiselle’s identity, making her seem like a stranger not only to the reader, but to the text itself.

**III. “Giddy-eh” – A Lost Identity**

First, let us focus on Mademoiselle’s most explicit form of exile – linguistic. As mentioned in both versions, the only word she knows upon arrival in Russia is “gdye,” meaning “where,” which she pronounces wrong as “giddy-eh,” the correct pronunciation being “gdye” with “e” as in “yet.” “Uttered by her like the raucous cry of some bird,” Nabokov explains in the English text, “[the word] accumulated such interrogatory force that it sufficed for all her needs. ‘Giddy-eh? Giddy-eh?’ she would wail, not only to find out her whereabouts but also to express supreme misery: the fact that she was a stranger, shipwrecked, penniless, ailing, in search of the blessed land where at last she would be understood.” 42 In the original French text, Nabokov’s account of Mademoiselle’s use of “gdye” is virtually identical to that which appears in *Speak, Memory*, except for minute changes in the last part: “...that she was foreign, shipwrecked, without resources, and that she was searching for the Eldorado where at

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42 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 98.
last she would be comprehended.” Whether referring to “Eldorado” or a “blessed land,” Nabokov means, in both versions, to convey that neither of these ideal places exists for poor Mademoiselle, who will never be truly “understood.” She remains not only ignorant of the Russian language, but perpetually lodged in a sense of exile from an imaginary homeland. Nabokov reflects on a visit he paid to Mademoiselle in Switzerland when he was an adult. “She talked of her life in Russia so warmly that one might have believed she had lost her own homeland,” and considered Switzerland strange and unwelcoming. The print of the Chateau de Chillon, a Swiss castle, which she had kept in her room throughout her years in Russia, had been replaced by the image of a “garish [Russian] troika.” Each is a kitschy remnant of life in either place – an indication that Mademoiselle’s homeland, or her idea of it, has disappeared to the extent that it is flexible to change at will, as if she can only feel at home in a place where she is not. Nabokov notes that in Switzerland, Mademoiselle and other former governesses, all forced to leave Russia after the revolution, commiserate in a shared sense of exile, even though they have returned to the home for which they pined while in Russia. “They had invented another country, - the past, - and it was truly upsetting, this posthumous love for Russia which they hardly knew.” If Mademoiselle is unable to find an “Eldorado” or “blessed land” where she will finally be understood, it is because she is lodged in a sense of never-ending exile from a

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45 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 115.

homeland that does not exist, against which the “raucous cry” of “gdye” is strongly resonant.

No exploration of Nabokov’s literal revisit to Mademoiselle would be complete without a look at *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov’s first novel written in English (1941), where Mademoiselle appeared even before she appeared in *Speak, Memory*. To write creatively in any capacity is to draw on one’s own experiences, using memory as a tool of artistic mise-en-scène. But, as Grayson explains, “What is extremely rare is for an author to present his personal experience – the same personal experience – to his public in both forms: as fiction and as autobiography.” ⁴⁷ This overlapping phenomenon notably occurs in *Sebastian Knight*, whose title character’s life coincides at several points with the writer’s own (birth year, childhood wealth and experiences, Cambridge education, etc.), but who is not to be viewed as a reflection of Nabokov. Near the beginning of the novel, V, Sebastian’s half brother who is writing a biography of the latter, goes to Switzerland “in order to find the old Swiss lady who had been first Sebastian’s governess, then mine.” ⁴⁸ The resulting interaction with Mademoiselle and her coterie of former governesses (together, “they ‘lived in their past,’”) almost directly mirrors the episode that appears in “Mademoiselle O” and later in *Speak, Memory*:

> How often have I heard Mademoiselle bemoan her exile, complain of being slighted and misunderstood, and yearn for her fair native land; but when these poor wandering souls came home, they found themselves complete strangers

⁴⁷ Jane Grayson, *Nabokov Translated*, p. 156.

in a changed country, so that by a queer trick of sentiment – Russia (which to them had really been an unknown abyss, remotely rumbling beyond a lamplit corner of a study back-room with family photography in mother-of-pearl frames and a water-color view of Chillon castle), unknown Russia now took on the aspect of a lost paradise, a vast, vague but retrospectively friendly place, peopled with wistful fancies.49

V has come to inform Mademoiselle about Sebastian’s death and to probe her for recollections of Sebastian’s childhood. But when the old woman starts reminiscing about “my poor little Sebastian,” recounting an instance in which the young boy, calling her “Zelle,” had expressed how grateful he was to have her, V grows uneasy. He detects in Mademoiselle’s memories an element of insincerity; a romanticism of Sebastian’s childhood akin to her romanticism of Russia. Upon leaving, V remarks that she had not “asked one single thing about Sebastian’s later life, not a single question about the way he had died, nothing.” 50 Thus, in Sebastian Knight, Nabokov takes Mademoiselle’s rosy view of the past (we see it in “Mademoiselle O” and Speak, Memory as well) to a new extreme. In “Zelle” he creates a fictional counterpart to his own Swiss governess, revisiting the object of his nostalgia twenty years before revisiting her again in Speak, Memory.

But let us now return to a comparison of the French “Mademoiselle O” and Speak, Memory, where the word “gdye” is heavily symbolic of Mademoiselle’s exile, and where the main difference between the texts is the word’s pronunciation. In the English, Nabokov stresses Mademoiselle’s faulty pronunciation: “Giddy-eh, Giddy-eh,” which is different from “gdye,” the word’s proper transliteration. In this sense,

the text embodies Mademoiselle’s sense of linguistic displacement both conceptually and visually. But in the French, Mademoiselle’s faulty pronunciation is not cited, nor is the word spelled any differently than in its initial appearance. It is “gdié” when first mentioned by Nabokov, and it is “gdié” coming out of Mademoiselle’s disoriented mouth. Indeed, “Eldorado” and “blessed land” have essentially the same meanings in the English and French versions. But “giddy-eh” (compared with “gdye”) and “gdié” (compared with “gdié”) are not. Nabokov’s isolation of Mademoiselle’s speech in the English text as not only incorrect but misspelled is heavily symbolic of the way that Mademoiselle’s evolving position of exile, both in Nabokov’s mind and on the page, is highlighted across a comparison of the French and English texts. In the original, Mademoiselle is portrayed as clumsy, neurotic, and culturally distraught. But her words – even those which she uses to express great discomfort – are still hers, because they are French. Her quotations are rendered in the language in which they were originally uttered.

The importance of this is clear when we examine the French text alongside its English translation. When quoting Mademoiselle in Speak, Memory, Nabokov alternately translates the quotations in full, provides them in French only, or gives the French with its English translation. Consider, for example, one of Mademoiselle’s first direct quotes in the French text – a reflection on her relationship with Nabokov and his brother: “Ah, l’on s’aimait bien!” (in Thirlwell’s translation, “Ah, we loved each other so much”). In Speak, Memory, the phrase is rendered as: “‘Ah, she sighed,
‘comme on s’aimait – didn’t we love each other!’” 51 Rendered in French in the French text, Mademoiselle’s words blend into the narrative and are taken for granted. In the English, however, her French words are relegated to italics and therefore isolated from the page and subjected to ironic question. For instance, in the French text Mademoiselle recalls having punished the Nabokov boys for running away: “‘Ah, quelle fessée…’ disait elle à la fin, les yeux au ciel, et elle passait à d’autres souvenirs” (in Thirlwell’s translation, “‘Ah, what a spanking…’ she would finally say, her eyes to heaven, and pass on to other memories’”). 52 53 In the English text, Nabokov completes Mademoiselle’s original statement: “Ah, la fessée que je vous ai flanquée – My, what a spanking I gave you!” 54 That her words are given in a foreign language emphasizes not only Mademoiselle’s foreignness to Russia, where the Nabokov boys tease her to tears, but also her foreignness to the text, where her words are visually isolated from the page and require a translation in order to be understood.

The effect is even stronger when the quotation is given solely in French in Speak, Memory. Consider Mademoiselle’s sarcastic, self-deprecating remark, upon receiving a smile from a neighbor at the dinner table: “‘Excusez-moi, je souriais à mes tristes pensées’” 55 Again, the French is in italics, making it easy to distinguish its incongruity with the rest of the text. But this time it is not translated. If the reader

51 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 107.
54 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 107.
55 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 112.
knows French, she knows that Mademoiselle is saying, “Excuse me, I’m only smiling at my sad thoughts.” It is not clear whether Nabokov relies on his reader to understand the phrase, or whether he intends the quotation to stand out as incomprehensible. Either way, the mere presence of Mademoiselle’s French, though seemingly meant to reaffirm her identity, instead accentuates her strangeness. Asanguished as she may be in the French text, at least she is at home in her language, which in Nabokov’s mind defines her being. But in the English text, she is lost even on this level. To quote Raguet-Bouvart, the “English re-writing of Franco-Russian memories in English” does not arrive without “an acute sense of loss – that of a period of life attached to a language.” 56 By giving Mademoiselle a voice in Speak, Memory, Nabokov essentially takes it away. Mademoiselle is continually unable, across the two languages and thirty years that separate the French and English text, to reach the “Eldorado” or “blessed land” where “at last she would be understood.” The crucial difference is that the French text merely describes this limbo, while the English text embodies it.

IV. A Francophone Childhood

Still, “Mademoiselle’s French was divine.” In both versions of the text, Nabokov counters her unfavorable qualities with the loveliness of her clear, sonorous voice, concluding, “Thus, it is with sadness that now I make out the cruel suffering which Mademoiselle must have felt hearing this voice of a nightingale lost in vain as

56 Christine Raguet-Bouvart, p. 500, translation mine.
it left her elephantine body.” 57 And in English: “This is why it makes me so sad to imagine now the anguish Mademoiselle must have felt at seeing how lost, how little valued was the nightingale voice that came from her elephantine body. ”58 These sentiments are almost identical. They show that, though she is capable of fine, delicate speech, Mademoiselle’s insecurities and clumsiness hamper her ability to be heard. The voice of a nightingale dwells within her soul, but her corpulence – both physical and mental – causes it to be lost and ineffectual. It is the tension between the purity of her words and the ungainliness of her being that seems to propel Nabokov’s ongoing investigation of Mademoiselle, and his continual interest in her role in his life.

As is to be expected, Nabokov’s relationship with French is more aptly defined and developed in the original text than in its English counterpart. This is especially evident in the opening lines of each version, in which Nabokov discusses his motives for writing about Mademoiselle. First, he introduces a concern that is central to understanding his creative process -- a tendency to furnish fictional characters with elements from his past, allowing them to “pine away in the artificial world” where he places them. In rendering aspects of his past creatively, Nabokov believes that he undermines their actual existence. In the English text, he writes: “The man in me revolts against the fictionist, and here is my desperate attempt to save

58 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 114.
what is left of poor Mademoiselle.” 59 Thus, rescuing Mademoiselle from the “artificial world” of his writing is the professed goal of the story (indeed, he had already inserted her into the fictional world of Sebastian Knight). But in the French text, Nabokov’s expressed reason for writing is heavily tied to his appreciation for French: "The idea came to me of saving what remains of this image [Mademoiselle], particularly since I have always had the desire to revive for my own pleasure, and also as a sign of posthumous gratitude, the exact inflection which the French language gave to my life in Russia.” 60

Likewise, only in the French text does Nabokov express his immense love for the French language, and his hesitation in grappling with its nuances:

Since I have hardly ever lived in a country where this language [French] might be spoken, I have lost the habit of it, so that it is an unheard-of task, an exhausting labor simply to seize hold of the moderately precise words which clamor to clothe my thought. 61

And shortly after,

I feel a horrible sense of suffocation, accompanied by a fear of ruining things, that is to say of contenting myself with terms I have had the luck to find in passing - instead of searching with love for the radiant word that dies waiting behind the mist, the indistinct, the not-quite in which my thought lingers. 62

Both passages, in which Nabokov reveals his limited ability to mold French words to his liking, display the writer’s intended irony, as they themselves have been written beautifully. Even if Nabokov did find his words merely in passing (which is doubtful),

59 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 95.
they seem to fit his purposes ideally. But in the English translation, these excerpts – among the most enjoyable in the story - are gone. Raguet-Bouvart believes that they are missing because Nabokov could not have described his linguistic hardship in French while manipulating yet another language – English. But I find that the omission is more a question of audience than of technique. The original “Mademoiselle O,” prepared for a French audience and published in a Parisian periodical, is understandably sprinkled with frequent reminders of Nabokov’s devotion to, and difficulty with, the French language, whereas the English version, prepared for an American audience, is not.

Moreover, in the French “Mademoiselle O,” Nabokov not only lauds Mademoiselle’s “divine French,” but also provides his listeners and readers with a history of the French language in Russia, so they might better understand his background. When Nabokov was growing up in the early 20th century, wealthy Russian children learned French not only from governesses such as Mademoiselle, but from a well-established tradition that was passed “directly from father to son.” French had been spoken among the Russian nobility since the reign of Catherine the Great (1762 to 1796), who kept a close correspondence with Voltaire and revered the work of French Enlightenment thinkers. Even into the 19th century, “Russian lacked

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63 Christine Raguet-Bouvart, p. 500.
the ease, the elegance, and the naturalness of French conversational style,” 66 and Russian writers endeavored (in Pushkin’s case, successfully) to close the gap between spoken and written Russian. In Moscow and St. Petersburg, French words entered Russian conversation, Russian words entered French conversation, and the verse of French poets - from lyrical Lamartine to symbolist Verlaine - became extremely popular.

As we see in “Mademoiselle O,” Mademoiselle is partial to Corneille and Racine, famous 17th century French dramatists, and reads their plays aloud with Nabokov. But he recalls these writers with lasting contempt, asserting: “I would not give one sonnet by Ronsard for all their drama.” Nabokov explains, “The role of the French nurse more concerned the form than the substance itself, grammar rather than Literature, that is to say it remained removed from the Franco-Russian tradition of which I have just spoken.” 67 Though Mademoiselle teaches her young student to read Corneille and Racine, she is detached from the burgeoning tradition of French symbolism that captivates Nabokov in the form of Verlaine and Mallarmé. In the version of “Mademoiselle O” that appears in Speak, Memory, Nabokov writes, “My father’s library, not her limited lore, taught me to appreciate authentic poetry.” 68 But only in the French do we get an historical perspective on what Nabokov calls the “Franco-Russian tradition” and a detailed account of young Vladimir’s tastes in

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68 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 113.
French poetry. According to Beaujour, Nabokov’s choice of a “Francophone and Francophile” element of his childhood for his first venture into creative prose in French was a “logical one,” since it allowed him to “refocus on the essentially polyglot nature of his Russian childhood,” something not emphasized in his novels completed in Berlin. As a result, the composition of “Mademoiselle O” in French aided the writer in moving “toward a redefinition of himself which would recognize the centrality of the polylinguistic matrix of his creativity.” 69 Mademoiselle’s story was not merely a memoir; it was a crucial stepping stone to Nabokov’s career as a polyglot artist who would reminisce not only in Russian and French, but also in English.

Focusing on the importance of French in Russia and in his personal life, it is clear that Nabokov tailored the first edition of “Mademoiselle O” for its original francophone audience. Still, Mademoiselle’s changing significance across the two versions of the text is the result of more than a consideration of linguistic audience. It is also indicative of the ways that Nabokov’s views of his childhood governess and her role in his creative and personal life evolved over the thirty years between the story’s French and English editions as Nabokov evolved as a writer – and as a person. This is reflected in how he revisited his work not only in terms of language, but also in terms of content.

69 Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, p. 90.
V. An Out-of-Text Experience

Evident in the title of his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov is heavily preoccupied with the expression of memory in art, particularly his capacity to relive and recreate his Russian childhood through writing. As a memoir, “Mademoiselle O” functions to portray the events of the author’s past. But it is also a work of fiction, suggesting that Mademoiselle is just as much a product of Nabokov’s imagination as a real component of his memory. It is useful to note that Nabokov considered memoir “a literary approach to my own past.” 70 Thus, the “blur,” to use Thirlwell’s word, of autobiography and fiction, is crucial to understanding “Mademoiselle O” and the entirety of *Speak, Memory*. Taking this into account, we might better appreciate two peculiar metafictional incidents that crop up in both versions of Mademoiselle’s story, in which Nabokov breaks character and emerges not as the narrator, but as the author of the text, albeit as a fictional authorial persona. In both cases, he situates himself in the present – the time in which he is writing – and contrasts it with the timeline of the story – his Russian childhood. Since there are thirty years between the French “Mademoiselle O” and its English edition in *Speak, Memory*, in the former version Nabokov-as-writer appears about thirty-two years after the events of the story take place (it was written in 1937; Mademoiselle became Nabokov’s governess when he was six years old, in 1905). In the latter version, he appears sixty years after the childhood events conveyed in the story.

First, let us examine the episode as it appears in the French text, in connection with a reminiscence of the Nabokov home:

The anguish that I feel now when I remember the beautiful house where I lived as a child has nothing to do with those political events which, to use a journalistic cliché, have overturned my country. I find nothing but amusement in these political events. It is on a whole other level and according to a turn of mind which is not concerned with the accidents of history that my memory moves and rests. No, I do not sigh the sigh of an exile in relation to his first fervor. If even today I were the peaceable citizen of a Russia which allowed me to follow my vocation in complete liberty, with the same anguish I would remember the first form, the true image of the things and beings growing old around me.\footnote{Vladimir Nabokov, “Mademoiselle O,” trans. Adam Thirlwell, pp. 7-8, emphases mine.}

Here, Nabokov thinks critically about his exile, acknowledging the “political events” (the Revolutions of 1917) that drove him from his country, but assuring the reader that they have not colored his art as much as one might expect. His interaction with the past as it appears in “Mademoiselle O” is far beyond a consideration of “the accidents of history.” Instead, it concerns the realm of emotion, inexplicably derived and expressed through the vacillations of memory. Nabokov’s account of Mademoiselle is not the memoir of an artist ravaged by history. It is the memoir of an artist driven by the vicissitudes of life as they would exist for him anywhere. He is in exile, but the pathos that pervades his art is a reflection of his continual mode of intuition – not of his estrangement from home.

Taking into account the metafictional episode as seen in the original “Mademoiselle O” above, let us consider the passage that mirrors it in \textit{Speak},
Memory. It appears when Nabokov describes the way, as a child, he imagined Mademoiselle’s journey from the train station:

Very lovely, very lonesome. But what am I doing in this stereoscopic dreamland? How did I get here? Somehow, the two sleighs have slipped away, leaving behind a passportless spy standing on the blue-white road in his New England snowboots and stormcoat. The vibration in my ears is no longer their receding bells, but only my old blood singing. All is still, spellbound, enthralled by the moon, fancy’s rear-vision mirror. The snow is real, though, and as I bend to it and scoop up a handful, sixty years crumble to glittering frost-dust between my fingers.\(^72\)

The “two sleighs” of Mademoiselle’s imagined trip home, which Nabokov imagined first as a child, then while writing “Mademoiselle O,” and finally while re-working the story in Speak, Memory, have left him – the real (but fictionalized) Nabokov – behind. Mademoiselle’s story has evaporated to reveal a writer who is exiled in America but also in his own text, where the image of a “passportless spy” implies a character who remembers and conveys the past, but undercover. If Nabokov were to really return to the Russia of his boyhood, he would face imprisonment or death. The scene culminates in a spellbinding image of “fancy’s rear-vision mirror,” in which Nabokov bends down and allows sixty years to “crumble in glittering frost-dust between [his] fingers.” In the French text, the character-breaking episode revolves mainly around Nabokov’s desire to be considered an artist rather than a displaced person. But in the English, he reveals himself as an exile to his own memoir, sifting through the “glittering frost-dust” of the forever-lost past from a post distinctly outside the story. When Nabokov stands back to view his evaluation of the past,

\(^72\) Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, pp. 99-100, emphases mine.
everything seems artificial. Only the snow, with which he metaphorically measures the passage of time, is truly “real.”

As soon as Nabokov returns to his role as narrator, he summons his memory to reconstruct the mundane details of the house where Mademoiselle was first received – the kerosene lamp, the staircase, the drawing room, etc., echoing Grayson’s assertion that, “in rewriting an autobiography the writer can refer not only to the first written expression of his reminiscences, but to hitherto unformulated memories, his own and other people’s. A new version furnishes the opportunity to… swell that narrative with more information and more remembered detail.”  

Thirlwell sees Nabokov’s attention to “real and remembered snow” in Speak, Memory as “emblematic of his style,” since it reflects his tendency to take complete control of the narrative – to “momentarily shift the reader into a suddenly irrational, inexplicable landscape.”  To be sure, the snow scene seems “suddenly irrational” and “inexplicable” next to the banal description of the drawing room, which brings the focus away from doubt and back to a comfortable place where memory is not to be questioned, only heeded. But I would argue that Nabokov’s episode with the “frost-dust” of memory is less indicative of his “style,” and more so of the way his understanding of the past and of his place in it can be seen evolving from the French original of “Mademoiselle O” to its English version in Speak, Memory. In the former, he fixates on the role (or lack thereof) of “exile” in his craft. In the latter, he dwells on

73 Jane Grayson, Nabokov Translated, p. 140.
74 Adam Thirlwell, Miss Hebert (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007), p. 420.
the increasing distance between his present self and the golden years of his privileged Russian childhood – the real exile that continues to plague him. Reduced to the status of a “passportless spy,” Nabokov realizes that he is no longer authorized to access his past, and that to reminisce about Russia is to retreat into a “stereoscopic dreamland,” a three-dimensional yet clearly synthetic realm that should be left behind. Even if his artistic impulse is to immerse himself in past events, he must resist becoming obsessed with them the point of no return, as is Mademoiselle, whose “perpetual exile” makes her a pitiable character. It is clear that Nabokov attempts to avoid Mademoiselle’s fate by grappling with her nostalgic misery in his work. He might not be able to “salvage” his governess from fiction, but he can certainly rescue himself. Thus, Mademoiselle represents Nabokov’s quest to imagine and inhabit the past (which we will see in the next chapter), and his simultaneous dedication to remain grounded in the present reality – in the “réalité actuelle” that is so elusive.

VI. Home in Sadness; Home in Art

In the original “Mademoiselle O,” Nabokov has the “strange sensation of having invented [Mademoiselle] in every particular, as entirely as other characters who pass through my books. Did she truly live? No, now that I think about it, she never lived. But from now on she is real, since I have created her…” 75 In Speak, Memory, he shares his “desperate attempt to save what is left of poor Mademoiselle” from the “artificial world” of her story. It would be best to say that Mademoiselle is a fictionalized version of her real self, based deeply in reality but strongly influenced

by Nabokov’s literary imagination. But only in the English version does Nabokov move beyond a preoccupation with Mademoiselle’s realness, focusing instead on her very real role in his life. Mainly, he wonders whether, in the time he knew Mademoiselle, he “had not kept utterly missing something in her that was far more she than her chins or her ways or even her French… something, in short, that I could appreciate only after the things and beings that I had most loved in the security of my childhood had been turned to ashes or shot through the heart.” Only after Nabokov’s belongings were burned by Bolshevik revolutionaries and his father was murdered by a bullet through the heart could he begin to conceptualize the significance Mademoiselle had lent to his privileged childhood.

Whether or not the man in Nabokov has prevailed over the artist, one thing is certain. Only as far away from his childhood as possible can he appreciate the impact that Mademoiselle had on his life, and this is reflected most accurately in Chapter Five of *Speak, Memory* – the last publication of “Mademoiselle O.” Raguet-Bouvart argues that by transforming “Mademoiselle O” from French to English Nabokov passes from “an intimate endeavor in French - the exhumation of a part of himself – to a public endeavor in English” – a piece prepared not for a small lecture audience or the readers of *Mesures*, but as part of a unified autobiography for a mass-market American audience. In the French “Mademoiselle O,” Nabokov organizes fragments of his past in a type of “internal checks and balances,” while the English version is a more developed work in which the style, diction, and imagery are more striking and

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76 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 117.
refined.  If the French “Mademoiselle O” consists of intimate, raw introspection, the English version seems more calculated - and for good reason, since it was written thirty years after the former. Along these lines, Grayson argues that “[Nabokov’s] intention [in *Speak, Memory*] is to convey a representative ‘memory-picture’ rather than incidental reminiscences.” In doing so, he “[assumes] more often the distance of adult judgment,” tending to “analyze, to appraise, and not merely to describe.” Thus, in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov focuses less on Mademoiselle’s particular actions and quirks, and more on her evolving importance in his life.

In order to understand the significance of Mademoiselle O – the character and the work - we have unearthed several disparities between the French and English versions of her story, as well as a number of parallels. I would like to close Chapter One with a look at one lasting similarity. At the end of both texts, Nabokov offers a closing reflection on Mademoiselle and her misery. “Unhappiness was for her a natural element, whose changes in depth gave her the sensation of movement, of doing something, of living, finally” (in the English, “native element” is used instead of “natural element”). If Mademoiselle is unable to find the “promised land” or “Eldorado” where she will be “truly understood,” and feels a nostalgic hunger for the Russia in which she was unhappy, she finds a home in sadness, sheltering herself in its familiarity – indeed, nativeness. And if she finds a home in sadness, Nabokov

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77 Christine Raguet-Bouvart, p. 501, translations mine.
78 Jane Grayson, *Nabokov Translated*, p. 130.
80 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 117.
forge[d] one in his writing, becoming a “passportless spy” only when he has stepped outside the confines of the fiction.

Throughout his career Nabokov disapproved of the term “émigré author.” In a Russian émigré journal called *Opredeleniia (Definitions or Determinations)* published in New York in 1940, he wrote, “Any genuine writer emigrates into his art and abides there” 81 Thirty years later, echoing his metafictional episode in “Mademoiselle O” in an interview with Alfred Appel, Jr., he would confirm this. “I have always maintained, even as a schoolboy in Russia, that the nationality of a worthwhile writer is of secondary importance. The writer’s art is his real passport.” 82 Through his art, Nabokov is able to revisit, and also to come to terms with, his lost childhood.


In Pursuit of Plausibility: Nabokov as Translator

I. “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible”

In 1937, a bestselling Hungarian writer was scheduled to give a reading in Paris. When she suddenly fell ill, Nabokov, still living in Berlin, was asked to speak in her place. In a 1966 interview with Alfred Appel, Jr., who had been one of his students at Cornell in 1954, Nabokov revealed that he remembered the title of the writer’s book – *La Rue du Chat qui Pêche* – *(Street of the Fishing Cat,* named after the shortest street in Paris) – but not her name (in fact, she was Jolán Földes, also known as Yolanda Foldes).\(^83\) Nabokov had already prepared a piece to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of Pushkin’s death, and had delivered it on January 21 in Brussels at the Palais des Beaux-Arts (See Appendix for the notice that was circulated). Shortly after, he left for Paris to deliver the lecture once again in Ms. Földes’ place. Having left Germany behind forever, Nabokov would remain in Paris until 1940, when he would flee with his wife and son to America.\(^84\)

\(^{83}\) Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, p. 86.

\(^{84}\) Brian Boyd, p. 432.
Though Nabokov’s friends tried to attract a crowd of Pushkin enthusiasts to his last-minute reading, the salon was mainly attended by Hungarians, some of whom even mistook Nabokov for Foldes’ husband and came rushing to him with words of sympathy regarding her sudden illness. Strangely, James Joyce was among the attendees, sitting with “arms folded and glasses glinting.” 85 Thirlwell views Joyce’s presence as reassuring evidence of “history coming up with thematic links” on its own, “trying to behave Nabokovianly” by fitting itself into an organized motif of the serendipitous meetings of literary figures 86 (Joyce knew nothing of Nabokov; in the decades to follow, both would be considered unsurpassable gems of their era). When the writers finally met over dinner in February of 1939, however, Nabokov “did not sparkle” before Joyce, and remembered the event as an evening of friendly conversation – nothing less, nothing more.87

The French essay that Nabokov read twice in January 1937 was entitled “Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable.” 88 It would later be published in the March 1, 1937, issue of La Nouvelle Revue Française, and translated by Dmitri Nabokov as “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible” for The New York Review of Books in 1988.89 First and foremost, Nabokov prepared Pouchkine (as we will call it)

85 Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p. 86.
86 Adam Thirlwell, Miss Hébert, p. 401.
87 Brian Boyd, p. 504.
to commemorate Pushkin’s literary legacy and to honor the poet on the anniversary of his premature death in a duel in 1837. But the essay serves more as a critique of the way that Pushkin was received in Russian popular society than as a straightforward elegy. Not until the last few pages (perhaps the last twenty minutes of a lecture that must have lasted an hour and a half) does Nabokov delve into his efforts to translate Pushkin’s verse into French – an interest that spurred his ten-year’s work on a translation of *Eugene Onegin* into English that would be published in 1964.  

II. The Biographer’s Challenge

Before embarking on the odyssey of translation, Nabokov engages his listener (in our case, reader) with a strange anecdote. It is about a man who, after falling from a horse in the prime of his youth, develops the sensation of “une fausse vieillesse,” a false old age. Not yet forty, he imagines having lived in centuries past, and speaks to Nabokov about his grandfather’s childhood, the seizure of Sebastopol, and his relations with Napoleon. “If he is still alive, my maniac,” Nabokov writes, “he must be quite far away, among the Normans, maybe, or even -- who knows -- in the arms of Cleopatra.”  

Nabokov’s main regret is that his “maniac” lacks the creative and intellectual fodder to maximize the experience of his strange dementia: “I know nothing stranger than the spectacle of a mania that by its very nature seems to provoke an entire world of knowledge, inspiration, and perceptiveness, but is instead

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90 In the pages that follow, I quote both the French text and Dmitri Nabokov’s rendition, depending on which translation of particular passages (mine or his) I find to be most faithful to the original. Therefore, all translations not attributed to Dmitri Nabokov are mine, taken from the French text, “Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable.”

forced to rotate in an empty head.” 92

It is this story – of one suffering from an uninspired psychotic condition – that strikes Nabokov each time he opens a “biographie romancée,” a genre of popular writing that attempts to chronicle the lives of great men in a speculative, misinformed manner (similar, perhaps, to the type of poorly written celebrity biographies that flood the shelves today). Nabokov walks us through the steps of writing a “biographie romancée,” which Dmitri translates as “fictionalized biography.” First, the biographer sorts through the great man’s correspondence to glean details about his life, “and as his best is generally a bit worse than the worst of the author about whom he writes, the latter’s life is fatally falsified, even if the facts are truthful.” 93 With “a Russian cigarette in the corner of his mouth, [the author] speaks freely about Tolstoy’s bare feet, Turgenev’s silvery pallor, Dostoevsky’s chains, building up to Pushkin’s love affairs,” as if he knew these men personally, not unlike the “maniac” who imagines himself conspiring with Napoleon. 94 Nabokov continues to disparage the saccharine material of “fictionalized” biographies, claiming that these accounts are all that middle-class Russians know of Pushkin, the nation’s greatest poet. The “biographies” are no better, in fact, than daily calendars whose pages are decorated with “the date of a battle, a poetic verse, an idiotic proverb” – among them extracts from Pushkin’s poetry, which Nabokov fears the average reader uses to “perfect his literary education.” Even more, those who set Pushkin’s verse to music are not only

misinformed but “criminal”; “truly these are cases in which the law should interfere.”95 If Nabokov seems to be overreacting here, it is because he resents the reception of literature in bastardized forms such as popular, non-academic reading materials and music. Pushkin should be read and enjoyed in one form only – his original verse – and its enjoyment should be guided by learned instruction.

III. “Biographie Romancée,” Revisited

But the question remains: “Is it possible to imagine in all reality the life of another; to revive it in oneself and put it intact on paper?” 96 If by merely thinking of how to describe one’s life and legacy the writer essentially corrupts the pursuit, one cannot realistically conceive of representing another with any degree of authenticity. As Nabokov puts it, “only the ‘plausible,’ and not the ‘real’” can be conveyed. This phrase is the source of the essay’s title, and also an indication that the lecture is not about Pushkin himself as much as it is about the nature of art, and of communicating what appears to be “truth” in words. Also, it is reminiscent of Nabokov’s idea as expressed in Mademoiselle’s story; that in rendering an aspect of reality artistically, one undermines its realness and essentially loses it, just as Nabokov’s characters (Mademoiselle especially) lose their realness by being transferred to the realm of fiction. The problem with Mademoiselle (“Have I really salvaged her from fiction?”) reappears in Nabokov’s consideration of the “biographie romancée” and what it misses in attempting to pay tribute to great men of the past. “The life of a poet is like

95 Vladimir Nabokov, “Pouchkine,” p. 365.
a pastiche,” Nabokov writes, “a sampling of his oeuvre.” In attempting to recreate the poet’s life and to articulate his importance in the larger cultural world, one tries to repeat his act of genius, but cannot. The resulting biographical work, therefore, is nothing but “un immense duperie” – a grand deception. 97

Interestingly, Nabokov’s criticism leads him to create his very own parody of a “biographie romancée.” Assuming a florid, poetic tone, he recreates an imagined scene from the prime of Pushkin’s artistic productivity – 1830. In the Pouchkine essay, we follow Nabokov’s idealized Pushkin as he mounts his horse in an elegant coat and boots, disguising himself as a gypsy, a Cossack, or an English dandy – whatever the poet deems fashionable. We see Pushkin dreaming on the banks of the Neva, raising his lorgnette at the theater amidst “the pink light and the brouhaha of violins,” and walking with his wife, who is much taller than he. Finally, Nabokov leaves us with an image of Pushkin with “a bullet in his stomach” in his fatal duel with D’Anthès. Like the “maniac” who imagined cavorting with figures of previous centuries, Nabokov imagines Pushkin in a romanticized vision of 19th century Russia. But he, of course, is merely trying to prove a point: “I am quite aware that this is not the real Pushkin, but a third-rate thespian whom I pay to play the part. What is the difference! The ruse amuses me, and I catch myself beginning to believe in it.” 98 In his parody of a “biographie romancée,” Nabokov has taken general facts about Pushkin’s life -- his residence in St. Petersburg, his high society connections, and his


death -- and has placed them into the structure of a creative piece, enlisting a “third-rate thespian,” a romanticized version of Pushkin, to play the poet’s part. If Pushkin has been molded to fill the clichés of the historical period, at least Nabokov has admitted the “ruse,” acknowledging the impossibility of portraying any figure with the appropriate degree of truthfulness.

If “the ruse” of a fictionalized biography “amuses [Nabokov],” it is because he is thrilled by the prospect of recreating, in his own words, the conditions that influenced his beloved poet’s life and work. In his “biographie romancée,” Nabokov describes Pushkin at his country house, “in his nightshirt, hairy, scribbling verse on a scrap of gray paper of the kind used to wrap candles, as he munches on an apple.” 99 He admits that “the true Pushkin would not recognize himself” in this imagined situation, but pardons his embellishment with the following: “If I inject into [these images] a bit of the same love that I feel when reading [Pushkin’s] poems, is not what I am doing with this imaginary life somehow akin to the poet’s work, if not to the poet himself?” 100 If a process of subjective reception and interpretation is inherent to any reading experience, why is it unsavory to represent a work, or its writer, in a way that reflects this process? If Nabokov reads Pushkin’s poetry (written while the latter was exiled from St. Petersburg) and imagines the poet writing in his nightshirt while munching on an apple, what is so wrong with this portrayal, however clearly it deviates from the “real” situation? In parodying a “biographie romancée,” Nabokov

both ridicules the genre and defends it, justifying his rendition as a labor of love, not of corruption. In the beginning of Pouchkine he condemns biographical “fictionizing” as “pretty revolting,” but through his own literary experimentation with the genre he develops an affinity for it, to the effect that it seems gradually less like a denunciation of the genre and more like a comical homage to Pushkin conceived in and of itself, without a parodic agenda.

If Nabokov revisits Mademoiselle in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, he also revisits, in the same novel, the notion of “biographie romancée.” V, the narrator, even uses the same term when considering how he will portray Sebastian, of whom he is writing a biography:

…I shall not attempt to describe Sebastian’s boyhood with anything like the methodical continuity which I would have normally achieved had Sebastian been a character of fiction…. But if I should try this with Sebastian the result would be one of those “biographies romancées” which are by far the worst kind of literature yet invented. 101

Of course, since Sebastian and V are fictional characters, the latter’s biography of the former can be nothing but a “biographie romancée.” Sure enough, directly following his denunciation of the genre, V proceeds to describe, in extravagant (surely “romancée”) language, “[Sebastian’s family’s] beautiful olivaceous house on the Neva embankment [fading out] gradually in the gray-blue frosty night, with gently falling snowflakes lingering in the moon-white blaze of the tall street lamp…” 102

Thus, in expressing disgust for the genre, V (and Nabokov, his creator) proceed at

101 Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, p. 18.
102 Vladimir Nabokov, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, pp. 18-19.
once to parody it, implicating the reader in an ironic awareness that he is reading what
the writer claims the text is not. Something similar occurs when Nabokov revisits the
“biographie romancée” again in *Speak, Memory*, which is a semi-fictionalized
“autobiography revisited” to begin with. Here, we find another dramatized vignette of
Pushkin, though not identified as such. It begins with Nabokov’s description of the
three family estates where he grew up, all located fifty miles south of St. Petersburg.
His grandmother’s estate, Batovo, was where “legend and logic, a rare but strong
partnership, seem to indicate, as I have more fully explained in my notes to *Onegin*,
that the Rileev pistol duel with Pushkin, of which so little is known, took place…
between May 6 and 9 (Old Style), 1820.” 103 From here, a narration of the estate’s
definitive history – it was acquired by Anastasia Mateevna Rileev, born Essen, in
1805 – blends almost imperceptibly with Nabokov’s imagined account of Pushkin’s
duel in 1820 (not the one that cost his life in 1837). This technique is reminiscent of
the one used in Chapter 5 of *Speak, Memory*, where a description of real memories of
Mademoiselle is juxtaposed with her imagined trip home from the train station, which
took place before Nabokov ever met her (“I can visualize her, by proxy, as she stands
on the station platform”).104 In the Pushkin episode in *Speak, Memory*, he is again on
the scene “by proxy”:

I can feel upon my skin and in my nostrils the delicious country roughness of
the northern spring day which greeted Pushkin and his two seconds as they
got out of their coach and penetrated into the linden avenue beyond the
Batovo platbands, still virginally black. I see so plainly the three young men

103 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 62.
104 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, p. 98
As in Pouchkine, where Nabokov imagines following his favorite poet around St. Petersburg, in Speak, Memory he pretends that he is present on the day of Pushkin’s duel with Rileev—so present, in fact, that he is able to closely observe the textures and colors of the foliage around him. But his immersion in a past that is not his own is set off by several references to the present. If the imagined scene of Pushkin’s duel takes place in 1820, Speak, Memory is being completed in the late 1960’s, and Nabokov has recently (in 1964) published his English translation of Eugene Onegin. Nabokov’s two mentions of Onegin make it clear that his imagined involvement in Pushkin’s first duel results from a deep admiration for the poet’s work. The possibility that Pushkin might have died in 1820, having never written Onegin, is at once mystifying and painful to Nabokov. As a result, he enlists his imagination to investigate the scene of the duel, creating a sort of “biographie romancée” that aims not to educate his reader on Pushkin’s near-death, but rather to demystify it, by imagining what truly happened on that day. By injecting himself into Pushkin’s time, Nabokov also allows himself, as narrator, to enter a Russian past in a country that he can never literally revisit, in the life of a poet who had greatly affected him. This self-transposal into the past is reminiscent of Nabokov’s first French work, “Les Écrivains et l’époque,” in which he considers what it means to evaluate past generations. It is evident that

105 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 62.
Nabokov did not quite adhere to the quotation that Kundera would later reproduce in “Sixty-three words” (as recounted in my Introduction): “I hate tampering with the lives of great writers.” 106

To the extent that Nabokov realizes the near impossibility of rendering Pushkin with truthful exactitude, recognizing instead the value of a creative and imaginative portrayal, we wonder if the “maniac” introduced in the essay’s opening, who fancies past correspondence Napoleon, is nothing but a fictionalized version of Nabokov the reader and littérateur, who lives in the work that he admires, particularly the opulent, daring world of Pushkin’s verse.

IV. Lost in (Paraphrastic) Translation: The Ezerski Stanza

If in the *Pouchkine* essay Nabokov lauds Pushkin’s genius, he also highlights the difficulty of finding suitable French translations of the poet’s work. Thus, as fascinating as the poet’s oeuvre is to Nabokov, it is largely unknown to French audiences in the 1930’s --and Nabokov is addressing his lecture to a French audience (albeit largely Hungarian and part Irish). “Our poet,” Nabokov writes, “seems to have no appeal to translators.” 107 If the novels of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky are read in France as if written by Frenchmen, Pushkin’s name and work, “which to us are so replete with music, remain prickly and shabby to the French ear.” 108 Further, Nabokov explains: “It’s a platitude to say that, for us Russians, Pushkin is a giant


who carries all the poetry of our country on his shoulders. But the moment the translator’s pen comes near, the soul of this poetry takes wing, and only a small gilt cage remains in our hands.” 109 Even if the words and meaning of Pushkin’s verse are preserved in translation, its deeper nuances escape as a beautiful bird abandons its cage, leaving a sturdy -- but empty -- structure behind. Nabokov’s enforcement of “us” and “our” in the quotations above -- an alignment with Russians, especially in the literary sphere -- seems not only convenient but also necessary to a discussion of Pushkin’s reception in France. Speaking in a French salon about Russian literature, Nabokov must not only praise but also defend Pushkin’s name against its obscurity.

In attempts to rectify the virtual unavailability of Pushkin’s verse to French audiences, Nabokov puts his own pen to the task (in his words, an “ungrateful toil”). In the Pouchkine essay, we are given four translations of Pushkin’s work: an extract of a longer poem, two shorter poems, and an alleged stanza of his famous novel-in-verse, Eugene Onegin. As Dmitri Nabokov points out in his English translation of Pouchkine, this stanza, “which is misidentified, through an editorial error or a rare absentminded lapse of the author’s as being from Eugene Onegin… is actually from ‘Yezerski,’” a poem written by Pushkin in 1830, when he was just finishing Onegin. Since Nabokov later translated the Ezerski stanza (spelled thus in his references to it) from Russian to English in the Commentary to his translation of Eugene Onegin, I have chosen to focus on it as an example of his revisiting impulse as well as his

translating techniques. Below I have reproduced Nabokov’s French version of *Ezerski* alongside my own very literal rendition of the French:

At first glance, it is obvious that Nabokov preserves the rhyme and meter of the stanza. The French *Ezerski* even has the exact rhyme scheme (*ababccddefegg*) and iambic tetrameter as Pushkin’s original stanzas from *Onegin*, highlighting Nabokov’s faithfulness to form. Thus, the French translation is paraphrastic (“a free version of the original, with omissions and additions prompted by the exigencies of form”).

But when the stanza appeared in English in the Commentary to Nabokov’s translation of *Eugene Onegin* almost thirty years later, it was translated literally, “rendering the exact contextual meaning of the original,” just as *Onegin* had been translated. In

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111 Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin, trans. Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, pp. xii, xiii.
the thirty years between the French and English translations, Nabokov made
something very clear: the richness of Pushkin’s meaning sufficed to bring his stanzas
alive, with minimal (if any) consideration for the preservation of meter and rhyme.

Since the *Ezerski* stanza was translated in 1937 and again in the 1960’s, it
represents Nabokov’s evolving priorities as a translator, from a paraphrastic
technique to a practice of “strict literalism.” Therefore, a comparison of the two
translations of the stanza – the French verse translation in 1937 and the English literal
translation in 1964 – will shed light on Nabokov’s propensity for revisitation and re-
translation. A comparison will address the following questions: What about the
English rendition of the stanza (1964), compared to the earlier French attempt (1937),
seems superior or more evocative, thus illustrating Nabokov’s shift in what Judson
Rosengrant calls “modes” of translation? 112 To what effect does the English literal
version of the stanza seem to reach beyond the “formal features” of the paraphrastic
text in order to unleash the poem’s deeper meaning? Below I have copied the 1937
French verse translation (*NVT, 1*) and the 1964 English literal translation (*NLT, 3*). I
have also provided an English literal translation of the Russian text done by Susanne
Fusso (*FLT, 4*), which I look to as a benchmark of “literalness” against Nabokov’s
English version. Seeing as I have no Russian and have trusted Fusso’s translation as a
direct lexical transposition of Pushkin’s original, if I refer to the “original,” I am
referring to Fusso’s translation. Finally, I have re-copied my own literal English

translation (GLT, 2) done from Nabokov’s French translation of *Ezerski*, to aid an exploration of the latter, since the analysis will be done in English.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Verse Translation, Russian to French</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong> Pourquoi le vent troublant la plaine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong> va-t-il virer dans un ravin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong> tandis que sur l’onde sereine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong> un navire l’attend en vain?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong> Demande-lui. Pourquoi, morose,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong> fuyant les tours, l’aigle se pose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong> sur un chicot ? Demande-lui.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong> Comme la lune aime la nuit,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E</strong> pourquoi Desdémone aime-t-elle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong> son Maure ? Parce que le vent,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong> le coeur de femme et l’aigle errant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>E</strong> ne connaissent de loi mortelle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>G</strong> Lève ton front, poète élu;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>G</strong> rien ne t’enchaîne, toi non plus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nabokov, <em>Pouchkine</em>, 1937</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2. Literal Translation, French to English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why does the wind troubling the plain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whirl in a ravine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While on the serene wave</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A ship waits for it in vain?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ask it. Why, morose,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleeing the towers, does the eagle perch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a stump? Ask him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As the moon loves the night,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does Desdemona love her Moor? Because the wind,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a woman’s heart and the wandering eagle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>know nothing of human law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise your brow, chosen poet;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing enchains you, you neither.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nabokov, <em>Pouchkine</em>, 1937</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Literal Translation, Russian to English</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why does the wind revolve in the ravine,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sweep up the leaves and bear the dust,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when avidly on stirless water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wait for his breath the galleon must?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From mountains and past towers, why</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does the dread heavy eagle fly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to a sear stump? Inquire of him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does young Desdemona love her blackamoor as the moon loves the gloom of the night? Because for wind and eagle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and maiden’s heart no law is laid.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poet, be proud: thus are you too:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neither is there a law for you.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nabokov, Epilogue to <em>Onegin</em> Commentary, 1964</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>4. Literal Translation, Russian to English</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why does the wind whirl in the ravine,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raise the leaf and carry the dust,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>when avidly on stirless water</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why from the mountains and past the towers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does the eagle fly, heavy and terrifying,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To a black stump? Ask him.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why does her Moor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The young Desdemona love,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As the moon loves the gloom of night?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because for the wind and the eagle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And the heart of a maiden there is no law.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be proud: just the same are you, poet,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And for you too there are no stipulations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susanne Fusso, 2010</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
To understand Nabokov’s reasons for revisiting Ezerski, let us first pinpoint the disparities in content between the French translation and the original. First, in order to furnish “sereine” with a rhyme, the French version introduces “la plaine” (the plain), which does not exist in the original. In doing so, it eliminates two aspects of the wind’s motion that are crucial to understanding the progression of the stanza: the leaf and the dust (Fusso: “Raise the leaf and carry the dust”, Nabokov: “sweep up the leaves and bear the dust”). Next, to accommodate a rhyme between lines 2 and 4 (ravin and vain), the French translation supposes that the ship waits “en vain” (“in vain”) for the wind, when in the original stanza it waits “avidly,” but certainly not in vain; the avidity implies eager energy, not futility. To preserve meter, the French uses “Demande-lui” (“Ask him/it”) twice, while 3 and 4 (Nabokov’s literal and Fusso’s literal) use it only once - in relation to the eagle alone, not the wind as well. In versions 3 and 4, it is clear that the eagle flies “from mountains and past towers,” but the French stanza does not mention mountains at all, depicting the eagle only as “fleeing the towers,” thereby causing confusion over the trajectory of the bird – an element that is crucial to understanding what occurs in the stanza. “Morose” in the French is a clever, poetic substitute for “dread heavy” (3) and “heavy and terrifying” (4). But the French stanza presents the stump without any notion of blackness, making it seem commonplace instead of foreboding. Likewise, the night, too, is given only as “la nuit” (“comme la lune aime la nuit”), whereas in 3 and 4 it is not only opposed to the moon in its inherent darkness, but also in an added sense of “gloom.” If translations 3 and 4 assert boldly that for the wind, eagle, and maiden “no law is laid” (and “there is no law”), the French understates this idea with “ne connaissent de
loi mortelle” (“know nothing of human law”), suggesting casual ignorance instead of complete immunity. Finally, whereas the original stanza and Nabokov’s literal translation assert that, for the poet, “neither is there a law for you” and “And for you there are no stipulations,” the French version makes the lack of constraint into an active verb: “Rien ne t’enchaîne, toi non plus” (emphases mine), implying a lack of restriction in a more direct – yet seemingly less severe – manner.

In a review of Walter Arndt’s rhyming, metrical translation of Eugene Onegin that came out just months before Nabokov’s, the latter criticizes Arndt’s strict adherence to form, calling him a “pitiless and irresponsible paraphrast.” Nabokov excerpts certain stanzas from Arndt’s translation alongside analogous stanzas from his own, having “italicized such verbal gobbets as are not found, or found in another form, in Pushkin’s text.” In list form, Nabokov categorizes Arndt’s missteps as a translator, revealing his use of “crippled clichés and mongrel idioms,” “burlesque rhymes” (such as “Feeler-Lyudmila,” “family-me” and “char-Africa”), and “stale slang.” Nabokov’s criticism of Arndt’s translation is similar to my criticism of Nabokov’s 1937 French translation of the Ezerski stanza, which I combed for missing and superfluous content devised solely for rhyming purposes, as well as for other deviations from the original.

In a rebuttal to Nabokov’s criticism, Walter Arndt doubted the relevance (or possibility) of producing a so-called literal translation, since “there are simply no...

113 Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p. 233.
114 Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions, p. 235.
interlingually equivalent semantic units, regardless of the form of discourse.” 115

Even more, he referenced the paraphrastic English translations that Nabokov had completed of poems by Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tyutchev as part of a compilation published in 1944, all of which “contain just such enforced liberties and padding as those which their writer so abominates in others.” 116 Using the criticism Nabokov previously used against Arndt, the latter gives examples of some of Nabokov’s failed rhymes and of his tendency to over-translate certain words based on their obscure dictionary definitions. If Nabokov criticized Arndt’s grasp of Russian, Arndt questions Nabokov’s proficiency in English. But in reply to Arndt’s rebuttal (published in the New York Review of Books in April 1965), Nabokov claimed to disown his paraphrastic translations of 1944. When asked for permission to reprint them, he had “always refused since they are exactly what Mr. Arndt says – lame paraphrases of Pushkin’s text.” He added, “They may be a little closer to it than Mr. Arndt’s effort but still have nothing in common with the literal translation I am preparing now [Eugene Onegin].” 117

But as Grayson points out, Nabokov did not “entirely abandon his old practices” of translation in the later years of his career. He translated all of his Russian poems not literally, but into English verse, and the foreword to his translation of Lermontov’s A Hero of Our Time includes a rhymed translation of Lermontov’s


116 Walter Arndt, “Goading the Pony.”

117 Walter Arndt, “Goading the Pony.”
poem “Son.” In Despair, a novel written in Russian, Nabokov includes a paraphrastic translation of another one of Pushkin’s poems, “The Dream.” Also, even his English translation of Ezerski in Onegin deviates in distinct ways from the original, despite a supposedly strict adherence to “literalness.” First, while Pushkin uses the standard word for “ship” and the French version uses “navire” (ship, boat), Nabokov uses word “galleon,” which connotes a 17th century warship – a choice that is over-stylized and far too specific. Why, also, in a literal translation, does Nabokov insist on preserving the rhyme between lines 2 and 4, forcing “must” to rhyme with “dust” so that the syntax of line 4 is inverted? Here, it is clear that Nabokov did not transcribe the line’s literal meaning, but instead embellished in terms of both content and word order. To direct Nabokov’s criticism of Arndt’s verse translation towards his own work, this line seems like an example of “padding” (the use of “plug words and rhymes”). The same can be said of “dread heavy” for “heavy and terrifying” (in Pushkin’s original, the eagle is both of these qualities; in Nabokov’s rendition they are combined in one, even though the idiom “dread heavy” does not exist in English). This instance is reminiscent of the criticism of Edmund Wilson, a friendly correspondent of Nabokov’s who later became one of his major detractors. Wilson had heavily criticized the translator’s tendency to consult several dictionaries in the pursuit of literal accuracy, rendering simple words like “monkey,” for example, as “old sapajous,” the very specific term for a tropical ape. With this in mind, why

118 Jane Grayson, Nabokov Translated, p. 18.

does Nabokov use “sear” to describe the stump that is simply “black” in the original? Why, too, does he use “blackamoor,” if the original and the French use the shortened word, “Moor” (“Maure”) (which echoes the exact title of Shakespeare’s play *Othello, the Moor*)? Perhaps “blackamoor” is used to aid the rhythm of the line, as “Moor” would mirror “moon” too much, giving a clumsy appearance of contrived alliteration. Either way, Nabokov’s embellishments display an undeniable concern for verse form that he criticized in others, particularly in Arndt.

Regardless, it is clear that his literal translation of *Ezerski* is far more faithful to the original than is his French rendition of the same stanza. If the French gets the stanza’s message across beautifully (that the poet is free to create as he wishes), it also confuses the meaning by omitting crucial images (leaf, dust, avid, gloom of night). On the topic of Nabokov’s French translations of Pushkin’s poetry in the *Pouchkine* essay, Beaujour insists that they are “brilliantly successful in maintaining the Pushkinian lightness of foot… more graceful and faithful that any I have seen done by native speakers of French translating from Russian into their mother tongue.” Evidently, Nabokov did not agree. In *Pouchkine*, he tells us: “I nurture no illusions about the quality of these translations,” explaining:

[The translation] is reasonably plausible Pushkin, nothing more; the true Pushkin is elsewhere. Yet, if we follow the riverbank of this poem as it unfolds, we do note, in the bends I have managed to comply with here and

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120 Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, p. 91.
there, something truthful flowing melodiously past, and that is the sole truth I can find down there – the truth of art. 121

If a “fictionalized” biography is unable to render Pushkin or any other cultural icon with the appropriate degree of “truth,” the process of translation produces nothing more than a “plausible” version of the original, as the essence of the work in its native tongue is compromised by even the slightest of alterations. The only truth that remains is “the truth of art.” In revisiting Ezerski with a literal translation, Nabokov attempts to augment this “truth,” succeeding only to a certain extent. Indeed, he was so dissatisfied with his paraphrastic translation of Ezerski that he revisited it, just as he had revisited Mademoiselle’s story, in order to approach it with greater accuracy. If Nabokov was initially engaged in the text while writing Pouchkine, he remained engaged to the extent that he recreated the stanza in a literal translation almost thirty years later. From a lecture in Paris in 1937 to his Translator’s Epilogue published in 1964, Nabokov demonstrated that in order for readers to understand and appreciate Pushkin’s poetry, they would have to know what it meant, not how it rhymed. Still, as Beaujour points out, “one cannot help believing that Nabokov, had he so decided, might have done the best possible poetic translation of Onegin.” This, however, is “an unfulfilled possibility [that] should be tucked away with the tantalizing suggestion that Nabokov might have been a French writer.” 122

122 Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, p. 111.
V. A Constant Intrusion of Gallicisms

Nabokov might not see the viability of preserving the meter and rhyme in his translations. But he recognizes that to simply transpose Pushkin’s words from Russian to English would be to ignore a critical dimension: the French influence behind the author’s word choice, locutions, and literary references. The translator’s job is to interpret not only the poet’s original verse, but also his allusions to established literature – in Pushkin’s case, European literature translated into French. Nabokov pays close attention to the echoes of French writing that emanate from Pushkin’s verse. In the “Onegin Stanza,” he sees the “frivolous narratives and badinage” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, particularly those of La Fontaine, “Pushkin’s unconscious source,” claiming that in translating Pushkin’s novel-in-verse one must “cope with a constant intrusion of Gallicisms and borrowings from French poets” 123 Speaking to the French audience of Pouchkine, Nabokov cites the vast body of French poetry that Pushkin put “at the disposal of his Russian muse.” 124 Likewise, in “Problems of Translation: Onegin in English,” he declares: “Gallicisms in various stages of assimilation populate [Pushkin’s] poetry with the gay hardiness of lucern and dandelion invading a trail in the Rocky Mountains” (Nabokov dedicated the largest section of another essay on the travails of translating Pushkin,

“The Servile Path,” to incorrect translations of botanical terms).\(^{125}\) \(^{126}\) The “faithful translator,” he asserts, must be aware of every direct quote, imitation, or influence from another language in the original text. A translator of Pushkin must know not only “a Russian’s Russian, but also Pushkin’s knowledge of French.” \(^{127}\)

This is particularly important because Pushkin and his contemporaries read the work of Shakespeare, Byron, Goethe, Schiller, and even the Classics not in Russian, English, or German, but in French – and only French. Consider, for example, Pushkin’s affinity for the work of Lord Byron, the English Romantic poet, particularly the narrative poem *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. Pushkin did not read *Childe Harold* in its original version, but as *Le Pélérinage de Childe Harold*, the French translation by Amédée Pichot that became available to Russian readers as early as 1820. Thus, in analyzing the resounding echoes of *Childe Harold* in *Eugene Onegin*, a translator must “be careful in distinguishing his author’s debt to Byron and his debt to Pichot.” \(^{128}\) He must be aware that lines in *Eugene Onegin* that mirror those in *Childe Harold* have been taken from French, and not from English. The same is true of Pushkin’s heroine, Tatiana, whose preoccupation with Richardson’s *Clarissa* is more realistically an absorption in *Clarisse*, the French translation of the novel that

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Pushkin himself would have read. In *Eugene Onegin*, Tatiana is not even able to write a love letter in Russian:

She knew Russian badly,
Did not read our reviews,
And expressed herself with difficulty
In her native tongue;

hence wrote in French.129

Upper-class girls like Tatiana spoke Russian with their parents and servants, “but they were unable to use it when an elevated or literary topic required linguistic nuance.”130

Nabokov explains that while both girls and boys of “fashionable” 18th and 19th century Russian society were taught French “in infancy,” only girls had English governesses (the Nabokov children, boys and girls alike, had a “Miss Jones,” but they were unusually anglophile). Still, French versions of English literature were so much easier to come across than the English originals that even those girls with a good knowledge of English read works in their French translations. Pushkin, of course, learned French as a child, but as seen in personal letters it was “strictly limited to a brilliant command of eighteenth century phrases and slightly dated idioms.” And if his French lacked “personal tang,” as Nabokov puts it, then his English never took flight. By the time he was writing *Eugene Onegin* in 1823, he could not even pronounce English vowels. 131

Nabokov proceeds to list certain French expressions - *fol amour* (mad love),


130 Alexander V. Issatchenko, p. 134.

amer regret (bitter regret), and attendrissement (tender feelings), all of which he claims were “transposed from French into melodious Russian,” and of whose linguistic origins a translator must be cognizant in order to avoid pitfalls. 132 To be sure, hundreds of French words had entered the Russian language by the time Pushkin was writing, both by mere borrowing and by gradual Russification. Nabokov warns against taking the words for granted as purely “Russian,” thereby failing to recognize their French origins. However, we must not take him too seriously. It is very likely that one would be able to translate Pushkin’s words in a literal sense with very little knowledge of their linguistic or literary origins, relying on their definitions alone. But Nabokov, above and beyond the average translator’s call of duty, takes pleasure in noting the ways that French expressions have been appropriated and transformed in their Russian form: “French stock epithets, in their Russian metamorphosis, breathe and bloom anew, so delicately does Pushkin manipulate them.”133 If we consider the myriad ways in which Nabokov engages in the text he translates, it is understandable that he could not afford, in good conscience, to keep rhyme and meter in mind. To communicate not only the literal meaning of Pushkin’s words but also their French subtexts, a preservation of form was of minimal importance.

It is one thing to grapple with translating Russian words whose French echoes, as Nabokov sees it, are too bold to ignore. But the most extreme degree of confusion arises when a certain phrase or allusion “is found to occur in the Russian version of

132 Vladimir Nabokov, “Problems of Translation: Onegin in English,” p. 133.
the French translation of an English author, so that in result Pushkin’s pastiche (which we have to render in English) is three times removed from its model!” 134 Having explored Nabokov’s own work, we can apply this statement to his own linguistic journeys. “Mademoiselle O” is a “transposition into English of memories in French that occurred in Russia” 135 that made its journey from English (if only in Nabokov’s notebooks) to French to Russian to English again. The genre of “biographie romancée” that Nabokov discussed, denounced, and defended in Pouchkine (and had arguably first dealt with in “Les Écrivains et l’époque”) was revisited in Speak, Memory and The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, used not only as a means of revisoning and imagining a distant past, but also as a symbol of what it means to render the past in any capacity at all. Finally, Nabokov translated the Ezerski stanza from Russian into French and finally into English, revealing changing modes of translation as his career progressed. In all cases, Nabokov’s interest and involvement in the French language played a crucial role in his artistic process of revisititation. As we will see in the following chapters, the same applies to Kundera.

135 Christine Raguet-Bouvart, p. 499, translation mine.
Chapter 3

Revision Embodied: Kundera’s Overlapping Oeuvre

I. The Joke: A Brief Background

Milan Kundera completed his first novel, Žert (The Joke), in Prague in 1965 -- the story of a young man who faces serious consequences in 1950’s Czechoslovakia after writing his girlfriend a “joke” postcard venerating Trotsky. For the two years after the novel’s completion, the Czech manuscript was kept from publication by Communist censorship in Prague, further delayed by Kundera’s steadfast rejection of any changes imposed on his work. Finally, in April of 1967, The Joke was published “exactly as I had written it.” 136 Within the next few years it was translated into French, and numerous times into English – and this is where the problems began. The original English attempt omitted several key passages, the second was entirely abridged (“even more simplified, more mutilated!”), and the third made a mess of Kundera’s punctuation (one character’s inner monologue, which was supposed to be an “infinite” sentence, had been broken up into several short sentences). 137 In a 1979


interview with French essayist Alain Finkielkraut, Kundera realized that there were significant flaws in the French text as well. When Finkielkraut asked Kundera why his later novels did not exhibit the “florid and baroque” tone of *The Joke*, the writer was puzzled. His style had always been simple and frank, “relaxed but always correct, somewhat like a medical manual for home use.” 138 Finkielkraut, it turned out, had gotten his misinformation from the French translation of the novel completed by Marcel Aymonin, in which a simple phrase like “the sky was blue” had been translated as “Under a sky of periwinkle, October hoisted its snowy shield.” 139

Enraged by Aymonin’s alterations to his text – primarily his style - Kundera set out to produce a French translation of *The Joke* that would be more faithful to the original Czech text. The resulting work-in-collaboration with French author Claude Courtot was published in 1980 by Éditions Gallimard, one of France’s premier publishing houses, under the title “La Plaisanterie.” In 1985, Gallimard published yet another edition of the text, this time called “la version definitive,” or “the definitive version,” which had been revised by Kundera himself and served as the template for waves of future translations into English, Spanish, German, and several other languages.

Allison Stanger argues that Kundera’s preoccupation with translation was primarily for the sake of “undoing unwelcome revisions” imposed by translators and reaching what seemed like an unattainable goal of “faithfulness” to the original


139 Caleb Crain, “Infidelity,” p. 488.
If we chart Nabokov’s process of rewriting from the author’s personal accounts as well as from the constantly changing “Mademoiselle O,” we learn of Kundera’s not only from his novels, but also from paratext --copyright pages, prefaces, and author’s notes -- which convey a process of transformation that, like Nabokov’s, spans years and languages. Consider, for example, the entry on The Joke on Éditions Gallimard’s website:


The 1968 translation by Marcel Aymonin, which misinterpreted Kundera’s words by imposing on them a “beau style,” as Caleb Crain puts it, is listed as “[traduction] du tchèque” – the original translation from Czech. The edition that was re-translated by Claude Courtot in collaboration with Kundera is referred to as the “Nouvelle edition entièrement révisée” – the “entirely revised new edition.” Finally, in 1985, the “Version définitive” – the “definitive version” – was published with an afterword by François Ricard. But the English translations were still inadequate.

Luckily, in the early eighties Kundera learned of a young American professor, Michael Henry Heim, who had published, in a literary journal, two translated passages that had been omitted from the earlier English translations of The Joke. Kundera was “deeply touched by this noble gesture of solidarity with mistreated,


humiliated literature.”  

At this time, his Czech works were being translated into English mainly by Peter Kussi, who produced Kundera-approved versions of *Laughable Loves*, *Immortality*, and *The Farewell Party* (among other titles). When Knopf, Kundera’s publisher, refused to let his relationship with Kussi continue (for reasons “unknown” to Kundera, as Kussi had “all [his] confidence”), Kundera turned to Heim for a translation of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. Then, taking the advice of his new editor (and soon-to-be translator) Aaron Asher, Kundera consulted Heim for a new translation of *The Joke* for American audiences.  

Heim’s translation was published twice in 1982: first by Harper & Row and then by Penguin in a paperback series compiled by Philip Roth called “Writers from the Other Europe,” meant to expose American readers to the works of authors from Communist countries. The Penguin edition was marketed as “Milan Kundera’s First Novel – in an Unabridged, Brilliant New Translation.” Kundera himself expressed gratitude in the preface for Heim, who had done the “first valid and authentic version of a book that tells of rape and has itself so often been violated.” 

For almost a decade, Kundera enjoyed the popularity of the newest English-language version of his first novel. But in the fall of 1990, when Asher proposed that yet another version of *The Joke* be published by HarperCollins (where Asher had his own imprint), Kundera was “gripped by suspicion.”  

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142 Milan Kundera, Preface to *The Joke*, p. viii.
143 Milan Kundera, Preface to *The Joke*, p. viii.
144 Milan Kundera, Preface to *The Joke*, p. ix.
text, and why had Asher deemed it inadequate? When Kundera examined the text in
detail (evidently, he had not done so previously), he was extremely disappointed,
having the “increasingly strong impression that what [he] read was not [his] text:
often the words were remote from what [he] had written; the syntax differed, too.” 146
The faulty translation, Kundera concludes, was neither a matter of incompetence nor
an exhibition of ill-will or carelessness. Heim, “in good conscience,” had produced
not a faithful translation, but a “translation-adaptation” – that is, adapting “to the taste
of the time and of the country for which it is intended, to the taste, in the final
analysis, of the translator.” In short, Kundera accused Heim of molding his novel for
American consumption – the third, and most egregious, of Nabokov’s “sins of
translation” as evoked in his article “The Art of Translation” – “when a masterpiece is
planished and patted into such a shape, vilely beautified in such a fashion as to
conform to the notions and prejudices of a given public.” 147 Kundera recognizes that
this technique, however detestable, might be the currently accepted mode of
translation. But for him (as well as for Nabokov), it is “unacceptable.” 148

In the wake of his disappointment over Heim’s interpretation of the text,
Kundera, along with Aaron Asher, set out to produce a fifth version of The Joke,
working from enlarged photocopies of Heim’s rendition and entering word-for-word
translations of the original, both in English and French (Kundera had a solid, though
not excellent, grasp of English). In the re-translation process, he retained several of

146 Milan Kundera, Preface to The Joke, p. x.
148 Milan Kundera, Preface to The Joke, p. x.
Heim’s well-translated passages (though not crediting Heim), as well as some from earlier versions of the English text. The final translation was not attributed to any translator at all. Kundera sent the work in installments to Aaron Asher, who united the “disparate elements” and sent them back to the author for “final correction and approval.” Finally, in February of 1992, Aaron Asher Books, a division of HarperCollins, published the fifth version of *The Joke*, pegged as the “definitive version, fully revised by the author.” In the preface, Kundera wrote: “To my readers, a promise: there will not be a sixth English-language version of The Joke.” 149 And so far, there has not been.

On a quest to find the most “authentic version” of *The Joke*, Stanger compared the original Czech novel, *Žert*, with its translations into both English and French. Though the 1992 “definitive version” translated by Asher ends with the notation “completed December 5, 1965,” leading one to believe that it was a direct transposition of the original, Stanger discovered that this translation actually differed in many ways from *Žert*, omitting over fifty passages (Stanger counted) and in some cases, complete paragraphs.150 The issue is confused by Kundera’s preface to the 4th English version, translated by Michael Henry Heim, in which he describes having made changes to the original text while correcting the faulty French translation in 1979. 151 Hot on the trail, Stanger set off to compare the fifth English edition (1992) with the “definitive reworking of the French translation” (1985), finding that both

149 Milan Kundera, Preface to *The Joke*, p. xi.
150 Allison Stanger, p. 94.
151 Allison Stanger, p. 94.
versions shared the same deletions and changes from the Czech original. Even more, this particular French version also ended with a note: “Achévé le 5 décembre 1965” (completed December 5, 1965), signifying that it was no different from the original text that had been finished twenty years earlier. Stanger deduced that a revised version of Žert had been created sometime in the 1980’s and had continued to evolve since that time, making both of Kundera’s “definitive” French and English translations “something other than faithful renderings of the work in its original [Czech] incarnation.” 152 There is no given justification for the changes made, nor are they referenced in the 1990 endnote to Kundera’s latest Czech edition of The Joke, which summarizes the publication history of the novel around the world. Addressing the author directly, Stanger concludes:

The curious situation that has resulted from all this is that your Czech audience now reads one version of the book while your French- and English-language audiences read quite another - yet the reader attempting to distinguish among these “definitive” versions is never made aware of these perplexing differences, or of the reasons for them. 153

Stanger recognizes that Kundera, as author, is authorized to make changes as he wishes. “But can a translation rightfully be described as a faithful rendering of the original, when the original text itself and not just its translated form remains a moving target?” 154 Kundera might be justified in omitting passages from English and French translations of the novel, but not in pretending that each new edition is faithful to the

152 Allison Stanger, p. 94.
153 Allison Stanger, p. 94.
154 Allison Stanger, p. 95.
Czech original, “completed December 5, 1965.” We recall that Kundera’s chief issue with Heim’s translation of *The Joke* was that it seemed to cater to a Western audience. Stanger accuses Kundera of the same offense, citing passages that are present in *Žert* but not in its later editions: among them a description of one character’s nostalgia for the already-deadly Stalinist movement, and another’s romantic view of the dawning of a “Slavic Era” brought on by Communism. Stanger interprets the absence of these passages as a refusal to complicate the plot and the historical background for Western readers, whose knowledge of Czech history would be minimal, not to mention overwhelmingly anti-Communist. She suggests that Kundera was responding more to a commercial impulse than to a creative one, compromising the “authenticity” of his work to appeal to a new audience – the same fault for which he had criticized Heim. Thus, Stanger highlights Kundera’s hypocrisy.

With this in mind, it is easy to contrast Kundera’s revision process with Nabokov’s. The latter never labeled any of his works as the “authentic” edition, nor did he claim to adhere to any original source. Each version of his autobiography had a different title, thereby making the modifications evident. If certain changes made between “Mademoiselle O” and *Speak, Memory* were not obvious at first glance, they were mentioned by the author in the preface to the latter. Kundera, on the other hand, was extraordinarily secretive when it came to editing, translating, and marketing his novels, making incorrect claims about each edition’s correspondence to the original Czech version. In short, his oeuvre is characterized by a conscious process of obfuscation. But if we compare various translations of two of his novels, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, we will find that
the revisionary steps that Kundera takes to update his work over time are embodied by the very work he updates.

II. What is Lítost?

Once Kundera’s work was banned in Czechoslovakia in 1970, he lost virtually his entire native-language readership. Most of the Czech speakers who read his work were in exile, and the only Czech versions of his work were published by the émigré writer Josef Škvorecký, who had a small publishing house in Canada. The print runs never numbered more than 9,000. 155 Thus, Kundera often said, “My books lived their lives as translations. As translations they were read, criticized, judged, accepted or rejected.” 156 Moreover, the majority of Kundera’s Czech novels had been published in French translations before they were published in their original language. Between 1985 and 1987, Kundera revised the French translations of all of his Czech novels, inciting his French publisher to mark each new edition as having “the same authenticity value as the Czech text” (“la même valeur d’authenticité que le texte tchèque”). 157 158 In effect, these versions became the originals, serving as the templates for future translations into English, most of which were done by Aaron Asher in the early 1990’s.

157 Caleb Crain, p. 496.
158 See Appendix for images of select “authentic” texts.
But as we saw with *The Joke*, Kundera’s terms of “authenticity” are not so easily defined. In his author’s note to the *Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (translated by Asher in 1996), Kundera explains having revised the French translations of his novels so deeply and completely that I was able to include, in the subsequent new editions, a note affirming that the French versions of these works ‘are equal in authenticity to the Czech texts.’ My intervention in these French versions did not result in *variants of my original texts*. I was led to it only by a wish for *accuracy*. The French translations have become, so to speak, *more faithful to the Czech originals* than the originals themselves.\(^{159}\) (It is helpful to note that the author’s note to Asher’s 2000 translation of *Life is Elsewhere* is practically identical, though “accuracy” is replaced by “fidelity to my thought and style.”)\(^{160}\) First, let us consider Kundera’s claim that “The French translations have become, so to speak, more faithful to the Czech originals than the originals themselves.” The obvious illogicality of the statement displays the author’s artful -- not literal -- treatment of authenticity and faithfulness, two weighty concepts central to any oeuvre that undergoes translation. Kundera’s sense of the “authentic” revolves around a consideration of how a text evolves over time, continually enriched by years of revisions and re-translations. Each “definitive” version of a novel is “authentic” because it represents the cutting edge of Kundera’s development as a writer, and of the development of his fiction. Thus, his assertion that the French


versions “are equal in authenticity to the Czech texts” is acceptable; their authenticity lies not in their closeness to the original text, but rather in their distance from it.

But to say that a revised rendition of a work is “more faithful” to the original than the original itself is to undermine the years of revisions and changes, whether minor or major, that made the most current version the way it is. Again, we might dismiss Kundera’s statement as merely literary – a hyperbolic description of his shifting loyalties to the “definitive” French versions of his novels, which he held in much higher esteem (and deemed more relevant) than the original Czech texts. If this is so, however, there is another trap in the author’s note: Kundera’s insistence that, “My intervention in these French versions did not result in variants of my original texts. I was led to it only by a wish for accuracy.” 161 As previously explored, the 1985 French “definitive version” of The Joke was quite different from the Czech original, since several passages had been omitted for either “aesthetic or stylistic” reasons. 162 Crain noticed similar, significant disparities between three versions of another novel, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting: Heim’s 1980 English translation from the Czech, François Kérel’s 1985 “definitive” French translation, and Asher’s 1996 English translation from the French. In particular, these disparities involve Kundera’s famous discussion of litost, the supposedly untranslatable Czech word for a universal brand of suffering.

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162 Allison Stanger, p. 94.
Consider the passage as it appears in Heim’s translation:

What is Lítost?

*Lítost* is a Czech word with no exact translation into any other language. *It designates a feeling as infinite as an open accordion, a feeling that is the synthesis of many others: grief, sympathy, remorse, and an indefinable longing.* The first syllable, which is long and stressed, sounds like the wail of an abandoned dog.

*Under certain circumstances, however, it can have a very narrow meaning, a meaning as definite, precise, and sharp as a well-honed cutting edge.* I have never found an equivalent in other languages for this sense of the word either, though I do not see how anyone can understand the human soul without it.163

In Kérel’s French translation of the book (*Le livre du rire et de l’oubli*), the “Nouvelle édition révue par l’auteur” (New edition revised by the author), the opening passage on lítost is as follows:

*Qu’est-ce que la lítost?*

*Lítost* est un mot tchèque intraduisible en d’autres langues. Sa première syllabe, qui se prononce longue et accentuée, rappelle la plainte d’un chien abandonné. Pour le sens de ce mot je cherche vainement un équivalent dans d’autres langues, bien que j’aie peine à imaginer qu’on puisse comprendre l’âme humaine sans lui. 164

Finally, here is Asher’s rendition, taken from the French:

What is Lítost?

*Lítost* is an untranslatable Czech word. Its first syllable, which is long and stressed, sounds like the wail of an abandoned dog. As for the meaning of this word, I have looked in vain in other languages for an equivalent, though I find


it difficult to imagine how anyone can understand the human soul without it.\textsuperscript{165}

Crain points out the ways in which Heim’s translation differs from Kérel’s and Asher’s – specifically two elements of the text that are missing in the latter two versions. One is the line that explains \textit{lítost} in what seem to be the clearest terms possible: “It designates a feeling as infinite as an open accordion, a feeling that is the synthesis of many others: grief, sympathy, remorse, and an indefinable longing.” The other is an overview of the word’s secondary meaning: “Under certain circumstances, however, it can have a very narrow meaning, a meaning as definite, precise, and sharp as a well-honed cutting edge.” In all three versions, the narrator suggests having looked “in vain” for an equivalent of \textit{lítost} in other languages, and considers the incomprehensible gap between the word’s untranslatability and its universal relevance. But only in Heim’s translation, taken from the original Czech, do we get a lucid, almost-definition of the term that increases its accessibility to Kundera’s readers, the majority of whom have no knowledge of the Czech language and therefore must understand \textit{lítost} in translation.

If Crain brings our attention to the most striking differences between Heim’s translation and the others, there are also several disparities that he neglects to mention. In all versions of the text, Kundera’s narrator illustrates a particular example of \textit{lítost}, involving a young student of philosophy who is depicted swimming with his girlfriend. While the student thrashes in the water, the girlfriend is a gifted athlete. To protect her companion’s pride, she slows down to his pace, but near the end of their

\textsuperscript{165} Milan Kundera, \textit{The Book of Laughter and Forgetting}, trans. Aaron Asher, p. 166.
swim is tempted to “give her athletic instincts a few moments’ free rein and [heads] for the opposite bank at a rapid crawl.”¹⁶⁶ In Heim’s translation:

He [the student] felt humiliated, exposed for the weakling he was; he felt the resentment, the special sorrow which can only be called litost. He recalled his sickly childhood – no physical exercise, no friends, nothing but Mama’s ever-watchful eye – and sank into utter, all-encompassing despair.¹⁶⁷

In the “definitive” French version, this passage is extraordinarily mild in comparison:

Il se sentit diminué, mis à nu dans son infériorité physique, et il éprouva la litost. Il se représenta son enfance maladive sans exercices physiques et sans camarades sous le regard trop affectueux de sa mère et il désespéra de lui-même et de sa vie.¹⁶⁸

The same comparative mildness is found in Asher’s interpretation of the French passage:

Feeling humbled, his physical inferiority laid bare, he felt litost. He recalled his sickly childhood, lacking in physical exercise and friends and spent under the constant gaze of his mother’s overfond eye, and fell into despair about himself and his life.¹⁶⁹

Finally, consider a very literal translation of the passage as it appears in the original Czech text, Kniha smíchu a zapomění, done by Susanne Fusso:

He felt himself humbled, exposed in his bodily inferiority, and he felt lítost. He recalled his sickly childhood without sports and without pals under the too-careful supervision of his mommy and he felt like despairing of himself and his life.¹⁷⁰

Of the passages excerpted above, only in Heim’s translation is the student’s sudden onset of *lítost* ascribed to humiliation, resentment, and “special sorrow.” Woods points out that this “special sorrow” is echoed in Kérel’s 1979 French translation (“cette tristesse particulière qu’on ne peut appeler autrement que *lítost*”). Evidently, however, it was not included in the 1987 French version by Kérel that had been reviewed and authenticated by Kundera, where the student merely feels “diminué” (“diminished”), or “humbled.” Thus, the effect of *lítost* itself is diminished, understood as more of an inconvenience than a resentful suffering. The undermined severity of *lítost* is furthered by the student’s flashback to his childhood. Though “sickly” in all versions, only in Heim’s edition is the boy burdened by his mother’s “ever-watchful eye”; in the others, including Fusso’s literal translation of the Czech text, the mother is portrayed as over-protective, but in a sense that suggests a surplus of love and affection (fondness, in Asher’s rendition), not hawk-like surveillance. Finally, while in Heim’s translation the student sinks into “utter, all-encompassing despair” from a mere inability to out-swim his girlfriend, in Kérel’s, Asher’s, and even in the Czech original, he more simply “[falls] into despair about himself and his life,” or “felt like despairing of himself and his life.” Evidently, Heim vastly exaggerates the student’s misery and contempt, not adhering to the intended meaning and style of the author’s Czech work. Heim’s indiscretion here allows us to better understand why Kundera had so harshly rejected his rendition of *The Joke*.

Then again, the passage on *lítost* is not exactly easy to translate. By merely

171 Michelle Woods, p. 111.
mentioning *lítost*, let alone dedicating a section to it, Kundera anticipates and complicates the eventual translation process of his work, as the word’s significance lies mainly in its supposed untranslatability. Therefore, the passage on *lítost* is less about *lítost* itself than it is about the elusiveness of comprehension. If no word can ever truly be translated, its context residing fully in a certain language, then Kundera’s mere reference to a particularly difficult idea solidifies this uncertainty. 

Woods points out:

> Writing as an act is a form of translation – by making a choice in placing a word in a certain context with a certain meaning, even though it may contain the trace of other meanings and possibilities of future meanings, the writer acts as a mediator of meaning in much the same way as a translator might. 172

Thus, translation not only dominates Kundera’s oeuvre from outside, but also has “literally permeated his work.” 173 A similar focus on untranslatable words occurs across Kundera’s oeuvre, particularly in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, in which certain sections (called “Words Misunderstood”) are dedicated to describing the complete subjectivity of certain words and concepts. Take “music,” for example. Sabina, a free-spirited painter, views music as unrelenting noise. It reminds her of propaganda tunes that were forced on her during her youth, their upbeat cheerfulness corresponding in no way to her sense of confusion and distress. But Franz, her lover, defines music very differently: “it liberated him from loneliness, introversion, the dust of the library; it opened the door of his body and allowed his soul to step out into

172 Michelle Woods, p. 106.
173 Michelle Woods, p. xi.
the world to make friends.” 174 According to Woods, “via this process” – making clear that words, concepts, and qualities have different meanings for different people - “Kundera defines his own novelistic lexicon, which is a self-conscious definition. Rather than insisting his readers understand the meaning of his words, he insists that the readers understand the mechanisms of positing meaning.” 175 If Kundera had been aiming for definitional accuracy, he would never have written about litost, which (in all versions of the text) cannot be adequately translated or even defined. Instead, he is interested in the amorphous nature of words and definitions, and their overwhelming subjectivity (recall Kundera’s “personal dictionary,” Sixty-three Words, which I mention in the Introduction). He also shows us that through words, one can attempt to translate the utterly untranslatable, if only by highlighting its untranslatability. As the narrator makes clear in the revised French edition and in Asher’s English translation of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, he has looked “in vain in other languages for an equivalent, though [he finds] it difficult to imagine how anyone can understand the human soul without it.” 176 Litost might be impossible to render in any language other than its own, but its universal role in human nature can be posited and understood by any reader, regardless of the changes made to Kundera’s text.


175 Michelle Woods, p. 106.

III. The Added Sentence ...about Adding Sentences

To further explore Kundera’s process of revision, let us look once more at *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera’s most famous novel, which follows four characters living in Prague and Western Europe around the time of the 1968 Russian invasion, probing their minds on issues of politics, sexuality, and existential meaning. Published in French even before it was published in Czech, the novel was translated by Heim into English the same year, and the “authentic” French version, revised by Kundera (originally translated by Kérel in 1984), came out in 1987. Narrating the novel as a fictionalized version of himself, Kundera asserts that the motifs and themes a reader uses to understand his novel are not to be written off as “fictive,” “fabricated,” or “untrue to life.” In *Anna Karenina* (the book Tereza is holding when she meets Tomas, her future husband, for the first time), the title character meets Vronsky, her lover, at the train station, where somebody has just been run over by a train. At the end of the novel, she ends her life by throwing herself under a train.

“This symmetrical composition – the same motif appears at the beginning and at the end – may seem quite ‘novelistic’ to you, and I am willing to agree,” writes Kundera as narrator. But he does not consider novelistic symmetry to be “untrue to life,” since “human lives are composed in precisely such a fashion.” 177 Real life is driven by a series of artful coincidences; fiction is driven by a series of deliberately placed parallels meant to mimic coincidence. Let us consider the following passages of the

They [human lives] are composed like music. Guided by his sense of beauty, an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence (Beethoven’s music, death under a train) into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of the individual’s life. Anna could have chosen another way to take her life. But the motif of death and the railway station, unforgettably bound to the birth of love, enticed her in her hour of despair with its dark beauty. Without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in times of greatest distress (H).178

Elles [les vies humaines] sont composées comme une partition musicale. L’homme, guidé par le sens de la beauté, transforme l’événement fortuit (une musique de Beethoven, une mort dans une gare) en un motif qui va ensuite s’inscrire dans la partition de sa vie. Il y reviendra, le répètera, le modifiera, le développera comme fait le compositeur avec le thème de sa sonate. Anna aurait pu mettre fin à ses jours de tout autre manière. Mais le motif de la gare et de la mort, ce motif inoubliable associe à la naissance de l’amour, l’attirait à l’instant du désespoir par sa sombre beauté. L’homme, à son insu, compose sa vie d’après des lois de la beauté jusque dans les instants du plus profond désespoir (K).179

Heim’s English passage and Kérel’s French passage are virtually identical except for one line, which was evidently added in Kundera’s revisionary steps to make the French version “as authentic as the original”: “Il y reviendra, le répètera, le modifiera, le développera comme fait le compositeur avec le thème de sa sonate.” Roughly, this translates to: “He will return to it, repeat it, modify it, develop it as a composer does with the theme of his sonata,” “it” being the motif that guides one’s life (as well as one’s novel). Thus, where Kundera fuses the material of fiction and reality in The

Unbearable Lightness of Being, there is a striking (though hidden) reference to his own editorial changes. If a composer amends and builds upon his original theme, a novelist creates motifs as a means of fictional organization, and man arranges his life according to fortuitous occurrences, Kundera revisits his work not only thematically (ideas of weight, lightness, and duality of body and soul are recycled throughout his novels), but also literally. The most striking manifestation of his fixation on the development of musical, literary, and real-life thematic motifs is the manner in which he revisits and rewrites his own work.

In adding the sentence in question, Kundera highlights his role as a novelist on two levels. First, he injects himself into the narrative as “I,” reminding us that he is in control. If Tereza views Beethoven’s music and Anna Karenina’s story as motifs that guide her love relationship with Tomas, it is because Kundera made it so. On the second level, we must remember that the added sentence (1987) is only noticeable to one who has carefully compared the several translations of the novel. The four key words – return, repeat, modify, develop – resonate not only as a clarification of man’s use of motif, but also as a reflection of what Kundera is physically doing to his own work. He is literally returning to, modifying, repeating, and developing a key theme in his oeuvre: the emphasis on life’s uncanny novelistic symmetry, which man (whether consciously or not) perpetuates in his daily existence. Thus, the revisions of Kundera’s work embody his process of revision, all while building upon the original text in a way that is virtually undetectable. The added sentence is a manifestation of Kundera’s resolve to modify his creative production, as well as its themes. In The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts, published in 2007 (twenty years after the revised
French version of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, he would declare: “[The novelist] is amazed at the composition he sees taking shape before him: the least detail is important to him, he makes it into a motif and will bring it back in dozens of repetitions, variations, allusions, like a fugue.” 180

III. “Disowning” the Past: Problems of Authenticity

Stanger makes a pertinent argument: if Kundera felt the need to constantly change his work, since his ideas of “authenticity” were always in flux, then why did he not edit accordingly? If the “definitive” French versions contained certain changes, why did he not go back and change them in the Czech originals, which in most cases had not even been published in his own country? “If the changes you have introduced make for a better work, one truer to your deepest aspirations,” Stanger asks the author, “shouldn’t these modifications also be carried into the original-language version, whenever the opportunity arises to reprint that text?” 181 She implies that the changes are “other than purely aesthetic” (instead, political “self-censorship for marketing purposes”). If the revisions in a certain book were for art’s sake, Stanger believes, Kundera would have modified the original Czech text in order to create a comprehensive “original” that was at once new, improved, and artistically complete.

But Kundera, evidently, did not want to amend his original. The definitive French versions are of “equal authenticity to the Czech texts” precisely because they


181 Allison Stanger, p. 99.
have been changed, and have the potential to be changed again at the author’s whim. In updating his novels for Western audiences, Kundera was not “betraying” his original Czech readership, as critics have suggested. Instead, he was merely obeying a constantly evolving impulse to create and recreate, regardless of how ingrained his work already might have been in the public domain. As Nabokov revisited “Mademoiselle O” to reflect his personal growth over the thirty years between the story’s initial and final publications, Kundera felt the need to maintain complete control over the maturation of his novels over time. Perhaps this explains his strange assertion, in the author’s note of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, that “The French translations have become, so to speak, more faithful to the Czech originals than the originals themselves.”\textsuperscript{182} The “originals” of which Kundera speaks are not real but ideal, almost mythical, residing not in the Czech texts themselves, but in the writer’s ever-evolving artistic input that continues to shape his oeuvre. Thus, if the revised French texts are “more faithful to the originals than the originals themselves,” it is because they are more faithful to Kundera’s disposition at the time of revision, while the “originals” represent the writer’s past means of expression. It is almost as if, in continually rewriting his work, Kundera wishes not to remain faithful to the “originals,” but to forget them entirely and replace them with new, improved versions that reflect his changing sensibility.

Considering Kundera’s unique view of authenticity, Stanger also takes issue with the lack of a single authoritative version of his novels, particularly The Joke. She

\textsuperscript{182} Milan Kundera, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, trans. Aaron Asher, p. 313.
asks: “if a reader would like to experience Žert/The Joke/La Plaisanterie as the author intended, what text should he or she read?” 183 If the author himself cannot pinpoint a particular definitive version of a host of definitive versions, then is it even possible for a reader to experience The Joke “authentically” in any one of its forms? And if so, which one? Since Kundera revises his novels repeatedly, there is no way for a reader, whether now or in the future, to experience The Joke without reading all of its myriad translations, which is a scholarly instead of a casual pursuit (and therefore not directed at Kundera’s general readership). Peter Kussi, who translated a number of Kundera’s novels from Czech to English, sums it up beautifully: “The perfect Kundera novel is the Idea, which is never fully realized and furnished…Each translation… has its own character, its linguistic and cultural constructions, so that the ‘genuine’ novel exists only as a cumulative approximation of all the possible translations or as an ideal in the author’s mind” 184 According to Beaujour, “Because self-translation and the (frequently) attendant reworking makes a text retrospectively incomplete, both versions become avatars of a hypothetical text in which the versions in both languages would rejoin one another and be reconciled.” 185 Just as a full comprehension of Nabokov’s “Mademoiselle O” requires an examination of all versions (since the “original” had never been truly completed), one must examine Kundera’s novels in all of their translations in order to, as Stanger writes, “experience Žert/The Joke/La Plaisanterie as the author intended,” since he intended something

183 Allison Stanger, p. 98.
184 Kussi in Michelle Woods, p. 62.
185 Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour, p. 112.
different while preparing each new translation and rewrite. If Kundera’s “originals” are akin to ideal forms that can never be reproduced, and if his oeuvre develops and becomes more “authentic” through constant revision, then it seems like an oversimplification of Kundera’s art to expect to read an entirely “definitive” version of any particular novel.

To quote Woods, “Rewriting is not an afterthought for Kundera, it is a modus operandi.” Like Nabokov, Kundera was heavily preoccupied with revisiting his work over time. According to Michael Scammell, who translated Nabokov’s last Russian novel, *The Gift*, into English, Nabokov “wanted to spare himself the temptation of rewriting his early Russian books in English instead of simply translating them.” Still, Nabokov, like Kundera, assumed full control over the translation and rewriting of his work. Scammell recalls his correspondence with Nabokov’s wife Véra, who continually stressed her husband’s desire for “as close an adherence to the original as possible.” And, of course, Nabokov reserved all rights to alter the work as he wished, in what resembled “a creative reworking” of Scammell’s literal translation. Likewise, reflecting on his experience as Nabokov’s translator, Dmitri Nabokov writes, “He and I had an inviolable contract. I was to furnish as literal a translation as possible, with which he could take whatever liberties

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186 Michelle Woods, p. 62.
188 Michael Scammell, p. 54.
189 Michael Scammell, p. 58.
he pleased.” 190 Kundera, too, considered rewriting and revisiting to be as artistically challenging as writing itself. In Testaments Betrayed, he declared, “Deleting a paragraph calls for even more talent, cultivation, and creative power than writing it does” 191 However, Kundera remained secretive (and frankly untruthful) about the changes he had made to his own work, even those that were easy to detect. He was quick and willing to speak of revising the French translations of his novels, but never to take responsibility for the obvious changes that were enacted. Even more bizarre, Kundera did not simply remain quiet about the changes; he lied, insisting over and over again that his newly authentic novels did not deviate from the original texts at all -- even that some of them, like the originals, had been completed in entirety in the late 1960’s.

Kundera not only erased chunks of his novels and denied their erasure, but also attempted to hide his bibliography from his reading public. We recall that Nabokov, in response to Walter Arndt’s critique of his metrical translations of famous Russian poetry, explained that these “lame paraphrases” should no longer be considered an example of his work (see page 61 of this paper). Kundera took this self-censorship a step further. In 1970, all of his work was banned in Czechoslovakia, published exclusively in Western Europe and North America. When Western audiences became interested in publishing the writer’s earlier work - including poetry, plays, short stories, and literary criticism – he refused to allow it to be translated from


191 Kundera in Michelle Woods, p. 63.
the Czech. Even when the ban was lifted in Czechoslovakia in 1989, Kundera resisted any efforts to reprint any of his books. The first work published in his homeland since the ban was *The Joke* in 1991. Here, in the author’s note, Kundera declares:

Publish my books. Yes. But which ones? There are two conceptions of an author’s work, or “oeuvre.” Some consider as oeuvre everything the author wrote… Or, the oeuvre is only that which an author, on balance, considers valuable enough to include. I have always been a vehement partisan of this second idea. To me, it is immoral to offer readers something the author knows to be imperfect and which no longer gives him any pleasure.

According to my thinking, that which one might call my “oeuvre” has nothing to do with (1) work that is immature (juvenile); (2) work that was not successfully completed; (3) work that is solely a product of circumstance.192

Under the umbrella of “immaturity,” Kundera files all of his musical compositions (“until I was twenty-five, they were much more important to me than literature”), his “theoretical monograph,” a book of literary criticism, on Bohemian writer Vladislav Vančura, and a play called *The Keeper of the Keys*. Under “unfinished,” he includes another play (only “a draft, a sketch”) and three stories that appeared in the original collection *Laughable Loves*, but had later been eliminated. Finally, under “strictly circumstantial,” Kundera lists his “polito-cultural” writings and the criticism that he had written in French on thinkers such as Voltaire, Kafka, and Bacon. The only works, in short, that Kundera wanted to remain a part of his bibliography were his novels and one of his plays, *Jacques et son maître*, an homage to Diderot based on the latter’s *Jacques le fataliste*.193

192 Fred Misurella, p. 163.
193 Fred Misurella, pp. 163-4.
In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera writes of a main character, Mirek: “His connection to life was that of a sculptor to his statue or a novelist to his novel. It is an inviolable right of a novelist to rework his novel. If the opening does not please him, he can rewrite it or delete it.” 194 In rewriting not only his novels but also his bibliography, it can be argued that Kundera was attempting to detach himself from his early career by canceling past creative efforts with revised updates that reflected his growth as a writer. The past was relevant only in how it informed the writer’s work; as time went on, updated versions of each novel were necessary from an artistic and practical standpoint.

IV. Faithfulness to Style: The Importance of Repetition

In my first section on Kundera (*The Joke: A Brief Background*), I discuss the writer’s criticism of translations of his work, among them Marcel Aymonin’s 1968 French translation of *The Joke*, the English translations of the novel published between 1969 and 1970, and finally Heim’s version, published in 1982, which Kundera had initially warmly endorsed. I even testify to Kundera’s hypocrisy, since his insistence on rewriting his work was repeatedly countered by what Woods calls an “utter objection” to textual changes made by others. Kundera continually claimed that translators were not being “faithful” to him and to his original texts. But having explored the writer’s unconventional idea (rather, ideal) of authenticity, I ask the following question: what did he mean by “faithful,” and how was this “faithfulness” to be achieved, if at all?

In *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera compares numerous translations of particular passages of Kafka’s *The Castle*, criticizing the tendency of translators to replace repeated words (very common in the original German texts) with varied synonyms. In a section called “A General Remark on the Problem of Authority,” Kundera asserts: “Supreme authority, for a translator, should be the personal style of the author. But the majority of translators obey another authority: that of common style, of ‘good French’ (or good German, good English, etc).”

According to Kundera, translators who clean up Kafka’s “uncluttered” prose in the hopes of conforming to a widely accepted standard of style are unfaithful to the writer’s creative impulse. In the same way, Aymonin’s 1968 French translation of *The Joke*, which injected the novel with a “beau style,” betrayed not only the original text, but also Kundera’s characteristically simple way of writing, which carries over to all of his novels. “Every author of value,” Kundera argues, “transgresses the ‘beau style,’ and it is in this transgression that we find the originality (and, overall, raison d’être) of his art. The translator’s first effort should be to understand this transgression.”

Kundera’s repetition of “transgression” three times in this sentence prefaces a larger discussion on the importance of repetition, and the impertinence of translators who attempt to eliminate it. Overall, he condemns the “reflex of synonymization”: the urge

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196 It should be noted that the majority of quotations made from Kundera’s *Testaments Betrayed* (*Les testaments trahis*) come from Linda Asher’s English translation from the French. In this section, however, I found my own translations from the French to be slightly more accurate than Asher’s, hence my reference to the original French text.

to replace an author’s repeated words with a more colorful, involved vocabulary. Of many examples, the most compelling involves Heidegger. Kundera asks us to imagine how his seminal opus would be compromised if a translator, “to avoid repetition, used instead of the word ‘das Sein’ one time ‘being,’ then ‘existence,’ then ‘life,’ then again ‘human life,’ and finally ‘being-there.’” In short, an author’s repetition serves both a “semantic and logical” role. Repeated words and concepts have added value, often acting as “key words” that point to the novel’s major themes. More importantly, repetition speaks to the writer’s individual style, and therefore must be preserved under all circumstances.

To quote Woods, Kundera’s main concern regarding translations was not that they enacted “an absolute transference of meaning between his different language texts but rather a consistency of language use.” In correspondences with his translators, he continually stressed the importance of preserving not only his sentence structure and vocabulary, but also his exact punctuation, once leaving a publisher who changed his semicolons to periods. This explains his frustration over Aymonin’s French translation of The Joke and a later English version that failed to keep the “infinite” quality of a certain passage, breaking it up into smaller sentences. Unfortunately, Kundera’s Western publishers (and, in turn, the translators they hired) were intent on providing “fluent and accessible” translations for their reading

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198 Milan Kundera, Les testaments trahis, p. 130.
201 Caleb Crain, p. 492.
public, not strange specimens of unconventional style. This, to Kundera, was a mark of ultimate betrayal – and understandably so, since only when rereading his own original texts years after they had been published did he recognize his own fixation on certain “key words” that had been emphasized in repetition, among them “lightness,” “kitsch,” and “forgetting.” If, to quote Woods, “Kundera claims to have fully realized his own aesthetic only when revisiting the translations of his novels,” it is clear that his repetitions were valuable and extraordinarily insightful, not to be removed on any account by translators looking to achieve “beau style.” It is the repetition of “key words” in Kundera’s work that facilitates his process of “returning to, repeating, modifying, and developing” the very motif of repetition across his oeuvre.

In Nabokov’s foreword to his translation of Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time,* we find a similar mistrust of “beau style”:

…”We must dismiss, once and for all the conventional notion that a translation ‘should read smoothly’ and ‘should not sound like a translation’ (to quote the would-be compliments, addressed to vague versions, by genteel reviewers who never have and never will read the original texts). In a point of fact, any translation that does not sound like a translation is bound to be inexact upon inspection; while, on the other hand, the only virtue of a good translation is faithfulness and completeness.”

Like Nabokov, Kundera repeatedly asserts that the “flow” of a translated text in its target language should never be considered paramount to the author’s style. But if Nabokov stresses the importance of faithfulness and completeness, Kundera seems to

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place all his emphasis on the former. Recall that in the author’s note in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Kundera asserts: “My intervention in these French versions did not result in *variants of my original texts*. I was led to it only by a wish for *accuracy*. 204 Considering his unwavering defense of an author’s style, it is conceivable that by accuracy he refers to the preservation of said style. Indeed, in discussions with his translators and publishers, Kundera’s limited grasp of the English language forced him to judge English translations of his work through their accuracy alone: the usage (and repetition) of certain key words, the sentence structure, and even the punctuation. 205 For example, in the preface to the fifth English version of *The Joke* (1992), revised by the author, Kundera criticizes Heim’s 1982 text as follows:

> From the start of Part Three, I had the increasingly strong impression that what I read was not my text: often the words were remote from what I had written; the syntax differed, too; there was inaccuracy in all the reflective passages; irony had been transformed into satire; unusual turns of phrase had been obliterated; the distinctive voices of the characters-narrators had been altered to the extent of altering their personalities… 206

Besides a momentary focus on tone and characterization, Kundera’s main concern is that, in failing to preserve his style in the English translation of *The Joke*, Heim had

205 Michelle Woods, p. 43.
not been “faithful.” Far worse than betraying Kundera’s “original” text, which was subject to change at any time, Heim had betrayed Kundera himself.

V. Fidelity & Betrayal: Reclaiming Control

As the theme of repetition explored in The Unbearable Lightness of Being represents Kundera’s process of revisitation, a discussion of fidelity and betrayal in the same novel functions to highlight the writer’s personal involvement with the “betrayal” of his oeuvre by translators. In a section of the book conveniently titled “Fidelity and Betrayal,” Kundera explores what both terms mean to a particular couple, Franz and Sabina (the same whose views on music we looked at previously). For Franz, fidelity is everything – the highest virtue. He was faithful to his mother until and after her death and has been faithful to his wife out of an idealized respect for the “woman” in her. When he leaves his wife at last, he vows to be faithful to his mistress, Sabina. To Sabina, however, betrayal, which means “breaking ranks and going off into the unknown,” is a main source of comfort. Ever since childhood, she longed to betray the forces around her – her overprotective father, Communism and socialist realism, her husband, and successive lovers. But in following a path of continual betrayal, Sabina is forced to “betray her own betrayal.” Of this vicious circle, Kundera writes, “The first betrayal is irreparable. It calls forth a chain reaction of further betrayals, each of which takes us farther away from the point of our original betrayal.” Taking into account the fact that The Unbearable Lightness of Being was first written in 1984, more than a decade after Kundera’s initial translation issues

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with *The Joke*, it is very likely that his editorial struggles with unfaithful translators had provoked a more psychologically charged exploration of the theme as it related to his characters. The original betrayal of Kundera’s work, Aymonin’s French translation of *The Joke* in 1969, can be applied to the cyclical nature ascribed to betrayal in the novel, in the sense that it paved the way for renditions of Kundera’s work that presented his story in a palatable form for Western audiences, but not respecting his original structure and repetition.

The issue of betrayal also figures largely in Kundera’s tendency to revise not only his novels, but his own bibliography as well, as explored earlier. In particular, he rejected association with his poetry, which revealed past ties to Czech Communism. Woods points out that Kundera’s refusal of his poetry is often perceived as an “attempt to airbrush his own past” – to protect his reputation first with Czech readers and then with Western Europeans and Americans. But when accused of having disowned and deserted his poetry, Kundera chose another word. “I did not leave poetry,” he wrote, “I betrayed it,” just as one might betray a religion. More specifically, he had betrayed verse form for the prosaic form of the novel, having grown to resent the “lyricization of the Terror” (“man’s propensity to beautify horror”) that poetry from the Communist era in Czechoslovakia had come to reflect. Kundera wished to sever ties with his poetry not only for reasons of political reputation, but also for the sake of artistic integrity, as he found the “ideological orthodoxy” of his

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208 Kundera in Michelle Woods, p. 92.
earlier work to be “innately linked to [its] ugliness.” 209 To be sure, Kundera’s suppression of past production seems extreme and unjust, since the novels, poetry, and criticism that he wished to reject had already been in the public domain for decades. But if denying the place of past works in his oeuvre signals a “betrayal” of his prior literary production, it also represents the highest form of fidelity to himself—a close adherence to his desire to update his oeuvre (and his artistic persona) over time. For Kundera, an author’s work never belongs to its readers; it always belongs to its creator.

Reflecting on the “more simplified, more mutilated” British translation of The Joke that had appeared in New York in the late sixties, Kundera wrote in the preface to Heim’s 1982 translation of the novel, “I was powerless. Contact with the outside world was becoming more and more difficult in occupied Prague, and what with house searches and arrests, I had other things to worry about.” 210 Unable to assert himself through correspondence with the publishers and translators of his book, Kundera had virtually no control over what happened to his work, and this greatly perturbed him. In Testaments Betrayed, he recounts a similar problem in relation to Franz Kafka, whose publisher had only agreed to publish The Metamorphosis if the author shortened it. Kafka “could bear the idea of not being published at all, but the idea of being published and mutilated he felt unbearable.” 211 Kundera knew that his works were being read in the West, but was equally certain that they were being read

209 Michelle Woods, p. 93.
210 Milan Kundera, Preface to The Joke, p. xv.
in forms different from what he intended. He cites the examples of Stravinsky and Beckett, both of whom made an immense effort to give their work “definite form, thoroughly worked out and supervised by the author.” “It is as if [they] wanted,” Kundera writes, “to protect their work not only against the current practice of distortion… as if they hoped to provide an example, the ultimate example of the supreme concept of author: one who demands the complete realization of his aesthetic wishes.” 212 To Kundera, Stravinsky and Beckett had accomplished the ideal: remaining in complete control of their work as long as they lived.

It can be argued that Kundera’s continual emphasis on and assertion of authorial control is an attempt to exercise the mere ability to publish his work as he wishes – something that he did with great difficulty in Prague, where his books were banned for nearly two decades. In revising and revisiting as he pleased, Kundera essentially reclaimed the power to dictate how his work would be received, a right of which a large number of his characters were deprived. Consider, for example, *The Joke*. Ludvik is a college student in Prague in the late forties following Czechoslovakia’s liberation from the Nazis and its transition into Communism. When his love interest, Marketa, attends a two-week Party training session in the country, leaving him behind without hesitation, Ludvik writes her a postcard meant to “hurt, shock, and confuse her.” It goes as follows: “Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky!” 213 All that comes of the

212 Milan Kundera, Testaments Betrayed, p. 274.
213 Milan Kundera, The Joke (Definitive Version), trans. Aaron Asher, p. 34.
postcard at first is a “brief and banal” reply from Marketa, until the District Party Headquarters at the Communist League of Students summons Ludvik for an interrogation. As it turns out, Marketa had handed over the postcard during an interrogation at the training camp, its contents were taken as counter-revolutionary, and its “dissident” writer barred from the League of Students. Ludvik attempts to convince his interrogators that the postcard was meant merely as a joke (“Comrades,” he protests, “it was meant to be funny”), but in vain.\(^{214}\) He loses his right to continue his studies at the university and is forced into a work brigade, where he labors in the mines for several years. In the author’s preface to Heim’s 1982 translation (the 4\(^{th}\) English version) of *The Joke*, Kundera shares a personal anecdote regarding the publication of the novel that seems eerily parallel to Ludvik’s. Reflecting on the first editions of *The Joke* published in Prague, he explains how, following the Russian invasion, the novel was “banned, removed from all public libraries, erased from the history of Czech literature; its author was named in official documents as one of the initiators of the ‘counterrevolution,’ deprived of the right to work, and finally forced to emigrate.”\(^{215}\) Thus, the novel was condemned by the very censorship it explored; the book became a physical manifestation of the themes treated within.

*The Unbearable Lightness of Being* also deals with censorship in a manner that is largely applicable to Kundera’s insistence on authorial control. Tomas, a gifted surgeon, follows an ongoing debate in Czech society in the late sixties: who is to


blame for the Communist atrocities that had transpired in the past decades, if those
who called themselves Communists had initially intended to create a paradise on
earth, and claimed to have been unaware of their compliance in the resulting waves of
injustice? Tomas concludes that, regardless of one’s level of awareness, one cannot
be pardoned on the mere claim of ignorance. “Is a fool on the throne relieved of all
responsibility merely because he is a fool?” Tomas asks.216 He draws a connection to
the story of Oedipus, who was unaware that he was sleeping with his own mother, but
did not try to convince himself that ignorance equaled innocence, and blinded himself
before leaving Thebes forever. After ruminating on the topic for weeks, Tomas
submits his thoughts on the Oedipus analogy to a weekly newspaper. The submission
is accepted, and he is invited to the editorial office to make a small change in word
order. But when the text is published, Tomas is not at all satisfied:

They had considered it necessary to ask him to the editorial offices to approve
a change in word order, but then, without asking him, shortened his text by so
much that it was reduced to its basic thesis (making it too schematic and
aggressive). He didn’t like it anymore. 217

A few months after Tomas’ extract is published, the chief surgeon at the hospital
notifies him that if he does not retract his argument, his job will be at stake (the
Russians have just invaded Czechoslovakia, and censorship has escalated). Tomas
realizes that there is a balance to reckon with: he must either remain faithful to his
honor (“which consisted in his refusing to retract what he had said”) or to “what he

had come to call the meaning of his life” – his work in medicine. Finally, disgusted by the complicit smiles he begins to receive from co-workers (those who had been forced to retract statements in the past, and saw Tomas’ retraction as a mark of shared honor; those who had never retracted, and would enjoy seeing Tomas betray his honor), he chooses not to take back his argument, and is forced to leave his job.

But there is another important consideration: the passage is not even how Tomas intended for it to appear. The omission of certain words has not just made the passage shorter, but has greatly compromised the integrity of his argument. This is why, seeing how his original text was altered, Tomas decides that he “doesn’t like it anymore.” Reflecting on how the editors had “amputated a good third of the text,” he even admits to his boss that it “couldn’t be any less important” to him.\(^{218}\) Kundera echoes this concern in *Testaments Betrayed*: “Publishing what the author deleted is the same act of rape as censoring what he decided to retain.”\(^{219}\) In regards to the suppression of his past works, he insists, “To me, it is immoral to offer readers something the author knows to be imperfect and which no longer gives him any pleasure,”\(^{220}\) echoing Tomas’ assertion that he “doesn’t like [his piece] anymore” because it has been dramatically shortened. Thus, Tomas’ run-in with censorship reveals how the content of Kundera’s fiction overlaps with the very real implications of his own editorial qualms. In fact, we might better appreciate Kundera’s insistence on managing and revising the translations of his novels, as well as effectively

\(^{218}\) Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, p. 179.


\(^{220}\) Fred Misurella, p. 163.
rewriting them as he saw fit, through a consideration of Ludvik and Tomas, who must accept that their words have been misconstrued with no space for appeal. Not only can they not edit their writing; they cannot even possess it (the “joke” postcard has long been confiscated; Tomas’ article belongs to the newspaper and to the authorities). Kundera, on the other hand, exercises the right to edit his work as he wishes, thereby reclaiming a power that his characters do not have. In Testaments Betrayed, he declares: “If a work emanates from an individual and his uniqueness, it is logical that this unique being, the author, should possess all rights over the thing that emanates exclusively from him.” Indeed, to edit his work as he pleased seems like the ultimate rebellion against the type of censorship represented in his novels. As we saw with issues of repetition, betrayal, and authorial control, Kundera’s themes are relevant not only in and of themselves, as literary motifs, but as guiding forces in his own writing process.

It is a cliché, Kundera writes, to detect “a perfect correspondence between lived experience and literary expression.” He (as well as Nabokov) condemns the practice of reading novels to glean information about an author’s life, particularly one’s love affairs or political opinions. In a 1985 interview with Olga Carlisle, he insisted, “No character in my novels is a self-portrait, nor are any of my characters the portrait of a living person,” likening such representations to a totalitarian violation of privacy. But one cannot deny the clear correspondence between

222 Milan Kundera, Testaments Betrayed, p. 270.
223 Olga Carlisle, “A Talk with Milan Kundera.”
Kundera’s characters’ struggles with misconstrued writing and the author’s own.

Rather than aiding a superficial look into the writer’s personal life, the investigation that we have undertaken helps to illuminate an artistic mindset of revisitation and authorial control that is crucial to understanding the formation of Kundera’s oeuvre.
Chapter 4

Persona-Making in Paratext: Nabokov and Kundera as Émigré Writers

I. Condemnation of Kafkology, Formation of Kunderology

If Kundera seems intent on conveying the importance of authorial control, he does so most efficiently in *Testaments Betrayed*. The commentary is built around Kafka, the majority of whose work was published when Max Brod, the writer’s close friend, refused to obey his request to burn his manuscripts after his death. Whether Kafka had truly wanted his works destroyed or not, Kundera refutes the common supposition (shared by Brod) that “wanting to destroy one’s work is a pathological act” that should be rectified by postmortem publication. According to Kundera, an author’s work is nobody’s but his own; he alone has the right to dictate its form, content, and publication, and his wishes should always be respected above everyone else’s – even after his death. In publishing not only Kafka’s incomplete novels but also his personal letters, including the “testamentary” letters for which Kundera names *Testaments Betrayed*, Brod helped to “create the model for disobedience to dead friends; a judicial precedent for those who would circumvent an author’s last wish or divulge his most intimate secret.”

224 Dmitri Nabokov, incidentally, would act

upon this same impulse. In 2009, he decided to publish *The Original of Laura*, the unfinished novel that his father had been working on at the time of his death in 1977, and had requested that his wife and son destroy. Véra Nabokov, who had once prevented her husband from setting the manuscript of *Lolita* aflame, procrastinated for years over whether to publish his unfinished work; when she died in 1991, the dilemma became Dmitri’s alone. Finally, acknowledging that the novel represented “the most concentrated distillation” of his father’s creativity, Dmitri published it, going against his father’s last wishes.²²⁵

In *Testaments Betrayed*, Kundera describes how Brod had not only published all of Kafka’s works (against his will, literally), but had also “created the image of Kafka and that of his work,” painting the author as a dejected, impotent hermit, while in reality he was sociable, relatively successful in literary circles, and known to frequent brothels.²²⁶ In virtually canonizing the writer, Brod undermined the artistic quality of Kafka’s prose, focusing instead on a mythic construction of his persona. The result is that “the author whom readers know by the name Kafka is no longer Kafka but the Kafkologized Kafka” -- “the patron saint of the neurotic, the depressive, the anorexic, the feeble.”²²⁷ To view Kafka’s work as evidence of his supposed character (frustrated, forlorn, and sickly) is to ignore the nuances of his novelistic


form and the distinct place his books hold in the tradition of modern art.

But as much as Kundera denounces Brod’s cult of “Kafkology,” he seems fascinated by the latter’s ability to create a compelling, marketable identity for Kafka that inspired an enormous following for the writer’s works for decades after his death. “Establishing a body of work,” Kundera writes, “means presenting it, interpreting it.”228 If Brod presents and interprets Kafka’s work by portraying the writer as a man whose psychological state reflects the chaos of his novels, it can be argued that Kundera creates a similar intrigue of his own – a type of self-imposed “Kunderology.” In part, this “Kunderology” dictates his need to obfuscate the changes made in his body of work, thereby retaining an even higher level of control, possibly to avoid the fate of a writer like Kafka, who in his view became the mascot of a personality ideal rather than the representative of a solid artistic oeuvre.

Curiously, in his discussion of Kafka in Testaments Betrayed, Kundera never mentions his own ongoing struggle with unfaithful translators. But it is evident that he is afraid of suffering Kafka’s fate, losing control over the presentation of his oeuvre and of his persona, being “Kunderologized” by someone else after his death.

If Brod fashions Kafka’s “Kafkologized” persona primarily through biographical material on the writer, Kundera does it mainly though his paratext -- prefaces, author’s notes, forewords, afterwords, and other parts excluded from the novel proper (literary theorist Gérard Genette includes titles, epigraphs, and intertitles in a consideration of paratext). According to Woods, Kundera’s prefaces in particular

228 Milan Kundera, Testaments Betrayed, p. 40.
function on multiple levels: first, as a seal of authorial approval of the work that follows; second, as explanations of the choice leading up to said approval; third, as an exposition of Kundera’s critical analysis of his work; and fourth, as a means of attributing “authenticity” to a particular work (explaining which edition is to be taken as the most authentic at any point in time). 229 Genette maintains that the authorial preface “has as its chief function to ensure that the text reads properly,” but first and foremost to ensure that the text gets read in the first place. 230 Since paratext is deliberately created to “surround and extend” the text proper, it represents not only how the author wishes his text to be portrayed, but also how he wishes to portray himself. 231 Furthermore, a preface enables a writer to address a certain audience at a certain time (and not others), “allowing a level of flexibility and elusiveness.” 232

Indeed, Kundera proved more candid in the prefaces to Czech editions of his novel than in English or French translations. For example, his discussion of the reconstitution of his oeuvre (of which we spoke twice earlier) appeared in the preface to the 1989 Czech version of The Joke – the first edition of Kundera’s work to be published in Czechoslovakia after the ban was lifted in 1989. Since Western European and American audiences had never known about Kundera’s earlier works to begin with, they did not need to be informed of their suppression. Similarly, in the

229 Michelle Woods, p. 84.
231 Gérard Genette, p. 1.
232 Michelle Woods, p. 84.
author’s note to the 1993 Czech edition of *Immortality*, Kundera is “fully candid” about having rewritten his work over time, claiming that there were three originating versions of each novel: the manuscript, the Sixty-Eight Publishers version, and the definitive French version – a claim that he never makes in the prefaces to the French and English translations of his work.233 (Recall the author’s note to Asher’s translation of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, where Kundera claims that the definitive versions exhibit “no variants” of the original texts). Perhaps he is more candid in the Czech versions because he feels that he has to be. As Woods points out, Kundera considered writing in French as a form of release, admitting that the loss of his Czech readership was actually an advantage, since he no longer had a public with specific expectations.234

Regarding Kundera’s tendency to differentiate the messages in his paratext, Woods asks: “Does he privilege one audience over another?” 235 I would argue that the word “privilege” here is inappropriate, and should perhaps be replaced by “tailor.” In introducing and essentially trying to sell his books, Kundera naturally had to keep his audience in mind, in order to place the novel in its appropriate context. A Czech reader would not need a description of the horrors of censorship; an American reader would not appreciate a discussion of the pro-Communist poetry that Kundera had decided to “betray.” To the extent that Kundera’s paratext not only introduces (or closes) each novel but also helps to present the author to distinct subgroups of

233 Michelle Woods, p. 84.
234 Michelle Woods, p. 117.
235 Michelle Woods, p. 85.
readership, it can be considered an integral tool of self-fashioning and thus an extension of the novelist’s oeuvre.

II. An Émigré, an Artist

To better explore how Kundera portrays himself in his paratext, it will be useful to compare the prefaces of the two English translations of The Joke published in the United States: the fifth edition in 1982 and the sixth in 1992. First, consider the preface to the 1982 translation, where Kundera opens with an anecdote: several years earlier, during a television panel devoted to his work, someone had called The Joke “a major indictment of Stalinism,” to which Kundera had replied, “Spare me your Stalinism, please. The Joke is a love story!” 236 After recounting this story, Kundera proceeds to describe the book’s publication and translation history, namely that it had been banned and he, its author, “deprived of the right to work, and finally forced to emigrate.”237 Kundera also references the preface that Louis Aragon, a novelist and member of the French Communist Party, had written for the French translation of The Joke several years before, in 1968. Other than declaring The Joke “one of the greatest novels of the century,” Aragon had given a rather grim prognosis on the future of Kundera’s country. In the 1982 preface, Kundera interacts with Aragon’s pessimism (which had been expressed several years before), describing the main issue at stake “behind the political terminology” of the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia:


237 Milan Kundera, Preface to The Joke, p. xiii.
[It was] nothing less than a shift in the borders between two civilizations: the Russian imperium had once and for all conquered a piece of the West, a piece of Europe… together with the other countries of Central Europe… (The fact that the countries in question have belonged to the history of the West for six or seven centuries longer than the United States has been forgotten).  

Painting the history of the Russian invasion this way -- as the engulfment of “Western” Czechoslovakia by the “Eastern” Soviet land -- Kundera simultaneously aligns himself with his American readers (in insisting that he, too, is from the “West”) and creates a gulf between them, highlighting that his “West” has been forgotten as such, and that he has seen firsthand a political phenomenon that American readers have only read about. Despite Kundera’s warning not to read a political commentary into the novel, he repeatedly stresses having been deeply affected by Communist injustice. For one thing, he repeatedly presents *The Joke* as his sole reason for leaving his country, when in fact he did not leave Czechoslovakia until 1975, seven years after the novel was first published. This slight obfuscation of facts seems to point to Kundera’s brand of “Kunderology,” since it is clear that he is aiming to present *The Joke* as not only popular (it had been translated into “all the languages of European countries not occupied by Russia, and Japanese and Hebrew as well” in 1968 and 1969), but also dangerous and forbidden – and therefore more attractive to an American audience. Even more, he points out that the English translations were originally inadequate (indeed, “appalling”), requiring Kundera’s expert revision. The effect is that the American reader is convinced that he is holding the most authentic, correct rendition of a book that has been presented as the author’s sole reason for

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leaving his homeland.

At a particularly striking moment in the 1982 preface, Kundera writes that the book had “coincided with a time when the combined inanity of ideological dictatorship (in the Communist countries) and journalistic oversimplification (in the West) was able to prevent a work of art from telling its own truth in its own words.”

Thus, he presents himself as a writer who is being constantly compromised: first in his own country, where to exercise free speech is to risk exile or worse, and then by American publishers, for whom the marketing and selling of books take precedence over all else. Kundera seems to be saying that, in producing *The Joke*, he was forced to sacrifice the integrity of his work not only in publishing for a Czech audience, but also in publishing for an American one. Therefore, in the preface to the 1982 translation of *The Joke*, Kundera not only introduces the text but also fashions himself as a worldly, intellectual “Other” who, having seen firsthand the horrors of Stalinism in his country (boldly likened to a “Biafra of the spirit” by François Aragon), is equipped to tell a stunning tale that takes place under Communism. In short, the book is intriguing even before the reader starts reading it, and so is Kundera’s émigré persona. Recall that to Genette, the authorial preface “has as its chief function to ensure that the text reads properly.”

Ironically, while Kundera warns his reader against reading *The Joke* as a political commentary, the persona he constructs for himself in the 1982 preface seems largely dependent on his experience

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240 Gérard Genette, p. 197.
under an oppressive Communist regime.

The preface to the 1992 translation of *The Joke* provides a stark contrast. Since this translation, revised by the author, had been rescued from Heim’s alleged betrayal, its preface focuses less on a presentation of the book’s political history and more on issues of translation and revision. While in 1982 Kundera presents himself as a daring émigré who risked his life for his fiction, in 1992 he focuses more on his vulnerability as a foreign writer than on the success of his novel abroad. “Living in a country occupied by the Russian army,” he writes, “deprived of my passport and so without any possibility of leaving, I found it very difficult to defend myself [regarding the poor British translations of *The Joke*] (He merely wrote, “I was powerless,” in 1982).” 241 242 Kundera proceeds to describe the first English translation, the second, and the third – all of which fell short from what the author had hoped to convey. In fact, my discussion of the English translations in my first section on Kundera (The Joke: A Brief History) derives from the preface to the 1992 translation. If in 1982 Kundera seems to radiate an aura of triumphant pride after finding Heim to translate what became the “first valid and authentic version of a book that tells of rape and has itself so often been violated,” 243 in the 1992 preface he describes having been “betrayed” by Heim. From one preface to the next, it is clear that Kundera’s hopes have been deflated, and his experience with Communist censorship has taken a backseat to a discussion of translator fidelity and aesthetic revisitation. Seemingly, he

241 Milan Kundera, Preface to *The Joke (Definitive Version)*, trans. Aaron Asher, p. vii
has modified his agenda, trusting his 1992 American audience to be more accepting of *The Joke* as an artistic work than as a political commentary, willing to view the author’s vulnerability as an author rather than as an émigré. This notion recalls a quotation from Nabokov that I provide in Chapter One: “Any genuine writer emigrates into his art and abides there.”²⁴⁴ In the 1982 preface to *The Joke*, Kundera seems to be overcompensating for his foreignness through elevated language and self-praise. But in 1992 he has retreated into the more basic elements of his writing, namely his preoccupation with translation.

III. Obfuscation and Revelation

Still, if Kundera gives a thorough publication and translation history of *The Joke*, it is nowhere near as precise as that which Nabokov gives in his preface to *Speak, Memory* (1967). In particular, he provides a detailed background of the story that had inspired the collection, “Mademoiselle O.” By simply reading the preface, an American reader picking up Nabokov’s autobiography for the first time learns that “Mademoiselle O” was written in French “thirty years ago in Paris,” published in *Mesures*. The reader is told of the author’s “migration” to America in 1940, “Mademoiselle O”’s translation into English first by Hilda Ward, and its republication in two anthologies of Nabokov’s stories: *Nine Stories* (1947) and *Nabokov’s Dozen* (1958-1960, in four different editions). Beyond a comprehensive outline of the trajectory of Mademoiselle’s story’s from French to English and from

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Mesures to Speak, Memory, Nabokov provides his reader with a precise publication history of all of the chapters of the autobiography, including the exact dates and places of publication as well as the author’s disposition at the time (Chapters four, six, seven, and nine, published in The New Yorker between March and September 1948, “had been written in Cambridge, Mass., at a time of great mental and physical stress”).245 The preface encompasses everything from a discussion of the book’s title (Nabokov had initially preferred Speak, Mnemosyne, but was told that it would be too difficult for old ladies at the bookstore to pronounce), his process of translating it into Russian (Drugie Berega), and finally his reasons for revisiting the memoir over time. He even describes some of the ways he has modified Speak, Memory from its original form, namely an “amplification” of his father’s biography. In short, Nabokov’s preface to his autobiography reveals a strong dedication to openness, whereas Kundera, particularly in the author’s notes to the translations done by Asher from the French, displays a tendency to hide.

We also see Nabokov’s openness in the prefaces to the English translations of two of his novels. In the preface to the 1959 English translation of Invitation to a Beheading (first published in 1936), Nabokov shares the origins of the text: everything from the original Russian title to the history of how and when it was composed. He explains having written the novel “exactly a quarter of a century ago in Berlin, some fifteen years after escaping from the Bolshevist regime, and just before

245 Vladimir Nabokov, Speak, Memory, p. 10.
the Nazi regime reached its full volume of welcome.” 246 Informing the reader of having needed to escape two deadly regimes, Nabokov portrays himself as an émigré not only from Russia, but also from Western Europe, where he first made his home in exile. He has been doubly exiled from two dangerous places, which seems to augment the value of his words. To Genette, the main function of the preface is to provide the author’s “interpretation of the text, or, if you prefer, his statement of intent.” 247 But in Nabokov’s case, as with Kundera’s 1992 version of The Joke, the most important element is a discussion of how the text has been revised and edited from its original form. “If some day I make a dictionary of definitions wanting single words to head them,” Nabokov writes, “a cherished entry will be ‘To abridge, expand, or otherwise alter or cause to be altered, for the sake of belated improvement, one’s own writings in translation,’” 248 adding that the “urge to do this grows in proportion to the length of time separating the model from the mimic” (which we saw in his revisitation of “Mademoiselle O” between 1936 and 1967). In the preface to Invitation to a Beheading, Nabokov echoes Kundera’s much-repeated arguments on fidelity, insisting that “my son [Dmitri] proved to be a marvelously congenial translator, and it was settled between us that fidelity to one’s author comes first, no matter how bizarre the result.” 249 Not only the “spirit” of the work is at stake; also the words must be expertly, and faithfully, rendered into the target language. Nabokov evidently feels

246 Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading, p. 5.
247 Gérard Genette, p. 221.
248 Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading, p. 7.
249 Vladimir Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading, p. 7.
that his book will not be complete to an American audience without an emphasis on the myriad translations and revisions it has undergone.

The foreword to the 1962 translation of *The Gift* (Nabokov’s last novel written in Russian, originally published in 1938) follows a similar trend, though devoting more space to Nabokov’s elegy for Russian culture. He warns the reader not to equate Fyodor, the novel’s émigré writer protagonist, with himself, even though they share a large amount of artistic and biographical features (we recall his similarities to Sebastian Knight). Nabokov describes how Russian intellectuals were viewed somewhat condescendingly by Americans, and how the novel’s heroine is not Zina, Fyodor’s object of affection, but rather Russian literature itself, the tribute to which is located throughout *The Gift* (“I can speak of this book with a certain degree of detachment. It is the last novel I wrote, or ever shall write, in Russian”). 250

Essentially, in the preface to *The Gift* Nabokov attempts to call back his Russian muse for an American audience who presumably knows close to nothing about Russian language and culture, other than its Soviet associations. Moreover, he recounts the publication and translation history of the novel, namely having “carefully revised” the translation done by Dmitri and Michael Scammell, claiming responsibility for the translations of the poems given in the book, and even adding that the epilogic poem “mimicks [sic] an *Onegin* stanza.” 251 As in the prefaces to *Speak, Memory* and *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov reveals a tendency to give an


251 Vladimir Nabokov, Preface to *The Gift.*
extremely detailed account of the artistic composition of the book that is about to be read. The preface is not a message of intent as much as an expectation of reading – of how the reader will interact with the text and the ghosts of past revisions that continually inform it.

Previously, I argue that while Nabokov saw the importance -- indeed, necessity-- of gifting his reader with knowledge of a book’s artistic and logistical development, Kundera felt empowered by the exact opposite, by “lulling [his readers] into a false sense of transparency.” 252 To be sure, several of Kundera’s author’s notes, particularly the one in Asher’s translation of The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and its identical counterpart in Life is Elsewhere, display the writer’s tendency to be secretive about the changes made to his work, as if perceiving weakness in full disclosure. But in the preface to the 1992 translation of The Joke, which I analyze earlier, Kundera, like Nabokov, seems intent on revealing his creative process, finding authorial power in providing his readers with the work’s linguistic and general background. Able to tailor his paratext to particular audiences, Kundera alternates between puzzling obfuscation and relative openness.

IV. A Mobilization of Power

To best understand the implications of revisitation and rewriting in the works of Nabokov and Kundera, it is necessary to revisit their works ourselves. In Nabokov’s case, we must read and compare the multiple versions of Mademoiselle’s

252 Michelle Woods, p. 76.
story leading up to *Speak, Memory* in order to detect the writer’s maturing reflections on Mademoiselle’s role in his life. Likewise, we must revisit the numerous renditions of Kundera’s novels in pursuit of textual changes, since the themes in his fiction overlap almost imperceptibly with his techniques of revision, coming to mimic the activity that creates them. As we have seen, both Nabokov and Kundera rely heavily on paratext to present not only their works to foreign audiences, but themselves as well. However, only in revisiting and comparing Kundera’s works can we begin to uncover a process of revision that is generally hidden in his paratext; only in returning to particular passages can we detect the correspondence between the themes in his fiction and his modes of revising. We can read all of Nabokov’s articles and essays on translation theory and practice, but only in examining and revisiting his French translation of *Ezerski* can we truly appreciate the significance of the English version that appeared almost thirty years later, and detect the translator’s shifting priorities.

We recall that Nabokov, when asked about the role of his exile in his writing, proclaimed that the term “émigré writer” is misleading and unnecessary, as “Any genuine writer emigrates into his art and abides there.” Kundera, too, habitually resists being categorized as an émigré, refusing to present his novels as commentaries on political or cultural exile. Still, I would like to close with one of Kundera’s less cynical ruminations on what it means to be estranged from one’s native land and language (incidentally in the same section of *Testaments Betrayed* as his reference to Nabokov, which I mention in the Introduction):

The adult years may be richer and more important for life and for creative activity both, but the subconscious, memory, language, all the understructure of creativity, are formed very early; for a doctor, that won’t make problems, but for a novelist or composer, leaving the place to which his imagination, his obsessions, and thus his fundamental themes are bound could make for a kind of ripping apart. He must mobilize all his powers, all his artist’s wiles, to turn the disadvantages of that situation to benefits.  

To adopt a new language is to gain access to an entirely new linguistic world, where the content of everyday life is understood on very different terms, and where there is constant potential for artistic innovation. At the same time, to write in a foreign tongue is to shake the foundations of one’s artistic development; to go against the original instinct of creation. To reconcile these extremes, a multilingual émigré writer must “mobilize all his powers, all of his artist’s wiles,” always maintaining control over his oeuvre and the projection of his literary identity. For Nabokov and Kundera, this “mobilization” is facilitated by the capacity to revisit, revise, and rewrite their work across borders of nation, language, and time.

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254 Milan Kundera, Testaments Betrayed, trans. Linda Asher, p. 94
Appendix

Nabokov with the staff (and friends) of *Mesures*, where “Mademoiselle O” was first published, in Paris, 1937. In the preface to *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov recalls: A photograph commemorates [the publication of “Mademoiselle O”], except that I am wrongly identified (in the *Mesures* group relaxing around a garden table of stone), as ‘Audiberti.’

Nabokov (not “Audiberti”) is standing behind the four women on the bench. The woman on the very left is Sylvia Beach, the first to publish James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (in Paris, 1922). Jean Paulhan, editor of *Mesures*, is seated on the bench to the far right.


Image reprinted in Jane Grayson, *Vladimir Nabokov*, p. 70.
ŒUVRES DE MILAN KUNDERA

Aux Éditions Gallimard

LA PLAISANTERIE.
RISIBLES AMOURS.
LA VIE EST AILLEURS.
LA VALSE AUX ADIEUX.
LE LIVRE DU RIRE ET DE L'OUBLI.
L'INSOUTENABLE LÉGÉRETÉ DE L'ÊTRE.
Entre 1985 et 1987 les traductions des ouvrages ci-dessus ont été entièrement revues par l'auteur et, dès lors, ont la même valeur d'authenticité que le texte tchèque.
L'IMMORTELITÉ.
La traduction, entièrement revue par l'auteur, a la même valeur d'authenticité que le texte tchèque.

Théâtre

JACQUES ET SON MAÎTRE, HOMMAGE À DENIS DIDEROT.

Essais

L'ART DU ROMAN.
LES TESTAMENTS TRAHIS.

SUR L'ŒUVRE DE MILAN KUNDERA

Maria Nemcova Baničová : PARADOXES TERMINAUX, Éditions Gallimard.

Select bibliography, opposite title page of Le livre du rire et de l'oubli (1987)

La Plaisanterie (The Joke)
Risibles amours (Laughable Loves)
La vie est ailleurs (Life is Elsewhere)
La valse aux adieux (The Farewell Waltz)
Le livre du rire et de l'oubli (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting)
L'insoutenable légèreté de l'être (The Unbearable Lightness of Being)

Entre 1985 et 1987 les traductions des ouvrages ci-dessus ont été entièrement revues part l'auteur et, des lors, ont la même valeur d'authenticité que le texte tchèque.

Between 1985 and 1987 the translations of the above-named works were entirely revised by the author and, since then, have had the same authenticity value as the Czech text.
Milan Kundera

L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être

Traduit du tchèque
par François Kérel
Postface
de François Ricard

NOUVELLE ÉDITION
REVUE PAR L’AUTEUR

Gallimard

L’insoutenable légèreté de l’être
Traduit du tchèque par François Kérel,
Nouvelle Édition Revue Par L’Auteur (1987)

The Unbearable Lightness of Being
translated from the Czech by Francois Kérel,
New Edition Revised by the Author
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