

Nabokov's *Podlets* ('The Scoundrel') vs. *An Affair of Honor*

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Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov's short story *An Affair of Honor* is an example of a self-translation or a translation authorized by the writer himself, where a set of questions concerning cultural orientation and acclimatization arise. In *An Affair of Honor* some instances of cultural adjustment can be found when compared to the original story *Podlets* (Подлец 'The Scoundrel'). While no real revision of the original was made, several minor shifts and changes can be observed. In this paper, deliberate changes rather than regular translation shifts are investigated.

1 Introduction

Vladimir Nabokov was born in 1899 in Saint Petersburg in a family where, in addition to Russian, English and French were also spoken. Nabokov—who in his forties (and ultimately after the success of *Lolita* in 1955) gained a world-wide reputation as an English-language novelist—admitted that he could read and write in English before he could in Russian, for which he probably could thank his father, the frustrated patriot (see Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* 1967: 28, 173–193).¹ However, after the family's emigration, first to England, then to Berlin, Nabokov published in Russian under the pen name V. Sirin and became a recognized poet and writer within the émigré community. In 1937 he left Germany; the family lived in France until May 1940 when they fled from German troops to America. In 1945 Nabokov became a citizen of the United States, but after the financial success of *Lolita* he returned to Europe and was able to devote himself entirely to writing. In 1961 he moved to Montreux, where he stayed until his death in 1977.

Nabokov also translated fiction, including some of his own earlier works, from Russian into English, and from French and English into Russian. Among his translations perhaps the most famous—and controversial—is an English version of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1964), with an abundant commentary. It is remarkable that in theorizing about translation Nabokov appreciated loyalty and an accurate rendering of the original. The generous commenting in his translation of *Onegin* leads one to think that his understanding of "loyalty" implied keeping faith with the supposed intentions of the author, and, simultaneously, the right of the readers in the target culture to obtain an explanation of everything suggested in the original.

This, again, leads us to think of a translation strategy obviously requiring lots of explication, turning implicit to explicit, and **explicitation**, as we know, is one of the suggested universal laws of translation.² When analyzing 'The Scoundrel' and *An Affair*

of *Honor* I realized that there is something along those lines that the Russian *Lolita* translated by Nabokov himself and the English version of *Podlets* (*An Affair of Honor*) have in common. *Lolita* in Russian reads readily as secondary to the original, appearing as “instructing”, in some parts talkative, without really being chatty; allusions are often made explicit and the delicate effect is lost. Nabokov apparently did not believe that Russian readers would understand suggested Biblical quotations and the like without explanatory notes. This same underlying tendency shows itself in the English translation of ‘The Scoundrel’—which, incidentally, was published roughly at the same time as Nabokov was involved in the process of translating *Lolita* into Russian.³

The original *Podlets* ‘The Scoundrel’ came out around 1927 in Berlin in the émigré journal *Rul’* (*Руль* ‘helm, rudder, wheel’, which existed from 1920 through 1931), and was reprinted in 1930 in the collection *Vozvraščenie Čorba* (‘The Return of Chorb’) by “V. Sirin” (pseudonym), which included fifteen short stories and twenty-four poems. Its English version was first published in *The New Yorker* in 1966 as *An Affair of Honor*, translated by Dmitri Nabokov, the son of the writer (some editions mention the father as a co-translator). We may assume that the translation was authorized by the author himself. As reported by the Nabokov specialist Pekka Tammi (personal correspondence), there are changes in the original English manuscript obviously inserted by the writer himself. It is not clear whether the English translation was first made by Dmitri Nabokov and the changes then produced by the writer himself, but it seems possible. All the same, the translation can be taken as Vladimir Nabokov’s last word to this story as it was published in the USA.

The changes in the English version, primarily additions and insertions, but also a few omissions, provoke the question of whether they were considered necessary by the author due to a different audience, because of the cultural background of ordinary American readers. It also seems natural to me that, in the 1960s, Nabokov would not have written exactly the way he did as a young writer in the 1920s. He had now become a famous novelist and short story writer and wrote his books in English.

Many of the additions and changes in the English translation of ‘The Scoundrel’ make the reference to Russian cultural background more explicit. For example, the main topic of a duel is in the English version accompanied with several remarks on the conventional ways and details attached to past duels in Russia—or as the protagonist imagined the duels would take place (see examples 12–15). That Anton Petrovich—the “hero” in the story—had some inherited knowledge that made **him** imagine in this or that special way did not need to be explained to Russian readers; the connotations were more or less clear even if they were only implied.

We have an interesting testimony by Nabokov in his auto-translation of *Lolita* into Russian. It includes a postscript (“Postscriptum”) in which the writer reconsiders his relationship with his native language. He explains that the

(1)

[...] story of this translation is the story of a disappointment. Alas, that ‘wonderful Russian language’ which, I imagined, still awaits me somewhere, which blooms like a faithful spring behind the locked gate to which I, after so many years, still possess the key, turned out to be non-existent, and there is nothing

beyond that gate, except for some burned out stumps and hopeless autumnal emptiness, and the key in my hand looks rather like a lock pick.

This feeling of encountering what used to be one's own language is a very good reminder to most people outside translation studies and to those who are not acquainted with modern linguistic thinking. It is unbelievable how difficult it is to understand that an individual does not own his or her language, in the sense that it could be put into a safety-box and taken out when needed again. If somebody does not use their language in communication with other people to discuss things and happenings, their feelings, etc. in these particular surroundings, in this society, in this culture—then trying to come back with one's used-to-be language to describe the events, situations and feelings that one experienced in an other world would be as if talking to people from another civilization in order to tell them things they are not familiar with.

2 The setting of the story

The story of 'The Scoundrel' is set in Berlin of the 1920s; the writer describes his contemporary countrymen, who had, like himself, recently emigrated from post-revolutionary Russia. Nevertheless, on some level, the story told might happen anywhere: there is not much of the surrounding German society, even if all the details presumably come from there. In fact, German society is only mentioned once, when Gnushke (one of the persons who promised to second the protagonist in his duel) reminds Anton Petrovich what German law says about duels. But neither the location being Germany nor the characters being all Russian seem to play any role in the story told; there are no questions that arise out of the plot or the content of the characters' speech. In the very outset of the story, when introducing Anton Petrovich (whose surname is never mentioned) and Berg (who is never referred to by his first name or his patronymic), who meet at the Kurdyumov family, the narrator states that they are all newcomers in Berlin (in the original, the location is not identified at this point). However, from which country they have arrived need not be explained; the names tell everything (see example 2).⁴

It has to be kept in mind that the story was published in Russian and the readers can be reasonably supposed to have been Russians. To Russian readers, this story is—or was—about people, and it is of no importance to point out their nationality: it is a most natural thing that they are like 'us', i.e. 'we' Russians living in Germany. The very core of the topic is a duel, as Russian as a topic can (or could) be, and the implications that Russians of the time would have seen in situations requiring a duel. The story begins with the passage in example 2:

(2)

THE accursed day when **Anton Petrovich** made the acquaintance of Berg existed only in theory, for his memory had not affixed to it a date label at the time, and now it was impossible to identify that day. Broadly speaking, it happened last winter around Christmas, 1926. Berg arose out of nonbeing, bowed in greeting, and settled down again—into an armchair instead of his previous nonbeing. It was at the **Kurdyumovs'**, who lived on St Mark Strasse, way off in the sticks, in the Moabit section of Berlin, I believe. The Kurdyumovs remained the paupers they had become after the Revolution, while Anton Petrovich and Berg, although also expatriates, had since grown somewhat richer.

In comparison with the original, the translation of *An Affair of Honor* contains some shifts that slightly move the point of view in the narrative structure; if not of the story as a whole, then at least parts of it. It is assumed that these shifts are not deliberately aimed at by the translator or the author. But perhaps due to the at-least-partial self-translation, the overall spirit of the story is preserved and minor unconscious changes in the point of view do not disturb the overall impression of a mixed narration, of the ambiguity in the point of view. An analysis of the narrative structure is not a topic in this paper, but it would be interesting to find out if the translation in the first version was made by Dmitri Nabokov, and if the point-of-view shifts come from his pen.⁵

As seen in example 2, there is a narrator—who seems to have empathy with the hero, or pretends to have, at least in the beginning. However, in many parts of the story the narrator is quite laconic, and sometimes pithy, rather ironic—even if, as a matter of fact, irony is created in the mind of the reader. And there are different readers.

3 Irreparable losses

Language-specific means may have functions of connoting certain qualities which are important to the pragmatics of discourse. A case of relative linguistic idiosyncrasy is involved in the systems of Russian and English personal pronouns. In Russian, a single person can be addressed either using the 2nd person singular (*ты*), or the 2nd person plural (*вы*) pronoun, which reflects intimacy, politeness, status and the like. In modern English one can only employ *you*. The same distinction is also expressed by mere verb inflection if, in Russian, no personal (or possessive) pronoun is explicitly used. In ‘The Scoundrel’, Anton Petrovich is formal when he finds his companion Berg in his own sleeping room in example 3, while Berg calls Anton Petrovich by the first name and *ты* ‘thou’ in example 4.

(3)

«**Уходите** немедленно прочь. Какое безобразие. **Уходите** прочь...»
“Go away immediately. This is dreadful. Go away....”

(4)

– Главное, не **волнуйся**, – сказал Берг, осторожно затягивая узел, – пожалуйста, не **волнуйся**. **Будь** совершенно **спокоен**.
“Above all, don't get excited,” said Berg, carefully tightening the knot. “Please don't get excited. Stay perfectly calm.”

Irreparable losses are found not only in cases with linguistic non-equivalence. There are also culturally triggered connotations and intertextual connections that will hardly be conspicuous to members of an alien culture. Here we come across necessarily omitted allusions. An example in ‘The Scoundrel’ is example 5, where a reference to *The Queen of Spades* by Pushkin is hidden, namely to the episode where the protagonist sees that the playing card that appears—the queen of spades—“slits” (winks) an eye at him, as it were.

(5)

“Best thing is to get some sleep,” he said aloud. But as soon as he closed his eyelids, Berg's grinning face would appear before him, purposively **slitting one eye**.⁶

4 Omissions

The omission demonstrated in example 6a has nothing to do with cultural differences; instead, it makes the story, the narrative flow, simpler and requires less imagination of the reader. The part marked with boldface is omitted in the translation 6b. Indeed, this part is bound to remain mysterious for the reader of the original, until he comes to the point later in the story where the source of this mental picture of Anton Petrovich gets its explanation in example 7: the episode remembered by Anton Petrovich from the past where Berg had demonstrated his impressive shooting skills.

(6a)

Перед глазами у Антона Петровича мелькнула страничка в записной книжке, исписанная крестиками, **а еще кроме этого: картонная фигура, которая вырывает у другой картонной фигуры зуб.**

(6b)

Before Anton Petrovich's eyes flashed a notebook page covered with Xs: diagram of a cemetery. -- /**and additionally: a cardboard figure yanking off another cardboard figure a tooth**'/

(7)

And ferocious cardboard dentist bending over a panic-stricken patient of cardboard—this he had seen such a short time ago, on a blue, green, violet, ruby night, shot with fireworks, at the Luna Amusement Park. Berg took a long time aiming, the air rifle popped, the pellet hit the target, releasing a spring, and the cardboard dentist yanked out a huge tooth with a quadruple root.

5 Changes in names

Let us now first look at some instances where some characters in the English translation are referred to with names which are different from the original Russian story.

A not unimportant and a most hilarious part in the story is devoted to Anton Petrovich's seconds in the announced duel. Mityushin is a suspicious friend of Anton Petrovich, while the other, Gnushke, as Mityushin calls him in the original *Genrik*, in the translation *Henry* ("in real life" obviously Heinrich), is a new acquaintance to him. Gnushke simply happens to be in Mityushin's apartment when Anton Petrovich—accidentally—comes and tells that "he is going to fight". These fellows, Anton Petrovich's seconds, keep their names Mityushin and Gnushke in the English version, too (as do the main characters Anton Petrovich and Berg, as well as Anton Petrovich's wife Tanya). However, there is a brief metalinguistic discussion of the name of the Russified German commented on by the narrator—apparently reflecting thoughts in Anton Petrovich's mind—different in the translation from the original. The surname Gnushke in the original story apparently provokes connotations to the Russian adjective *гнушный* 'wicked, obscene, scurrilous, foul, vulgar'.⁷ Where the original (example 8a) tells that the friend of Mityushin has an "extremely vulgar surname", the English translation (8b) omits this remark and replaces it with a "domesticating" comment: "He was nicknamed the Gnut".

(8a)

И говорили, что у этого приятеля прегнусная фамилия.
'And they said that this friend has an extremely vulgar surname'

(8b)

MikaEL

Kääntämisen ja tulkkauksen tutkimuksen symposiumin verkkojulkaisu

Electronic proceedings of the KäTu symposium on translation and interpreting studies

3 (2009)

Mityushin was a brawler and a drunkard. He could go and do all kinds of things at the least provocation. A real daredevil. One also recalls having heard about a certain friend of his who, to spite the post office, used to throw lighted matches into mailboxes. **He was nicknamed the Gnut.** Quite possibly it was Gnushke.

Another change is made in the names of Mr. Berg's seconds. Both are first referred to by Mityushin incorrectly, in the Russian original as Malinin and Burenin, but in the English version as Marx and Engels (!). Mityushin is corrected by Gnushke who, in the original, states that they are Burenin and Colonel Magerovski, whereas in the translation they are Markov and Colonel Arkhangelski (example 9).

(9)

"...They introduced themselves, and, well, to put it in a nutshell, everything is in order. Their names are Marx and Engels."

"That's not quite exact," interjected Gnushke. "They are Markov and Colonel Arkhangelski."

In the following discourse in the translation, Mityushin insists on occasionally calling the latter "Angel", perhaps deliberately; similarly the use of "Marx and Engels" is hardly meant to be interpreted as merely accidental.

Anna Nikanorovna is a woman in a minor role in 'The Scoundrel'—a sleeping lady with a "generous back" encountered in the company of Mityushin and Gnushke when Anton Petrovich comes to Mityushin's place. She is of some importance to the narration, because the reader should not fail to pay attention to the name mentioned by Anton Petrovich's journalist friend Leontiev, appearing later in the story, and infer that they are married. Anyway, it remains a mystery why she is called Adelaida Albertovna in the English translation. It looks like a "derussification" of the name while such a change in the interpretation of the character does not seem motivated in any way.

6 Additions

Berlin as the location where the story takes place is mentioned in the translation (example 10) in the very beginning, while it becomes clear later in the original story. There is no direct reference to the persons being expatriates in the original story, but as also shown in example 10, this is explicitly told in the translation: the parts that are shown in bold here have been added.

(10)

... who lived on St Mark Strasse, way off in the sticks, in the Moabit section **of Berlin** ... The Kurdyumovs remained **the** paupers **they had become after the Revolution**, while Anton Petrovich and Berg, **although also expatriates**, had since grown somewhat richer.

In example 11, more evidence of explicitation as one of the universal tendencies in translations is provided. There is no direct reference in the original to a number of realia present in example 11. To the readers of the Russian story, the setting of the conflicts in the Crimea need not be explained as the Russian civil war; the enemies Berg had fought against were, of-course, Reds, and everybody knew Denikin was a white general. All this the translator has thought to be worth explaining.

(11)

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He once showed Anton Petrovich a little old black notebook. The pages were all covered with crosses, exactly five hundred twenty-three in number. “**Civil war** in the Crimea—a souvenir,” said Berg with a slight smile, and coolly added, “Of course, I counted only those **Reds** I killed outright.” The fact that Berg was an ex-cavalry man and had fought under **General Denikin** ...

Example 12 is from the episode where Mityushin reports on the expedition that the seconds of both had undertaken together to choose a place for the duel. As far as I can see, the addition referring to Lermontov’s duel in the translation is simply a trick to promote the product by adding some exoticism in the story, emphasizing its “Russianness”.⁸

(12)

We took a walk through the woods there and found a glade, where, it turned out, these chaps had had a little picnic with their girls the other day. The glade is small, and all around there is nothing but woods. In short, the ideal spot—**although, of course, you don’t get the grand mountain cor as in Lermontov’s fatal affair.**

The readers of the original and of the translation naturally have equal possibilities to see the foolishness in that, anticipating the duel, Anton Petrovich thinks that the opponents would be waiting already when he arrives. However, the first addition (“they always do in books”) in example 13 shows that the author relied more on the readers to catch the irony when writing the original, while the new readers of the translation are given the source where the protagonist had got the silly idea that the opponents would supposedly arrive at the duel place before himself. Thus, the explication additionally underlines Anton Petrovich’s naivety—unnecessarily to an informed reader. The other parts having been added to the translation in example 13 also motivate Anton Petrovich’s behavior, accentuating his Russian background.

(13)

Berg and his seconds would probably be waiting there already, **they always do in books.** Now, there was a question: does one salute one’s opponent? **What does Onegin do in the opera? ... Somebody (in a Pushkin story?) ate cherries from a paper bag. Yes, but you have to bring that bag to the dueling ground—looks silly.**

To comment upon the story and its narrative tools, not the two versions, it can be remarked that the irony works on two levels: first, it is directed to the protagonist’s person in the fictive story; second, the irony involves the books (and other arts), presenting the duel theme with such stereotypical details.

In example 14, the first additions (“even if one lived to be a hundred in Turkey... Nice to travel, sit in cafés”) admittedly escape my explanation, while the second additions with the tenor Sobinov can again be explained as accentuating the exotic Russianness, as above. The same applies to Anton Petrovich’s recollecting who was the last person killed in a duel in Russia in example 15, which only appears in the English version.

(14)

And then, suddenly, something utterly terrible, something absurd would happen—an unimaginable thing, even if one thought about it for nights on end, even if one lived to be a hundred **in Turkey... Nice to travel, sit in cafés...** What does one feel when a bullet hits one between the ribs or in the forehead? Pain? Nausea? Or is there simply a bang followed by total darkness? **The tenor Sobinov crashed down so realistically that his pistol flew into the orchestra.**

(15)

Who was the last person killed in a duel in Russia? A Baron Manteuffel, twenty years ago.

In one case Nabokov's narrator, in the translation, adds a comment upon the use of names by one of the characters. The addition in example 16 may be motivated by the assumed non-acquaintance of the reading audience with the Russians' use of patronymics. Another thing is that the use of the patronymic itself—which in no way seems odd to Russian readers—is required for the readers to make a conclusion that Leontiev's wife is exactly the same lady who in the earlier episode at Mityushin's place was impressively sleeping with her back turned to the company.

(16)

Adelaida Albertovna, of course, has a quick temper herself," he added with a sigh. **He was one of those middle-class Russians who use the patronymic when speaking of their spouses.**

7 Conclusions

We can now try and determine whether the changes discovered above in the English translation have been triggered by an underlying common strategy or tendency.

1) "Irreparable losses." In two cases we found that some information contained in the Russian original was lost. One of these omissions was due to grammar: the system of personal pronouns in Russian enables distinguishing different levels of formality and status in addressing people (examples 3 and 4). The second case involved an allusion effectuated by culture-bound connotations that require knowledge of the content in certain key texts of the source culture (example 4). In both cases, nothing was done (or could not be done) by the translator to help the target reader to understand what is thought to be self-evident for the reader of the original.

2) "Indispensable changes." Further, there are a number of overt changes in the translation motivated by the inadequacy of simple replacement of linguistic material with equivalent material of the target language to produce metalinguistic jokes or the like (example 8). In all these instances, not much else could have been done, and, consequently, these changes and omissions cannot be regarded as stemming from a conscious translation strategy, as foreignizing or domesticating.

3) "Explicitation." Some of the changes found are due to explicitation, although not really pertaining to any comprehensive translation strategy. This applies especially to several additions that seem to be made for target language readers in order to clarify culture-bound concepts, realia and connotations (examples 10 and 11). However, I am very much inclined to judge the quite extensive additions as over-explicitation, resulting in a certain simplification of the narrative technique which decreases the sublimity of the story. The protagonist runs the risk of becoming an object of plain ridicule.

4) "Marketing." Moreover, several additions and changes (examples 12–16) seem to unnecessarily emphasize the cultural background and identity of the protagonists. Finally, the omission exemplified in example 6 is in agreement with the observed tendency to reduce the burden of the reader by minimizing his efforts to follow the story

in all its complex interrelations. As a whole, the Russian *Podlets* of 1927 was a story on adultery and cowardice, while the English *An Affair of Honor* is an exotic story of Russians in exile involved in a ridiculous conflict. But perhaps this is what the writer was after.

There remains the question for translations into languages in which this story by Nabokov has not yet been published. Incidentally, none of Nabokov's work written in Russian has been translated into Finnish directly from Russian. His first short stories definitely deserve to be made available to Finnish readers. The question is whether this short story should be published in Finland/Finnish as *Lurjus* ('The Scoundrel') or *Kunnia-asia* ('An Affair of Honor').

Material

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¹ Both the novel *Lolita* and the memoirs entitled *Speak, Memory* are in the United States often ranked amongst the best books of the 20th century.

² The terms explication and explicitation are not always kept apart. The first one, explication, is mainly used in philosophy (e.g. Carnap 1950) and literary criticism (cf. Gustave Lanson's explication de texte and close reading; Lanson 1995). Explicitation—as a tendency generally observed in translations to be more explicit than the original—has been recognized and described at least since the 1970s (cf. Toury 1980: 601).

³ The Russian *Lolita* appeared in New York with Phaedra Publishers in 1967; in the Soviet Union it was not published until the perestroika, in the beginning of the 1990s.

⁴ But cf. Berg; nothing of his background is told, in opposite to Gnushke who is said to be a Russified German. It can be inferred that both are ethnic Germans from Russia before the October revolution.

⁵ Cf. studies of free indirect discourse by translation scholars, notably by Kuusi (e.g. 2003 and 2006), who has investigated the effects of explicitation of the narration technique and its connection to a certain simplification of the story told.—While the reference to experiencing consciousness in the translation of 'The Scoundrel' is made simpler, and free indirect discourse strategy is in many cases changed, the effects of polyphony are retained, as witnessed by Tammi (2003) who has used this story as an example of (not at all "standard") FID.

⁶ In all the examples, the **bold** emphasis has been added by me (HT).

⁷ Perhaps the name was also associated with the German social democrat Gustav Noske, who played a role in suppressing the Spartacist uprising as the first Minister of Defense of the Weimar Republic, and was largely identified as a traitor—not only to the working class—preventing a revolution led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

⁸ The most celebrated poets of the Golden Age in Russia, both Pushkin and Lermontov, were killed in duels.