

Corinne Scheiner

Colorado College, USA

**In Place of a Preface: Reading Chapter One of Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* as a Foreword to the English Translation**

In the foreword to his 1963 English translation of *The Defense*, which first appeared in Russian in 1930 under the title *Zashchita Luzhina*, Vladimir Nabokov comments on “the chess effects [he] planted” in the novel and offers the following justification for alerting the reader to them: “I would like to spare the time and effort of hack reviewers—and, generally, persons who move their lips when reading and cannot be expected to tackle a dialogueless novel when so much can be gleaned from its Foreword [. . .]” (8). How are we, the readers (and particularly, we readers who are also critics) to take Nabokov’s disparaging remark? Are all these readers and critics as horrid as the “hack reviewers” and “persons who move their lips when reading” that Nabokov refers to with such disdain? And, if they are, why does he bother to give them any help at all with their reading in the form of a preface to the translated text? Moreover, why did Nabokov continue to bother with these “hack reviewers” and “persons who move their lips when reading,” by writing ten forewords or afterwords in twelve years (or twelve prefaces or postfaces in thirteen years if one takes into account the fictional prefaces that appear in *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*)?

The sheer amount of paratextual commentary penned by Nabokov suggests that paratextual elements play an integral role in his work and that they cannot be dismissed as merely a sort of condensed version of the text—Nabokov’s protestations to the contrary. Accordingly, in this paper, I explore, in a very preliminary fashion, the role of the paratext—principally, the foreword—in Nabokov’s novels. I begin with a short discussion of Nabokov’s use of paratextual commentary—in particular, the myriad forms in which it appears in his novels—to demonstrate that from 1959 on, Nabokov employs prefaces not casually, but integrally in his novels. I then examine the functions of the largest group of these prefaces, Nabokov’s forewords to his self-translations, by drawing on the theories of the paratext that Gérard Genette articulates in his seminal work, *Seuils* (1987), published in English as *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (1997). I argue that these forewords serve two primary functions: 1) they allow Nabokov to comment directly on the act of self-translation in which he is engaged; and 2) they provide Nabokov with an opportunity to guide the reader away from certain interpretations of the text (in particular, Freudian or socio-political) and towards his own conception of the text. To illustrate the pervasiveness of Nabokov’s paratextual practice, I end the paper with a discussion of the only one of his English translations not to present the reader with a traditional, authorial preface: *Laughter in the Dark*. Although the text may not appear to offer the reader a foreword as such, I contend that the first chapter, which Nabokov completely reworked in self-translation, may in fact be read as a preface to the text and that, not surprisingly, it serves the exact same functions of his more conventional prefaces.

As the prefatory remarks to my own paper make clear, the primary form of paratext Nabokov employs in his novels is the foreword. The sole exception is his famous afterword to *Lolita*, appended to the 1958 Putnam edition and all subsequent editions and translations under the title “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*.” The opening lines of the afterword allude to a possible explanation as to why Nabokov chose to append the text in the form of a postface rather than a preface: “After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one—may strike me, in fact—as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book” (*Lolita* 311). Thus, the reason for the afterword may be as simple as the fact that the text already contains a fictional preface attributed to “John Ray, Jr., PhD” (*ibid.* 6). (1)

The remainder of Nabokov’s paratextual commentary in his novels appears in what he refers to as the “Forewords” to his texts. Genette identifies six fundamental types of prefaces, based on the type of sender—the author or another—and the place and time—simultaneous with the text or later. Nabokov’s forewords uniformly fall into one of two of these categories: 1) *fictional prefaces*, such as Ray’s in *Lolita* and Kinbote’s in *Pale Fire*; and 2) *authorial prefaces*. The only one of Nabokov’s English novels to contain an authorial preface is *Bend Sinister*. Genette would classify this foreword as a *later authorial preface* for it did not appear in the first edition of the novel in 1947; rather, Nabokov added it to a subsequent edition in 1963. The rest of Nabokov’s authorial prefaces in his novels appear in his translations of his own work. He produced eight of the nine self-translations that comprise what he called “the series of definitive English versions in which [my] entire set of nine Russian novels [. . .] is available to

American and British readers” (*Glory* ix) during the twelve-year period from 1959 to 1971; significantly, all eight of these self-translations contain authorial prefaces. In fact, in examining Nabokov’s corpus as a whole—the novels in Russian, the novels in English, and the self-translations—, one discovers that he wrote all of his paratextual commentary—postfaces, fictional prefaces, and authorial prefaces—during this twelve-year period (or thirteen-year period if one includes the afterword to *Lolita*). Indeed, none of the first versions of Nabokov’s novels—neither the Russian texts that he later translated and prefaced nor the early English novels written prior to 1959 such as *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941) and *Pnin* (1953)—contains a foreword, nor do the later English novels such as *Transparent Things* (1972) or *Look at the Harlequins* (1974).

(2) Furthermore, the only one of Nabokov’s self-translations not to include a preface is *Laughter in the Dark*, his 1938 translation of *Kamera obskura*. Thus, it is clear that during this period Nabokov makes a conscious decision to exploit the different forms and functions of the preface.

Genette asserts that “not all prefaces ‘do’ the same thing—in other words, the functions of prefaces differ depending on the type of preface” (*Paratexts* 196). Moreover, he claims that “most often, each preface fulfills several functions successively or simultaneously” (*ibid.* 197). This is most certainly the case with Nabokov’s prefaces to his self-translations, but what type of prefaces are they? Genette does not provide much help in the matter as he explicitly excludes translations from his study:

I have [. . .] left out three practices whose paratextual relevance seems to me undeniable, but investigating each one individually might demand as much work as was required here in treating this subject as a whole. The first of these practices is *translation*, particularly when it is more or less revised or checked by the author [. . .]; and all the more so when the entire task is undertaken by the author alone, in keeping with the established practice of a bilingual writer such as Beckett, each of whose translations must, in one way or another, serve as commentary on the original text (*ibid.* 405).

Recall, however, that Genette breaks down the fundamental types of prefaces based on: 1) the type of sender—author or another; and 2) the place and time—simultaneous with the text or later. Using these criteria, one may confidently categorize Nabokov’s prefaces to his self-translations as *authorial*. (3) Yet, it is more difficult to classify them with respect to place and time; that is, are the prefaces what Genette designates as *original* or *later*? In a sense, they fit both categories—they are original with respect to the (English) translated version, but they are later with respect to the first (Russian) version of the text.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that Nabokov’s forewords to his self-translations share the primary functions of both original and later prefaces. According to Genette, “[the] original assumptive authorial preface [. . .] has as its chief function *to ensure that the text is read properly*” (*ibid.* 197). To do so, original prefaces provide the reader with information and guidance; thus, they often discuss the genesis of the work and provide commentary on the title. (4) As I will demonstrate further on, these

two elements take on a particular pertinence when the text is a self-translation. Later prefaces differ from original prefaces in one significant way: they are addressed to new readers. Genette suggests that

The author never approaches a new public without having more or less strongly felt the reaction of the first one—in particular the reaction of the kind of reader who is hardly likely to take another look and correct himself on the occasion of a new edition: the critic. Most often, therefore, later compensation for the absence of shortcomings of the original preface inevitably takes the form of a *response to the first reactions of the first public and the critics*. Without any doubt, that is the main function of the later preface or postface (*ibid.* 240, my italics).

Nabokov's authorial prefaces to his translations clearly perform both of the functions described above: they attempt to ensure that the text is being read properly and they respond to the critics of the earlier Russian versions.

How exactly do Nabokov's forewords carry out these tasks? To answer, let us turn to Charles Nicol's excellent analysis of the contents of Nabokov's authorial prefaces in his 1994 article, "Necessary Instruction or Fatal Fatuity: Nabokov's Introductions and *Bend Sinister*." Specifically, Nicol constructs a paradigm that breaks down Nabokov's comments in the introductions into four groups: 1) personal and bibliographic; 2) miscellaneous comments prompted by the particular novel at hand; 3) polemic statements; and 4) elliptical commentary on the plot (115). Recasting this schema in Genette's terms, it becomes quite clear how Nabokov's prefaces perform these functions.

Recall that Genette proposes that the preface ensures that the text is read properly by two means. First, it provides the reader with information on the work's genesis and on the title; such information may be found in Nicol's first category of the personal and bibliographic. However, as Nicol notes, this information may refer not only to the first (Russian) version of the text, but to the translated (English) version as well. Moreover, these prefaces tend to include a direct statement about the translation at hand and/or the act of self-translation in general. For example, in the foreword to his 1959 translation of *Invitation to a Beheading*, Nabokov writes: "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" (6-7). Therefore, for Nabokov, the statement regarding the act of self-translation appears to be the single most important piece of information that guarantees that the text is read properly.

Second, the preface ensures that the text is read properly by offering the reader guidance; this guidance corresponds to the polemic statements such as the rejection of comparisons and influences, the denial of moral purpose and social commentary, the rejection of "general ideas" and trashy authors, and a one-sentence rejection of Freudian content that comprise Nicol's third category (115). These polemic statements also pointedly fulfill the other function of responding to one's critics for, it is precisely these "hack reviewers" who have misread the text in Nabokov's eyes. Thus, Nabokov conflates the functions of Genette's original and later prefaces—that is, he guides the reader toward a proper reading of the text by critiquing the decidedly improper ones of his critics.

To illustrate the integral role of the preface with respect to Nabokov's self-translations—particularly his use of it to guide the reader and to comment on the act of self-translation—I would like to end with a short reading of the opening pages of his 1938 translation of *Kamera obskura*, *Laughter in the Dark*. Although the text lacks the conventional, separate, authorial prefaces of the self-translations that follow, I believe that the first few pages of the English version may be read as a foreword, conscious or not, to the novel; for, indeed, these pages perform the same two functions of the prefaces of the later self-translations that I have just described. I should note that claiming to find a preface where none is demarcated is not as strange as it may first appear. Genette himself writes that “the authorial preface had a prehistory: centuries of ‘hidden life’ buried in the first or last pages of text” (*Paratexts* 263) and that not until the sixteenth century did “the authorial preface itself [become] detached from the body of the text” (*ibid.*). Let us now turn to this “hidden” or “buried” authorial preface in chapter one of *Laughter in the Dark*.

The Russian version of the novel begins with a description of Cheepy, a cartoon guinea pig created by the celebrated caricaturist Robert Horn. Horn's decision to embark upon a series of drawings featuring a guinea pig resulted from a conversation over lunch with a young physiologist: “They were talking about experiments on living animals, and the physiologist, a very sensitive man, maintained that in the dissecting room, scientists permitted dumb animals to be tortured more than was really necessary” (*Camera Obscura* 5). (5) The physiologist hoped that Horn's depictions of the guinea pig would “draw the attention of the public to the sad fate of this most lovable animal” (*ibid.* 6). In

many respects, Cheepy's fate at the hands of the scientists foreshadows what awaits the protagonist of the novel, Bruno Kretschmar. Ironically, it is Horn, Cheepy's creator whom he believes to be his friend, and Magda, his unfaithful mistress (she is cheating on him with Horn), who will torment the clueless Kretschmar later in the novel. Horn's torture of Kretschmar is not all together unexpected, however. Witness Horn's response to the physiologist's lament of the fate of the poor guinea pigs in the lab: "Guinea-pigs always reminded me of rats, I can't stand them. Let them squeal under the dissecting knife for all I care" (*ibid.*). It is precisely this cold-bloodedness that permits Horn to cuckold Kretschmar and to play cruel jokes on him later in the novel.

Nabokov removes all traces of Cheepy from the English version of the novel and instead provides the reader with a concise summary of what awaits the protagonist, renamed Albert Albinus: "Once upon a time there lived in Berlin, Germany, a man called Albinus. He was rich, respectable, happy; one day he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress; he loved; was not loved; and his life ended in disaster" (*Laughter in the Dark* 7). It appears that in this version, rather than imply or suggest what is to come via the guinea pig Cheepy, Nabokov decides to explicitly inform the reader of the action to follow. In doing so, just as he does in the prefaces to his self-translations, Nabokov avails himself of the opportunity to guide the reader away from certain interpretations of the story and toward his own conception of it. Specifically, he prohibits the reader from seeing the protagonist as an unfortunate victim—a reading the Russian text, with its parallels between Cheepy and Kretschmar, clearly makes possible. By highlighting Albinus's own actions—"he abandoned his wife for the sake of a youthful mistress"—the text pointedly implicates him in the negative events that occur. (6)

The opening chapter of the English version continues as follows: “This is the whole of the story and we might have left it at that had there not been profit and pleasure in the telling; and although there is plenty of space on a gravestone to contain, bound in moss, the abridged version of a man’s life, detail is always welcome” (*ibid.*). Here, Nabokov uses the new first chapter to comment on his translation of the text and to provide justification for the very act of self-translation itself. A brief note on the history of the text’s translation will prove useful at this point. Nabokov wrote *Kamera obskura* in Russian in 1931; the novel first appeared in serial form in 1932-1933 in the émigré journal, *Sovremennye Zapiski*, and then in book form in 1933. In 1935, Winifred Roy translated the text into English for the London publisher John Long and gave it the title *Camera Obscura*. Nabokov despised Roy’s translation, calling it “loose, shapeless, sloppy, full of blunders and gaps, lacking vigor and spring, and plumped down in such dull, flat English that I could not read it to the end.” (7) Thus Nabokov decided to retranslate the text himself. Self-translation is precisely that *retelling* in which there is both profit and pleasure. For, in retranslating the text, Nabokov rescues it from the grave to which the “dull, flat English” of Roy’s translation had relegated it. This “dull, flat English” reduced the novel to an “abridged version” that, while it may have accurately presented all the “facts” of the story, lacked the detail, particularly the use of language that marks Nabokov’s stories as his own.

Christine Raguet-Bouvard suggests that, upon reading the two opening paragraphs of *Laughter in the Dark*, “nous nous trouvons [. . .] en présence d’une forme d’introduction qui comprendrait à la fois prologue, épilogue et un résumé des événements [. . .]” [we find ourselves in the presence of a type of introduction that

encompasses a prologue, an epilogue, and a summary of events, all at once] (121). As I have illustrated, readers do indeed find themselves in the presence of an authorial preface, one that guides their reading of the text and one that calls attention to the text's translation, and, by extension, to the very act of self-translation itself.

### Notes

(1) Not that the existence of such a preface deterred the Everyman Library, which published an edition of *Lolita* a few years ago in which Ray's preface was replaced with an introductory essay by Martin Amis.

(2) Although *Ada* (1969) does not contain a preface—fictional or authorial—, Nabokov does play with other paratextual elements of the work. For example, he appends a series of notes to the text attributed to one of his anagrammatic doubles, Vivian Darkbloom; although not as flagrantly misleading as Kinbote's notes to *Pale Fire*, these notes hardly provide the information one might expect from a textual note. In addition, Nabokov tweaks the standard statement found in novels regarding the fictionality of the characters. A note precedes the text and reads: "With the exception of Mr. and Mrs. Oranger, a few incidental figures, and some non-American citizens, all the persons mentioned by name in this book are dead." Thus, one may argue that despite its lack of a preface, *Ada* merely displays different manifestations of Nabokov's exploitation of the paratext.

(3) Genette would most likely endorse such a classification for, as he notes in his description of allographic prefaces: "In the case of translation, the preface may be signed by the translator [. . .]. The translator-preface-writer may possibly comment on, among

other things, his own translation; on this point and in this sense, his preface then ceases to be allographic” (*Paratexts* 264n22).

(4) Genette divides the information presented by the original preface into the following categories: genesis of work; choice of a public; commentary on the title; contracts of fiction; the order in which to read; contextual information; statements of intent; and genre definitions.

(5) Given that my purpose here is to contrast the content of the opening chapters of the Russian and English versions rather than to analyze their stylistic devices, all references to the Russian text (*Kamera obskura*) will be taken from Roy’s translation (*Camera Obscura*).

(6) Further support for this reading may be found in the different ways in which Horn/Rex and Kretschmar/Albinus come to know one another in each of the versions. In *Kamera obskura*, Horn comes to Kretschmar’s attention when Kretschmar is asked to give his “expert opinion” regarding a lawsuit Horn mounts against a film actress who has illegally used the guinea pig in a publicity photo. In *Laughter in the Dark*, Albinus contacts Rex with an idea of his own: “colored animated drawings—which had just begun to appear at the time. How fascinating it would be, he thought, if one could use this method for having some well-known picture [. . .] perfectly reproduced on the screen in vivid colors and then brought to life—movement and gesture graphically developed in complete harmony with their static state in the picture” (8).

(7) Vladimir Nabokov, letter to Hutchinson & Co., May 22, 1935, in *Selected Letters*, 13. John Long was an imprint of Hutchinson & Co.

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Corinne Scheiner, The Colorado College, [cscheiner@coloradocollege.edu](mailto:cscheiner@coloradocollege.edu)