

Spaces of Plurilingual Interdialogism in Cournos's *Autobiography* (1935): a linguistic prototype for Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* (1966)

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1. Introduction

John Cournos is an unknown personality in the wide field of transnational literature¹. Born in the Ukraine in 1881 (he had Jewish origins), he was one of the first Eastern European literati to move to the United States in 1891. Although Vladimir Nabokov is considered the most outstanding translingual writer, Cournos paved the way for numerous Russian intellectuals who emigrated to the West

¹ As Wanner argues, "[o]ver the past decade several younger writers of Russian origin have achieved literary stardom with books written in French, German, and English. Unlike Nabokov, who began his career as a Russian writer before switching to English in midlife, these authors never published anything in their native idiom. Given that they are using the language of their adopted home countries exclusively, they need to be classified as translingual rather than bilingual writers" (2008: 662).

(Bozovic 2018: 180)². His autobiographical work, *Autobiography*, illustrates his long journey from the Ukraine to America through Europe, and then back to England and then Russia and, at the same time, shows the extent to which his language undergoes different levels of contamination, interference, and semi-translation. The author, therefore, experiments with new linguistic and cultural voices that mark his itinerary and make his work an embryonic laboratory of translation experiments, a narrative space where he experiences the introduction of new socio-cultural elements which forge his American identity.

If compared to the more famous autobiographical work by Nabokov, *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited*, *Autobiography* presents a linear narration and a clear language. Although it may read like a piece of travel writing and lacks the fictional aspect of Nabokov's autobiography, it lends itself to some metalinguistic interpretations and represents a space in transition towards the more complex world of *Speak, Memory*, characterized by sudden space-time shifts and foreignizing effects, as a result of the frequent use of French and Russian words and phrases in the English macro-text³. English, French and Russian are, in fact, the languages that Nabokov employs in his itinerary from east to west. Written in two different centuries, the two autobiographies share a great many aspects; not only do their authors write their memoirs in their adopted language, but they also use other sublanguages to describe their passage from Russia to America. Their emigration was characterized by long stays in Europe as well, which exposed the two writers to different cultural environments. The two authors' transcultural experience exerted an influence over their autobiographical

² In this regard, Trousdale confirms "[...] Nabokov's central place in an emerging transnational canon", because he "[...] provides both a model and a point of reference" and is "[...] an ancestor in an affiliative intellectual family" (2011: 7).

According to Basch, Blanc-Szanton and Glick Schiller, transnationalism is "[...] the process by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their country of settlement" (1992: 1).

³ De la Durantaye emphasizes the fictional aspect of *Speak Memory*, as "[...] it does not tell a classical story. [...] It departs from the traditional forms autobiographies have taken" (2014: 165).

writings, since they include linguistic elements of the places they went through during their emigration.

Taking into account that an essay would not suffice to analyse Nabokov's and Cournos's numerous works and translations, and that Nabokov's *oeuvre* has been studied over the years, I suggest focusing on *Autobiography*, because it presages Nabokov's route and, being an autobiography, discloses more explicitly the writer's inner world and personal experiences; what is more, it illustrates, from an intimate perspective, the linguistic transition which led Cournos from the Russian to the American world, as well as to the adoption of translingual writing. In light of these considerations, this essay means to investigate the cultural contexts Cournos dealt with and to examine the extent to which such contexts forged the linguistic structure and setting in his work, whose variegated linguistic geology, unearthed by his early linguistic experiments, stands out in *Speak, Memory*. The two autobiographies (re)translate and (re)write Cournos's and Nabokov's geographical itineraries and reveal, at the same time, a fascinating dialogism among different languages, settings, events, and literary traditions. In spite of the numerous studies on Nabokov, *Speak Memory* has been mostly analysed from a narratological perspective. By dwelling on the linguistic aspects of *Autobiography*, known to but a few scholars, this study aims to redefine the linguistic contextualization of Cournos's work, which would anticipate Nabokov's linguistic experiments in *Speak Memory*.

2. Theoretical Framework

Considering the well-known Bakhtinian theory of pluridiscursivity (Bakhtin 1979: 133-40), which investigates the social and cultural value of words in their layered configuration, I will explore the semantic mosaic and the lexical background in *Autobiography*, by making some comparisons with *Speak, Memory*. The analysis of the lexical texture will take into account other known theories, such as the process of interlingual and intralingual translation (Jakobson 1959: 233), with the purpose of highlighting a constant dialogue among the different cultural and linguistic worlds which Cournos evokes. Being written in the writer's adopted

language, *Autobiography* represents an example of translingual text, whose composition partly involved a process of self-translation; by re-writing his life in his target language, the author re-translates his European and American experiences into his target language. The essay will, therefore, apply the different overtones of self-translation to the text by following Oustinoff's (2001: 29) classification of different types of self-translation, which Sanfelici (2016: 142-43) analyses in her essay on bilingualism and self-translation: *naturalisante*, target language-oriented, *décentrée*, source language-oriented, and *(re)créatrice*, an approach which eliminates all links between the source text and the target text, (re)creating the target text. The process of self-translation results from Cournos's crossing different floating territories, whose languages interact in his text to negotiate spaces of cultures and meanings. The dialogue between the writer's languages leads to discuss the relationship between his host(ing) language(s) and his host(ed) language(s) to analyse Cournos's transition to his target language, with the consequent deprivation of his source language(s).⁴ Cournos experiences that travelling, as a result of his emigration, generates a never-ending process of translation and self-translation which implies, in turn, the deprivation of his own cultural and linguistic world and the passage into a specific host(ing) language (Zaccaria 2017: 35-7). The latter tests the writer's conditions to be welcomed in the new cultural setting. However, Cournos's hospitality in the New World is affected by barriers and borders, with the consequent increase in cultural and linguistic estrangement, a feeling that the writer will never stop experiencing. Such a discourse will obviously include Godayol's well-known theory (2000: 94-5; Polezzi 2012: 349-50) about the concepts of frontiers and hybridism, in order to underline the author-translator's role, as an observer of his

⁴ When I refer to Cournos, I pluralize, with the aim of emphasizing his linguistic in-betweenness, "source language(s)", putting the pluralizing "s" in parenthesis, because Cournos's mother language was primarily Russian, but he must have had some knowledge of Hebrew. Since he uses both Russian and Hebrew in his work, I will refer to both languages by writing "source language(s). For the same reason I pluralize "host(ing) language(s) and host(ed) language(s)", putting in parenthesis the suffixes "ing" and "ed", owing to the interchangeable identity that his languages, as source and target languages, assume during his emigration. When I do not pluralize the word "language", I refer to a specific source language or target language. I will follow the same principle when I refer to Nabokov too, since he uses English and French words in his autobiography.

linguistic spaces both from a marginal, paratextual, perspective and a central, intratextual, angle.

As I have mentioned, drawing from Cournos's autobiography, my work will suggest some comparisons with Nabokov's famous *Speak, Memory*, in order to discuss the complex linguistic structure of the texts and underline the splitting process Nabokov goes through between the languages and the cultures of his autobiography. The passage from Russia to America through Europe described in the two works generates new uprooting and estranging identities which influence the two writers' languages. The separation between the linguistic and cultural components starts in Cournos's text as the writer crosses the boundaries of his country; it becomes more complex in Nabokov's autobiography, whose frequent linguistic interferences generate examples of a linguistic mixture, thus blurring the borders marking the different linguistic and cultural spaces evoked in the text.

3. Analysis and Discussion

3.1. Cournos: The First Steps to Plurilingualism

The linguistic analysis of Cournos's work could not be carried out without a short illustration of his cultural contextualization. Unlike Nabokov, who never returned to Russia, Cournos emigrated with his family to Philadelphia at ten and later returned temporarily to Russia. Although he received some education during his childhood (he was taught Russian, German, and Hebrew), Cournos did not grow up, as he himself claims, in a culturally stimulating environment which forged, instead, Nabokov's education. The rural environment of his childhood affected his linguistic background and exerted an influence over his linguistic adaptation in the USA. As regards his life in Ukraine, Cournos writes: "My education proceeded in a desultory fashion. I lived among woods, yet I scarcely knew the names of the trees. [...]" (Cournos 1935: 40, 70)⁵. When he refers to his first days

⁵ All subsequent quotations from *Autobiography* will refer to this edition; page numbers are given parenthetically in the text. All the Russian and Hebrew words quoted from *Autobiography*, as well

in Philadelphia, he claims: “[...] in those days I stammered a great deal, and not alone because of the limitations of my English. My childhood in the Russian woods had simply made me incapable of speech (70)”. The language barrier made his life in the USA difficult; however, Cournos was soon in contact with outstanding intellectuals, increased his readings of English and Russian literature and wrote for *The Philadelphia Record*. In addition to this, he did numerous translations from Russian into English, which proved to be useful exercises to improve his target language. His relationships with educated people led him to plan a journey to England: “I had been for some time developing two correlated passions: the love of the English language and the desire to go to London. The latter desire was further encouraged by Feldman, who had made a journey to England” (183). Cournos went to London in 1912 because he considered the British city the symbol of culture and, therefore, he chose to go there to improve his English. Before settling in London, he visited some Italian cities - like Naples, Rome and Florence - and Paris, where he met many artists. Cournos’s tour around Europe was an important moment for his cultural and linguistic development. Despite his long stay in London, he still struggled with English: “I could not even speak English properly, as the English spoke it” (218). Among the artists Cournos met in London, Yeats and Pound were the ones who mostly influenced him and shaped his translingual writing. His improvements in English were so remarkable that he became, during his stay in England, one of the members of the Anglo-Russian Commission, sent to Petrograd in 1917 for political reasons.

Cournos’s autobiography covers his life from his childhood years until the end of the 20s and is entirely written in English, with some Russian and Hebrew words and phrases. The writer illustrates the different phases of his life and, at the same time, questions his proficiency in using his target language as his literary language. When he moved to America, he probably could not speak and write his source language(s) well because of his early age and it took him several years to have a good command of the target language. Cournos’s case, therefore, is

as the Russian words quoted from *Speak, Memory*, are transliterated by Cournos and Nabokov respectively.

particular since he could not properly speak any language when he emigrated to America and was in need of finding his own linguistic identity in the American environment. *Autobiography* illustrates each phase of the writer's itinerary: Russia, his childhood, the American years and his problems with settling down in a new context, England, his literary formation, and Russia, again, on his temporary return as a translator for the Anglo-Russian Commission. Each place brings back different memories: the Romantic landscapes of rural Russia, the social and cultural contrasts in the USA, the vibrant atmosphere in Europe and the unexpected backwardness of urban life in Russia.

Set against Cournos's socio-cultural background, *Autobiography* sums up the writer's transnational experience. Although he wrote books reflecting his experience as an emigrant, his autobiography deserves major attention since it discloses the writer's most intimate views and is one of the earliest examples of translingual narrative, as a consequence of his emigration overseas on the eve of the twentieth century, which inspired later Russian-born intellectuals to leave their country. From a linguistic perspective, the work is characterized by its linearity and by a plain language, owing to the use of simple grammatical structures. It reads like a "reportage" or a "travelogue", but lends itself to insightful interpretations.

Although Cournos's childhood was affected, as said, by his rural environment, which somehow hindered the development of his linguistic education, he was attracted as a child by all that sounded or looked foreign, and the only foreign things he was introduced to were books:

I loved Russian poetry, and was early acquainted with the simpler lyrics of Pushkin, Lermontov and Nekrassov. I read Grimm's and Andersen's fairy tales in translation; also Robinson Crusoe; and the fables of Krylov and Lafontaine. I learned several chapters of Isaiah by heart. [...] I admired the sound of the prophet's dithyrambs. The magnificent onomatopoeic sibilance of the opening lines sent me into raptures: *Shim-m-oo shomayim, / Vihoazinu oretz, / Ki Adonai dibair...* (Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth: for the Lord hath spoken.) I was too young to understand the significance of the words, but the sound captivated, as the sound of English was to captivate me later, as one is captivated by an infusion of a rich red wine. [...] There were but few books in the house, and, in any case, my education was very

much haphazard. By then, I had my fill of those charming Ukranian songs.
(40)

The first pages of *Autobiography* are dotted with some foreignisms, mainly Hebrew and Russian words, whose English translation is quoted in parentheses; some English passages are excerpts from British and American poets, while Hebrew and Russian words and phrases mostly refer to religion or to the esoteric world, such as “byess (devil) [...] vyedma (witch)” (34), “bogomoltzi – pilgrims – [...] radi boga – for God’s sake” (13). Cournos expresses his attraction to foreign sounds and dwells on them even when he does not understand them. The interference of his source language(s) does not recede from view even when he emigrates overseas, a passage which is marked in the text by the title of the chapter “Go West, Young Man!” (53), in which he describes his emigration; when his stepfather arrives in the USA and sees his newly-born son, David, he exclaims “*Nastoyastchy Amerikanetz!* A real American!” (81) The occasional use of Hebrew and Russian vocabulary in the English macrotext represents the writer’s attempt to set up a dialogic relationship among the foreignisms employed in the narrative space. Following Bakhtin’s (1979: 138-9) theory of pluridiscursivity, each word embodies a “mosaic” of semantic elements which are, in turn, dialogized, discussed, and thus subject to various interpretations. As such, the foreignisms interact with the target text by means of the translation provided by the author. On the one hand, their introduction into the narrative texture foreshadows a dialogue among different linguistic and cultural worlds; on the other hand, they increase the effect of foreignization and estrangement. By quoting isolated words and expressions from foreign worlds, Cournos attempts to create a lexical-cultural network, which allows him to have the different languages interact. Some elements of the Russian and Jewish culture are transplanted into the American social context to have them dialogize with the new environment of the target language.

Apart from the examples in the book of interlingual translation, which helps the author to engage the reader in the dialogic relationship between the interfering languages and the target language, Cournos enriches his text with metalinguistic comments, which focus on the different accents and intonations of the target language. This is particularly evident when he recalls his first months in the USA,

where the cultural and linguistic settlement was not easy at all, and when he moves to London, where he noticed the differences between American and British English. His analysis of typical American and British expressions represents his intralingual approach to the target language, what Jakobson defines “Intralingual translation or rewording”, namely “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language” (1959: 233). This engages Cournos in a process of rephrasing which explicates the signs of the target language by means of other signs of the same language. When Cournos describes the first months of his life in the USA, he does not hide his difficulties with the language, amplified by the problems of social integration, as many people call him “You dirty sheeny”(68). In particular, he dwells on some expressions whose sound and intonation attract his attention:

My effort to accustom myself to English had its amusing side. A child learns to speak phonetically, and the language I heard about me did not predispose me to learn as I should. Thus it is that an immigrant learns to say, “Gerarre here!” when “Get out of here!” is meant; “Whatzemarre wid you!” when “What’s the matter with you?” is intended. Many words I caught by ear had indeed no meaning at all to me, and I used them afterward with absurd, sometimes entertaining effects. (70)

Cournos’s effort to understand the target language is characterized by his attempt to grasp the possible links between the sound effects and the most peculiar aspects of his new linguistic context. When he starts working to make ends meet and sells newspapers in the streets of Philadelphia, he shouts “Pay-pers” (73), as if he meant to allude to his need for money, as symbolized by the sound effect created by the root word. In his intralingual analysis, Cournos emphasizes the artistic dimension of the language, by reproducing the onomatopoeic effect of the typical American expressions and phrases that he catches. To mention Bakhtin again, the writer creates a phonic contact between the words and the reality that they signify and represent (1979: 133-40). He highlights the necessity to employ the onomatopoeic aspect of the words to have a more authentic dialogue with the New World; it is the means which allows him to interpret the American speakers’ idiolect and grasp the core of the new linguistic environment. Cournos adopts the same approach to facilitate his linguistic integration when he moves to London in 1912 to make a literary career. In spite of his long stay in the USA, he claims,

once in London, that “I could not even speak English properly, as the English spoke it” (218). The writer’s feeling of displacement increases as he perceives the different accent, which he tries to reproduce in the text. He quotes an ironic comment he heard in London on his appearance; in this quotation, he emphasizes the local accent: “I sa-ay, Bill, is it Bikon or is it Shikes-pirr?” (216). Moreover, he mentions a sentence uttered by a man who explained the reason why a woman had died during the men’s demonstrations to gain their right to vote: “That was because she got in the w-wye (way)! Just like a woman!” (216). When he settles both in the USA and in England, the writer makes great efforts to fathom the surrounding environment by lingering on the sounds he hears, which he learns as onomatopoeic expressions and connects with the phenomenological world. Cournos is attracted by the lively atmosphere in London, where the Shakespearean culture satisfies his expectations. He is impressed by the city’s “polyphonic revelation” (218), as he claims, which pervades its intralingual scenario, where the interpretation of the British semiotic dimension creates a heterogeneous context of subcultures and linguistic overtones (Stavans 2018: 27). In addition to the intralingual translation that he carries out when he is in London, Cournos finds himself concerned with an unconscious process of self-translation in writing his autobiography in the target language. By self-translating his life into the adopted language, he adopts a *décentrée* approach, a source language-oriented approach (Oustinoff 2001: 29; Sanfelici 2016: 142-43). As a result, the author preserves, by means of the contamination created by the use of some foreignisms, the linguistic estrangement, the echoes of the source language(s), maintaining his link to his original world. Such an approach is strictly connected with the translingual writing, characterized by the adoption of the target language as a literary language and by preserving estranging, foreignizing expressions. At the same time, Cournos’s contaminated English consists of clear and linear sentences, as well as a straightforward vocabulary, which neither contains metaphorical messages nor does it require the reader’s interpretation of particular semantic effects. When he writes about his progress in English during his stay in London, he claims:

I was able in those days, [...] to construct long elaborate rhythmic sentences with a surer sense of grammatical adequacy than to employ properly the

commonplaces of English fitted into the language by usage. In any event, it was not always a matter of correctness; a person relatively alien to English might construct a sentence grammatically correct yet be utterly wrong from the point of usage. (248)

Apart from the linguistically distancing effect created by the Russian and Hebrew words, the English macrotext contains simple sentences and constructions; the constructions and lexis are also comprehensible to a foreign ear, but they are not as refined and sophisticated as the ones that an English native speaker would employ in a literary context. The excerpts from *Autobiography* show that Cournos sometimes combines, in his text, words from his source language(s), but the English macrotext conveys a plain language, in that it does not disclose metaphorical meanings or hidden allusions. His approach to translingual writing is, therefore, conditioned by his linguistic doubts and hesitations, which he overtly mentions; this leads him to express the denotative aspect of reality. Following Oustinoff's theory, not only does Cournos use an estranging self-translation, owing to the presence of some foreignisms, but he also tends to (re)create the phenomenological world by means of the onomatopoeic sounds he brings in. "Gerarre here!", "Whatzemarre wid you", "Pay-pers", "sa-ay [...] Shikes-pirr?" are expressions (re)created by Cournos's linguistic perspective, and rephrase the surrounding environment according to the linguistic peculiarities of the places he passes through. By using such phrases, Cournos means to re-shape from his angle the contexts where he is hosted and attributes to those same contexts different social and cultural characteristics: America is the world of barriers and discrimination, England oozes with the European cultural atmosphere, which makes him feel at ease. The writer considers English a language without grammar and, for this reason, he approaches such a language from the study of its sounds: "Actually, too, Mr Hueffer once said to me, English has no grammar; it is mostly a matter of usage. Joseph Conrad, he insisted, notwithstanding the super passages of his prose, violated the English language most abominably, but was a great writer in spite of it" (248).

Along the borders where different languages clash and are compared, Cournos lies between his host(ing) language(s) and his host(ed) language(s) to emphasize the changing identities of the languages he uses. Travelling means losing one's

culture, one's mother tongue. Generally speaking, as the exile travels, he or she experiences the loss of his or her language; the exile experiences the deprivation of his or her linguistic identity because he or she crosses different borders (Zaccaria 2017: 36). Likewise, Cournos emigrates from his source language(s) to his target language and experiences the deprivation of Russian and Hebrew which, however, he could not use at a literary level. When the writer left his country, he was too young to be able to master Russian and Hebrew. His translingual journey and his pluri-identities gradually blur the distinction between his source language(s) and his target language(s), between his host(ed) language(s) and his host(ing) language(s). Cournos's languages are host(ed), received, by the American and British English(es), which can be regarded as the host(ing) language(s). However, the linguistic frustrations never recede from view when the writer lives in the USA and in England, owing to the linguistic doubts which he discloses in his frequent metalinguistic observations in the text. English, the host(ing) language, the target language, becomes Cournos's source language, but his metalinguistic questions on English(es) place him in the condition of an eternal foreigner, although he sees English as his final linguistic 'abode'. In the last part of his autobiography, Cournos realizes that America is his country and partially completes his process of cultural and linguistic integration: "And again I dream that America, safe between two oceans, has taken it all over, has taken the place of Europe. America can become a great country. America is a better country since the Depression. It is harder to exist – for you and me. Yet it is a better country" (343). Cournos's final appreciation of America is due to his long experience in Europe, especially in England, where the contacts with the main literary personalities of the time, like Pound and Yeats, enriched his background. Western Europe, therefore, was the source of his linguistic and literary evolution, the space where he could treasure the foreign influences.

From a narrative perspective, the work re-maps the writer's route and, with the numerous geographical references, traces out the different phases of Cournos's journey from Europe to America and vice versa. The memories of his emigration are contextualized in specific places in Europe and in America and include, as seen, few foreign expressions which still maintain the existence of linguistic

borders, although they gradually lose their firmness⁶. Unlike Nabokov, whose autobiography contains frequent digressions and nomadic thoughts to imaginary dimensions, Cournos is much more concerned with the geography of his route and provides a straightforward account of his experiences.

3.2. Nabokov and the Interlingual Dialogue

Speak, Memory, which, as known, recollects the author's memories from his homeland to France, until his departure for the USA, further develops the linguistic process that Cournos started and goes beyond the frontiers separating the different socio-cultural areas. The pluridiscursive approach that appears in *Autobiography* is here amplified, as the linguistic interferences are much more frequent than in Cournos's text, and Nabokov's metalinguistic experiments involve the phonic and metrical structure of the languages he employs. As a consequence of such interferences, the language used by Nabokov is more complex, metaphorical and pervaded by allusions to imaginary dimensions. In contrast to Cournos, the journey towards the USA is characterized *Speak, Memory* by the writer's numerous solipsistic digressions and thoughts. The dialogue among the semantic aspects of the foreign words included in the work increases the effect of foreignization, generated by the separation of the writer's languages from their own cultural contexts. Nabokov has his source language, Russian, interact with the culture of his target language, English, by means of the mediating presence of French. He amplifies the estranging effect produced by the combination of these languages by using specular linguistic tricks, puns and metalinguistic references (Wyllie 2016: 1-19)⁷. I will not quote many examples

⁶ Like the contemporary Italian bilingual writer Francesca Duranti, Cournos "[...] views the process of self-discovery as intertwined with the process of telling stories and the act of narration, and as one that is in turn inseparable from the act of translation (the translation of life into writing and vice versa)" (Wilson 2009: 187).

⁷ As regards Nabokov's linguistic "mazes", Nafisi (2019: 152), in her analysis of *Pnin* (but her comment can be referred to *Speak, Memory* as well), writes: "There is obviously nothing new in the idea of reality being reflected in the mirror of art. What is new is the manner by which Nabokov

from *Speak, Memory*, since the work has been thoroughly studied over the years. However, I will dwell on some of the most relevant passages to highlight the linguistic mosaic of the text.

An emblematic character in this plurilingual evolution is his Uncle Ruka, whose foreign utterances are often quoted. When Nabokov recalls the day in which his uncle said to him he would be his heir, he writes: “On my fifteenth nameday, he took me aside and in his brusque, precise and somewhat old-fashioned French informed me that he was making me his heir. ‘And now you may go,’ he added, ‘*l’audience est finie. Je n’ai plus rien à vous dire*’ (Nabokov 1967: 69)”⁸. Uncle Ruka’s linguistic mastery is so good that he even mingles French and Russian in his conversations with people. As the writer claims:

[...] his speech was a fastidious combination of French, English and Italian, all of which he spoke with vastly more ease than he did his native tongue. When he resorted to Russian, it was invariably to misuse or garble some extremely idiomatic or even folksy expression, as when he would say at table with a sudden sigh [...]: *Je suis triste et seul comme une bylinka v pole* [as lonesome as a ‘grass blade in the field’]. (71)

“*Bylinka v pole*” is an idiomatic Russian phrase and means “grass blade in the field”. In this passage Nabokov disapproves of Uncle Ruka’s combined use of a Russian idiomatic expression with the poetic overtone of the French words. The use of a plurilingual vocabulary increases as the narration progresses; the numerous linguistic interferences are points of discontinuity in the autobiography, as they intrude upon the narration and underscore its foreignizing effect. Unlike *Autobiography*, which presents a more linear and plain style, *Speak, Memory* sets Nabokov’s memories in a more romantic dimension, as the author often dwells

merges the mirror with the reflection of reality, creating an irrefutable though invisible nexus between reality and art”.

For a thorough study of Nabokov’s specular games and masks, see Faye 2019: locations 1886-2597 (being an e-book, page numbers are cited as locations).

⁸ All subsequent quotations from *Speak, Memory* will refer to this edition; page numbers are given parenthetically in the text.

on the moments he spent with his nurses, tutors and his family in his summer estate. The romantic and idealized aspect of the past, whose Bergsonian time expansion procrastinates the end of the narration, is as a pretext for developing further contrastive analyses among the three languages. The quotation of some lines from one of the letters that Tamara, his past lover, wrote to him, expresses Nabokov's comparative impulses:

'Why did we feel so cheerful when it rained?' she asked in one of her last letters, reverting as it were to the pure source of rhetorics. '*Bozhe moy*' (*mon Dieu* – rather than 'My God'), where has it gone, all that distant, bright, endearing (*Vsyto eto dalyokoe, svetloe, miloe* – in Russian no subject is needed here, since these are neuter adjectives that play the part of abstract nouns, on a bare stage, in a subdued light). (249)

The use of the three languages aims to bring the past to the present time. Nabokov switches from "*Bozhe moy*", his source language, to his target language, "My God", passing through "*Mon Dieu*". In particular, he uses "rather than" to point out that, in this specific case of self-translation, he prefers using the French translation to the English one. In his self-translation of the phrase "*Bozhe moy*" he writes down the translations in French and in English, but his choice, in this case, emphasizes French, to remind the reader of the importance of French as a language in-between his route from Russian to English. He means to set up a channel of communication with the reader by describing the different steps of translation. The writer's concern with the translation of the Russian lexical units represents his attempt to attract the reader's attention, without losing any contact with him or her. The translation of such units stands for the expression of the phatic function (Jakobson 1960: 355-56), characterized by short communicative formulas used by the addresser to call for the addressee's attention. Likewise, Nabokov involves the reader in the plurilingual act of communication and, at the same time, deals with the issue of the foreignizing effect generated by the frequent introduction of French and Russian words and phrases. The constant emergence of the Russian hypotext reveals, as Kadiu (2019: 36) claims, that "[...] no translation, however foreignizing or defamiliarising it might be, can highlight the ethnocentrism at play in translation processes without also pointing to the ethnocentric violence underlying its own creation". Nabokov's linguistic violence consists in the combination of different languages in the text, which amplifies the

estranging effect on the reader's part. The introduction of words and echoes from other languages brings in different registers, as in the above-mentioned sentence "*Je suis triste et seul comme une bylinka v pole*"; this creates new and 'dissonant' linguistic environments. However, from another perspective, the writer's interference in the translation of the foreign words and phrases has the purpose of reducing the alienating effects of the ethnocentric perspective of the text. Nabokov discusses, mediates the translation of the foreign fragments; he means to share with the reader the different semantic aspects of the foreign words that he translates. As such, his approach to translation is reflexive as, quoting Kadiu (*ibid.*) again, reflexivity "[...] is possible only if we make visible the act of translating itself, by showing the original text that is being translated". Nabokov, more than Cournos, who is often concerned with the investigation into the sounds of the languages of his text, explicates his translation. He makes the reader aware of his choices of translation and, at the same time, strains to limit the violating effect produced by the linguistic interferences and to come to terms with the target language. The examples of linguistic alloys in Nabokov's text represent the writer's interest in "[...] the language as it is, be it his native or a foreign language. He is eager to experiment with new language expressive means" (Maklakova, Khovanskaya, Grigorieva 2017: 1264). Nabokov's linguistic experiments pave the way for further approaches to translation. The shared translation of the passages and phrases in *Speak, Memory* is the first phase of the dialogized translation that he adopts in one of his last works, *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), his fictitious autobiography; in this work, Russian passages are not always translated into English but, at times, commented and discussed by the writer himself. *Look at the Harlequins!* thus initiates a paraphrastic translation, characterized by the use of words and expressions that do not necessarily translate the specific and literal meaning of the source text⁹.

As occurs in *Autobiography*, Nabokov finally approaches a (re)creative self-translation of his life, in that he writes a translingual text in which the languages

⁹ In this regard, Shvabrin (2019: 338) states that "The determined literalist continued to engage in the paraphrastic translation of poetry into poetry at the same time as he argued against the advisability, indeed legitimacy, of such an approach."

of his emigration interact. The linguistic borders, like in *Autobiography* (and even more than in *Autobiography*) fade in *Speak, Memory*, along with the distinction between the host(ing) language(s) and the host(ed) language(s). The quotations from the text, therefore, show that the increased pluridiscursive configuration weakens the linguistic boundaries and creates a plurilingual context, in which the concepts of identity, language and culture become flexible, negotiable and changeable (Godayol 2000: 95), as a consequence of the splitting process between the author's languages and the cultures to which they belong. Each language is not confined to its cultural space but interacts with other textual and linguistic contexts. By sharing his narration and his translation with the readers, Nabokov, as a writer and translator, looks at his text from different linguistic angles. As a bilingual and a trilingual translator, he owns particular cultural and linguistic powers, which endow him with the privilege of examining the peculiarities of his languages from two perspectives: the marginal perspectives and the paralinguistic spaces of the text, marked by the frontiers, to dwell on the interlingual passage from one side of the borders to the other; the central and intratextual perspectives of the text, characterized by intense plurilingual interactions, which allow him to examine the peculiarities of each singular language. (Hamrit 2019: 277-79; Godayol 2000: 95)

4. Concluding Remarks

Cournos's text starts a long tradition of plurilingual autobiographies, with different levels of linguistic and cultural dialogism. The pluridiscursive relationships, of Bakhtinian echo, among the foreignisms in *Autobiography* generate both the intralingual translation from American English into British English, and the interlingual translation from Russian and Hebrew into English. The interlingual approach stands out in *Speak, Memory*, whose linguistic elements echoing from Nabokov's different geographical spaces interact and often combine to form moments of discontinuity. The two writers deal with a complex process of self-translation; their works result from the (re)creative encounter of different languages, with the consequent coinage of plurilingual passages. The plurilingual

interdialogism aims to preserve the different linguistic moments in the writers' lives and to establish a specific relationship between the languages they use. Such a relationship leads but to the intertwinement of the source language(s) and the target language(s), forming a fascinating dialogue of linguistic voices and identities. This affects the consistence of the linguistic borders, whose existence is still perceived at times in Cournos's text, due to his source language-oriented approach, but is more blurred in *Speak, Memory*, so as to allow the writers to analyse their plurilingual autobiographies from different textual and linguistic perspectives.

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