

Title: “Il ne faut pas péter plus haut que son cul”? Nabokov’s *Nikolka Persik* as *Colas Breugnon*

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Looking back at his audacious attempt to Russianize Romain Rolland’s *Colas Breugnon* (completed 1914, published 1918) as *Nikolka Persik* (completed 1921, published 1922), Vladimir Nabokov likened the French original to “a Vesuvius of words, an eruption of old French lexicon.” Taming this violent upsurge of verbal matter was to become for Nabokov an exacting rite of passage on the way to becoming a Russian writer.

In Nabokov’s adaptation, *Colas Breugnon*, ostensibly a confessional narrative by a fictional seventeenth-century master-craftsman from Rolland’s native Burgundy, is transposed into a vaguely Russian rustic setting. In *Nikolka Persik* Nabokov makes extensive use of Vladimir Dahl’s *Tolkovyi slovar’ zhivogo velikorusskogo iazyka*, effectively turning his adaptation into a literary workshop and an act of communion with the living sources of a native language from which he had been severed. While the importance of this exercise for Nabokov the can scarcely be overestimated, how – if at all – did Nabokov’s encounter with Rolland’s view of art affect that of Rolland’s first Russian translator?

Breugnon’s ribaldry, Rolland’s deep knowledge of medieval music only adds to the difficulties faced by anyone who attempts to transpose the novel into a foreign language. What were the strategies employed by Nabokov in his adaptation, how do they fare when compared not only with the works of his rivals, but, perhaps most importantly, with the original itself? Due to its nature, *Nikolka Persik* naturally displays a wide array of semantic departures from the original, but what is the overall result of Nabokov’s engagement with an author and thinker so diametrically opposed to his own mature thought?

A study in the technical aspects of translation as well as an examination of its ideology, the present paper will attempt to bring our understanding of *Nikolka Persik*’s significance to a new level.