Scholar Presents Nabokov the Translator

Long after gaining renown for his fiction, Vladimir Nabokov began the less glamorous work of translating great Russian writers into English.

The Russian language is notoriously resistant to translation, said preeminent Nabokov scholar Brian Boyd at a Harriman Institute lecture on Nov. 14—which proved an irresistible draw for the celebrated author and butterfly expert.

“He loved difficulty, in a way,” said Boyd, a professor of English at the University of Auckland. “He loved the challenge of translation.”

Boyd, whose two-volume biography of Nabokov has won numerous awards, began his presentation by reading part of the introduction to his forthcoming collection of the novelist’s verse translations, Versions and Versions, which he is co-editing with Stanislav Shvabrin.

Fielding a question about what it was like to study Nabokov’s translations, Boyd said he was constantly reminded of one of the writer’s most enduring characteristics: “an almost moral passion for precision.”

Still, there were times when the mental exercise of translation stymied him. Boyd said, particularly when he was working on verses by Aleksandr Pushkin, Nabokov’s greatest muse—and frustration.

Pushkin’s “Ya vas lyubil” is considered one of the greatest Russian love poems—but reading a misguided translation by Carol Ann Duffy might not leave that impression, Boyd quipped. A 1929 version by Nabokov was an improvement, he argued, in that it preserved the original rhyme, but still rang rather “trite.” Boyd’s third example flowed from his own pen, and he explained his complicated decision of which word to end with, conveying a sense of the layered obstacles translators typically face.

Finally, Boyd read Pushkin’s original lines in Russian while the audience followed him on copies of the text, which included a literal word-for-word translation into English.

“How often do you get to hear Pushkin, in Russian, with a New Zealand accent?” he asked, drawing one of several rounds of laughter from the group.

Columbia would have foregone this unique opportunity altogether had it not been for Rebecca Jane Stanton, an assistant professor of Russian at Barnard College and fellow New Zealander, who invited Boyd to participate in the Harriman event, which was cosponsored by Maison Française and the departments of Slavic languages, English and comparative literature, and French and romance philology.

The lecture was also timed to correspond with the worldwide celebrations marking the 50th anniversary of Nabokov’s most popular work, Lolita. This year has brought a flurry of Nabokov scholarship, including a forthcoming book, Visiting Nabokov, by Nina Khrushcheva, an adjunct at Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs.