

SLOVENE POETRY IN ENGLISH: CHALLENGES AND PROBLEMS

Irma M. Ožbalt

Perusing slim, often bilingual editions of Slovene poetry in English, published on both sides of the ocean between 1954 and 1993, one inevitably has to ask: who are these elegant books for, who will read them? Editors and translators seem to have anticipated this question, and some of them define the purpose of their endeavour in longer or shorter introductions to their selections and/or anthologies.

The editors of the selection from Prešeren's poetry in 1954 clearly state: "... until now only a few isolated poems by (Prešeren) have been accessible in English. Consequently, a publication of this kind may help to fill a distinct gap for lovers of poetry and for students of literature in general,"¹ thus defining their target audience as two distinct groups of readers: those who read poetry for nothing else but pleasure, and the scholars who would study Slovene poetry and assess it in the context of world literatures.

In the Preface to his monograph on Prešeren, in which he interprets rather than translates Prešeren's poetry, Henry R. Cooper explains that he aims at about the same two groups, defining them as the majority who knows "nothing or almost nothing about either the man or his poetry," and "those who come to this book with some or much knowledge of the poet and his oeuvre."²

In the "Introduction" to his translation of Prešeren's *Baptism on the Savica*, the same author gives an additional reason for undertaking his task: "... to elucidate a central text of Slovene culture by making it accessible to readers of English,"³ aiming at the world audience who should be acquainted with Prešeren's *Baptism* to the same extent it is familiar with e.g. Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

Tom Ložar anticipates not two, but four audiences for his bilingual volume of Kocbek's poetry; he separates them into "Lovers of Poetry," "those who know a little Slovenian and a lot of English," "those ... who know more Slovenian than English," and finally "those fascinated, perhaps newly, by Central and Eastern Europe."⁴

The choice of the original texts thus depends on the translator's anticipated audience, or, commercially, on the buyers of his book. What options does he have? This question was amply discussed in Rado L. Lenček's paper "On the Options of

1 W.K. Matthews & A. Slodnjak: *Selection of Poems by Francè Prešeren Translated from the Slovene*, Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1954, Introduction

2 Henry Ronald Cooper, Jr.: Francè Prešeren, Boston, Twayne Publishers, 1981, Preface.

3 Ni teksta za opombo!

4 Edvard Kocbek: *Na vratih zvečer - At the Door at Evening*, translated by Tom Ložar, Dorion (Quebec, Canada). The Muses' Co. - La Compagnie des Muses, 1990, p. 7.

the Poetry of a Small Nation."⁵ His conclusions are: if a translator wants to invite the attention of an international audience, he has to base his choice of poems, written in an unknown language, first, on their quality, i.e. on the formal perfection and the value of each poem's message, and second, on their specificity. This means: each poem has to offer the international audience something new, either present a known theme or an often expressed idea in a novel, fascinating way, or introduce new motifs, feelings and thoughts, based on the socio-historic experience and cultural tradition of a particular ethnic unit. An anthology, or a selection of poems by a single author, should - in addition to the above - endeavour to choose poems which define each individual poet as unique, different from all the others, the poems that illuminate him in his most striking aspects. In other words: the poetry that deserves a role on the world stage should be at the same time national, typical for the land in which it was conceived, and international, in that its human appeal reaches the ultimate boundary of universality.

These considerations, unfortunately, have not always determined the choice in the translations of Slovene poetry in the last forty years.

After determining for whom and what to translate, the translator has to decide how he is going to proceed, i.e. what method he would use. There have been many discussions and polemics on the theory of poetic translation, the attitudes toward it having been defined according to the relative importance given to the source and target texts. At one extreme, translators view the original poems as little more than the source of themes and styles, which they adapt at will; at the other, there is Nabokov's view that the only true translation is the one he calls literal, i.e. the one rendering, as closely as the associative and syntactic capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Somewhere between the two extremes there is the so-called "creative translation," in which the translator's creativity is respected and is in a delicate balance with the creativity of the source author.

The editors and translators of Slovene poetry do not mention to which theory they subscribe, except Ložar, who declares that he is "of the Nabokovians." It seems that they simply undertook their task (or chose a poem close to their heart) and executed it according to their individual abilities and tastes, with vastly different results. These, of course, depended on who the translators were, and with what qualifications they approached the challenge.

The demands on a translator are daunting. The most essential, and yet the least achievable among them is his absolute mastery of both languages. This comprises not only the easy and natural application of grammar rules and fluid manipulation of the idiom in both the source and the target languages, but also - very often - the knowledge of a particular jargon or a dialect with all its sub-cultural connotations. In addition to that, the translator must possess a sharp ear for the sound effects, which play such an important part in conveying images and feelings in Slovene poetry. Finally, a translator of poetry must be a poet himself; without this quality, he performs a valuable task of transmission and interpretation, but not that of translation, which demands co-creation.

The following analysis tries to point out to what extent the translators of Slovene poetry in some publications between 1954 and 1993 succeeded in their work.

5 Rado L. Lenček: On the Options of the Poetry of a Small Nation, *Slovene Studies I* (1979), 4-13.

1. POEMS BY FRANCE PREŠEREN, 1954 (1969)

The selection of poems by France Prešeren, which was first published in 1954, was a product of collaboration between two editors, W.K. Matthews and A. Slodnjak. It aims at both, the lovers of poetry and the students of literature, and comprises most of the poet's representative work. The complete "Wreath of Sonnets," a couple of "Sonnets of Love," four post-"Wreath" sonnets, five "Sonnets of Unhappiness," and two "Gazelles" offer a researcher ample examples of Prešeren's mastery of complicated literary forms, of his complex metaphors, and of his philosophical speculation based on his extensive knowledge of world history, literature and mythology, as well as on the socio-cultural and historic events that have shaped his own nation's heritage and temperament. Other poems, such as those on the theme of unrequited love ("Commands," "Mariner," "Forsaken," "Lost Faith," "To Stargazers") or on socio-philosophical meditation ("To the Poet," "A Farewell to My Youth," "Memento Mori," "The Minstrel") offer pure esthetic enjoyment to any lover of poetry, due to their music, pathos and, often, playfulness.

The lion's share of these translations (16) was undertaken by Janko Lavrin, half of them being the product of his collaboration with W.K. Matthews - a successful combination of a native speaker of Slovene and a native speaker of English. The greatest feat, the translation of "A Wreath of Sonnets," however, was accomplished by V. de Sola Pinto, who contributed also some other translations. Other translators (Paul Selver, Griša Koritnik, Monica Partridge, Kenneth Matthews, Gloria Komai) contributed one to three poems each. All of these translators seem to adhere to the school of literal translation, although they sometimes opt for freer, poetic co-creation. They try to convey the form of each poem faithfully and give its contents with varying, generally very good, even excellent results.

A - Form

The metric scheme of the original poem is mostly left intact. There are, however, a few cases where the verse form is changed quite extensively. For example: In the "Unmarried Mother" the original dactyls and trochees are replaced by iambic tetrameters, which, nevertheless, still convey the smoothness of the original rhythm. The same meter replaces trochaic tetrameters in "The Forsaken," while the seven-foot trochaic verses in the first "Gazelle" are shortened into hendecasyllabic pentameters. In "The Minstrel" the original trochaic verse is changed into iambic. - The length of stanzas, the rhymes and their order are nearly always retained. Most of the time, however, the feminine rhymes of melodious Slovene give way to the masculine rhymes of the monosyllabic English vocabulary. This changes the original hendecasyllabic verses of Prešeren's sonnets into iambic pentameters. It also causes the verses to sound less melodious, more stilted, even when the translation is poetic in its vocabulary and metaphors.

It is interesting that the staccato repetition of the monosyllabic Slovene "tjè" at the beginning of five lines of the fifth "Sonnet of Unhappiness," which sounds like the hammering of nails into a coffin and conveys the feeling of despair and terror, is not imitated in the translation. Contrary to the usual masculine rhymes, we find here the polysyllabic "yonder," and even that is repeated only twice.

It seems that the translators cannot overcome the challenge of the verse where the message and atmosphere depend on the acoustic effects of Slovene sounds. Thus, e.g. in the poem "To the Poet" the translator does not hear, or is unable to

achieve, the gradation of distress created by Prešeren's order of vowel sounds from -a -e -i -o to the final -u, even though he keeps the same form of verse and stanzas, as well as the same order of rhymes. The problem of sound, as well as that of vocabulary, also robs "The Master Theme" sonnet of the "Wreath" of its all-important acrostic, which is so vital for the comprehension not only of Prešeren's virtuosity but also of his desperate courage.

In spite of such details, the translators nearly always succeed in meeting the challenge of the formal complexities and precision of Prešeren's poetry. They are not always equally successful in conveying its message.

B - Contents

Dealing with the richness of Prešeren's ideas, images and allusions, the translators often relinquish the demands of literal translation in favour of co-creation. Changes and deviations from the original generally stem from the translator's misinterpretation of a particular idea or metaphor, or from the lack of his intimate knowledge of Slovene history, folklore, or language intricacies. Few of these changes are purely artistic.

Some of them involve semantics. Misunderstandings or misinterpretations of vocabulary can sometimes destroy, or at least obscure a metaphor, and in some cases convey a completely wrong message. Here are some examples:

In the poem "To the Poet," "kragulj, ki kljuje srce," is not translated as *hawk*, but as a "vulture that seizes heart for its prey," making the metaphor less visually shattering. - In "Parting Words" the adjective *žal-i*, meaning *offensive, reproachful*, is confused with *žalosten*, and the line "žal besede v ustih ni" is translated as "Hear no sadness in my voice." - In "Lost Faith" the noun *život* is replaced by a vague *you*, and the verse "Život je tak, roké, nogé / so, kakršne so pred bile" becomes "You are unchanged, your hands and feet / Are still as skilful and as fleet," the second line added in order to produce the rhyme. - In "Mariner" the verses "Po zemlji varno hodi, / moj up je šel po vodi," translated as "Farewell, you earth-bound daughter, / My hopes are swept by water," show a misunderstanding of two Slovene idioms: *moj up je šel po vodi*, which simply means *I've lost all hope*, and *po zemlji varno hodi*, which is an idiom, expressing farewell wishes and has nothing to do with *earth-bound*. - In the same poem *jadra* is translated as *masts*. - In the "Unmarried Mother" the possessive pronoun *moji*, which in Slovene means *my family*, is translated as *my friends*. This seemingly minor slip is an example of how the lack of familiarity with the idiom and usage of the source language can distort the message of the original. - In the poem "The Minstrel," *kos*, which means *blackbird*, is translated as *thrush*, the bird called *drozg* in Slovene. - Translators of Prešeren's, as well as other Slovene poetry, misunderstand the word *roža / rož'ca*, translating it as *rose*. Yet, while in rare cases *roža* can mean *rose*, it nearly always means *flower*, while the rose is called *vrtnica* in Slovene. In its diminutive form, *rož'ca*, it always means a flower, be it in daily conversation, in folklore or in Prešeren. Thus, in the 14th sonnet of the "Wreath," the verse "ko rože, kadar mine zima huda" should not have been translated as "Like roses when the winter's passed away." An indication that the poet talks about humble wild flowers can be found in other verses of the same sonnet, referring to bees, shepherds, nightingales and "natura cela."

Semantic errors, however, are responsible only for minor deviations from the original. There are other changes, sometimes major, which occur because of the translator's striving to fulfil the formal demands of a particular verse, or because of

omissions and additions to the original, which can sometimes involve a simple adjective or adverb, and sometimes syntactic restructurings, involving the change of the subject in the sentence. Sometimes the translator misunderstands the original, sometimes he manipulates it consciously. As a result of these alterations, the translated poem can convey a slightly different message or take away from the sharpness of an original metaphor. The examples are numerous.

In the 12th sonnet of the "Wreath," the lines "Tak' blizu moj'ga bi srca kraljice, / bi blizu tebe, sonca njih, dobile / moč kvišku rasti poezij cvetlice," translated as "If my poetic flowers in sunlight grew, / They'd live again and freshly thrive ere long / For you, their queen - the blossoms of my song," sound poetic, close to the original, yet, by skipping the phrase "tebe, sonca njih" they fail to relay the metaphor: *you* are the sun that gives life to my poems.

The refrain in "Commands," which in the original is repeated four times unchanged, differs in every stanza of the translation. - In the same poem, the last stanza is translated very freely, even if poetically; the lines "Al' srce mi drugo ustvari, / al' počakaj, da to bit' / v prsih neha - Bog te obvari! / pred ni moč te pozabit", given as "Change my *poor* heart for a *neighbour's* / Or endure till it grows cold - / Until then *vain are your labours* / Since your image I must hold," omit the farewell phrase "God be with you!" and thus fail to convey the tenderness, forgiveness and goodness of the poet's nature. The added sentence "vain are your labours" originates from the translator's knowledge of Prešeren's life-style, not from the poem itself.

In "Parting Words" the third stanza does not reflect the poet's resignation verging on cynicism. Instead of translating the lines "saj ni pred bilo veselo, / ko se zate je unelo, / naj ne bo prihodnje dni!" as: "my heart had not been happy before I met you, so let it be unhappy in the future, too," the translator says something quite different: "If the present can't refashion / All the sorrows of my passion, / Can the future be more kind?"

In "Lost Faith," the last lines "Srce je moje bilo *oltar*, / pred *bogstvo* ti, zdaj lepa stvar," in which the poet conspicuously underlined the three key words, are translated as "This heart was once an altar flame: / My goddess then - now but a name." The stark contrast between a goddess and a beautiful object - sculpture, which is the very core of the verse, is lost. No flame is mentioned in the original, either.

In the poem "Where Now?" some metaphors and images are added, and the order of some verses reversed: "val morja" becomes "wild horses of the sea," "oblak neba" "the scudding clouds' wild company," "drvi jih sem ter tje vihar" is expanded into "scouring the plains of earth and sky." The whole effect of the original image of aimless drifting is changed into a ferocious force injuring everything in its path. The translation of "da pred obličje nje *ne smem*" as "Never again I'll see her eyes" omits the prohibition implied in the original verb; "kjer bi pozabil to *gorje*," rendered as "In which I could forget her face," arbitrarily changes the object of the verb from the poet's miserable fate to his lover's face.

In "Mariner" the lines "Pri Bogu sem obljudil, / da pred bom *dušo* zgubil, / ko nehal te ljubiti," rendered as "That I would perish rather / Than sacrifice my love," are watered down by the omission of *soul*. The poet's desperate pledge that he would sooner forfeit his soul, his eternity, than stop loving his girl, is lost. - The last image in the same poem, "morja široka cesta," is translated simply as *sea*. - In the lines "obrazov njih lepota, / sneg beli njih života / zmotila nista me," the translation

coyly omits the mention of the white body (breasts), concluding the stanza with a pedestrian "Their charms, alluring graces / Left me completely cold." The idea that the mariner did not succumb either to fair maidens' beauty or to sirens' physical charms and his own passion, is lost.

In the "Unmarried Mother" both lines, "vendar presrčno ljubim te" and "vedno bom srčno ljubila te," are translated as "with all my heart I love you so," thus missing the young mother's pledge for the future. - The translator also adds the sex of the baby, which is not mentioned in the original: "dete ljubo, dete lepo" becomes "My baby dear, my darling son." - The omission of *sam* in the line "on, ki je sam bil ljubi moj," given as "And he who was my own true love," robs the poem of its emphasis on the tragic detail that this unmarried mother only had one lover, and that he deserted her in her time of need.

The poem "Forsaken" is translated quite loosely. Important nuances that give the original its fragile beauty are left out, images and ideas are either misunderstood or added. The third line of the third stanza is completely changed. "(Da prisegel, si obljudil, / da boš mene samo ljubil, /) da ne boš ti druge snubil," in translation ends as "... and change your ways unruly," a promise not mentioned in the original. - The simple line "(da srce) nikdar več ne bo veselo" is expanded into a lovely image: "... you can shatter / This heart of mine and scatter / My days like leaves grown sere." - The tragic resignation that concludes this poem, "Bog men' uro daj posledno / prej, ko gresta pred oltar," is translated as "... and speed the hour / That brings me to my bier," omitting the girl's specific plea: please, let me die before their wedding day!

In the poem "In Memory of Andrey Smolè," the phrase "take zdravljice" is amplified into "toasts bitter and galling," while the proper name in the line "bolj'ga srca ni imela *Ljubljana*" is omitted. The translation loses the authenticity and flavour of the original and sounds quite prosaic: "There was no one half so good in *our city*." The translator also misses the idiom "Človek dobrega srca," which means "a generous man." A similar omission appears in the line "*kranjski* v obupu zapustil si svet," which is given as "*Your native country* you left in despair."

Erasing specific geographical and socio-historical references in Prešeren's poetry violates their intent and their firmly defined position in space and time. Omission of such references does not give a poem a more universal appeal; it only waters it down and one might even say, displays shyness bordering on servility towards the mighty world beyond the boundaries of Slovenia. Such omissions are numerous throughout the volume, and are especially glaring in the sonnets.

In the *Gazelle I*," the line "v nji bom med *slovenske* brate sladki glas zanesel" is translated as "Let *my countrymen* hear." - The first "Sonnet of Love" has most likely not been translated exactly because the omission of historical and geographical names (Metulum, Ljubljana, Sisek, Kolpa, Kranjci) would render it pointless. - In the second sonnet of the same cycle, "*Ljubljana*" and "*ljubljske* gospodične" become "*our city*" and *its beauties*. - In the "Prologue to A Wreath of Sonnets," which so precisely explains the location of Prešeren's first, crucial encounter with Julija, the line "po cerkvah tvojih hodil sem, *Ljubljana*" is given as "... I strolled ... *the city churches*." - In the sixth sonnet of the "Wreath" the line "le tujke so častile *Kranjcev* množ'ce" reads "While foreign beauties won both heart and hand ... in *our land*." - The translation of the seventh sonnet skips "*Kranja*" again, and in the eighth "boj *Vitovca*" is lost in the line "With woes our history is deeply lined," although Samo, Pepin and the Turks are mentioned.

The use of general terms instead of proper names is also found in the sonnets in which Prešeren used examples from classical mythology. Thus, the lines in the fourth "Sonnet of Unhappiness," "ak bi imel *gigantov* rok stotero, / ne spravi vkup darov potrebnih *Pluta*" read "Although he had a hundred *mighty* hands, / Would vainly strive for *riches* here below," which gives a different undertone to Prešeren's idea.

The selection of Prešeren's poems is furnished with some explanatory notes; it would have been easy to add a few more, which would explain proper names, historical and geographical, allowing the translations to convey Prešeren's deep involvement with the concerns of his era and his homeland, as well as his extensive knowledge of world history, literatures and mythologies. The problem of names, of course, was only one of the challenges the translators encountered in Prešeren's sonnets. There were many others. The translators dealt with them in different ways.

In the fifth "Sonnet of Love", the line "Nobena me še ni deklet ljubila" is arbitrarily translated as "Instead of loving, women did but grieve me." Prešeren does not say either here or anywhere else that women pitied or grieved him. - The translation of the first line in the first sonnet of "A Wreath of Sonnets," "Poet tvoj nov Slovincem venec vije," translated as "A Slovene wreath your poet has entwined," fail to convey the all-important message that the "Wreath" was created not only for Julija but also as a present to all Slovenes; "a Slovene wreath" simply means that it was written in Slovene, thus making the adjective pointless. - The line in the second sonnet "ko mi na zgodnjem grobu mah porase," translated as "When moss shall grow upon my tomb forlorn," misses the poet's prophetic vision of his early death. - "Mokrocveteče rož'ce poezije" in the third sonnet, are wrongly interpreted as "These tear-stained flowers of a poet's mind." Prešeren talks about the pale, inferior quality of his poems-flowers inspired by his unrequited love for Julija, not about his tears. - In the fourth sonnet, a whole, very nice metaphor is added to the line "kjer seje zdaj ljubezen elegije," which is translated as "... Love is sowing there / Sad elegies each with my longing signed." In the same sonnet, the line "... V oknu domačije / ne da te najti ... sreča kriva," suggesting that the poet often passes by Julija's home, trying in vain to catch a glimpse of her in a window, is translated as "I seek in vain at home." This creates the wrong idea that Prešeren tried to visit Julija at her home - which is inconsistent with the proud poet's character and with the social conventions of his time.

In some cases the translation is not incorrect; it simply fails to transmit the intensity of the feeling displayed in the original, or is just less poetic. Such are the lines in the fifth sonnet of the "Wreath," where the original lines "kjer vsa v pogledu tvojem skrb umira, / vseh bolečin se pozabljujost pije," are given as "Where all the cares of this world are at rest / And sweet oblivion follows close behind," - a very prosaic translation. - The point of the "Epilogue to 'A Wreath of Sonnets'" is destroyed by the misinterpretation of the legend on which the whole simile rests. In the phrase "žlahtnič trde glave," the qualifier "*trde glave*" is translated as "simple-hearted;" the verb "*ni znal*," i.e. the fact that the youth was not intelligent enough to learn more than the beginning of "Hail Mary," is omitted. Thus, the legendary rose with petals inscribed with these two words does not follow logically, and neither does the parallel with Prešeren's use of Julija's name in the acrostic of the "Wreath." The lines stating that the youth "Pledged to a vow, like any saintly brother / To worship ... the Savior's mother" are an arbitrary substitution and an addition to the original.

To do justice to the "Sonnets of Unhappiness," the translation should reflect concrete data of Prešeren's life in the way they are shown in the original. Instead, vivid detail of daily life in the poet's native village, as well as allusions to his own experiences, are watered down with generalities, omissions and additions. Thus, the verses "My house, my fertile fields, and all my own / Protected by our patron, good St Mark," omit the mention of fire, hail and wheat, and replace "bližnji sosed" with "our patron." - In the third "Sonnet of Unhappiness" the simile comparing an oak smitten by a mighty blow of a winter storm and the poet, is made less stark by stating that the poet is receiving "blow on blow," which suggests a repeated action of the verb, while in the original the perfective verbs "trešne" and "telebi" suggest only one blow. - The problem of the verbal aspect also affects the fourth "Sonnet of Unhappiness," where the verse "Komur je sreče dar bila klofuta" refers to only one strike of misfortune, while the translation, "he who from fate receives but blow on blow," again suggests repeated action. The last triplet of the same sonnet fails to paint the dramatic images of the original. The lines "šele v pokoju tihem hladne hiše, / ki pelje vanjo temna pot pogreba, / počije; smrt mu čela pot obriše," are given as "And only in the quiet, cold abode, / Which after weary life's span is decreed, / Will death relieve him of his toilsome load." The verses read beautifully, but the gloomy image of a funeral and the peaceful image of Death wiping sweat off the dead man's brow, are lost.

It seems that the translators of the "Sonnets of Unhappiness" opted for poetic co-creation rather than for literal translation. The result is sometimes very poetic, but the authenticity of Prešeren's verse is lost. The second quatrain of the fifth sonnet in this cycle is a good example of such translation. Prešeren's verses "ti ključ, ti vrata, ti si srečna cesta, / ki pelje nas iz bolečine mesta / tjè, kjer trohljivost vse verige zgrudi" are translated as "Oh happy road, O key to our endeavour. / You lead us where mortality shall sever / Life's chains and free us from these pains of hell." "Vrata," "bolečine mesta," "trohljivost" are skipped, and "our endeavour" and "pains of hell" added. The shattering image of decay gnawing at chains is replaced by a gentler metaphor of mortality undoing the chains.

In "Memento Mori" the descriptive line "Kaj znancev je zasula že lopata!" is weakened into "And numerous the friends interred for aye." The metaphor "da smrtna žetev vsak dan bolj dozori" is compressed into the phrase "looming death," the verse then completed with an addition: "as one made sorry," which accomplishes a rare feminine rhyme, mori - sorry.

The challenges that confront the translators of Prešeren's poetry are numerous. They range from linguistic and formal demands to the problems concerning an intimate knowledge not only of Prešeren's life and his position in Slovene culture but also of Slovene history, geography and folklore, as well as of world literatures and mythologies. Some problems concerning the sounds of Slovene language used as a mood-creating poetic device seem to be insurmountable.

Most translators of this selection show great respect for the original poems, no matter which theory of translation they subscribe to. The result of their labour is a sample of Prešeren's work that the Slovenes can proudly present to the world and that enables Slovene literature to claim its rightful position among literatures of mightier nations.