

# THE POSSIBILITIES OF VERSE TRANSLATION: THE RECEPTION OF AMERICAN POETRY IN SLOVENIA BETWEEN THE TWO WARS

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Contemporary American poetry was more or less *terra incognita* in Slovenia throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The thesis question, then, is why are there so few translations of American poetry into Slovene in the discussed period between the two world wars? Although this subject has not been treated in detail, the best critical reference is to be found in the study »American Poetry in Slovene Translations«<sup>1</sup> by Mirko Jurak, Janez Stanonik's research of American-Slovene relations,<sup>2</sup> and Velemir Gjurin's work on Griša Koritnik, one of the foremost verse translators of the period, and his translation of E. A. Poe's poem »The Raven«.<sup>3</sup>

The absence of verse translations from American literature is, however, not to be explained by the lack of verse translations generally, because those from other European literatures abounded. The reasons for such a situation are several. On the one hand American literature (including poetry *per se*) was in the eyes of contemporary Slovene poets and translators derivative of the European one, which was according to them the sole »high culture« and thus the only one worth translating. The second reason was voiced by one of the then Slovene literary critics, who saw American »materialism« and the way of life as totally anti-lyrical. Slovene poets also felt that European, or for that matter American literary movements, like Futurism, Surrealism and Expressionism, allowed them to address in their works important issues, such as the existing economic, political and social conditions altogether, as well as the search for lost ethical values. Yet another reason for the scarcity of verse translations is that the general cultural orientation and the knowledge of foreign languages in Slovenia was in the discussed period directed primarily towards the German and French speaking countries. Conversely, the Slovene intelligentsia and culturally aware public were well acquainted with the literary activity in these countries, while there was a great deal of ignorance as far as American literature/poetry is concerned.

<sup>1</sup> Mirko Jurak, »American Poetry in Slovene Translations«, *Seminar on Contemporary American Poetry*. Ohrid, 1977, pp. 72—87.

<sup>2</sup> Janez Stanonik, »Ameriško-slovenski odnosi« (»American-Slovene relations«). *Enciklopedija Slovenije*. Ljubljana: MK, 1987.

<sup>3</sup> An exhaustive study about Griša Koritnik was prepared by Velemir Gjurin, »Gregor Koritnik in njegov prevod *Krokarja*« (»G. Koritnik and his translation of *The Raven*«). *Iz zgodovine prevajanja na Slovenskem*. Ljubljana: zbornik DSKP, 1982, p. 279.

Initially we shall examine the translation of an essay on American literature by V. F. Calverton, which appeared in 1932 in one of the leading Slovene periodicals of the period between the wars: *Ljubljanski zvon* (*The Ljubljana Bell*).<sup>4</sup> It is significant to note that in the very same year that Calverton's essay appeared in translation, Louis Adamič (1898—1951), a renowned American Slovene fiction writer, visited his native Slovenia for the first time since his childhood on a Guggenheim Fellowship, which caused a revived interest in American literature. Consequently an American edition of *Ljubljanski zvon* to be published in Cleveland was being prepared, but because of financial difficulties the scheme fell through. However, several translations from American poetry appeared that year in the magazine, and it seems only reasonable to believe that Adamič must have visited the editor(s) and suggested the possible topics for the translations into Slovene. Moreover, on close inspection of the personal letters of Louis Adamič we discovered that Calverton was in fact his good friend, which proves our point. V. F. Calverton was merely a *nom de plume* that George Gaetz used in his articles. In 1931 Adamič spent some time in the Yaddo colony of artists in Saratoga Springs, N. Y., where he worked on his novel *Laughing in the Jungle: The Autobiography of an Immigrant in America*. On October 8<sup>th</sup> he answered Calverton's letter of October 5<sup>th</sup>, in which Calverton offered Adamič to use his flat in New York upon his return there and his editorial work that Adamič was to start with *The Literary Rotary*. Adamič thanked him warmly for the generous offer and it seems very likely that he did use the flat in the forthcoming winter.<sup>5</sup> Adamič mentioned Calverton also in his letter to Upton Sinclair,<sup>6</sup> namely his article on Sinclair's fiction,<sup>7</sup> published in the literary magazine *The Modern Quarterly*, the editor of which Calverton was.

In the article which was translated into Slovene, Calverton emphasizes the influence of the British and European literary tradition on American literature and the »Americanness« of Walt Whitman's poetry, saying that »the sphere in which our colonial complex grew is dead«.<sup>8</sup> While he admits that a number of contemporary American poets, for example Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Hart Crane, Robert Frost and Robinson Jeffers, are fairly original, his overall view is that American poetry is still trying to establish its solid basis and rid itself of its »colonial complex«. Hence, the essay was informative enough, but did not hasten the interest of the then Slovene poets and translators for contemporary American poetry. It also proves that this poetry was considered as derivative of the European one and therefore inferior to the latter.

<sup>4</sup> V. F. Calverton, »Emancipacija ameriškega slovstva« (»The Emancipation of American Writing«). Translated by Griša Koritnik. *Ljubljanski zvon*, LII (1932), 293—299.

<sup>5</sup> *Izbrana pisma Louisa Adamiča* (*Selected Letters of L. Adamič*), ed. by Henry A. Christian, transl. by Jerneja Petrič. Ljubljana: CZ, 1981, p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> V. F. Calverton, »Upton Sinclair: A Satirist«, *The Modern Quarterly*, 1923, pp. 45—48.

<sup>8</sup> V. F. Calverton, »The Emancipation of American Writing«, transl. by G. Koritnik. *Ljubljanski zvon*, LII (1932), 294.

Within the extant critical surveys or rather literary appraisals of American lyrical poetry we would single out an essay written by Vinko Košak,<sup>9</sup> in which he wonders from the outset why the Slovenes still have not got a comprehensive, scholarly study in this particular field. Košak (1903–1942) wrote poems, fiction, essays and literary criticism for all the major Slovene magazines and was shot as a hostage during World War Two.<sup>10</sup> In his opinion the fact that Slovene intelligentsia did not speak English at the time largely accounts for their ignorance in the field of American literature *in abstracto*, which was also the case with most European countries, except for the British, of course. Moreover, it is coupled by the erroneous belief that American art is merely a bad imitation of the European one. Still, Košak points to Harriet Monroe's magazine *Poetry* which, to his mind, represents a new, typically American spirit in art and lyricism in general.

The essay by Ferdo Delak is in some ways an extremely provocative one.<sup>11</sup> Delak (1905–1968) had multiple interests in his life: he was a director, an actor, an editor and even a film director, as well as an avant-garde dramatist and essayist.<sup>12</sup> He somewhat surprisingly maintains that the notion »American lyrical poetry« is really nonsensical, for the Slovenes are »used to being showered mainly with the dubious blessings of American technical, materialistic society«. <sup>13</sup> Furthermore they should only expect to get from America bare facts, hectic tempo, tension, and no emotional deepness. This harsh and by far exaggerated writing brings no credit to its author; nonetheless it shows to what degree some of the contemporary literary critics were emotionally dependent on the »greatness« of European art and poetry, which prevented them from seeing the true merits of American literature. Accordingly, Delak considers American poetry and »the American way of life« as totally anti-lyrical.

<sup>9</sup> Vinko Košak, »Ameriška lirika« (»American Lyrical Poetry«). *Jugoslovan*, I (1930), 65, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Vinko Košak (1903–1942) graduated in Slavic languages in Ljubljana in 1928 and then served as a high school teacher in various Slovene towns. The Italian Fascists put him into prison because of his underground activity during the war and shot him as a hostage in 1942. Before the war he was on the editorial boards of the magazines *Mladina* (Youth), *Svobodna mladina* (Free Youth), and also *Novi čas* (New Era), published by the American Slovenes in Cleveland, which very likely represented his contact with American literature. He wrote poems, fiction, articles, essays (cf. A. Gspan, »Vinku Košaku v spomin« (»In Memory of V. Košak«), *Jis*, IV (1958/59). Košak is also represented in the anthology of the letters written by those sentenced to death (*Lettere di condannati a morte*, Torino, 1954).

<sup>11</sup> Ferdo Delak, »Ameriška mlada lirika« (»American Young Lyrical Poetry«). *Slovenec*, 56/1928, pp. 280–287. Cf. also the article Anton Debeljak adapted from A. Kreymborg, »A. Kreymborg about Modern American Lyrical Poetry«, *LZ*, 1931, pp. 703–704.

<sup>12</sup> Ferdo Delak (1905–1968) studied Slavic languages and drama. In 1925 he formed a »leftist« drama group »Novi oder« (»The New Stage«), together with Avgust Černigoj. He was a director and an actor in the group which worked in Gorica (the then Italian Gorizia). It was banned by the authorities and he fled to start publishing »the magazine of modern Slovene art« *Tank* in 1927. When it was banned, too, he went to Berlin and delivered a lecture on Slovene revolutionary art; he edited a special issue of the magazine *Der Sturm* (1929) entitled »Die junge slowenische Kunst«. In 1930 he led the »Prolettheater« in Vienna and published *Rote Revue*. In 1933 he returned to Ljubljana, where he was a reporter; a director in Trieste and Zagreb, and finally the stage manager of MGL (The Civic Theatre of Ljubljana, 1957–1961).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. note 11, p. 282.

As far as the cultural impact of Imagism in Slovenia is concerned, one is led to believe that the French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859—1941), whose theory of an art that rather »suggests than causes« in its turn exerted a strong influence on Imagist poets, served as a kind of intermediary, a secondary source from which the Slovenes indirectly learned about this new movement and its *libido dominandi*, Ezra Pound, who was rendered into Slovene only after the Second World War. Particularly one of the best known Slovene poets Oton Župancič (1878—1949) played an important role in it, since he assisted the lectures delivered by Bergson in Paris at Collège de France during his Paris years 1905/6.

It looks as though Imagism had not been noticed in Slovenia until the mid-thirties, although it could have been because of its nature better accepted than the abstract Futurism.<sup>14</sup> Imagism represented a new, typically American poetics, which Slovene poets failed to pick up, although they could/should have found it sympathetic. The reason for this may well be in their »cultural snobbishness« that highly appreciated primarily European literary movements. Thus Imagism remained somehow closed within the Anglo-American cultural circle, and, as the lack of translations amply proves, with which the Slovenes had developed very few direct cultural ties. Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell were in the period between the two wars mentioned a couple of times, together with Harriet Monroe, who published the first poems of the Imagists.<sup>15</sup> These articles were obviously not based on a thorough knowledge of the Imagists, but just repeated the second-hand information about the contemporary development of American poetry. It is significant that at the time they were published Imagism was no longer active in the United States.

## II.

The choice of poets and themes for the translation into Slovene in the discussed period largely depended on what could be called »a direct ability of communication« to the Slovene reading public, such as political or ideological reasons, economic migration, aspirations for democracy or simply owing to European »cultural snobbishness«. Thus the Slovene verse translations of Walt Whitman, Edgar Allan Poe, Carl Sandburg and some black American poets will now be briefly examined, although also a few poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow were published.<sup>16</sup>

Those Slovene poets who had at least some knowledge of American literature most admired the poetry of Walt Whitman. He was at the time considered the epitome of a new, democratic America that had emerged since

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<sup>14</sup> Majda Stanovnik, *Angloameriške literarne smeri v 20. stoletju (Anglo-American Literary Trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> century)*. LL 8, Ljubljana: DZS, 1980, pp. 5—29.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> The bulk of translations from H.W. Longfellow appeared in Slovene at the turn of the century or by the beginning of the Great War. Andrej Smrekar (1868—1913), an American Slovene and the vicar of Collingwood in Ohio, produced masterly translations and some of them published in the Slovene immigrant press in the United States. Unfortunately many of his unpublished verse translations (including also Byron, Bryant, etc.) were lost after his death. In the discussed period a few Longfellow's poems were published: »Excelsior. Sužnjeve sanje. Izvor žita, Pesem«, transl. by Griša Koritnik. *Modra ptica*, 8/1936—37, 9, pp. 289—90.

the Civil War: Vladimir Martelanc wrote on him in 1922<sup>17</sup> and Karlo Kocjančič translated an essay on Whitman originally written by Giovanni Papini in 1925.<sup>18</sup> There was no systematic approach to Whitman's poetry and the reasons for occasional translations were usually external ones, such as for example the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Whitman's birth<sup>19</sup> in 1938.

The first individual to have translated Whitman was the well-known social realist poet Tone Seliškar.<sup>20</sup> Karlo Kocjančič in 1926 translated some poems from Whitman's collection *Children of Adam* and published them together with an essay about the poet's life and times.<sup>21</sup> It is only in 1932, eighty years after its original publication, that the Slovenes get a more comprehensive selection of poems from the central collection *Leaves of Grass*, which points to a relatively long time lag, considering its importance.<sup>22</sup>

Janez Žagar succeeded in creating a smooth free verse in his Slovene translations, or to be more precise, a special kind of rhythmical prose in which it is indeed hard to find any kind of recurring metrical pattern. However, the metrical scheme of the verses from *Leaves of Grass* at times seems very regular. In the translated poem »Mother and Child«, for example, his verses are additionally enriched by original phonetic colouring. In the phonetic determinants we may observe the repetition of the consonant groups containing aspirated plosives p, t, k, which convey the impression of a deliberate consonance. This by no means isolated fact rightly leads us to believe that the phonetic, vocal harmonization as a structural and in consequence also as a translational principle usually tends to occur in the instance of free verse, where no regular metrical scheme has to be observed. This seems to be one of the most significant features in the translation of free verse from English into Slovene, and possibly into other languages as well.

In 1939 the poet Anton Podbevšek prepared a short selection of translations from Whitman's lyrical poetry.<sup>23</sup> His verses reflect the determination to search for visually constructed lines and stanzas, similarly to his own original, typographic poetry in which verse and prose sections reappear alternately. The role and significance of Walt Whitman as a literary instigator and inspirator is today widely recognized and considerable also among the Slavic nations.<sup>24</sup> For the one who investigates the literary fortune of Whitman in Europe, Whitman's reception in these countries is more to the point, especially in France, Germany, and to a lesser extent, in Italy. This has to do with cultural influences and with general political relations, since in the 19<sup>th</sup> cen-

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Martelanc, »Walt Whitman«. *Učiteljski list*, III (1922), 76—77, 85.

<sup>18</sup> Giovanni Papini, »Walt Whitman«, transl. by Karlo Kocjančič, *LZ*, XLV (1925), pp. 551—555, 625—629, 686—691, 750—754.

<sup>19</sup> »Iz lirike Walta Whitmana: Nekoč sem šel skozi obljudeno mesto. Pesniki bodočnosti. Ko sem bral knjigo. Ne zaprite svojih vrat. Neka ženska me pričakuje. Jaz sem tisti, ki z ljubeznijo muči. Ko berem o priborjeni slavi junakov. Nekemu dečku iz zapada«. Transl. by Anton Podbevšek, *Modra ptica*, 10/1938—39, II, pp. 359—361.

<sup>20</sup> Walt Whitman, »Disonančna pesem«. Translated by Tone Seliškar. *Ameriški družinski koledar*, 12/1926, p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> Walt Whitman, »Iz Spevov ob slovesu«. *Ženski svet*, 5/1926—27, 12, p. 365. Translated by Karlo Kocjančič.

<sup>22</sup> W. Whitman, »Iz Travnih bilk« (»From *Leaves of Grass*). Transl. by Janez Žagar (= Lojze Šegula). *Modra ptica*, 4/1932—33, 7, pp. 213—215.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. note 19.

<sup>24</sup> An authority on the reception of Whitman's poetry abroad is G.W. Allen, ed., *Walt Whitman Abroad*, Syracuse UP, 1955.

tury Europe, French and German were far more widely used than English is today. Another feature to bear in mind is that a great number of Slavic peoples lived under the Habsburg and later Austro-Hungarian monarchy, thus within the orbit of the German language, while French was the language of the aristocracy and the diplomatic world. Therefore, Whitman's reception in Germany and France has influenced also his fortune among the Slavic nations.

This can best be illustrated by the famous, patriotic Slovene poem »Duma«, written by Oton Župančič, and its heavy indebtedness to Whitman's poem »Salut au Monde«.<sup>25</sup> One could say there was a »Whitmanesque« period in his poetic creativity after his return from Paris in 1906. The star of Whitman was then in France decisively ascendant, especially owing to the Unanimists (Roumain, Claudel, etc.). For, Jules Laforgue as early as 1886 published, under the title »Translations of the Astonishing American Poet Walt Whitman«, several of his poems from *Leaves of Grass*, which considerably contributed to the fame of Whitman in France.

One of the most productive poetic translators in the period between the two wars, Griša Koritnik, highly successfully rendered into Slovene Poe's poem »The Raven«,<sup>26</sup> also because he had studied Poe's relative essay to this poem *The Philosophy of Composition*. This translation was primarily intended to pay tribute to 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Poe's birth. Apart from »The Raven« Koritnik brought Poe's ballad »Annabel Lee« in his anthology of English and American poetry,<sup>27</sup> which is artistically good enough, with the reserve that it appears at times semantically poorer than the original.

Carl Sandburg was primarily not voicing the ideas of the American proletariat of the 1920s and 1930s; however, the American Slovene Ivan Molek chose for translation particularly those poems that according to him stressed the hardships of American workers during the Great Depression which could also relate to Slovene workers.<sup>28</sup>

American black poetry had a very strong resounding in Slovenia. The poet Mile Klopčič in 1932 prepared a small anthology of the authors such as were Hughes, Cullen, McKay and a few others.<sup>29</sup> Cvetko Kristan, like Klopčič, translated these poets from the German translations of their poems by Anna Nussbaum, published in the book *Afrika Singt (Africa Sings)*.<sup>30</sup> The poetry of Langston Hughes appears very frequently in Slovene translation, which is probably due to the themes Hughes treats in his poems, to his progressive social and political outlook, as well as to his racial background. In the poetry of American black authors one gets the impression that the poet does not

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Igor Maver, *The Echoes of English and American Poetry in Slovenia until 1945*. Typescript. Faculty of Arts and Science, Ljubljana, 1987, study submitted as an M.A. thesis.

<sup>26</sup> E. A. Poe, »Krokar« (»The Raven«), transl. by Griša Koritnik. *Ljubljanski zvon*, XLIX (1929), 85–88.

<sup>27</sup> Griša Koritnik, *Listič iz angleške lirike (A Leaf from English Lyrical Poetry)*. E. A. Poe, »Annabel Lee«, p. 38. Ljubljana, 1929.

<sup>28</sup> Carl Sandburg, »Iz zbirke Sandburgovih pesmi« (»From the collection of Sandburg's Poems«), translated by Ivan Molek. *Pod lipo*, 4/1928, 11, p. 161; 12, pp. 177–178.

<sup>29</sup> Mile Klopčič, »Iz lirike črncev« (»From Black Lyric«), translated are L. Hughes, C. Cullen, C. McKay, S. A. Brown. *Ljubljanski zvon*, LII, (1932), 7–8, pp. 434–436.

<sup>30</sup> Langston Hughes, »Črnčev spev« (»Black Man's Song«), translated by Cvetko Kristan. *Pod lipo*, 3/1926, 10, p. 155.

draw the inspiration merely from his own personal experience; rather, his poetic sensibility reflects the bitter experience of a nation and may well represent also an advantage, particularly as far as culture is concerned, the fact the Slovenes are not unfamiliar with.

### III.

As for the original poetic creativity of the Slovene poets in the period between the two wars, it seems that what they should have done is to abandon the »majority/minority« dichotomy, namely Europe vs. America/Slovenia) in culture and by extension in literature appraisal. This view of the comparative literature science is not decisive for the literary and theoretical verification of a »minority« culture, in this instance Slovene. You will observe that the traditional dichotomy of the literature belonging to a »small« and »big« nation, respectively, could possibly be overcome by using the more objective notion of a »majority/minority« culture, which is based solely on quantitative figures of the people that represent each particular culture/literature. Thus the biased appraisals of a literature, belonging to economically powerful or just bigger society and that of the opposite kind, are in the Foucaultian sense avoided. For only good literature is of any consequence, stemming from either of them. It is as simple as that.

In this sense European and American literatures are not adequate standards against which to measure the Slovene literary works of the discussed period, since the real merit lies in their intrinsic, autochthonous aesthetic value. However, it is noteworthy that the behaviour of Slovene poets was also counter-productive. They tried to imitate the »majority/big« literatures, American and European, and to judge their own work against American literature or European models, that is to condemn or praise it accordingly.