

John Donne in Slovenian and the “Reflexive” Translation Theory of Antoine Berman

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In his last book, Antoine Berman developed his theory of “translation criticism” by considering the poetry of John Donne in French translation. The present article applies that theory to Slovenian translations of Donne by Janez Menart and Marjan Strojan. It makes particular use of Berman’s concept of “marked” textual features to consider the survival of Donne’s “far-fetched” stylistic devices in Menart’s and Strojan’s translations. The article suggests that translation critics outside the Slovenian milieu should be aware of the preconceptions fostered by the hierarchy of “high” and “low” impact cultures. Silvia Kadiu, commenting on Berman, stresses the importance of “reflexivity” on the part of literary translators. When, as translation critics, we consider these two translators’ place within Slovenian culture and investigate the critical erudition they display towards Donne’s historical milieu, we find that Strojan and Menart pay exceptional respect to the principle of reflexivity.

Keywords: literary translation / English poetry / Donne, John / Slovene translations / Menart, Janez / Strojan, Marjan / reflexivity

The theorist Antoine Berman attempted to resolve the enduringly tricky question of how we should assess literary translation. Berman synthesized his ideas in his last book, *Towards a Translation Criticism: John Donne*, and debated the success of a number of French translations of the infamously challenging English poet.¹ My remarks here will apply Berman’s methods to another case study: translations of Donne included in the Slovenian language anthology of English poetry edited by Marjan Strojan, which has become a standard reading text and reference work in Slovenia since it first appeared in 1997. The discussion

¹ For synopses of the book and summary of its place in Berman’s oeuvre, see Davis 2013 and Berman’s translator’s introduction (Berman vii-xvii).

will center on Berman's conception of the textual features that translator and critic should determine as "marked." The hierarchy of "high" as opposed to "low" impact cultures will prove to have a bearing here, one that Berman's theory, while not explicitly acknowledging it, effectively encompasses and counteracts. I will end by drawing on the work of Silvia Kadiu to support Berman's suggestion that in certain circumstances we should understand translation itself as a "reflexive" act of criticism. The Slovenian language treatments of Donne by Strojan and Janez Menart, I will argue, fall under this category.

The criticism of literary translation complicates the challenge posed in assessing any form of translation. The question is never merely "Does the translation get the message across?" but "are the literary merits of the translation adequate to convey the message?" and, of course, "what actually *is* the message?"

For Antoine Berman, a distinguished specialist in the field, a conflict between schools of translation criticism exacerbates the problem. Some critics are loyal above all to the historical particularity of the original text as they perceive it. Berman is less than polite towards them. "Engagé" analyses, as he calls them, are all about denunciation; "denouncing," moreover, "with precision." They involve the "meticulous tracking of the incoherencies, poor systematicity, and biases of the translators" (Berman 32–33). In contradistinction if not outright opposition to such readers are translation critics of what Berman calls the "Socio-critical" or "Tel Aviv" School. Such critics stress the "norms" translators follow and the cultural discourses in which they participate. Berman explains the "Tel Aviv" rationale as follows: "To analyze a translation without going back to the system of norms that shaped it, then to judge it on this basis [i.e. without considering the position and background of the translator], is thus absurd and unjust, since the translation could not be otherwise, and since, as an act of translation, it only had meaning insofar as it was an operation subjected to these norms." (39) Berman as such is kinder, on the whole, to Tel Aviv critics of translation than their "engagé" counterparts, but he still finds their methods deficient. The "Tel Aviv" school would implicitly accept as translation anything that presents itself as translation. Berman sees this as an overture to bowdlerisation: translations can all too easily sacrifice challenging content (or passages that are merely "hard" to translate) to "the literary norms of the receptor culture" (43).

The conflict between “engagé” and “socio-critical” analyses is a painful one for Berman because he deeply wishes to defend the integrity of translation, which is to say the literature of translation, as literary art in its own right. He stresses the “creative and autonomous role of translation in Western history” (Berman 39): it is for him a noble endeavor. He is unapologetic (and a tad provocative) in insisting on the Latinate and indeed essentially “Roman” nature of the discipline of translation (9–11); he claims that there would be no “space for *colinguism*” in “the West” without translated literature.

Berman develops the engagé / socio-critical distinction very much on his own terms, but parallels and precedents in the work of other theorists bear him out. Skopos theory offers a less idiosyncratic description of the competing traditions that can guide critics of translation. Some seek the freedom of the modes Katherine Reiß called “communicative” or “creative” translation; some will place a literary translator’s efforts against the standards required by “philological” translation (Reiß and Vermeer 124–125). Once all due distinctions are made, those categories fall in rather neatly with Berman’s schools of criticism: the engagé critics are natural allies of philologists while socio-critical “Tel Avivians” are likely to be patrons of creative-communicators.

These were rifts and torsions that Berman hoped to overcome. His own theory seeks to synthesize and to some extent reconcile the two approaches. The translation critic must be an elucidator as much as an evaluator; he (Berman and his translator use the masculine pronoun) must both study meticulously the key features and historical setting of the original (Berman 54–58), and consider the “position” and “product” of the translator himself (58–62). With great care, the critic may then proceed to set up a “confrontation” of translation and original. In doing so, he must remain aware of factors that together comprise the translator’s “horizon.” The translator’s hermeneutic horizon, for Berman, who cites the “post-Heideggerian” tradition which developed the metaphor, is made up of “the set of linguistic, literary, cultural and historical parameters that “determine the ways of feeling, acting, and thinking of the translator” (63).

Berman resists what he calls the “infeudation” of literary translation to any particular school of theory that might “tell translation ‘what to do’”: he is against “traductologies” *per se* (Berman 53). Nevertheless, a “philological” or “engagé” priority, for him, does bind critic and translator alike: namely a strong working knowledge of the critical traditions that pertain to a given text. For Berman, marked features of a literary text are “those stylistic characteristics, whatever they may be, that

individuate the writing and the language of the original” (51); and yet, broad as their remit might seem, neither critic nor translator have complete autonomy in deciding what the “marked” or salient features of the original work might be. Those features have already been “marked” by other hands, including, in some cases, the author’s. Berman approvingly cites Chateaubriand resolving to surround himself “with all the disquisitions of the scholiasts” in order to translate *Paradise Lost* (Berman 52).

Still greater rigor is required, for Berman, on the part of the translation critic. The care he urges in this regard, Silvia Kadiu argues, stems from his sense that “reflexivity” is essential to good translation, a belief “that it is no longer possible to practice translation without reflecting on it” (Kadiu 97). Translation, for him, is a critical activity in itself. “Translation criticism” is as such an ambiguous term. It can denote either the criticism of literary translation or, in specific conditions, the criticism performed by literary translation. Since, in the former sense, it is in effect the “criticism of criticism” (98), Berman insists that good translation critics will always know more and see further than good translators. The critic’s readings should be “more connected, more systematic, than those of the translator” (Berman 54). With little hope of reaching that standard, I shall at least try to apply it to two Slovenian translators’ treatments of two poems by Donne.

“Marked” stylistic traits, for Berman, are by no means the most elegant or beautiful in a writer’s repertoire: they are the most “necessary” (Berman 55). Although Berman devotes almost half his book on translation criticism to the discussion of a single poem by Donne (Elegie XIX), he does not say a great deal about the history of reception that has enfolded and transmitted Donne’s poetry. By common consent, nevertheless, Donne’s poetic style is marked by a fascination for striking, yet often logically contrived and outlandish figures and constructions. It arguably marks one of his chief contributions to the later seventeenth-century tradition. As one recent authority observes: of other English “metaphysical” poets, often labelled members of a “school of Donne,” “it is traditionally said that the group was united by the use of far-fetched comparisons, or “conceits,” that drew attention to their own ingenuity—although this is more evidently a feature of Donne’s work than that of other members of the group” (Burrow). Partly on account of this predisposition (and partly due to Donne’s notorious

arcane), his friend Ben Jonson warned that Donne’s writing “for not being understood, would perish” (Jonson, “Conversations” 466, [187–188]). Modernist criticism of course demanded that we cherish that preoccupation with what Jonson disapprovingly termed “far-fetched descriptions” (Jonson, “Explorata” 427, [2197–2198]). In either case, regardless of the critical view taken, “far-fetchedness” qualifies as a “marked” feature of a distinctive Donnean text.

The basic premise of Donne’s well known “Song” (“Goe, and catch a falling star”) is that it is easier to experience miracles than for honesty to prosper or a beautiful woman to be faithful. Here is a signal moment:

If thou beest borne to see strange sights,
 Things invisible to see,
 Ride ten thousand daies and nights,
 Till age snow white haire on thee. (Hayward 4)

There is broad agreement that Donne wrote for an extremely well read, rhetorically literate coterie readership, which encountered his secular poems in manuscript. Some if not all of his first readers will have identified the idea of age “snowing” white hair “on thee” with a Horatian metaphor, “the snows of the head” (“capitis nives”; Horace, *Carmina*, 4.13.12). Classical rhetoricians disapproved of such contrivances. Marcus Quintilian, the eminent Roman authority, singled out Horace’s trope as an example of questionable practice. It demonstrated that metaphors could at times be “harsh” when “derived from distant resemblances” (Quintilian 435, note 22, vol. 3). Ben Jonson, who greatly admired Quintilian, echoed him directly when he declared that “metaphors farfet [far-fetched] hinder to be understood” (Jonson, “Explorata” 431, [2359–2360]). As I mentioned above, Jonson seems to have had constructs of this sort in mind when he worried that Donne’s work would perish “for not being understood.”

Donne, however, as so often, made this particular trope work: in his poem, unlike Horace’s, one does not think of dandruff. The odd tenor of the image fits well among the fabulous sights and outlandish events his listeners will need to experience before they meet a) “an honest mind” or b) a “woman true and fair,” even though “the snows of the head” are in themselves a commonplace phenomenon. Donne’s use of the idea moreover serves a further purpose, one that he may well have expected a rhetorically educated reader to spot. Some with Donne’s learning may have recalled the specific place where Quintilian gently chides Horace; some will merely have recognized that Donne’s use of

the trope went against ancient authority. This was the sort of thing one should not do, in poems or in letters or sermons or, for that matter, state documents: the blizzard of white hair advertises the writer's affinity for, and willingness to use, a class of devices that classically inspired teachers of rhetoric vigorously discouraged. From the viewpoint of intellectual history, it lends Donne's writing a rebellious, almost disdainfully learned quality, and further accentuates the wearily contemptuous air of the "Song." It is a tiny, yet telling indicator of his outlook, and possibly his status, among the Elizabethan and Jacobean avant-garde. It is a feature "marked," moreover, by Ben Jonson's unmistakable disapproval.²

Modern readers of Donne will, unless they have had some prior contact with Horace's odes, remain entirely oblivious to this slight contextual tremor until and unless a footnote or some other expository guide informs them of it. The notion of age *snowing* white hairs accordingly poses the translator a challenge. It would be all too easy to opt for a bland if clearer alternative such as "till old age makes your hair go white." Here is Marjan Strojan's translation of the passage:

Če čudés ti vid je dan,
glej nevidene reči,
jezdi tisoč dni in dan,
da lase Čas zasneži. (Strojan, *Antologija* 127–128)

(If sight of miracles is given to you,
See things never seen before,
Ride a thousand days and a day,
So that Time covers hairs with snow/
So that Time starts to snow hairs.)³

² Marotti drew on prior manuscript scholarship to refine the coterie context and inspired many further studies; Pebworth is an early example. Ettenhuber offers a recent view of how knowledge of rhetorical convention guided both Donne and his readers (or listeners) in negotiating "far-fetched comparisons" (Ettenhuber 401). On the wider classical and early modern scepticism towards such devices, see Berry; Cooke 222–225; Skinner 88. My doctoral topic some twenty years ago was the bearing of the far-fetched on Shakespeare; I remain grateful to my supervisors, Gavin Alexander and Colin Burrow, for their thoughts in this area as in others. I returned to the subject in publications on later figures and periods (e.g. Stubbs, *Jonathan Swift* 92–93).

³ Paul de Man warned mockingly of the dangers of translating translation (de Man 35; commenting on Benjamin 81). I offer my back translations in a duly cautioned spirit of pragmatism, for readers unfamiliar with Slovenian.

Putting the translation alongside the original reveals a number of disparities; not least a typological distinction between “Age” in Donne’s poem, and “Time” in Strojjan’s reading. The “harsh” metaphor of age’s snow is notably present, however. Rather strikingly, Strojjan uses the resources of Slovenian both to preserve the far-fetchedness of Donne’s image, and to soften it. As my (far from definitive) back translation indicates, the line concerned may be heard, and translated, two ways. The first sense of the verb *zasnežiti* recorded by *SSKJ* (the standard Slovenian dictionary), “to start to snow,” gives a line very close indeed to Donne’s.⁴ The second standard sense of the verb means to cover an object or surface with snow; if this is the active sense, we see the rider’s hair turning white under the snows of time. There is no Slovenian counterpart to “white” or “on thee” in Strojjan’s reading. Donne’s image has as such acquired lapidary focus, a precision which some might feel in fact alters or intensifies it. It has also taken on a spiritual pathos that Donne’s text does not confer. The “snows of time” are invisible, figurative and defined only in their effects; a snow of white hair is, by comparison, wackily imaginable yet more than faintly absurd. Both images are present in Strojjan’s working of the line. Those who read Slovenian will also note that Strojjan’s line also has a quite different phonic concentration and evenness to Donne’s; a smoothness maintained throughout the whole translation. I might (and I beg pardon for the play on words) seem to be splitting hairs; but the auditory and illocutionary qualities of a poem in verse translation are naturally a vital aspect of its meaning—and I will return to that side of things towards the end.

Berman is in no doubt at all that such minutiae are crucial. He exhorts us to discover as much as we can about the translator in our attempts to explain such details. “We want to know if he has written articles, studies, dissertations, monographs about the works he has translated and, finally, if he has written about his own practice as a translator, about the principles that guide it, about his translations and translation in general” (Berman 58). Most Slovenian readers of these pages will know of Marjan Strojjan’s verse translations of *Paradise Lost* and *The Canterbury Tales*, and his credentials as an interpreter of the later medieval and early modern canon. Strojjan (1949–) is a distinguished and prolific poet in his own right, and has had considerable

⁴ I am reliably informed, moreover, that the *SSKJ* entry on *zasnežiti* does not entirely capture actual usage: most Slovenians would hear in this context a perfective verb lending an emphasis which perhaps only the future perfect can render in English: “Ride a thousand days and a day / So that time will have snowed grey hairs.”

influence on Slovenian literary culture beyond the sphere of translation alone. He has moreover spoken of translation as a “unique poetic act,” by which working poets in effect place their skills at the service of their text, but invariably transmit something of themselves to it (Bratož). He might seem, as such, very eligible for recruitment to the “creative” school that socio-critical Tel Avivians admire. With regard to Donne, however, engagé philologists should note that not long before his *Antologija angleške poezije* first appeared, Strojan published a scholarly yet very accessible short account of Donne and his work. Strojan’s article shows keen awareness of the erudition of Elizabethan-Jacobean literary circles and their familiarity with demanding forms such as the “artificial conceit” (Strojan, “John Donne” 7).

It seems reasonable to claim that, when translating Donne’s “Song,” Strojan decided that the line about snowy hair (or snowing hair, to be more precise) certainly mattered. The extent to which he was aware of the exact Horatian source is probably indeterminable; the notes to his translation of the “Song” ignore the line (Strojan, *Antologija* 685). Yet Strojan’s phrasing creates a double effect. Time starting to snow white hairs is a Donnean thought; time covering hairs with snow abides by a principle closer to Quintilian’s or Ben Jonson’s. In Strojan’s translation the image with which Donne transgressed the classical rule is present, and yet the rule itself is tacitly re-imposed.

Strojan’s decision to retain the image of snow is all the more striking if one considers details in the original he decided to exclude. The original poem’s opening sardonically urges the listener to “Goe, and catch a falling star.” Strojan’s Poet instead says:

Daj, ujemi zvezdo v dlan (Strojan, *Antologija* 127)

(Go on, catch a star in the palm of your hand)

Strojan’s opening imperative, *daj*, is untranslatable (literally, it means “give”), yet entirely idiomatic. An entirely Slovenian expressive choice has as such displaced Donne’s very characteristic, more than faintly sardonic “Go” (a literal rendering of which in Slovenian, *pojdi*, would sound most discouraging). More importantly still, a purist might argue, is that the glancing and uncatchable flash of Donne’s falling star disappears altogether. Instead, and it would seem unaccountably, Strojan introduces something of his own—the palm (“dlan”) of the star-catcher’s hand. Here Strojan has surely breached Berman’s rule about preserving salient features of the original.

That said, a larger, not quite literal parity between Donne’s line and Strojjan’s is worth considering. Strojjan knew, as Donne almost certainly did not, that although one might not catch a shooting star at any considerable altitude, it was quite possible to pick up and pocket a shard of meteorite.⁵ Plucking a fixed star out of the sky and holding it in one’s palm is obviously inconceivable, even though the thought of doing so is both vivid and compelling. Accordingly, the core principle of Donne’s line, namely an impossibility related to some direct intervention in a matter of astronomy, remains intact.

Here one might say that Strojjan follows a maxim laid down by another theorist of translation, indeed another eminent Slovenian practitioner with whom he worked closely. Recalling his first efforts at translating Chaucer at the age of eighteen, Strojjan has spoken of the tutelage of Janez Menart (Crnović). Menart (1929–2004) was later Strojjan’s fellow translator of Donne (among other English poets) for the 1997 anthology. Among Menart’s maxims for the translator of poetry was the following:

The translator is obliged to mediate between the poet and readers of the second language. In doing so he will wish by all means to ensure that the reader of the translation will experience to the greatest possible extent the “same” feeling he would derive from the original, if he spoke the language in which the poem was first written (Menart, “O prevajanju” 666).

The philological / engagé traductologist would protest: yet the *skopos* for translation set out here is undoubtedly relevant to Strojjan’s management of Donne’s “Song.” Although he cancels Donne’s falling star, Strojjan surely preserves the dominant “feeling” of Donne’s poem—its incredulity about virtue, its challenge that the reader or listener perform the impossible. Indeed, there is possibly an overlap here between Berman’s theorising, “post-Heideggerian” approach to “marked” textual features and Menart’s lighter, aphoristic notion of “feeling.” My next concern will be the extent to which one of Menart’s anthology contributions manifests the same stylistic traits in Donne preserved by Strojjan, as prescribed by Berman, and whether it follows his own self-declared principle of translation.

⁵ The astronomical nature of shooting or falling stars was established by Giovanni Schiaparelli in 1862.

If we consider Menart's treatment of a poem to which Berman devotes a great deal of attention, Donne's nineteenth "Elegie," "To his Mistress Going to Bed," few would find any loss of the original's overwhelming, indeed provocative and controversial erotic charge. Consider the following lines, first in Donne:

Licence my roving hands, and let them go,
Before, behind, between, above, below.
O my America! my new-found-land,
My kingdome, safeliest when with one man man'd. (Hayward 96)

And in Menart's version:

Naj blodijo mi roke gori, doli
in spredaj, še vmes dovoli!
O ti, Amerika! Naj te spoznam,
kraljestvo, varno le, če vladam sam!

(May my hands wander up, down,
and in front; allow them to go between, as well!
O you, America! May I know you,
a kingdom, only safe if I rule it alone!)

The combination of carnal and imperialist imperatives—and the uncertain irony that hovers over the latter—is still present. Significantly, however, Menart modulates the imperative voice heard through Donne's imperious "Licence," by using the third person with the particle *naj* to express a wish or "understated command" ("omiljen ukaz"; see *SSKJ* 1, a). Menart adds, and he takes away. The Slovenian verb "bloditi" (wander, stray) takes on a comic vagrancy here that Donne's simple "go" doesn't have. The geographical and suggestive particularity of Donne's "Newfoundland" meanwhile, disappears.

There is much throughout the translation to satisfy *les engagés*, and much to vex them after second thoughts. Menart had reservations about the capacity of the Slovenian language to furnish cognates for archaic or recondite diction in pre-modern texts (Menart, "O preva-janju" 668); yet he is never short of an equivalent, by necessity somewhat antiquated term for each of the various garments and accessories the poem's "mistress" casts off. There are also moments when he succeeds in achieving a near-perfect literal rendering of an English line that is also wonderfully euphonious in Slovenian. "Tu, kjer je prst, pritisnil bom svoj žig" ("Here, where my finger is, I shall set my stamp")

is Menart’s treatment of Donne’s “Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be” (Strojan, *Antologija* 125; Hayward 97). The task of the translation critic involves weighing up the significance of Menart’s replacing Donne’s hand with just a finger, or making the first person “I” rather than “my seal” the active subject of the second clause.

Despite the closeness of translation, in letter and spirit, to the original, the shifts noted above indicate that the “feeling” of Menart’s translation differs quite strongly from Donne’s. A single finger of course suggests contact of a kind quite distinct from that which the entire, controlling hand of Donne’s Poet establishes. The formal “you” occurs throughout when Donne’s speaker addresses his “mistress” (as “madam,” moreover, in l.1); Menart’s Poet uses the informal Slovenian *ti* pronoun. Donne’s avoidance of his customary informal “thou” is distinctive if not exceptional amid his “love poetry,” and contributes to a disquieting quality in the original that Menart tries on the whole to subdue. There is little in Menart’s text of the provocative humor that emerges in Donne’s opening couplet:

Come, Madam, come, all rest my powers defie,
Until I labour, I in labour lie. (Hayward 96)

The speaker compares his frustration in waiting (for the “labour” of lovemaking) to the pangs of childbirth: a claim that would stir objections in any age. This is the first of a number of figurative gender exchanges that conclude with the Poet eventually comparing himself to a midwife. The figure doubtless qualifies as a “farfet metaphor” of the kind both Quintilian and Ben Jonson disliked (few women experiencing parturition would compare the sensation to impatient sexual arousal). Menart, for his part, drops the idea of the male speaker’s imagined womb dilating.

Daj, pridi že, moč ne trpi čakanja,
napor nedela k delu me priganja. (Strojan, *Antologija* 124)

(Go on, come here, [my] strength can’t bear waiting,
the strain of not working is pestering me to start work.)

Berman’s theory of translation criticism urges us to inquire why the translator might cancel such a salient point in the original. Given the control of idiom and undertone demonstrated elsewhere in the same translation, it is inconceivable that Menart missed the meaning of the English phrase “in labour.” He has substituted Donne’s anatomical

impossibility with an altogether much fainter paradox, “napor nedela”—the strain (or effort) of inactivity. He was possibly uncomfortable with the drastic if entirely figurative sexual transformation the line imagines, or indeed its incredible sexism. Much of the original, in lexis, structure and spirit is manifestly there in the Slovenian. The inflective echo of “labour” in Donne’s line survives in the recurrence of “delo” in Menart’s, although the precise figurative form of the original disappears.⁶ Similarly, Menart’s “Daj, pridi že,” carries a remarkably exact prosodic echo of Donne’s “Come, Madam, come.” Notwithstanding such fidelity, the outlandishness—indeed, the outrageousness—of the original opening has disappeared. Perhaps Menart felt that the poem could do without it; perhaps he felt it was in poor taste. Certainly, he rejected any option that might have compromised the idiomatic clarity of his own Slovenian line or the smooth rhyme of his couplet. For whatever reason, he has applied a Jonsonian principle and cancelled a far-fetched figure: in effect, he has edited Donne’s poem. In doing so, unlike Strojani in his handling of the “falling star,” Menart broke his own rule. He manifestly did not preserve the “feeling” of the original.

In fact, as we have seen, Menart has made somewhat free with his text overall; he has softened its pungent, radical humour, introduced an air of genuine intimacy that the original arguably lacks, and made it resemble the “poem of love, joy and nudity” that Berman, for one, believed it to be (Berman 13).⁷ The question is, should he be applauded or reprimanded for doing so; or, to put it in less “engagé” terms, how should we—we trainee translation critics—explain the changes Menart chose or was led to make?

Berman’s ideas would to some extent rescue Menart’s translation from a blunt verdict that the translator “got things wrong”. Yet there is something else present, on the hermeneutical horizon, as it were, that even Berman does not consider: namely the possibility that Menart did not feel he was getting things wrong but that he was putting certain things right, and that he felt entitled to do so.

Another factor affecting discussion of the success or otherwise of such a translation is the sort of translation culture to which it belongs. Theorists define national or regional literary cultures as “low” or

⁶ Donne’s device is an example of antanaclasis, the repetition of a word (here, “labour”) with a change of meaning in the second instance.

⁷ I first encountered Menart’s version of the elegie when the late Uroš Mozetič read it aloud at a literary event in Ljubljana: I was immediately struck by it as an undoubtedly brilliant poem—but one quite different to the Donnean text. Menart’s performance is a poem of love; Donne’s is not.

“high” impact: as Martina Ožbot explains in a recent collection of papers, Slovenian works routinely fall under the latter category, and the imbalance is equally felt in the sphere of translation. Addressing trends in that sphere, Ožbot works with the longstanding linguistic distinction between “foreignization” and “domestication.” She considers, for instance, an Italian version of Miroslav Košuta’s poem “Daljava” (“Distance”) (Ožbot 34) as an example of how Italian translation very often “domesticates” Slovenian-language structures and idioms with forms that better suit Italian. The English-Slovenian context obviously offers no direct parallel to the cultural locus of Western Slovenia and North-East Italy that Ožbot approaches. A number of principles she summarizes do however apply: there is a basic tendency for “central cultures,” notably, “to be more self-focused, while peripheral cultures may be more open to the Other” (86). Among the trends such openness displays in the practice of translation is a greater willingness within “peripheral” cultures to sacrifice the target language’s idiomatic norms for the sake of preserving characteristics of the source text. As Ožbot puts it: “In Slovenian target texts, foreignization is often encountered, especially at the level of lexis, and appropriation of source elements is a common characteristic of literary texts translated into Slovenian.” (87)

Foreignizing their language in this way was an accommodation that both Menart and Strojjan were patently unwilling to make. At significant moments, indeed, they pointedly resist the prevailing trend of central-peripheral relationships. Ožbot, guided by the work of Itamar Even-Zohar, observes that such practice, in emphasizing “acceptability” (to the target culture) is more typical of translators working within central cultures. Peripheral cultures typically place more stress on the “adequacy” or accuracy of translation (Ožbot 86). Menart and Strojjan appear to have challenged this unwritten arrangement. How and why they did so merits further scrutiny.

Berman, to his credit, would urge us to go “in search of the translator” (Berman 57) regardless of the language group to which “he” belongs, peripheral or central (or median): and when we do so we learn that Menart, like his younger colleague Strojjan, was a distinguished and prolific translator of medieval and early modern literature. On further investigation it also transpires that Menart, a figure proverbially “born for success” (Glavan), was and remains highly regarded in Slovenia for

his own poetry as well as his translations. He was a major figure within the country's postwar milieu.⁸

Menart's intermittently "editorial" approach to Elegie XIX can be better understood when we consider the sort of poet he was. Unlike Donne, Menart's diction and figurative language exhibit a preference for the fecund minimum. Like Jonson, whom he clearly admired, he seems to have felt that a composition "hath blood and juice, when the words are proper and apt, their sound sweet, and the phrase neat and picked" (Jonson, "Explorata" 436, [2570–2573]). Menart's Slovenian diction could be extremely rich, yet he obeyed a strikingly strict Elizabethan rule of aptness: his poetry displays none of Donne's taste for cryptic extravaganzas. It could, nevertheless, be distinctly "metaphysical," as in one of his most famous short lyrics, "Jaz" ("I" or "Self") (first published in 1953):

Pred ogledalom nem stojim
in tujca pred seboj strmim.

Kot da zrem prvič ta obraz,
vprašujem ga: Si ti res jaz?

Zamišljeno me zro oči
in vprašajo: Sem jaz res ti?

In trezno pravi mu moj jaz:
Jaz nisem ti, ti nisi jaz;

jaz sem le jaz, ki se mi zdi,
in ti si jaz le za ljudi;

a pravi jaz je dan za dnem
uganka meni in ljudem. (Menart, *Stibi* 8)

(I stand mute before the mirror
And stare at the stranger in front of me.

As if beholding that face for the first time,
I ask it: Are you really I?

Thoughtfully its eyes gaze on me,
And ask me, am I really you?

⁸ For testimony to Menart's standing, see e.g. Mejak 317–319; Jenuš; Zlobec; Žerdin.

And, thinking straight,⁹ my self tells it,
I am not you, you are not I,

I am just I as I seem to myself,
And you are I only for others.

But the real I is, day after day,
A riddle to myself and other people.)

My back translation can of course capture nothing of Menart’s versatile simplicity, nor of the rich shifts of sense he creates from the repetition of small, everyday words, nor his carefree exploitation of the morphological resources of the Slovenian language in his discovery of rhyme. At moments, equally, the rhyme belongs in the nursery, consisting of no more than a straightforward joining of nominative nouns. *Jaz* in Slovenian is both the first person subject pronoun and the word for the self, and the unity of the self as such is split between those senses as well as between the poles of gazer and reflection; belying the complexity it stirs, the word rhymes crisply with *obraz*, the word for face. Conceptually, the poem strands its speaker in a perpetual feedback loop of perception and reflection; yet, simultaneously, it provides gnomic closure to satisfy any child committing it to memory. For it is a child’s poem: a striking and accessible Slovenian treatment of the mirror phase published long before Slavoj Žižek got anywhere near that subject. To a student of Menart’s translation of Shakespeare, the poem also offers a magical antidote to the pain of Sonnet 62, to which its vocabulary presents compelling parallels. Within the parameters of seventeenth century stylistics, its “neat and picked” use of form and diction are much more reminiscent of George Herbert, that avid student of Jonson, than of Donne.

The poetic mode displayed here is equally evident in Menart’s practice as translator. His writing manifests what one could call a Jonsonian or, more strictly speaking, a neo-classical poetic; he applied the same principles to Donne’s text—for its own good, as Jonson would have said. Those principles emerge throughout Menart’s treatment of the elegie: in his redacting the strange idea of a man being in labor, or replacing Donne’s rough possessive hand with a single, more sensitized finger. One might well disagree with Menart’s choice, in cancelling the

⁹ “Collectedly” might be a better translation here of “trezno” (literally, “soberly”). Amid the post-war existential agonies over human identity, Menart’s “self” keeps a cool head—even while professing itself to be a fragmentary enigma.

distinctive, zany moment of Donnean inaptness which the opening couplet of Elegie XIX comprises, but it would be unwise to discount it or class it as an error of translation. The harshest words, moreover, are likely to arise from within the translator's own milieu: a scholarly and principled yet misguided critique, for example, reprimanded Menart for apparent inaccuracies in his early verse translation of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* (see Grosman).¹⁰ I suggest that we refer the matter to another standard invoked by Antoine Berman.

The larger point to be made with regard to "translation criticism" hinges on one of Berman's central tenets: translation should be a "reflexive" exercise. For Berman, translation is reflexive when it constitutes an act of criticism in its own right. In Silvia Kadiu's summary, he believed that "the critical nature of translational reflexivity is realized in the process of translation itself" (Kadiu 96).

If translators are to be credited as critics, a question of authority arises. The status of translators depends on their status within and the scale of their contribution to their own culture; it also depends on the status of that culture itself within an international hierarchy. Some languages may "domesticate" others, and others may not. Apparent divergences from the original in a translation by Seamus Heaney or Robert Lowell are likely to gain recognition as creative, interpretive or critical acts. Within the Slovenian milieu, clued-in readers are able to accept Menart's translations in the same spirit. They know and, generally speaking, revere his style, and they can recognize his hand (or finger) in the text of his translation. This is to say that they will see that Menart's treatment of a poem by Shakespeare or Donne represents a synthesis of his learning and his own capacities and instincts as a poet. His profile and back catalogue in fact reinforce awareness of the cultural contingency of his translation. To those unacquainted with Menart's "low impact" cultural setting, his apparent amendments of Donne are more likely to seem errors.

Kadiu warns us that the principle of reflexivity is always at risk of being lost in such situations. "Reflexivity in research," she tells us, "is built on an acknowledgement of the historical and ideological pressures forming researcher and researched alike" (Kadiu 14). Within the parameters of Berman's theory of translation criticism, this means that the critic

¹⁰ I discuss the critical debate between Grosman and Menart in Stubbs, "Shakespeare's *Sonnets*."

must be open about “his” hermeneutical horizons while attempting to delineate the horizons of author and translator. Reflexivity should be more than a mere profession of faith in and adherence to the principle itself, or a superficially self-relativizing statement of intent: “no amount of highlighting, pointing or self-awareness can ensure an ethical practice of translation” (145). Kadiu voices deconstructive pessimism about language’s ability to perform what it preaches, or find oneness with the Other it purports to signify. True reflexivity, she suggests, lies within the stylistic “play” of the translation itself and any critical appraisal of it; and even then, manifests itself as an absence rather than a presence, “at moments of hesitancy, ambiguity and opacity” (145).

For Kadiu, reflexivity is primarily a safeguard against the distortion of “minor” by “dominant” cultures. Without reflexivity, the outcome is invariably translation Kadiu finds unethical. “The main idea underlying this line of thought,” she explains, “is that, in order to highlight manipulation (such as a stereotypical representation of the source culture), research must itself be reflexive and think about the conditions of its own emergence.” (Kadiu 14)

The loss of reflexivity is surely a bad thing, at the level of practice or theory, with respect to “minor” and “dominant” cultures alike. How, then, are we to understand the loss in translation—Menart’s apparent deletion—of a crucial feature such as Donne’s idea of being “in labour” at the outset of *Elegie XIX*? Is Strojjan’s cancellation of Donne’s image of a falling star, in the famous “Song,” another unwarranted intervention? Their apparent un-reflexiveness would be all the more grievous, at such moments, since a resounding quality in their manner of translation is its confidence—a notable lack of the “hesitancy” Kadiu sees as a hallmark of reflexivity. Instead of hesitancy, Menart and Strojjan offer critical erudition. We (as translation critics) should approach their work as Tel Avivians but with the philological equipment of the engagé scholar. If we consider Menart’s version of *Elegie XIX* in the light of a discussion of his own poem, “Jaz,” the stylistic harmony between the two is self-evident; and the relationship is a reflexive one. The poetic that guides Menart in handling Donne’s verse is plain to see. The shared affinity for difficult speculation, yet with an aversion to spiky, far-fetched conceptualization and a tacit dislike of Donne’s sardonic, often rather unkind manner is manifest in the rhyming tetrameters, dating back to the 1950s, which I considered above. Our assessment of Menart’s achievement as translator in short depends on whether translation critics bother to investigate his own creative literary achievement. This is by no means tantamount to licensing a

bowdlerised or sketchy translation: no one can seriously suggest that Menart has offered a slapdash or approximate realization of the elegie. Nor did he approach the exercise by imposing an utterly alien aesthetic on his text. He did not, for instance, turn Donne's stanzas and couplets into unrhymed free verse, and thereby pre-emptively silence engagé quibbles with an implied "take it or leave it." Both Strojjan and Menart's choice of Donne, and their management of his thought, his diction and his rhythms, reflect a profound involvement with the stylistic values that shaped his work. Those values influenced their own practice as poets; their translation of Donne is a profession of that involvement. As poets, nevertheless, both translators are closer to Jonson than to Donne himself. They admit as such—reflexively rather than directly—in their treatment of Donne's approach to form.

Jonson, in his signature fashion, declared "that Donne, for not keeping of accent [i.e., for his disregard of prosodic rules], deserved hanging" (Jonson, "Conversations" 462, [42]). Both Strojjan and Menart rejected this "marked" stylistic trait, and opted to present a distinctly mellifluous, metrical Donne to their Slovenian readership. A glance back at the stanza quoted earlier from Donne's "Song" will illustrate the point. The jagged cadence of Donne's line, "Till age snow white haire on thee," is unrecognizable in the sibilant, suggestive smoothness of Strojjan's rendering: "Da lase Čas zasneži." The shade of Jonson would commend Strojjan here; as would that of Pope, who "versified" (that is, rewrote) Donne's second and fourth satires. Eliot, who praised the rhythms of real speech he found in Donne's metrical irregularity, might disapprove, though I cannot see him faulting Strojjan's craft.

The translator of Donne's poetry would be in a terrible position were it not that the arguments over Donne's treatment of "accent," insofar as translation is concerned, effectively cancel one another out. To reproduce intentional discordancy in the original when translating poetry is, if not impossible, then at least a risky policy to pursue (except in obvious instances of, for instance, burlesque); the target language readership will almost certainly interpret prosodic irregularity as a failure on the part of the translator. In the case of Donne, however, the translator is spared: attempting to replicate the liberties Donne took with "accent" would be redundant and self-defeating. For by a paradox almost worthy of the poet himself the polarity between the critics and defenders of his prosody proves to be an artificial one. Ultimately, like East and West, the two schools meet: the early twentieth-century champions of the Donnean mode argue that he actually did "keep accent." Eliot or F.R. Leavis would merely maintain that he did so by

observing principles of euphony to which Ben Jonson and the neoclassical tradition could never subscribe.¹¹ Instead of striving to emulate Donne’s hanging offence, Menart and Strojan chose the wise course of using their own strengths as versifiers in serving Donne’s text. Where their translation seems to edit and amend that text, it is reflexive, which is to say open, about the operative system of values that guides such amendments. Their insistence on euphony, on “keeping of accent” in Slovenian, is a sustained expression of that system.

Accordingly, Menart and Strojan succeeded in “domesticating” Donne; they made his original uncannily present in their translation, yet captured it within an idiom that is unmistakably Slovenian. They did so, nevertheless, by applying a literary standard that was present in, and characteristic of, the culture Donne addressed. In the Slovenian translations considered here, Donne has been judged and, in places, reformed—but according to laws that his ghost might recognize from his own time, and his own land. An “ethical” act of translation criticism, by Antoine Berman’s standards, has been performed.¹²

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¹¹ The example of this defence that has always stayed with me is of Leavis singling out Donne’s use of “Did,” violating the iamb at the beginning of the second line of “The Good Morrow”: the moment is representative of Donne’s “consummate control of intonation, gesture, movement and larger rhythm” (Leavis 11–12). Leavis’s praise was notoriously hard earned.

¹² Many friends and colleagues have helped me in my work on Slovenian translations of John Donne and other Elizabethan writers. In particular I would like to thank Matjaž Berger, director of the Anton Podbevšek Teater in Novo Mesto, who invited me to give a talk on Donne—accompanied by readings given by Barbara Ribnikar—in April 2022. Looking further back, my great mentor on this poet is David Colclough, author of the entry on Donne for the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, and I renew my thanks to him here.

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John Donne v slovenščini in »refleksivna« prevodna teorija Antoina Bermana

Ključne besede: literarno prevajanje / angleška poezija / Donne, John / slovenski prevodi / Menart, Janez / Strojan, Marjan / refleksivnost

Antoine Berman je v svoji zadnji knjigi predstavil teorijo »prevodne kritike« prek obravnavanja poezije Johna Donna v francoskem prevodu. Ta članek omenjeno teorijo aplicira na slovenske prevode Donna, ki sta jih napravila Janez Menart in Marjan Strojan. Še zlasti se opira na Bermanov koncept »zaznamovanih« besedilnih značilnosti in z njim obravnava ohranjanje Donnovih »daljnosežnih« slogovnih sredstev v Menartovem in Strojanovem prevodu. Razprava kaže, da bi se morali prevajalski kritiki zunaj slovenskega okolja zavedati predsodkov, ki jih spodbuja hierarhija med »visokimi« in »nizkimi« kulturami vpliva. Silvia Kadiu v komentarju k Bermanovi teoriji poudarja pomen »refleksivnosti« literarnih prevajalcev. Ko kot prevajalski kritiki razmišljamo o mestu teh dveh prevajalcev v slovenski kulturi in preiskujemo kritično erudicijo, ki jo izkazujeta do Donnovega zgodovinskega okolja, lahko ugotovimo, da Strojan in Menart izjemno spoštujeta načelo refleksivnosti.

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