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WHY I TRANSLATE, AND ESPECIALLY WHY I TRANSLATE POETRY

Apologia pro translatiunculis suis[1]

Tom Priestly

I taught a university course in "Russian-English Translation" for over ten years: but I did so for a long time without any actual personal experience in translation. Then, in 1986, I was attracted by the task of translating the poem "To the inhabitants of London" by Anna Akhmatova, the translation competition in that year's issue of *Journal of Russian Studies.* This called for a rhyming, rhythmic English version: could I devise a poem which kept these structural aspects? Two of Akhmatova's lines end in the names of Shakespearian characters—*Makbetu, Dzhulietu,*—and it was worth trying to duplicate this foregrounding in my translation. But this was not easy: *Juliet,* alas, does not end in /eth/, so I would have to use *Macbeth* and the only two common other English words: "death" and "breath."[2] Would not using these three "-eth" words result in something trite? I took up the challenge and submitted the result, aware that it was not as good a translation as I wished; it did indeed, sound rather facile to me; but it did capture Akhmatova's desperate tone. And to my delight it was adjudged first-equal, although it was not clear how many submissions there were.[3]

In the same year I was asked by Vinko Ošlak, who then worked for *Celovški zvon*, to write a review of Herbert Kuhner's "Kaj je povedala noč"/ "Was die Nacht erzählt"/ "What night reveals," which comprised Kuhner's two translations of the Merlak/Detela poetry of that name. The title of my review article says it all: "Kako naj bi ne prevajali poezije."[4] I had been, simply, amazed at the basic errors in Kuhner's versions. I then wondered: given my scant personal experience in translation, how could I dare be so brazenly dogmatic? Perhaps, I realized, I should do some translating myself, at least to show that I had *some* basis for my criticisms! And I bought the latest available book of non-rhyming Carinthian Slovene poetry, the slim volume "Pesmi iz Listja" by Jožica Čertov, and translated all the poems. Two

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1 For help with the subtitle, my thanks to Christopher S. Mackay.

2 I refrained from "beth," "heth," "meth," "seth," and "shibboleth"—the most common others.

3 For discussion and the other prizewinner, see *Journal of Russian Studies* 53: 46. For my success with respect to the "tone" of the original, see Priestly (2011).

4 See appendix 2, Articles on translation. Vinko Ošlak is nowadays well-known for his own literary work; see: https://prabook.com/web/vinko.oslak/1771896.

of my translations were published in *Colorado Review*.[5] I was much encouraged!

As is clear from what I have written, I was responding to specific translational challenges: first, by those who set the Akhmatova poem as a task; then, by the editor of *Celovški zvon*; and then, by myself with respect to Čertov.

It may seem unusual that a linguist by training should be translating poetry: looking back now, I can appreciate this question. My formal education in literature had ended in 1958, thirty years previously, and had been limited to mostly traditional approaches, at boarding school, to the classics in French and German like Racine and Schiller; and then for one university year to traditional approaches to Russian classics like Dostoevsky and Turgenev. I do, however, still recall the way in which poetry made breaks in the literary tedium: Verlaine, Gerald Manley Hopkins, and T.S. Eliot[6] in my teens, and Pushkin, Lermontov, Tiutchev, and Blok in my twenties. I still know, by heart, fragments of the poetry of all of these.[7] When I came to translate poems, it was the attempts to capture their formal structure that was the most exciting challenge; and I suggest that a linguist can appreciate the formal aspect as well as, if not better than, a non-linguist.

I next turned to another Carinthian Slovene Milka Hartman, whose poetry throughout her career was "traditional" (i.e., with rhymes and regular rhythm): she, being a peripatetic teacher of music and composer (as well as a teacher of "household economics") in the pre-war period, did not deviate far from traditional forms. The regular rhythm and rhymes of the thirty-seven poems that I chose were an initiation for me: they were, in some cases, difficult enough to imitate formally, but I managed—in some instances, with results that I was proud of. (Note that as a linguist by training, my untrained "ear" was probably a fallible guide.) Later, when I was studying poetry written in dialect, I translated Hartman's one published poem in her native dialect into an English dialect roughly as spoken in Sussex, where I grew up.

I chose my next three poets: Maja Haderlap, Janko Messner, and Gustav Januš. All were Carinthian Slovenes, but very different in the poetry they wrote. I automatically remained, for my choices, in Austrian Carinthia: the first variety of Slovene that I learned was the variety spoken in the village

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5 "Universitätsstrasse" and "As you become" (1989).

6 I even acted, on tour, in Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*. This was at a time when the phrase "Mutually Assured Destruction" was in all the available media and the immortal lines from Eliot's 1925 "The Hollow Men," in 2020 again prophetic, were quoted again and again ("This is the way the world ends… Not with a bang but a whimper.")

7 When, for instance, my colleague at the Utah State University, Jane Hacking, mentioned Gerald Manley Hopkins on her Facebook page, at once the line "I thank the Lord for dappled things" dropped into my mind.

of Sele,[8] and selščina was the basis upon which my knowledge of the standard language was based. Only later did I temper my allegiance to Carinthia with respect to my choice of whom to translate.

Maja Haderlap's early poems were rather straightforward and I found them easy to understand; her later ones were more difficult, but she told me that I was correct when we discussed them (she even changed the wording in two of them during our discussion!)

I tackled Janko Messner's poetry both in the 1990s and again, after much discussion with Janko himself, in the 2000s. Both his comic and his polemic poetry make interesting material for the translator, especially his poem about the "Thirteen beheaded,"[9] which I translated after a visit to the room in Vienna which still contained the guillotine used. (This visit also evoked from me the only serious poem that I have ever written.[10]) Janko's grasp of the English language was not as good as he thought it was—this led to disagreements about my versions of his poems—and I spent many frustrating hours with him, but his passion for his poetry and his defense of his political views were enthralling, so the time spent was more enjoyable than frustrating. Given his presence on the Carinthian Slovene scene, it was not difficult to find a publisher, although I had to share a booklet with Czech versions of the same poems.

I then turned to an easier task as relief—the simpler, more amusing poems by Gustav Januš. And again, I found a publisher. Payments were, as I mention elsewhere in this *apologia*, always welcome, although I must emphasize that I would have welcomed publications without payment: but at least what I had done was available to more readers.

It was only after these translating tasks that I found myself responding to commissions which took me on my translating adventure south of the border. When, about this time (the late 1990s), Henry Cooper and I were commissioned to translate Prešeren, I agreed not because of what we would

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8 I am now considered an honorary villager, a "Polselan." I first went to Sele in search of a linguistic fieldwork site, in 1973, and went back for four months 1978–79; and have been back frequently since, doing research or just visiting my by now very good friends.

9 On 29 April 1943, thirteen young people (twelve men, one woman) were guillotined in the "Gerichtskammer" in Vienna for giving help to the partisans. They all came from Sele and its neighbourhood. The building where this took place is referred to as "Siva hiša." Their photographs are on the front wall of the old church in Sele.

10 "The tap," with translation into Slovene by Tom Ložar and Ljubica Črnivec, "Pipa"; translated into German by Klaus Detlef Olof, "Der Wasserhahn; cited by Milač (1998: 12–13). See also: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k70DKyah7oA.

be paid when we finished, but because of the challenge that his poetry set. Hartman and Messner gave me some, but not enough experience with rhyming poetry; but at least I was confirmed in my basic approach: *Start from the end.* As with the punch-line for a joke, if the composer knows how the poem will end, the composition of what goes before will be that much easier—a principle I learned many years previously when making up limericks. Without anticipating "the home of the brave," for instance, Francis Scott Key would have been at a loss when he came to the end of the poem which eventually became the U.S. anthem; and without some initial idea of the lines of the "Magistrale," Prešeren would have taken very much longer to write his "Sonetni venec."

Every poem of Prešeren's was not only in a language that I imperfectly understood (and this is where Cooper came in: without him, the poetry would still be untranslated!) but has rhythms and sound structures that are difficult to capture. We began with "Zdravljica" ("A toast"), the seventh stanza of which was adopted as the Slovene national anthem;[11] this was a different kind of challenge: since the lines are so short, the translator has to squeeze the poet's ideas into short spaces without losing the rhymes or the rhythm. And it was, and is, the sense of achievement that comes when the challenge is met, when translators (as, probably, poets) are satisfied—in my case, very often delighted—with the results. We finally completed a book containing Prešeren's best-known poetry: Henry was responsible for the content[12] and I, for the form. This involved two poems that required long hours and laborious thought: the "Crown of Sonnets" was especially difficult, since I wished to get all the rhymes "right,"[13] and the "Baptism on the Savica" was, to speak frankly, a strain, for it seemed to go on and on and on![14] (I felt that Prešeren himself must have felt as tired as I did at times—we were, I believe, both completing the poem because we felt that we had a duty to do so: he to his fellow-countrymen, I to my acceptance of, and reluctance to abandon**,** the challenge that this epic poem offered.)

During the early 2000s I was asked, or chose, to translate poetry by several Slovenian poets, among them the controversial Francè Balantič;[15] and

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11 One aside: this is one of the very few national anthems which is friendly, not militant, in its attitude to other countries (cf. "Bombs bursting in air," "Le jour de gloire est arrivé," "Deutschland über alles," "Send her victorious," and so on).

12 See Henry R. Cooper, Jr. (1981).

13 See Priestly (2014). Both poet and translator have to follow a strict sequence of rhymes for all 196 lines of the poem, and ensure that the first lines of each of the fourteen poems combine to make a "Master Theme" with the correct structure.

14 It consists of twenty-six tercets and fifty-three octaves—802 lines in total.

15 This was at a time of newly-heightened discussions about the roles of the partisans and the *domobranci* during the war and the attitudes to and (mis-) treatment of the latter after it. I realised that the invitation to publish a book of

also Kajetan Kovič, who was satisfied with my translation of fifteen of his sonnets and his cycle of children's songs "Maček Muri in Muca Maca." This last gave me enormous pleasure: I listened over and over again to a recording of Neca Falk singing the songs in the original,[16] and (after a productive discussion with Klaus-Detleft Olof, who had "done" a German version and persuaded me that "loose" translations were permissible in the case of children's songs) spent several afternoons in an easy chair beneath an apple tree in my Carinthian Slovene friends' farmhouse yard, drinking beer and allowing the music to dictate my efforts. Kovič then asked me to join a three-person team translating the work of Slovene poets and writers who had belonged to the Academy.

I thus came to the work of eleven more poets, including a poem by Pavel Golia which I still look back on with delighted enjoyment, for it seemed to translate itself without my having to do any thinking at all. Right at the outset I decided that I would try to use Golia's intricate sound-structures with the sequences /ster/ and /é/. These I copied into their correct positions (with allowances for UK English /st´/ where necessary) and the remainder simply fell into place. I felt that translation must have its own muse, and that she had taken over on this occasion: I did not lift a mental finger![17]

Finally, a publishing triumph: a book of my poetry translations published in an English-speaking country—Canada. Cvetka Lipuš had sent me her first four books of poetry in 2004; we met once, briefly, in Celovec, and then cemented our co-operation with a joint poetry reading at the Slovene National Benefit Society's cultural center in Enon Valley, Pennsylvania in 2006.[18] Eventually four of my translations were published in 2007, two more in 2009, and four more in 2011. Then, in 2016, I agreed to tackle first some, then all of the poems in her collection *Kaj smo, ko smo*. The result was published in Edmonton in 2018: *What We Are When We Are*. For the first time in my career[19] I was able to discuss my translations "in process" with their creator—Cvetka had lived for nearly two decades in the USA and her

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Balantič's poetry had a partly non-literary motive, but I ignored this and translated a selection simply because I liked them.

16 The YouTube versions have been deleted. For a very colourful, indeed enjoyable if rather frantic, filmed version of "On the Menu" (and also of the first song in translation, and of both songs in the original) please contact the author. There is also a link to the texts of the Slovenian, English, and German versions of the booklets that accompany the CDs. My gratitude to Tone Stojko and to Neca Falk for making these available at very short notice!

17 I include this poem in appendix 1, Selected examples: it makes an interesting complement to Kovič's "Il faut savoir."

18 Arranged by Carole Rogel, to whom our thanks!

19 I had had fruitful discussions of my translations of her poetry with Maja Haderlap also, but that was after their publication.

English is excellent—and I believe our collaboration made for better translations.

To finish this *apologia*, I have to pay tribute to an author I found inspiring when I taught translation: Douglas R. Hofstadter who, under the heading "I am not a generous translator," so well expresses my own aims in translation:

> When I tackle a translating challenge, it is not in the least because I yearn to reveal to some poor deprived non-speakers of language X the hidden structure and meaning of some passage in language X—no, for me, translating is simply the sheer joy of trying to do something deeply paradoxical: namely, to carry off in medium 2, radically different from medium 1, some virtuoso stunt that someone once carried off with great aplomb in medium 1… I am not someone who makes translations as gifts… No, I'm just a selfish translator, someone who translates simply and entirely because doing so is exhilarating and beautiful… (Hofstadter 1997: 366)

Thus, I began translating to see if I could; and I continued translating because I found that I could—for the most part—with some success and occasionally with a success that, indeed, was exhilarating. This is what I hope for when I translate, and I can now look back and say that I found what I hope for more often than not.

Like Hofstadter—although I am far from being such an extremist as he is in this respect—I translate in the first place for myself; if there is an added bonus, in that I give pleasure to someone else, or (and this applies, of course, to poetry in Slovene) make some piece of literature available to someone to whom it was previously barred, or because I am going to earn some payment, then so much the better: unlike Hofstadter, I welcome the additional benefit. But I believe that I would not have had less success if I approached translation with unselfish motives: for it is the challenge which transmutes translation from a chore into a joy. In addition, as Willis Barnstone wrote,

> What is most interesting to translate and is most susceptible of success is the impossible, or… the untranslatable… These "untranslatables" stimulate the imagination of the artist-translator, who in confronting the untranslatable cannot be seduced by the surface obvious into producing an unimaginative, mechanical version. (1993: 49)

If someone has stated that such and such a piece is "untranslatable"—and this applies above all to poetry, especially rhythmic and rhyming poetry like *Le ton beau de Marot*—this is a challenge which cannot be resisted!

If any reader should be considering translation, my advice is: a. choose a text that you enjoy; b. have an approachable friend who knows the language that you don't: if you are an English-first speaker, the friend *must* have Slovene as their first language; and vice versa. These are both essential.

Have I now finished translating? Is this essay my swan song? I submitted this essay early in what was soon termed the Covid-19 pandemic; by April 2020 I had time on my hands and hoped to do some more translation. I requested, and on 18 April, received, Cvetka Lipuš's latest poetry collection: *Odhajanje za začetnike*. I have now started and am enjoying yet another challenge.

University of Alberta

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