

OTON ŽUPANČIČ: 'DUMA'

translated by Henry R. Cooper, Jr.

One of the longest and finest of the works of Oton Župančič (1878-1949), perhaps Slovenia's greatest twentieth-century poet, is the poem he entitled with the Ukrainian word *duma*, roughly 'thought', 'meditation' or 'revery'.¹ Written sometime between 1903 and 1907, it was included in the volume *Samogovori* ('Monologues') which he published in 1908; it is regularly anthologized in Slovene-language and translated collections of Slovene literature, and remains popular to the present day.² In my opinion, the poem makes clear references, especially in its first half, to the work of Walt Whitman (1819-92), and most particularly his 'Salut au monde', one of the larger items in Whitman's chief poetic work, *Leaves of Grass*, whose last definitive edition authorized by Whitman was published in 1891-92. Župančič imitated Whitman in his poem in order to contrast the American's cosmopolitanism (a sentiment the Slovene himself was not without) to his own fears concerning the deracination of Slovenes living abroad, and the consequent dangers to Slovene culture and the national identity. While the first half of 'Duma' (through verse 92) clearly celebrates the world and its achievements, the second half sings a far more lugubrious song. In the compelling image at the end of the poem, of the oyster slowly extruding its pearl as the result of constant pain, we are invited to see the poet himself meditating aloud and poetically on the fate of his land.

The present translation, not the first into English,³ attempts to underscore the affinities between Whitman and Župančič, particularly in the first half of the poem.⁴ Though I have tried to recreate the rhythm and structure (especially the refrains) of the original, I have not sought to replicate its rhyme-scheme, which in the second half plays an important role in giving shape to the poem. By and large the poem moves from free verse at the beginning to more and more organized, traditional verse patterns by the end, and these are emphasized by the rhymes.

In doing this translation, I owe a large debt of gratitude to both Professor Helga Glušič and especially Ms. Ljubinica Črnivec, both of Ljubljana University.⁵ Without their assistance, careful reading and thoughtful advice, the text that follows would have been an even paler reflection of the powerful original.

REFERENCES

1. Though the poem is clearly a meditation or revery, the implication of Župančič's use of this non-Slovene word for his title is unclear to me. It may be an allusion to a genre of Ukrainian literature; it may be a reflection of "Slavic solidarity" on Župančič's part; or it may simply have been a popular term, with a variety of meanings and vague resonances, from the beginning of the twentieth century. Since it is not a Slovene word, I have decided to let it stand as the title of the poem.
2. For details and further references to criticism of the poem and the poet, see Henry R. Cooper, Jr., "Župančič and Whitman," *Southeastern Europe* 9 (1982) 147-59.
3. For a complete list of translations into English, see Vasa D. Mihailovich and Mateja Matejić, *A Comprehensive Bibliography of Yugoslav Literature in English, 1593-1980* (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1984) 198, s.v. Oton Župančič. For a complete but somewhat flawed French translation, as well as a study of the poet himself, see Lucien Tesnière, *Oton Joupantchitch: poète slovène* (Paris: Belles-Lettres, 1931).

4. The translation is based on the text (with annotations) in Oton Župančič, *Zbrano delo II* (Ljubljana: Državna založba, 1957) 79-87.
5. See R.L. Lencek, "Slovene Language and Literature at Columbia University," in this volume, notes 6, 13.

DUMA

I have heard a song and I have heard a voice singing,
 The voice of a man, as if the answer to a woman's voice;
 I have heard my heart ringing.

The song of the man and the answer to the woman's song:

You are amidst the fields and you sing me a song entirely green, 5
 A song of the wind and the branches and the grass and the sun on the grass,
 A song of the hastening and a song of the standing waves,
 A song of the silver and a song of the golden waves—
 A song of the brooks and a song of the grain.

"The villages here are bound by roads as if by ribbons; 10
 The church has raised its head above the roofs,
 From above it observes the toil of the people beneath,
 It measures their hours and divides their labor.
 The houses are tiny, the windows so small, the carnations from the windows
 Pour green along the wall, red foams 15
 This quiet waterfall in the sun—
 A signal to the boys who walk past during the day,
 A secret signal for the night—"
 So you sing; and your eyes are glad at the patterned kerchiefs,
 The healthy, sunburned cheeks and the pearl-white laughter, 20
 The angular motions and the awkward gait and the peasants' straits;
 Coarse oaths are wine to your ear,
 The strong simile—you would pay good money for it.
 You are amidst the fields and you sing me a song entirely green,
 You sing and invite: 25

"The oak giants stand beyond the field and fight with the wind,
 The dreams of the ages rock their crowns to a distant roaring,
 Each spring novelty pays heed to the secrets of the past;
 You struggle abroad and suffocate your soul—
 While I am with roses a rose: I mix among them— 30
 You could walk by and not distinguish me from my friends."

You are amidst the fields and you sing me a song entirely green,

You shout out for joy and invite,
You summon back to the countryside.

Look and my pride rises high and a song with it, 35
Bold and daring it looks your song in the eye.
To your song I oppose the song of the cities,
The song of the immured roads and steps hastening along the pavement,
The rhythm of hands and shoulders that move stones and tree trunks,
The beat of the railways, the same beneath all the stars, 40
The flow of great rivers, whose boast is materials and cargo,
The hum of the wires that bind north and south
And lead the voice of the west to the ear of the east.
(I like to put my ear to the telegraph pole:
It stands on duty, an immovable courier, and sings and sings, 45
With muted murmurs receiving the news which it sends on farther—
So does the heart of the poet accompany the ideas hastening
With the electricity of the era over his head.)

Where are foreign lands? What is suffocating me?
I have seen mothers—standing guard as in our country over cradles, 50
The child groping at their bosom for milk;
I have seen men in battle for their coarse bread,
Strong and gloomy men,
And for love; I was among them myself;
I have seen the surge of blood, 55
Passion and struggle;
I have seen a country and a countryman on his own soil,
To him it was dearest, as ours is to us;
I look at that country—and it was as beautiful as ours is, 60
Worthy of the same love as ours is;
I have seen a house along the road and have entered it a traveler—
I have received wine and bread and a kind word,
The last more pleasurable to me than the wine and the bread.
In the great cities' surging I myself have been a wave,
O, and my heart has beat 65
In their powerful, thousandfold rhythm;
The soul of the villager has risen to new life,
New faith has embraced his tired heart.
I have seen foreheads: as if turtles were crawling beneath their skin,
But it was thought that wrinkled them so; 70
I have seen cheeks: in them furrows for the seeds of the future;
Hands have served the machine all day,
But in the evening that sooty brow glistened,
And the eye wandered through bright regions,
It dreamed daring dreams of the future, 75
Followed an orator's powerful gestures,
And kept faith for a generation which is not yet born. . .
I have heard the martial shout from Manchuria,

In the middle of Paris I have heard its hundredfold echo.
 I have watched the sculptor's chisel: with love 80
 It went like a kiss through the whiteness of the marble,
 From the stone it gently kissed out its material,
 Shyly life began to sigh in it.
 I have seen the thinker: he was writing laws
 For a not earthly people—he was showing the stars the way, 85
 And a disturbance in the universe he investigated,
 His calculations demanded new worlds,
 "So be it!" he said—and the night gave him a new world. . .

Here, here life's veins meet,
 The ways of the universe criss-cross here, 90
 I love them with their noise and sound, these great cities—
 The path to freedom goes through them, through them goes the path to the future. . .

*

I have heard my heart ringing:

You are holy, O Land, and blessed is he for whom you bear—
 With oil you heal his cracked palms, 95
 You fill his barns and return him wine for sweat,
 You give hay and grass for the ox who pulled his harrow,
 Walked in front of the plow and together sweated with the plowman;
 You pour honey into the flowers' cups, so that the bee may come,
 Driven in spring by a secret care to toil for Christmas; 100
 The housewife does not fear the cold because her family
 Has doubled clothing, and do you hear the hemp-brake on the block?
 And the warp on the frame is awaiting the woof.
 O, there the Holy Spirit has spread his wings above the table,
 Blessed is the labor and blessed the repose of the family. 105

I have walked over our land and drunk her delights.
 I have loved her. As of the bared breasts of a girl
 Have her scorched fields smelled beneath the sun;
 I have dived into the waves of her grain,
 I, I alone, hidden only by my thoughts, 110
 In the silent company of youthful yearning,
 Young, young—that is to say: in the heart of all life.

And her whole breadth dreamed with my dreams,
 And sky and mountains responded to my desires;
 The lark—a singing rocket—showered down songs: 115
 Did he hear my heart, did he learn from it to sing?
 Meadow, did you see the blossoms of my soul,
 And imitate them, and use them to adorn your own sod?

Your hand, my father, uncovered for me the beauty of the land
 And—miracle after miracle—rent apart nature's curtain; 120
 You showed me the fruits of the fields, led me into the forest,
 Explained the secrets of the voices and the families of the trees,
 And we two knew where the blackbirds nest, where the thrushes,
 Where the wild man walks, where the fairies hide in the woods.

On St. Gregory's—father, you remember—the birds got married, 125
 In the hedge behind the school garden they celebrated, drank;
 The two of us listened from across the road. . . “Do you hear chirp-chirp?
 That's ‘cheers’—the head of the table has now toasted the bride.”
 And when the guests flew away from the hedge all aflutter,
 You tugged my sleeve and told me to go look. 130

Then—with marvel in my heart and fearfully—I went to look in the hedge,
 I went to glean after the birds and their feast:
 And look, there under the bush, the white beech, little cakes,
 And sweet wine, carob, figs, sweets of all sorts.
 “But won't they be back?” “No, they've left all that for you, 135
 What you scattered for them during the winter, they've now given back to you.”

O native home, O roof of my father's house!
 A fortress for the poor and a joy for the traveler going far:
 The dove trembles, back from under an alien sky,
 Longing has shown him the way and the place; 140
 Why can the swallow not stand the southern summer?
 Memory of her nest bears her over sea and mountains.

Confused the doves circle over a burning house. . .
 Lonely my thoughts lament over an empty homestead. . .
 A grey day has come; we have dispersed far and wide, 145
 Wherever life's force and the heart's restlessness have driven us.
 The swallows have stayed under the roof in safe refuge—
 We have been cut up and scattered through the world. . .

My youth has now bowed its exuberant head,
 But its secret thought has been embodied in a lowering bird, 150
 No longer a dove flying over a fire,
 Now it is an eagle, whose wings are a storm,
 Whose eyes are lightning, racing into darkening distance,
 Seeking, finding; not a home, much more: a homeland. . .

I have walked over our land and drunk her miseries. 155

You are holy, O land, and blessed is he for whom you bear;—
 Do I know the fields—whose are they, shining in the sun?
 You have left the plow and the hoe, you have burrowed into the earth,
 Old man, and the cross on your grave rusts and sways;

Your son has buried himself alive beneath the earth—he is a miner in America, 160
 Even in the shaft the sunrise of the meadows suffuses his dark thoughts,
 His son will no longer know them, nor dream of them.

I have heard the widow's lament:

“My Matty, O, my Matty!”

The great bell has sung— 165

My Matty, O, my Matty!”

Hamburg! Hamburg! calls the bell. . .

There her son collapsed and died,

There not one tear fell for him,

There no marker graced his grave. 170

Hamburg!—her thoughts stagger wildly,

Not knowing where to fly,

Nor where to alight on his grave,

Nor where to shed a tear.

If I had been God then, 175

“My Matty, O, my Matty!”

I would have called into his grave:

“My Matty, arise, Matty!”

Hamburg, Hamburg!—Beats the bell

Singing, swinging, 180

Weeping, keening,

Falling hard upon her head.

Hamburg! Hamburg!—falling blackness,

Sweeping, sluicing,

All entrapping, 185

In its turmoil, earth and sky.

If you had been then, God,

“My Matty, O, my Matty!”

You would have called into his grave:

“My Matty, arise, Matty!” 190

But their arms and shoulders are like rocks,

Their necks—let a tyrant lay on a load—

Will bear it and not bend;

But their hearts are quiet and powerful—

Their pride is without words; 195

Yet they are men—

As if they had not been brought forth out of a mother,

As if they had sprung forth from the flanks of the mountains:

They must go into the world, and foreign lands are adorned

With the works of their hands; 200
 There in America, there in Westphalia
 They have disappeared from us—never again will our eye
 Catch sight of them. . .

Where are you, homeland? On these fields?
 At the foot of Triglav, near the Slovene Alps? 205
 Are you in the forges, or in the mines?
 Here? Across the sea? And have you no bounds?

Once I wanted for you to grow broad,
 For you to spread your circuit over the world—
 Look, and now I see: you are powerful, boundless, 210
 You scatter your offspring like seed far and wide.

Will you call them back like the swallows to yourself?
 Like the doves will you summon them under your roof?
 Or will they be seduced by foreign glory
 And never return to you again? 215

Where are you, homeland? On these fields?
 At the foot of Triglav, near the Slovene Alps?
 Are you in the forges, or in the mines?
 Here? Across the sea? And have you no bounds?

I sense you, I feel you. The poet's dream 220
 Many a year has hovered above you,
 Watched, listened, cried, hoped,
 Inquired after your mystery.

The oyster on the sea-bed grew ill,
 Into a pearl she pressed all her pain— 225
 Poet's heart—what has coalesced in you?
 Poet's heart—you hurt from that pain.

ANNOTATIONS

Line(s)

- 1: A deliberate evocation of Walt Whitman, especially his 'Salut au monde'.
- 2: Župančič has the following to say about his poem—see Oton Župančič, *Zbrano delo II* (Ljubljana: Državna založba, 1957) 331: "In 'Duma' the framework is this: to transpose love of the homeland and the understanding of nationality from the realm of romantic flirtatiousness with its trappings via a realistic or rationalistic cosmopolitanism to a base with a social-esthetic point of view. Thus the voice that praises the romantic beauty of the homeland is female, the voice of the cosmopolitan is male—and the last voice, my own, the voice of the soul," (*Zapuščina, mapa XI*). "In 'Duma' I wanted to look homeward with a clear eye and a feeling heart: thus I introduced two voices. I wanted to examine everything soberly that was ours—misery and greatness, then via romanticism (the

- female voice) and cosmopolitanism (the male voice) to go farther," (from a conversation with Izidor Cankar, "Obiski," *Ljubljanski zvon*, 1911).
- 5-9: The song of the male voice.
- 10-18: The male voice citing the 'green' song of the female voice.
- 19-25: The song of the male voice again.
- 26-31: The male voice, again citing the female voice. Of particular importance is line 29, which is repeated ironically by the male voice in line 49, then echoed at the conclusion of the poem by the 'third' voice in lines 204 and 216.
- 32-92: The male voice alone sings.
- 69: Župančič in his own annotation to 'Duma' says, "He to whom this simile seems excessive [should] see for example Dostoevsky's forehead."
- 78: A reference to the Russo-Japanese conflict in Manchuria, which lasted, on and off, from 1894 to 1905, when the Russians were defeated.
- 84: A reference to the discovery of the planet Neptune through calculations based on the disturbances in the orbit of the planet Uranus, by John Couch Adams, 1845.
- 93: The beginning of the second half of the poem, with a more regular rhythm, stanza length and (after line 111) rhyme and occasional refrains. Perhaps it is the 'voice of the soul' speaking here in the first person.
- 94-105: Cf. Psalm 104, especially verses 14-15.
- 101-02: Župančič notes: "This is taken from Trubar, but I forgot to note the passage where it is located." The reference is to the Protestant writer Primož Trubar, whose reputation as the Father of Slovene Literature was only becoming established at the beginning of the twentieth century.
- 106: A line to be contrasted later with line 155.
- 125: Perhaps St. Gregory of Nyssa, feast day: 9 March, or St. Gregory the Great, feast day: 12 March.
- 128: Župančič notes: "The residents of Bela Krajina [his native district] call the bride *mlada*." This is the term he uses here.
- 160: A reference to the problem of the emigration of the Slovene labor force to northern Europe and North America, a particularly burning issue at the turn of the century.
- 164: 'Matty' is in the original "Mate," a hypercoristic of Matej "Matthew": a personification of the exploited young Slovene living abroad.
- 187, 189: These lines are misconstrued by Tesnière in his translation of the poem, p. 163.
- 205: Triglav is the highest mountain in Slovenia and the symbol of the country; the term 'Slovene Alps' is my translation for Slovene 'Karavanke' (German 'Karawanken'), a mountain range of the Austro-Slovene Alpine region.