

THE QUESTION OF LITERARY TRANSMISSION AND
MEDIATION: AESTHETIC, LINGUISTIC AND SOCIAL
ASPECTS OF SLOVENE TRANSLATIONS FROM
AMERICAN VERSE UNTIL 1945

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Studying verse translation also means being aware of the many parallel processes that shape a culture at a given point in time, taking into account the economic, political, social and metaphysical needs implicit in the choice of texts for translation and consequent dissemination. In short, the 'ideological' dimension has been all too often ignored in investigations of various translation processes, even though it would substantially enrich the general knowledge of cultural history. The role of cultural exchange and cultural diffusion by verse translation is undeniable, which is what prompted this research.¹ Regardless of the complex ambiguity of the meta-language of verse translation, including the opposition between *ad verbum* or *ad sensum* translation from the source into the target language, the importance of verse translation in a meta-textual sense, i.e., in terms of cultural appreciation and understanding, remains unchallenged.

In this article we try to provide an answer to the question of why Slovene verse translators/poets, in different time periods, for very different reasons, seem susceptible to the influence of American poetry. The line of research we would propose, then, consists of trying to determine the internal and external factors that conditioned the selection of texts from American poetry to be rendered into Slovene and thus be made more accessible to the reading public. The central concern would therefore be to study the role of Slovene political, social, cultural and artistic imagination, as seen through the emergence of Slovene translations of American verse in the making of America in Slovene literary consciousness until 1945. Was America, which is quintessentially still often perceived as a dream or a fiction, really seen as a purely oneiric model by the Slovene *literati* of the period?

American poetry is deficiently, indeed, very poorly represented in Slovene translations until 1945, more so than American fiction or drama; this is not the case with the post-World War Two years that have tried to make up for the literary loss. Many mainstream and also popular American poets active prior to 1945 were completely unknown in the Slovene cultural space.² The first translations appeared only at the turn and particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century with Andrej Smrekar's translations of H. W. Longfellow and W. C. Bryant (1898). Since Smrekar's significant work

1 Cf. the polysystem theory propounded by Gideon Toury and Itamar Even-Zohar in *The Manipulation of Literature*, ed. Theo Hermans. London: Croom Helm, 1985.

2 The best reference studies are: Mirko Jurak, "American Poetry in Slovene Translations," *Seminar on Contemporary American Poetry*, Ohrid, 1977, 72-87; Janez Stanonik, "Ameriško-slovenski odnosi," *Enciklopedija Slovenije*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1987; and Igor Maver, "The Possibilities of Verse Translation: the Reception of American Poetry in Slovenia Between the Two Wars," *Acta Neophilologica XXI*, ed. J. Stanonik, University of Ljubljana, 1988/89, 31-37.

is less known and undeservedly insufficiently explored in Slovene literary history, his literary activities will be given more attention in this discussion. The discussed period roughly falls into two parts: the period before the Great War, which is characterized by the translations of Andrej Smrekar, and the period between the two world wars which features several translations of Walt Whitman's poems and a lively interest taken in his verse, as well as a significant body of translations from American black poetry by Mile Klopčič, triggered off in the 1930s by Louis Adamic's first visit to Slovenia in 1932.

Around 1880 the great migration wave to America began. Excited by the exaggerated descriptions of 'the American dream', the poverty-stricken peasants in Slovenia, for a long time oppressed by Austro-Hungarian rule, found in the mythic image of America the bright hope, the possibility to escape from poverty and political/national oppression. It should be noted that American-Slovene links go way back,³ and the literary beginnings of Slovene presence can first be associated with the early newspapers, almanacs and journals, e. g. *Ameriški Slovenec* (1891) and *Ameriški družinski koledar* (1914).

Andrej Smrekar was born in 1868 in Kneža near Podmelec in the area of Tolmin. He attended school in Gorica and in 1891 left for America, where he became an ordained priest in 1897 in St. Paul, Minnesota. He served in several places in Minnesota (Tower Ely, Bemidja, Duluth), and then from 1905 until 1908 in Cleveland, Ohio, finally to settle in the parish of St. Mary in Collingwood near Cleveland in 1908. Smrekar was himself a poet and the first translator of American poetry into Slovene, and published his original works and translations in American-Slovene papers: *Koledar ameriškega Slovenca*, *Nada*, *Nova domovina*, etc.. Unfortunately, the vast majority of his unpublished translations in manuscript form were either stolen or lost after his death and never found again. He allegedly translated several of Shakespeare's works, hence much earlier than Ivan Cankar and Oton Župančič, and those of Milton, Byron, Tennyson, Gray and Southwell. For our research, however, his fine verse translations of H. W. Longfellow (the epics *Hiawatha* and *Evangeline*) and W. C. Bryant are of interest. It is particularly important to note that his own poetry was humorous, lively and melodious, thus much reminiscent of the one written by Smrekar's fellow countryman from the same region of Tolmin, the poet Simon Gregorčič (1844-1906). It is practically impossible to establish whether Smrekar knew Gregorčič personally, but he was most probably familiar with his *oeuvre* (*Poezije* I, 1882; *Poezije* II, 1888).

Smrekar's verse translations are, like Simon Gregorčič's, exquisitely rhythmical poems, melodious, harmonious, and generally faultless in terms of form and content transposition. However, his own poems and translations are not characterized by the *Weltschmerz* mood that we find in Gregorčič (as

³ See Janez Stanonik, "Longfellow and Smolnikar," *Acta Neophilologica* I, 1968, 1-40. "Letters of Marcus Antonius Kappus from Colonial America," *AN*, XIX, 1986, 33-57; *AN*, XX, 1987, 25-38; *AN*, XXI, 1988, 3-9; *AN*, XXII, 1989, 39-50.

the result of Josip Stritar's influence). The very first published verse translation by Smrekar appeared in 1898, eight years after his arrival to the United States of America.⁴ In less than ten years after his arrival he was able to pick up English to such an extent that he was able to publish verse translations, which in many ways (i. e. from linguistic and poetical points of view) surpass much later translations from American (and English) poetry. Due to the unfortunate disappearance of Smrekar's unpublished manuscripts, his work as a poet and especially as a translator has so far remained in the dark, although the existing translations of poems meet all the aesthetic requirements and are characterized by precise rhythmical and consistent melodic movements.⁵

One possible way of determining the quality of a Slovene verse translation is the degree of realization/reproduction of the 'natural' metrical scheme, namely the ratio between the 'theoretically' possible and the 'actual' number of accents. The percentage of these realized ictic rhythmical accents (in metre) in individual stanzas, however, does not only have a formal, prosodical value, but should pertain to the content of a verse translation as well.⁶ The first stanza of Smrekar's Slovene translation of H. W. Longfellow's poem "Srečanje" thus reveals, for example, perfect quatrains, which by definition contain three 'theoretical' accents, icts. Due to iambic trimeters there could in total be 48 'realized' ictic accents in Slovene translation ($4 \times 3 = 12 \times 4 = 48$). Smrekar's translation contains 42 'actual' accents:

Stanza I	:	10 accents	-	83.8 % of the total,
Stanza II	:	9 accents	-	75.0 % of the total,
Stanza III	:	11 accents	-	91.6 % of the total,
Stanza IV	:	12 accents	-	100.0 % of the total.

The degree of the actual ictic realization is therefore in the average of 2,6 accents per line of verse (of the possible 3 accents), which is within the context of Slovene translated and even original verse very high indeed. As in Gregorčič's case, the expressive rhythmical movement adds to the melody of the poem:⁷

Po dolgih dneh ločitve
Si stiskamo roke:

4 Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Stenska ura" ("A Wall Clock"), translated by Andrej Smrekar, *Koledar ameriškega Slovenca*, Cleveland, 1898, 134. The poem was reprinted in the article by Ivan Mulacek, "H. W. Longfellow. K stoletnici ameriškega pesnika," *Dom in svet*, 20/1907, 5, 223-224. It also reprints Andrej Smrekar's translation of the poem "A Wall Clock."

5 The published American poems that were translated into Slovene by Andrej Smrekar are: W. C. Bryant, "V cvetju in petju," *Nova domovina*, 7/1904-1905, 62, III; H. W. Longfellow, "Stenska ura," "Otroci," "Vaški kovač," "Beli čar," "Pevci," "Srečanje," "V mraku," "Po dnevnem delu," "Vsakdanje skrbi," "Ko zvezde žare," "Suspiria," *Nova domovina*, 7/1904-1905, 43, 47, 55, 85, II; H. W. Longfellow, "Vaški kovač," "Otroci," *ibid.*, 192; H. W. Longfellow, *Glasilo slovenske narodne podporne jednote*, 6/1913, 41, III; cf. also Janez Stanonik, "Longfellow in Slovenci," *Slovenski koledar*, 1966, 168-170.

6 A. V. Isačenko, *Slovenski verz*. Ljubljana: Partizanska knjiga, 1975, 60.

7 More detail about Smrekar's verse technique in Igor Maver, "The Echoes of English and American Poetry in the Slovene Cultural Space Until 1945," M. A. thesis submitted to the Department of English, University of Ljubljana, 1987, 111-115.

Veselje ali žalost,
Kaj čuti nam srce?

Že mnogi list z življenja
Otresel je vihar,
Le tuintam v vršičku
Drgeče samotar

A detailed analysis of Smrekar's translation practice further points to the fact that he primarily relied on the choice of words with great 'rhythmical usefulness.' The four stanzas of Longfellow's poem "Srečanje" illustratively contain mostly short, one or two-syllable words with explicit rhythmical adaptability:

- 1 - syllable words are used 24 times,
- 2 - syllable words are used 15 times,
- 3 - syllable words are used 10 times,
- 4 - syllable words are used only once.

The innate intuitive sense of meter rarely forced Andrej Smrekar to resort to the usage of obsolete words or contrived, self-made paraphrastic expressions. His Slovene rendition of the American pre-Romantic poet W. C. Bryant has, until the present day, remained the sole translation from Bryant's poetry. The translator (signed as Fr. Bremec) was living in Cleveland, Ohio, at the time and it seems as if he projected his nostalgic memories of Slovene mountains into Bryant's description of the "green" American mountainous landscape:

Višave gledal modrojasne,
zelene gledal sem gore
in mislil: ko oko mi ugasne,
ko v tihi grob me polože,
naj to zgodi se v mladem letu,
ko vse se smeje v rajskem cvetu,
ko v gajih pesmi se glase,
pogrebec grob naj naredi,
ko slednja gora zeleni!⁸

Generally speaking one could say that Henry W. Longfellow's verse, as well as Walt Whitman's, particularly appealed to Slovene verse translators; we find his poems rendered into Slovene much later, in 1936,⁹ and in the

8 W. C. Bryant, "V cvetju in petju," *Nova domovina* 7/1904-1905, 62, III.

9 H. W. Longfellow, "Excelsior," "Suž njeve sanje," "Izvor ž ita," "Pesem," translated by Griša Koritnik, *Modra ptica* 8/1936-1937, 247, 290, 289. H. W. Longfellow, "Graditelji" ("The Builders"), translated by Ivan Zupan, *Novi svet*, 3/1940, 5, 134. H. W. Longfellow, "Excelsior," translated by Griša Koritnik, *Ameriški družinski koledar* 7/1941, 17. H. W. Longfellow, "Puščica in pesem" ("The Arrow [Arrow?] and the Song"), translator unknown, *Poezije* 1/1941, 1, 7.

American-Slovene press, even during the Second World War, when Ivan Zupan published the poem "Graditelji" ("The Builders"), 1940-41.

Apart from Smrekar, there were three other prominent figures among Slovene immigrants in America that hastened Slovene translations of American verse and the general cultural exchange in the early twentieth century through their public activities and personal contacts. Ivan Zorman (1889-1957), a poet and musician, migrated to the United States in 1893. He brought a new theme into Slovene poetry, namely the experiences of the various generations of Slovene immigrants in America (*Poezije*, 1919). As a mediator between American and Slovene poetry Zorman is important for his first considerable body of translations from Slovene poetry into English (cf. his anthology *Slovene (Jugoslav) Poetry*, Cleveland, 1928).¹⁰ Etbin Kristan (1867-1953) was one of the leaders of the Yugoslav social democratic party, who migrated to America just before the Great War, where he for a time edited *Ameriški družinski koledar* and *Proletarec*. After the war he returned home to Slovenia, but went back to New York in 1921. At the 'Tivoli meeting' in Ljubljana (November 1909) he, however, supported the untenable thesis that Slovenes are not a nation in their own right, but rather an element of a still unconsolidated (Yugoslav?) nation. Kristan was particularly interested in theatre and his own plays ("Bomba v tovarni"; "Svilene nogavice", etc.) which demonstrate his social (socialist) commitment. In 1951 he returned to Slovenia, but during his lifetime kept close contacts with Slovene cultural/literary workers.

Several travelogues published in the early thirties helped to forge the myth of America in Slovene consciousness: e. g. Etbin Kristan, *V Ameriki in po Ameriki* (1928); Pavel Brežnik, *V sencu nebotičnikov* (1930); Božidar Jakac and Miran Jarc, *Odmevi rdeče zemlje* (1932). The most significant American-Slovene writing is represented by that of Louis Adamic (1898-1951), who began to write in the 1920s and '30s and emerged as an important American essayist, novelist and social commentator. In 1932 he visited his native Slovenia for the first time since his childhood on a Guggenheim Fellowship, which caused a revived interest among Slovenes in American literature. An American edition of *Ljubljanski zvon* to be published in Cleveland was being prepared, but because of financial difficulties the scheme fell through. However, many translations from American poetry appeared that year in the magazine,¹¹ and Adamic certainly suggested some of the possible texts for the translation into Slovene. The 1932 issue of *Ljubljanski zvon* also contains a heated discussion of Oton Župančič's article "Adamič in slovenstvo." We discovered that upon Adamic's arrival to Ljubljana the poet and journalist Mile Klopčič discussed contemporary American verse with Adamic, which gave Klopčič an additional impetus for translating American poetry into Slovene:

10 See *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature*, eds. Robert J. Di Pietro and Edward Ifkovic. New York: The MLA of America, 1983, 283-295.

11 Mile Klopčič, "Iz lirike črncev," translations from Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Sterling A. Brown, *Ljubljanski zvon* LII, 1932, 7-8, 434-436. Also Langston Hughes, "Čmčev spev" ("Black Man's Poem"), translated by Cvetko Kristan, *Pod lipo* 3/1926, 10, 155.

"When I was accompanying Louis and Stella to this meeting at Čad, and when during our walk through the Tivoli park I mentioned to him in passing that I had recently completed a few translations of American black poetry from German translations, Louis seemed pleasantly surprised. He immediately translated our discussion to Stella and inquired about the translated American authors. After having mentioned a couple of names, I noticed that he knows them all, some of them also personally. He further insisted I compare my translations with the originals, which is why he promised to write to America to have sent a few collections of these poets from his own library to me. In three or four weeks I already received the books, and together with Olga Škerlj we went through my translations that were later published in the 'American' issue of *Zvon* in the fall of 1932.¹² "

American black poetry had a fairly enthusiastic reception in Slovenia. Mile Klopčič and Cvetko Kristan translated these poets from the German translations by Anna Nussbaum (*Afrika Singt*). Langston Hughes was especially popular, not only because of the themes of his poems but also for his social and political outlook as well as his racial insight.

V. F. Calverton's essay "The emancipation of American writing", translated by Griša Koritnik, was also published in 1932,¹³ just after Adamic's visit to Slovenia. Indeed, we established that Calverton (a *nom de plume* George Gaetz used in his articles) was Adamic's friend (or at least an acquaintance): on 8 October Adamic answered Calverton's letter of 5 October, in which he offered Adamic his apartment in New York upon his return from the Yaddo colony of artists in Saratoga Springs, N. Y.. He thanked Calverton warmly for the generous offer and it seems very likely that Adamic did use the apartment in the following winter.¹⁴ The translated essay was informative enough for the Slovene reading public, however its insistence that American poetry was still trying to get rid of its 'colonial complex' did not really stimulate the interest of Slovene translators for contemporary American poetry, which was then still considered to be as derivative of the European one and therefore 'inferior'.

The considerable body of Walt Whitman's poems in Slovene translation warrants detailed research in a separate study. It can, however, be said that Slovene poets-translators, who were at least partly knowledgeable in American literature, most admired Whitman's poetry: he was considered the epitome of the new, democratic America.¹⁵ The existing translations of his

12 Mile Klopčič, "Prvi Adamičev obisk domovine (1932-1933)" ("The First Visit of Louis Adamic to his Home Country," extract translated by I. Maver). *Louis Adamič simpozij*, Ljubljana, 1981, 260-261.

13 V. F. Calverton, "Emancipacija ameriškega slovstva" ("The Emancipation of American Writing"), translated by Griša Koritnik, *Ljubljanski zvon* LII/1932, 293-299.

14 *Izbrana pisma Louisa Adamica (Selected Letters of Louis Adamic)*, ed. Henry A. Christian, translated by Jerneja Petrič. Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1981, 162. See also the following essays: Vinko Kosak, "Ameriška lirika," *Jugoslovan* I, 1930, 65, 10. Ferdo Delak, "Ameriška mlada lirika," *Slovenec*, 56/1928, 280-287.

15 Vladimir Martelanc, "Walt Whitman," *Učiteljski list*, III, 1922, 76-77, 85.

vers libre into the Slovene language reveal an original phonetic colouring.¹⁶ In the phonetic determinants one can notice the repetitions of the consonant groups containing aspirated plosives p, t, k. Phonetic, vocal harmonization as a structural/translational principle thus usually tends to occur in free verse translations into Slovene. Perhaps it should be observed that free verse when in its more elastic measure can be more culturally adaptive and humanly collective in translations. Whitman's verse greatly appealed to the poet Oton Župančič (particularly as regards the impact of Whitman's "Salut au Monde" on Župančič's poem "Duma"¹⁷), but he never embarked on translating Whitman's poetry.

One of the most productive translators of American (and English) poetry into Slovene between the two wars was Griša Koritnik (1886-1969), who rendered into Slovene for his anthology of English and American translated verse E. A. Poe's poem "The Raven"¹⁸ and the ballad "Annabel Lee."¹⁹ Among other American-Slovene translators Ivan Molek chose for translation Carl Sandburg's poems that, in his view, stressed the hardships of American workers during the Great Depression which was theme that Slovene workers could relate to.²⁰

Imagism was ignored in Slovenia until the mid-thirties, which may have been because its concrete nature then better echoed the Slovene social realism/expressionism active at that time in Slovene literature than the more far-fetched futurism or surrealism. As for this new specifically American strain of poetics, Slovene translators and poets as well failed to pick it up: the reason for this may well be in their 'cultural snobbishness' embracing the high appreciation of primarily European literary movements, which is why imagism remained with the exception of Latin American writing largely enclosed within the Anglo-American cultural circle and was unexplored in Slovene translations. The comparative lack of Slovene translations from American poetry in the period until 1945 can be given several possible explanations that can at least indirectly be detected in some of the critical essays written at that time: first, American literature was considered by Slovene poets and translators as primarily derivative of the European 'high literature', which was really worth translating, second, Slovene literary critics saw the American way of life as 'materialistic' and anti-lyrical, and third, the scarcity of verse translations was partly the result of the general cultural orientation and contiguity of the German speaking part of Europe.

16 Walt Whitman, "Disonanč na pesem," translated by Tone Seliškar, *Ameriški družinski koledar* 12/1926, 94. W. Whitman, "Iz Travnih bilk" ("From *Leaves of Grass*") translated by Janez Žagar (=Lojze Šegula), *Modra ptica*, 4/1932-1933, 7, 213-215.

17 Cf. Henry R. Cooper, Jr., "Influence and Affinity: Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* and the Early Poetry of Oton Župančič," *Obdobje simbolizma v slovenskem jeziku, književnosti in kulturi*. Ljubljana: Filozofska fakulteta, 1983, 267-276.

18 E. A. Poe, "Krokar" ("The Raven"), translated by Griša Koritnik, *Ljubljanski zvon* XLIX, 1929, 85-88. See also Velemir Gjurin, "Gregor Koritnik in njegov prevod *Krokarja*." *Iz zgodovine prevajanja na Slovenskem*. Ljubljana: DSKP, 1982, 279.

19 Griša Koritnik, *Listič iz angleške lirike*. Ljubljana, 1929. (E. A. Poe, "Annabel Lee," 38.)

20 Carl Sandburg, "Iz zbirke Sandburgovih pesmi" ("From the Collection of Sandburg's Poems"), translated by Ivan Molek, *Pod lipo* 4/1928, 11, 161; 12, 177-178.

The study of the translations of American poetry into Slovene until 1945 leads us to believe that within the context of intercultural and cross-national influences the intertextual approach to translations should replace translations that are borne of a one-sided cultural and literary interpretation, because inherent in such translations is a cultural reduction, a literary reduction that assumes intertextual literacy. We would take the position that the anatomy of this literacy in terms of verse translation has to be completed by mediation, a much broader concept than those described by earlier (positivist?) theorists of literary influence. Douglas Archibald thus writes:

Discussions of mediation can become forbiddingly abstract and dangerously diagrammatic. Nevertheless, they suggest some important truths for the investigation of literary influence. The first is that it is a matter of threes (or more) not twos; of angles and refractions, of movements from received consciousness to active consciousness and then to imaginative absorption and transformation, rather than of straight lines from one text to another. The relationship that we must explore is anterior to any single poem. Another is that literature is a mode of experience: reading is experience, so are children, politics and sailing. Literature is 'made' of other literature only insofar as that literature is significant experience, and it is rarely a self-contained and never an isolated experience.²¹

Tracing literary influence across national or linguistic borders can easily fall into the trap of being nothing but a study of reception. There were, for instance, many factors at work which promoted, impeded and otherwise affected the processes of transmission of American verse to Slovenia. The translations of American verse into Slovene entailed not merely textual but also personal encounters between 'American Slovenes' and Slovene cultural figures (e. g. Ivan Zorman, Etbin Kristan, Louis Adamic). The low level of Slovene interest in the cultural developments of America, translation policies that insisted on the translations from German and Slavic languages, censorship, publishing procedures were also major contributing factors. When one culture (American) allows itself to be 'transmitted' to the other (Slovene), we are reminded of the importance of delays in time and differences of national historical temperament, economic and political situation, and the level of cultural awareness. Still, as far as verse translation in general is concerned, its oscillation between imitation (mimesis) and creation (poesis), Jacob Grimm was perhaps right to paradoxically maintain: "A faithful translation of a true poem is impossible; for in order not to be any poorer, any worse than the source text, it would have to be identical with it."²² But it is worth while to keep on trying.

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21 Quoted in Douglas N. Archibald, "Yeats's Encounters: Observations on Literary Influence and Literary History," *New Literary History*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1970, 454-455.

22 *Briefe der Brüder Grimm an Savigny*, ed. Wilhelm Schorf, Berlin, 1953, 115.

POVZETEK**VPRAŠANJE LITERARNEGA PRENOSA IN
POSREDNIŠTVA: ESTETSKI, JEZIKOVNI
IN DRUŽBENI VIDIKI SLOVENSКИH PREVODOV IZ
AMERIŠKE POEZIJE DO LETA 1945**

Članek skuša odgovoriti na vprašanje, zakaj so bili slovenski pesniki oz. pesniški prevajalci v različnih časovnih obdobjih dovzetni za vpliv ameriške poezije. Pri tem upošteva nekatere notranje in zunanje dejavnike, ki so pogojevali izbor tekstov iz ameriške poezije za prevod v slovenščino in poudari vlogo pesniškega prevajanja pri medkulturni izmenjavi med ameriško in slovensko ustvarjalnostjo v obravnavanem obdobju. Makrobesedilna analiza prevodov odkrije, da so nastali iz različnih vzrokov, ki so pospeševali, zavirali ali kako drugače vplivali na procese literarnega prenosa in posredništva. V tem smislu posebej opredeli pomen prvega obiska Louisa Adamiča na Slovenskem leta 1932, ki je sprožil številne procese prevajanja v slovenščino in opiše nekoliko prezrto literarno-kulturno posredniško vlogo nekaterih slovenskih izseljencev v ZDA.