TRANSLATING CONTEMPORARY SLOVAK POETRY INTO ENGLISH – A CASE STUDY

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The following paper is inspired by the author's experience of translating into English a selection of poems by the contemporary Slovak poet, Ivan Štrpka. Through examination of one of these poems titled *Neviditeľná vlajka. Deti na úteku*, the paper seeks to highlight some of the challenges involved in the processes of such translation, focusing on the translator's approach towards the task and discussion of the difficulties of comprehension and adequate interpretation of the selected poem which arose during the translation process. This leads to an account of how the poet himself and then the commissioner of the work both became involved in this process. Despite the apparent benefits of such collaboration, questions emerge about how effectively such a poem can be translated into English. After consideration of all the pitfalls which may be encountered, some readers may end up wondering whether the task is even feasible.

In this paper I would like to describe my experience of translating into English a poem by the Slovak poet, Ivan Štrpka (1944), author of numerous collections of poetry published over a period of more than forty years, none of which have yet been published in English. I had been commissioned to do the translations by Peter Milčák, owner of Modrý Peter, a publishing house specializing in contemporary Slovak poetry. Towards the end of 2018, he asked if I would be willing to translate six poems by Štrpka in the hope that their potential publication would enable the anglophone world to have opportunity to read someone whom Milčák described as one of Slovakia's finest living poets. Although I had translated Slovak poetry into English before (including Milčák's own collection *Prípravná čiara 57/Preparation Line 57*), I was not entirely sure whether I was the best person to undertake such work, however. Indeed, during the weeks that followed my acceptance of the commission, I was to find that translating Štrpka's poems into English was a lot more difficult than translating Milčák's own verse.

In the following text I would like to try and explain what it was that made the poem I discuss here so difficult to translate. I will then relate what I did to try and solve these difficulties before going on to raise the question of whether, ultimately, in such translating endeavours, the ends actually justify the means. Translating poems calls for a level of attention to detail which goes far beyond that required for other kinds of text; the translator needs to invest a lot of time and energy into trying to produce a

target text which is both faithful to the original and aesthetically pleasing. But given the ambiguity of Štrpka's source text and the elusiveness of its authorial voice, is it possible for the translator to render the poem satisfactorily in English? And if so, how can we be sure? Is it the translator or the commissioner who is best qualified to arbitrate on this matter?

The question of how feasible it is to translate poetry into another language is one which has been debated for centuries and as Andričík shows (2008), one which has divided the literary and translating community into so-called pessimists and optimists for that whole period[1]. It is not my intention here to rehash all their time-honoured arguments for and against the activity; instead I would just say that when I receive such a commission as a translator, despite whatever misgivings I might have about my own abilities or the actual value of such a task (is there a market for such poems in translation?), I try to do the best job I can and approach the task in a spirit of optimistic realism, knowing responses to poetry, whether originals or in translation are always going to be varied and subjective. As Andričík states:

> We have to realize that a translator is above all an interpreter and just as reader interpretations (of poems) can widely differ, so can those of translators. The translator's rendering of the original is also conditioned not only individually but also historically and culturally. Differences in translations are therefore understandable and legitimate. (Andričík 2008, 21[2])

When receiving Štrpka's poems for translation, my first task was thus to read them very closely, several times over, and try to grasp as well as I could their meaning so that my interpretation would not deviate too far from the one intended by the poet. However, I soon noticed that his poems were not as easily comprehended as I would have liked. For the purposes of this article, I would like to illustrate this by focusing on just one of the poems I was asked to translate. I have chosen the one below for analysis both because of its relative brevity but also because of its ambiguity of meaning. Next to the Slovak poem I provide a literal word-for-word translation:

[1] Robert Frost's famous statement that 'Poetry is what gets lost in translation' is often quoted in such discussions.
[2] Translated by the author.

Neviditeľná vlajka. Deti na úteku	**Invisible Ensign. Children on (the) Run**
Uzly na šnúrkach topánok sú rozviazané. Deti sú na úteku.	**Knots on laces of shoes are undone. Children are on (the) run.**
V náhlení ľudí si ich oči vyjavene svietia na útržky sveta,	**In rushing of people, their eyes startledly shine on shreds of (the) world**
ktorý sa kde-tu vynára a blysne v trhlinách	**which here and there emerge and blink in cracks**
medzi rýchlo plynúcimi dňami. Všetky sú	**between rapidly passing days. All are**
ako jeden, mesto si hučí svoje ďalej. Stroj pradie hladko,	**like one, town rumbles its onwards. Machine purrs smoothly**
nezastaví. Nik nehľadá nás. Sme tu	**doesn't stop. No-one is looking for us. We are**
stroskotaní.	**shipwrecked.**
Uzly na šnúrkach topánok sú rozviazané –	**knots on laces of shoes are undone –**
kamenné móla, skoncujeme s vami! Vlna	**stone jetties, we are finishing with you! Wave**
už stúpa. A vzduch špliecha. Opitý koráb	**is now rising. And air splashes. Drunk boat**
sa nám vlečie za pätami.	**is trailing behind our heels**

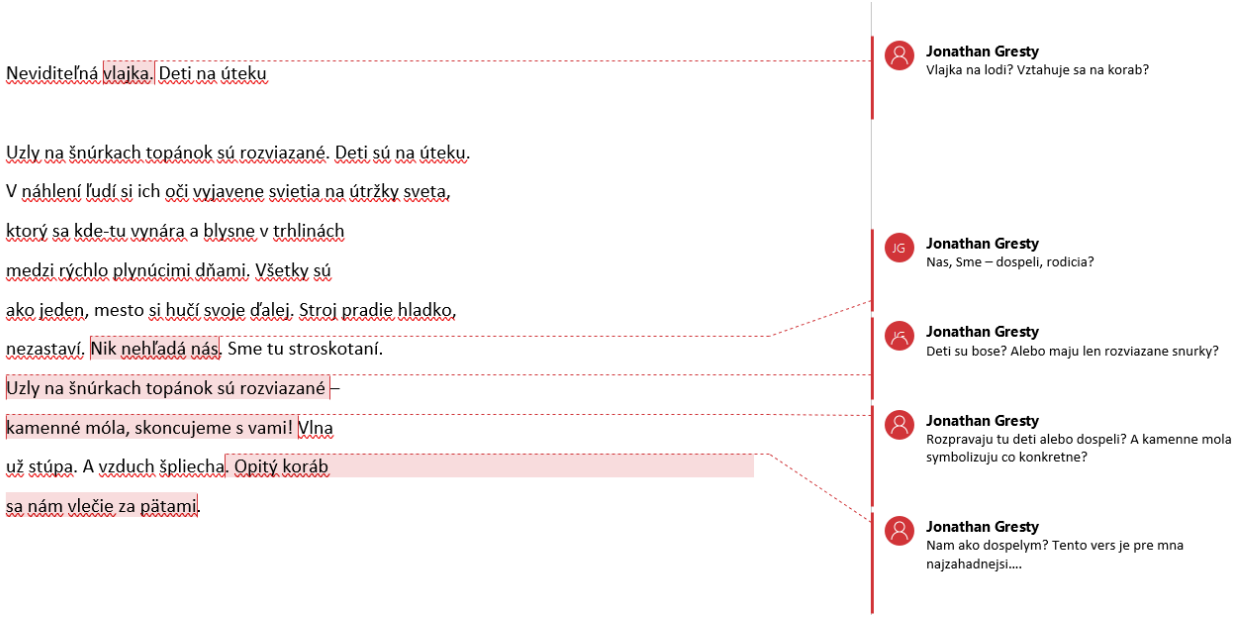
Short and in free verse, the poem at first sight seems relatively easy to work with. The language is expressive and contains certain unusual collocations such as *útržky sveta* and *vzduch špliecha* but the poem has no constricting regularity of form or complexity of diction. Its sentences are mostly declarative and the imagery is not unduly abstract and can be clearly visualized. And yet the process of translating this poem turned out to be much more complicated and time-consuming than I first thought. After multiple readings, I realized I needed to discuss the poem with some learned Slovak readers of poetry and ask them to clarify certain textual difficulties. I thus consulted several Slovak native speakers: family, colleagues from the Department of Slovak Studies at the university, as well as Slovak students of translation, to ask them how they interpreted the parts of the poem that I found so difficult. And what I soon noticed (and here I am coming to the crux of the article) is that many of the people I asked to read the poem interpreted it in different ways, their interpretations differing to such an extent that my English translation would radically differ depending on which of their interpretations I chose to accept as the most

adequate one. Following all their conflicting comments and observations, I was simply unable to decide to my own satisfaction exactly what the poet meant in certain lines and who or what their referents were. And without being sure of their meaning, I could have no confidence in my translations of these lines.

Probably the main advantage of translating a contemporary poet, unlike a dead one, is the opportunity it gives the translator to ask them for clarification of their work. Some people might consider such consultation superfluous or inappropriate: if the literary work does not speak for itself, should the author be given opportunity to explain its meaning through some extratextual means? Some literary theorists may claim that once a poem is published, it is no longer the author's exclusive property but an autonomous text which should be open to the interpretation of every reader: what the author *means* by their words hardly matters once the poem is 'out there' if such a meaning is lost on the vast majority of the poem's readers. And if the poem contains ambiguities which even highly educated Slovak readers are unable to decode (as in the one above), should the task of the translator be to produce an English version which is less ambiguous? I would say no.

And yet I would also say in response to these opinions that the need or yen for understanding is often so strong, especially for translators who, after all, are always obliged to try and understand what they are translating, that in the end I felt compelled to write to the poet to ask for explanation of a few details; for my own peace of mind, I simply *needed* to know. One thing I could not resolve in my head, for example, was the exact nature of the shifting voice in the poem. Who are *we* or *us* in the sixth line? Are they the same as the *us* in the last line? And who does the *you* in the eighth line refer to? Although the poet does not use speech marks, it is clear that the narrative voice shifts a few times in the poem between a third-person and a first-person one. But is it clear when this happens? One thing which troubled me during my discussions of the poem with Slovak colleagues was that several of them gave quite different answers to these questions.

So after speaking to these people and failing to find satisfactory answers to all my questions, I decided to send an email to the poet explaining what I was unsure about and asking him for help. Together with my message to him, I also sent the following attachment in which I clearly identified the things I did not fully understand. Beneath the attachment is the poet's reply to my queries which came a few days later:



– Áno, vlajka na lodi. Vzťahuje sa k úteku detí na more. Pod touto neviditeľnou vysnívanou vlajkou sú na úteku.

– "Nik nehľadá nás." – od tejto vety až do konca básne to všetko hovoria deti na úteku. Bude to zrejmé, keď to všetko dáme do úvodzoviek ako ich priamu reč. Skúste to tak urobiť.

– Deti majú rozviazané uzly na šnúrkach topánok aj všetky iné v sebe – ponáhľajú sa, sú v pohybe zbavovania sa vlastných topánok aj všetkých príťaží, ktorými ich zväzuje dnešný svet našej zauzlenej civilizácie. Sú na úteku pred takýmto svetom, smerujú k vlastnej nespútanosti, k slobode, ako malí divosi.

– Prvá časť básne, od začiatku až po vetu "Stroj pradie hladko, nezastaví." je všetko čosi ako autorský komentár, uvedenie do situácie. Ďalej až do konca už všetko rozprávajú deti.

– Kamenné móla" sú posledný výbežok nehybnej pevniny , ktorú deti opúšťajú – v svojom úteku na pohyblivý, neznámy otvorený živel, ktorým je more.

– " Opitý koráb" je narážka na názov známej básne Jeana Arthura Rimbauda, básnika – zázračného dieťaťa. Jeho šialený nespútaný opitý koráb tu zaostáva za divým energickým pohybom detí utekajúcich na neznáme otvorené more – aj slávny neovládnuteľný "opitý koráb" tu zaostáva za nimi, iba sa vlečie za ich pätami ako ich malá detská hračka.
(Ivan Štrpka, personal communication, December 2018)

Some of the above points made by the poet need commenting on here, I think. One is – or at least this is what I *perceived it to be* at the

time – his recommendation for me to use speech marks in the target text, an act of explicitation and removal of ambiguity which some readers may object to. With speech marks, it becomes much clearer that it is the children speaking here – and only the children. Another point of interest is his statement that the last five lines are all spoken by the children; this may be so (it is the poet's own work after all – he *should* know). However, it seemed much more natural to me (at the time) to attribute the second occurrence of the line *Uzly na šnúrkach topánok sú rozviazané* to the authorial voice – thus forcing me to break up the speech of the children.

The poet's comments were, of course, very useful and I saw his recommendation for me to add speech marks as a kind of sanctioning on his part of a more 'explicitating' translational approach. This licence he granted me, for instance, also lay behind my decision to translate *Opitý koráb* as *Rimbaud's drunken boat* (I had not picked up on this literary allusion and thought it would be in the interests of the reader to clarify it). However, in making the decision to make this allusion more explicit, I recognize the danger of such an approach. As Nida says:

> In some instances it is the translator's own sense of insecurity which makes it difficult for him to let the document speak for itself…At times the translator may be misled by his own paternalistic attitude into thinking that the potential receptors of his translation are so limited in understanding or experience that they must have his "built-in" explanations. (Nida 1964, 155)

Based on my own limited knowledge of European poetry and attendant 'insecurity', I admit to 'building in' the Rimbaud reference for the benefit of other readers like myself. However, while offering the text below as my own suggested translation, I would still grant full rights to the editor to make the final decision about whether to retain *Rimbaud's* or not, as well as whether to keep or change the speech marks I have added:

> *6 / Invisible Ensign: Children On the Run*
> *With laces undone, the children are on the run.*
> *Amidst people rushing by, their eyes shine on shreds of the world,*
> *Jumping and glinting out of the cracks*
> *between quickly passing days. They are all the same,*
> *the town goes on rumbling. The machine churns on,*
> *never ceasing. "No-one is looking for us. We are stranded."*
> *The laces on their shoes are undone –*
> *"Dry land, we are finished with you! The wave is*
> *Rising and the air is splashing. And Rimbaud's drunken boat*
> *is trailing in our wake.*

When speaking about poetry, Venuti argues that "only rarely can one reproduce both content and form in a translation, and hence in general the form is usually sacrificed for the sake of the content" (2004, 154). I would argue that this is the case with my translation of this poem: although I attempted to preserve the lexical meaning of the original while trying to render it in a way which avoids over-literality (*kamenné móla* as *dry land* and not *stone jetties* or *piers*, for instance), I cannot judge whether it has the same resonance or musicality of the original. Indeed, I can freely admit that the form of the original had very little bearing at all on how I translated it. Although I did aim to come up with a target text which was poetic in its lexis and rhythms, how much they correspond to those of the source text is impossible for me to judge and very much up to the individual reader to decide.

To what extent can I, as a non-Slovak, appreciate the poetics of the source text? I sense the originality of the *útržky sveta* which *sa kde-tu vynára a blysne v trhlinách medzi rýchlo plynúcimi dňami*. These are arresting images which suggest a highly poetic imagination. The personification of the town and the constantly working machine evoke a troublingly inhuman and dystopian world which the children are keen to escape from. This 'authorial commentary' (as the poet himself describes it) then leads into the children's own first-person plural voice with its shorter sentences and more affective tone: *Nik nehľadá nás. Sme tu stroskotaní…. kamenné móla, skoncujeme s vami!* This voice echoes the dystopian nature of the earlier lines and provides the emotional coda of the poem as the children bid farewell to their previous lives and sail out to sea in their hunger to regain some freedom of spirit.

Although I can appreciate the poem's content, however, can I really apprehend its formal qualities, its sounds, rhythms and other more elusive aesthetic features? And if I do discern certain sounds and rhythms which I think characterize the source text and enhance its poetic effect, should I try to replicate them somehow in the English translation? It is when dealing with questions such as these that such a translation task becomes particularly problematic. The conscientious translator may rack their brains in the attempt to create some kind of aesthetic equivalency. But as Newmark says with particular reference to imaginative literature:

> The metalingual sound-effects which the translator is trying to reproduce are in fact unlikely to affect the TL reader, with his different sound-system…In any event, the reaction is individual rather than cultural or universal (Newmark 1988, 50).

With this awareness of the essential subjectivity of response (as well as my own artistic limitations) in mind, I did not therefore attempt to create any special 'sound-effects' in my translation but instead aimed for

something similar to what I perceived as a simplicity of form in the original. In my choice of lexis, I opted for words of mostly Anglo-Saxon rather than Latin etymology, including very few root words of more than one syllable. Regarding the unusual marked collocations of the source text which I mention above, rather than trying to 'normalize' them by creating something that would not sound strange to Anglophonic ears, I simply reproduced them in English as accurately as I could.

After I had finished my translation of the set of poems, I sent them to the commissioner but heard nothing back from him for many weeks. When his reply finally did come, he was sorry to inform me that, in his opinion, my translations were not publishable, although he did suggest they could become so with further work and cooperation between me and the poet. By this point, however, I had decided I was not the best person for such work and withdrew from the project. But as part of the process of writing this article, I decided I should, after the space of nearly two years, contact the commissioner again both to find out about his success in getting Štrpka published in English and also to ask for his approval of the above paragraphs. A few days ago, I received a long reply from him written in Slovak in which he told me the project is still ongoing, with John Minahane, the experienced Irish translator of Slovak poetry now working on the English translation. Peter Milčák also wrote the following about the above:

> Regarding the text of your study, I have no objections to you mentioning me as the commissioner of the translation nor to the fact that I described your translation as unpublishable…Your study made interesting reading and in some ways indicated why you made errors and, to my mind, unacceptable shifts in your translation. Some of these may have arisen because you didn't fully understand certain parts of the Slovak text while assuming they were not problematic. I know this can happen from my own experience of translating: I often consult parts I am not sure about with native speakers but mistranslate parts that I think I fully understand. And because I think they are easy to translate, I don't ask about them and then translate them inaccurately.
>
> A specific example in Štrpka's poem comes in the very first line: Uzly na šnúrkach topánok sú rozviazané. There is a difference between whether the laces have come undone (rozviazané) or are merely untied (nezaviazané). You translate that the laces are undone. "Rozviazané" laces, though, are laces which were previously done up but have come undone or been undone by someone (someone who felt tied or knotted up, perhaps). This is a key difference. The state of the laces

coming undone is an important motif on which the whole poem is built.

You did not capture the point which signals that the authorial voice changes to that of the children: Nik nehľadá nás. In this line there is a subtle but very important syntactic shift. The natural syntax would be as follows: "Nik nás nehľadá". But by shifting the "nás" (us) pronoun to the end of the line, the author emphasizes and makes clear that it is now the children themselves speaking.

In my opinion, you also misunderstood Štrpka's instruction: `"Nik nehľadá nás." – from this line to the end of the poem, it is the children speaking. It will be obvious if we put it all in quotation marks as their direct speech. Try to do this (Skúste to tak urobiť).`

Štrpka is not telling you here that you should put this part of the translation into quotation marks but is recommending you to read it as if it were. This would then help you as a translator but the quotation marks are not intended to be part of the final translation.

You, however, added them and then did not respect the instruction of the author that the whole text up to the end is intended as a statement by the children. By not putting the line: 'The laces of the children are undone' in quotation marks, you undercut the tension created by the same formulation occurring both in the 'speech' of the author and the children.

Another very clear problem is translation of the collocation "kamenné móla'' (stone jetties) as "dry land". There is no reason to make such a fundamental change and that way, impoverish the text. 'Dry land' is something general, whereas a *kamenné mólo* is something tangible and easy to imagine, carrying specific connotations and the very last extension of dry land – so is in no case merely 'dry land'.

Changing "opitý koráb" into 'Rimbaud's drunken boat' is also unacceptable. This is a literary reference which poetry readers do not need to have explained to them. If you as a translator have the feeling that they need help here, however, I would do this by adding an explanatory note at the end of the book (where there could be other similar notes) but definitely not by adding anything to the original text.

(Peter Milčák, personal communication, December 2020[3])

I was very pleased to receive the detailed reply from the commissioner of the translation from which these paragraphs are taken as I feel it sheds light on many of the problems I had translating this poem as well as of translating poems in general, especially where the process

[3] Translated by the author with permission from the correspondent.

involves people from two language cultures with different opinions about what works best in the target language. My misreading of Štrpka's instruction regarding inclusion of speech marks clearly shows, for instance, how easy it is to misunderstand things when translating and Milčák's point about how translators are least likely to ask questions about the parts of texts they *think* they understand is a very interesting one deserving of further analysis. Despite these stimulating ideas and the creative nature of such work, however, I feel no regret for giving up my efforts to translate Štrpka's poems. Based on the feedback above, I feel the task of doing it to the satisfaction of all the parties involved is even harder than I felt it to be two years ago.

If we take the issue of how best to render "kamenné móla" in English, for instance, I would say that in terms of literal meaning 'stone jetties' is of course a much more accurate translation than 'dry land'. However, despite what Milčák writes above to the contrary, I would argue that if the abiding image at the end of the poem is to be that of the children abandoning their home, their parents, their own country of birth in order to take charge of their fate and turn their back on the 'tired' values they have been raised on, then them saying: 'Dry land, we are finished with you' communicates this much better than the peculiar sounding and less expressive 'Stone jetties, we are finished with you'. By following the wishes of the commissioner and adopting the solution he prescribes, I would feel forced into creating an English poem with, in this case at least, what I see as being unnatural and overly literal phrasing. In so doing, I would be forced to give up some of my autonomy as a translator and sign off on something I was not very happy about.

This is just one example but one which fully reflects the difficulty of balancing the rival claims of staying faithful to the source text and creating a target text which is both meaningful and poetic. One could quote Benjamin here when he says that words have "emotional connotations" and that "a literal rendering of the syntax completely demolishes the theory of reproduction of meaning and is a direct threat to comprehensibility" (1968, 77) – to my mind 'Stone jetties, we are finished with you' does not adequately convey the sense of the children sailing out to sea and is far less comprehensible than the solution I chose. So although I would not like to be unduly prescriptive nor contend that Milčák is less qualified than I am to decide on what the 'best' English translation of this poem might be, I cannot see how, based on the above, such literary collaboration involving poet, translator and editor can really work without similar disagreements arising rather too often for comfort. I would argue therefore that from my own point of view, as a person who is by no means a specialist in poetry, the process of making Štrpka publishable in English is too challenging. With a person like John Minahane doing the translation, however, a person with both much more knowledge of poetry in general and greater experience of

translating Slovak poetry into English than I have, the prospects of translator, commissioner and poet reaching some kind of consensus are undoubtedly brighter.

This study is an outcome of the VEGA research project No. 1/0407/17 Slovak Poetry in English Translations.

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