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(NOT) NEW MIŁOSZ IN SLOVENIAN

Abstract: This paper discusses a selection of Czesław Miłosz’s poetry published in Slovenia in 2008. First, it briefly describes the Polish Nobel Prize winner’s works present in Slovenia. Next, it focuses on their most important translations. This evaluation highlights the multigenerational aspect of the selection: it compiles most of the translations of Miłosz’s poetry (made by seven translators) which have appeared over the last three decades. The various techniques and approaches adopted by the translators define the poet’s current image in Slovenia. Last but not least, the article presents Jana Unuk’s essay, which closes the selection. Unuk perceives Miłosz primarily as a poet of paradoxes and private experience who constantly returns to the questions of God, religion and eroticism. The popularity of the individual and the existential dimensions of Miłosz’s works is a result of the Polish poet’s peculiar sensibility, which largely derives from his generation.

Key words: Czesław Miłosz, Polish-Slovenian translation, selection of poems

As in many other countries, interest in Miłosz’s work only began in Slovenia in any discernible way after he received the Nobel Prize. And even if we add that single poems appeared in a number of publications,¹ and that his name was cited by scholars of literary criticism and history, Miłosz’s presence in Slovenia in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s can only be described as minimal (Štefan 1960; Šalamun-Biedrzycka 2004).² Yet as early as 1981, there appeared a selection of his works translated by Janko Moder,

¹ The first translation appeared in Slovenia in 1959: *Naša Sodobnost* published a translation of Miłosz’s poem *In Warsaw* by Lojze Krakar. Along with another poem, *Café*, it found its way to Krakar’s *Poljska lirika dvajsetega stoletja* (Polish Lyrical Poetry of the 20th century) anthology.

² The text by Šalamun-Biedrzycka is an extensive review of Krakar’s anthology. In her comments on poems by Miłosz, the author is critical of the selection of texts and points out errors in their chronology; she also notices imperfections in the translations.

including *The Issa Valley*, *The Land of Ulro*, and a collection of a dozen or so poems, selected and translated by Katarina Šalamun-Biedrzycka. If we add press publications and *The Seizure of Power*, also translated by the latter (although a complete version was not published until this century), and if we recall that Miłosz was not a writer then whose output could be described as accessible, the Slovenian Polish Studies community must be seen as a group of well-informed specialists (Unuk 2008a). This impression is even more warranted by the general history of Polish-Slovenian literary contacts and the bibliography of available translations of Polish literature, which is quite extensive when one recalls that Slovenia is not a huge book market (Jež 1996, 2006; Tokarz 2009; Kopczyk 2006).

Much was written about Miłosz in Slovenia in the 1980s and the 1990s; translations of studies by Polish scholars also appeared. Miłosz's poems were then mostly translated by the literary scholar, translator and poet Tone Pretnar. In 1987, he was the prime mover behind the publication of a selection of Miłosz's poetry, *The Dusk and the Dawn*, containing translations by Rozka Štefan, Lojze Krakar and Wanda Stępniaówna, apart from his own, which nonetheless accounted for the majority of the volume (Miłosz 1987a). Despite its modest size, this was the most extensive selection of Miłosz texts in Slovenia at the time, and it must be seen as a critical moment: it finally gave Slovenian readers a broad perspective of the Polish Nobel Prize winner, and the chance to place his work in their own cultural context. This was greatly enhanced by the translator's selection, with its clear preference for the poet's cultural and historical experiences. As Bożena Tokarz stated, "Pretnar's Miłosz is, above all, a poet at the crossroads of the cultures of *Byzantium and Rome*, an émigré, an observer of the world, a philosopher and a moralist strongly tied to Polish literary tradition and history" (Tokarz 1998: 47). Tokarz concludes that Pretnar saw in Miłosz

a philosopher poet who rationalises his own biographical and historical experience to define his own place and identity, whether intellectual, artistic, or national. He saw him as a poet who spoke not only to himself, but to Slovenians in general; their fate, although not identical to the Poles', was equally forged by the maelstrom of *history's iniquities*. The defence of their own identity has been, to a greater or lesser degree, an existential stance in both cultures. Identity is a value, irrespective of a nation's size. The artist-poet has a very special part to play here (Tokarz 1998: 50).

The translator achieved this result in part through a brief presentation of the early catastrophist poems, and through the inclusion of a lecture

from *The Witness of Poetry*. While this had an obvious impact on how representative the selection was, the translator attempted to compensate by discussing some of the more important elements of Miłosz's *oeuvre* in an essay accompanying the collection. The favourable response to the book and, above all, the reception of Miłosz's poetry in Slovenia, as evidenced by the work of a sizeable group of artists, seem to confirm this strategy. We should also give due credit to the quality of the translations themselves, which – we can now maintain with full assurance – have become part of the Slovenian tradition.

A collection of essays prepared single-handedly by Jana Unuk, entitled *Life on Islands*, appeared ten years later. Subsequent years brought three more books by Miłosz: *Road-side Dog* (in Unuk's translation), the aforementioned *Seizure of Power*, and *The Witness of Poetry*, published after the poet's death. If we add to this a series of press articles³ and texts included in various anthologies (poems, essays, interviews), it becomes clear that Czesław Miłosz is now one of the "best-translated" Polish writers in Slovenia, and overall probably Poland's best-recognised author as well. This position is indicated not only by the number of translations, but also by an important collection of scholarly studies. It seems that the Slovenian image of the poet is free of the "politicised fallacy" which has distorted the true dimension of his work in many other literatures (including those of some other post-Yugoslav countries). On the other hand, it is easy to see that this image is somewhat impoverished by the unavailability of complete editions of such works as *Native Realm* and *The Captive Mind*.

The volume *Zvonovi pozimi* (Bells in Winter), published in 2008 in the respected "Beletrina" series by the Students' Publishing House (Miłosz 2008), is impressive even by mere virtue of its size. The sheer number of poems (approximately 280 on almost 600 pages) makes this selection much more representative than the Pretnar book. It contains works from all of the poet's volumes of poetry, from *A Poem on Frozen Time* all the way to works included in *Last Poems*. The editors must have considered their "import," usually measured in terms of the presence of a given text in literature history books and in other anthologies. And while it would be an exaggeration to speak, based on the content of this collection, of a "rediscovered" Miłosz or of a specifically "Slovenian" Miłosz, one cannot but observe a clear shift of interest towards the later poems (only ten of the pre-war poems have been included). As a result, the anthology reiterates the more

³ Of these, *Nova Revija*'s 1997 column on Miłosz was the most extensive.

recent image of Miłosz (much like his Polish reception) as primarily a poet of existential reflection focusing on the meaning of time and transience. The same theme is followed by Jana Unuk in her essay which also appears in the volume. It must be said that, despite the size of the selection and the undeniable knowledge of the translators on what “simply must” be translated of Miłosz’s entire *oeuvre*, some significant omissions are visible. Obviously, these are significant from the point of view of Polish reading habits and our familiarity with Polish texts on Miłosz’s poetry. These “omissions” would include such poems as “Dawns,” “Song on Porcelain,” “A Moral Treatise,” “Veni Creator,” “Incantation,” “A Task” and “Lauda.” The list could go on; and while this is not necessarily a criticism of the creators of the volume, it shows that the final shape of the anthology is a sum of individual choices, and that individual taste, sensibility to particular tones, to certain shades of Miłosz’s abundant *oeuvre*, must have served as the main criterion here. There is also a certain departure from the formal criterion: some poetic prose from *Road-side Dog*, a volume that probably does not qualify as a collection of poems; another poem, “Esse,” seems to function differently, as a constant in most selections of Miłosz’s poetry, including those (such as *A Personal Anthology*) that the writer compiled himself. Since the poem “Not Mine” from the same collection also features in the book, it would have been a good idea to preserve the original italic script that emphasises the difference between this text and most of the others.

Zvonovi pozimi not only brings forth new translations, it also collects most of the earlier ones (in more or less equal proportion), and thus stands as something of a summation of the presence of Miłosz’s poetry in Slovenia to date. Various generations meet, from active translators to those now retired: from the very first (Rozka Štefan and Lojze Krakar) through the somewhat younger (Šalamun-Biedrzycka and Pretnar), all the way to the middle and the younger generation (Jana Unuk, Primož Čučnik and Agnieszka Będkowska-Kopczyk). Consequently, the Slovenian reader is presented with a collaborative effort, a blend of various translatorial strategies, preferences and temperaments. And while it is difficult to point out any major dissonances – despite the many transformations of his own work over time, Miłosz remains a coherent poet with a distinct diction – one is unable to overlook certain discrepancies, standing as evidence of various sensitivities and ways of defining that particular feature that Stanisław Barańczak has defined as a work’s “semantic dominant” (Barańczak 1994). For instance, the translations by Štefan and, even more, those by Pretnar are

characteristic in their careful preservation of versification and tone. This is particularly important in the early poems; sadly, the collection contains very little of the poet's pre-war output. In understanding this feature of Miłosz's early work – once described by Stanisław Balbus as a “struggle with the poem” – translators usually preserve the original rhymed form and attempt to reconstruct the characteristic broken rhythm, often with certain semantic modifications. This allowed them to achieve an impression of the works' “familiarity,” of the poems having taken roots in the melodic of the target language, both goals rarely achieved in translation. Particularly successful in this case is Pretnar's rendering of the poem with the incipit *You strong night* and of the dazzling “Waltz.” A comparison of the translation of “Song for One String” with its original is a model of the translator's attempt at concision and formal detail. First, a fragment of the Polish version:

Dar natchnienia niepowrotny, W jakiś wieczór ciepły, słotny, Zrozumiałem, że jestem samotny.	Inspiration's gift unreturnable, On an evening warm and rainy, I realised I was lonely
Przechodziłem pod ulic lipami, Deszcz mył oczy ciężkimi kroplami, Dobry deszczu, nie umiałbym łzami.	I passed under the streets' lindens, The rain washed my eyes with heavy drops, Good rain, I could not do that with tears.
Więc to jest ta wielka dojrzałość, Trochę mądrość, trochę żalność, Życia własnego niedbałość? (...)	So this is true maturity, Part wisdom, part sorrow, Part carelessness in one's life?

(Miłosz 1987b: 74)

And now the same fragment in Pretnar's rendering:

Da nam navdih za hip je dan,
spoznal sem jasen, pozen dan,
spoznal sem tudi, da sem sam.

Ko blodil sem med lipami,
mi dež umival je oèi,
ker sam ne znam jih s solzami.

In to naj zrelost bi bila,
zdaj pametna, zdaj žalostna –
nemoè življenja lastnega?
(...)

(Miłosz 2008: 40)

It is true of this and any other translation by Pretnar that one can discuss the success of individual decisions or even the limits of translatorial freedom; yet it is impossible to ignore their quality, which is testament to his perfect ear for traditional versification. In this respect, the translations by Rozka Štefan – whose achievements include a good part of Romantic Polish literature – are as good as those by Pretnar. A particular sensitivity to the formal features of the poems is also visible in the work of the Čučnik – Będkowska-Kopczyk duo. This team, however, has mostly dealt with newer poems, which give them less of an occasion to display their talents. It is probably not insignificant that Čučnik joins Krakar and Pretnar in being a poet-translator. His own work, as he often maintains, largely derives from a careful reading of Miłosz. His first volume, *Two Winters*, shows a trace of intertextuality in the title itself, and one worth following, if only for the significance accorded to Čučnik's *oeuvre* after the initial publication of his translation, i.e. after 1999. One could say that Čučnik seems to be following in Miłosz's footsteps, who treated his own translations of other poets as "helpful in establishing [his] own idiom" (Miłosz 2007: 313).

On the other hand, Katarina Šalamun-Biedrzycka seems to attach more importance to a fidelity to the literal meaning of the original, often at the expense of the poems' specific melodies. It is quite easy to get the impression that the poem "In My Country," deprived of its peculiar singsong quality, which is largely achieved by maintaining a set number of syllables and by using rhymes and their deliberate irregularity, "means" something different from its Polish model, not least due to the fact that these modifications weaken its connotations with the Romantic tradition. Yet this strategy permitted the translator to enhance the intellectual and discursive character of the poems, so important for Miłosz himself, and probably attractive to the modern reader, and so to preserve the concision typical of the poet's style. In fact, the translator complained that this was lacking in the early renditions by Krakar (Šalamun-Biedrzycka 2004: 40). This preference must have been shared by the authors of the anthology, who tended to choose texts by Šalamun-Biedrzycka whenever their collection contained "double" translations. Most of the translations (around 40%) are by Unuk, and it is she who has the main impact on the shape of the anthology; this is, in part, visible in the predominance of the later poems. The translations are meticulous and usually quite successful at rendering the rhetorical, archaized and syntactical features of the originals. At the same time, they are a good illustration of the difficulties inherent in repeating the games Miłosz

plays with various language registers; thus one should not hold it against the translator that, at times, she applies a more “neutral” style to maintain the work’s discursive dimension. Preserving the integrity of poetic cycles – at least where the latest translations were concerned – is another fine decision, as it shows off their characteristic dramaturgy. More debatable are the changes to the original versification, not always, perhaps, required by linguistic structures, which show that the import of enjambment in these poems might have been underestimated.

Jana Unuk has also taken the trouble to explain the context that might cause problems to the foreign reader. She achieves this through numerous and extensive footnotes, in which she makes good use of the available critical studies (chiefly Aleksander Fiut’s commentaries to Miłosz’s collected works in Polish and the poet’s own observations scattered in various texts), adding her own information, which is important for the reader less well versed in Polish culture. The translator’s ambitions have clearly exceeded the simple task of providing the reader with a key to the meanings that are obvious to the author and the reader; the sheer size of some of the comments makes them almost independent texts, interesting in their own right, rather than mere aid in understanding the poems. At times, the quotations offered by Unuk to her readers suggest an interpretative strategy, as well as allowing a better grasp of the work’s context.

Equally noteworthy is Unuk’s essay *Ostrina in prizornost*, which closes the selection. She presents the major elements of Miłosz’s work – not merely his poetry – by placing it in explanatory contexts of world poetry, mainly that of the latter half of the 20th century, and that of Polish poetry of the time. She is quite successful in combining some “textbook” information on the poet (rooted in a discreet presentation of the current state of scholarship) with an encapsulation of her own reading of Miłosz’s *oeuvre*. Applying a visibly Slovenian point of view, she proposes that literature we know so well be considered, above all, as a record of the author’s existential and philosophical dilemmas. The result is a fairly subtle yet distinct shift of stress from the readings Pretnar proposed in his selection. Miłosz as read by Unuk is chiefly a poet of the private, the intimate experience; he is an author of poems that immortalise moments of epiphany, that continue to revisit themes of transcendence, God and religion; he is an author who analyses the role of the erotic, its cognitive aspect in our experience of reality and our presence among other people. To a great extent, such a reading is a clear result of the passage of time: for obvious reasons, the authors of

earlier selections had no way of knowing the last stages of Miłosz's work, when themes that might be described as existential acquired a greater significance, a new dimension, new content. The question of a generation's perspective must also have played its part, since the author of the closing essay represents a different age group of poetry readers, one with its own predilections and perhaps less attuned to history's role in individual perceptions of reality. What makes this poetry special – and what becomes the main source of its “signification” – is for Jana Unuk its variation, its constant transformation over many decades. Even more clearly, Unuk highlights the presence of paradox, which in some way reflects that of the poet's own view of the world. She partly perceives this aspect in his way of depicting nature as cruel yet enchanting, history as destructive yet salutary (whenever it allies itself with memory, which has the power to rescue man from the universe of natural determinants and to allow him empathic coexistence with the dead, to become accustomed to the frailty and brevity of human life). Equally paradoxical is the Nobel Prize winner's relationship with Romanticism, as he distances himself from the role it imposes on poetry and poets, while he continues to help himself to its heritage and to kow-tow to its most important Polish representative, Adam Mickiewicz.

Jana Unuk seems to be mainly interested in the “dark” and mystical dimensions of Miłosz's poetry: the poet in constant struggle with a sense of hopelessness, with a universe which he tries to plunder for its secrets, to break through to “the second space,” to learn the truth, even if it should prove terrifying. And to discover this through literature, obviously, as the only thing that can shoulder the weight of this ambitious task. For, according to the author of the anthology:

Literature, and especially poetry, is for Miłosz a careful observation of reality, a quest for “the eternal moment,” the epiphanic vision, when the curtain that conceals the essence of things might temporarily lift...

It is a quasi-mystical expectation, from youth till old age, that, one day we shall learn all the answers, that the shroud covering reality will disappear, leaving nothing “but sharpness and clarity” (Unuk 2008: 549).

This new selection of Czesław Miłosz's poetry will undoubtedly be an important step in establishing a reliable image of the poet in Slovenia. The size of this publication and, above all, the high quality of the translations, give us hope that this anthology will contribute to an even clearer presence of the author of *Three Winters* in the consciousness of readers in Slovenia. Time will tell.

trans. Jan Rybicki

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