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THE SLOVENE NOVEL IN ENGLISH: BRIDGING THE CULTURAL GAP

Eden izmed problemov, s katerimi se sooča vsak prevod slovenskega romana v angleščino, je njegova kulturna specifičnost. Razlike med slovenskim kulturnim prostorom na eni strani, z zelo značilnim slovanskim jezikom, katolicizmom in avstro-nemško dediščino, in prevladujočim anglo-saksonskim kulturnim modelom na drugi strani se zdijo morda nepremostljive. Pa vendar kulturni svet romanov v angleščini vsebuje ničkoliko primerov, ki kažejo, da še tako 'tuje' besedilo lahko uspe v tem svetu. Pričujoči članek se osredotoča na možne težave pri prevajanju dela, kot je na primer roman Draga Jančarja *Katarina, pav in jezuit.* Avtor članka ponudi nekaj koristnih nasvetov za prevajanje in se pri tem opira na angleški roman *The Map of Love* egiptovske pisateljice Ahdaf Soueif.

slovenski roman, prevajanje v angleščino, izhodiščno besedilo, ciljno besedilo, kulturna razdalja, ustreznost prevoda, potujevanje, posvajanje, socio-kulturna norma, retorična konvencija, D. Jančar, *Katarina, pav in jezuit*, A. Soueif, *The Map of Love*

Among the many problems facing any attempt by a Slovene novel to reach a wider international audience through translation into English is cultural specificity. The differences between the Slovene cultural space – with its distinctive Slavonic language, Catholicism, and Austro-German heritage – and the dominant Anglo-Saxon cultural model, may seem almost unbridgeable. However, the cultural world of the English-language novel contains plentiful precedents to suggest that even the most 'foreign' texts can thrive within it. This paper focuses on the potential difficulties involved in the translation of a work such as Drago Jančar's *Katarina, pav in jezuit,* finding some useful indicators in the novel *The Map of Love,* written in English by the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif.

Slovene novel, translation into English, original text, target text, cultural gap, appropriateness of translation, foreignizing, domesticating, socio-cultural norm, rhetorical convention, D. Jančar, *Katarina, pav in jezuit*, A. Soueif, *The Map of Love*

This discussion of the feasibility of bringing Slovene fiction writing to an English readership was prompted by the reading of two very disparate novels: Drago Jančar's *Katarina, pav in jezuit* (Slovenska matica 2000), which won the Kresnik award for best Slovene novel in 2001; and the 1999 Booker Prize nomination *The Map of Love* (Bloomsbury 1999), written in English by the Egyptian-born Ahdaf Soueif. Although the two works differ in many ways, they do

have something in common: they are both set in parts of the world and in periods that the average contemporary English reader knows little about, and they are both embedded in cultures that seem distant and even exotic from the Protestant Anglo-Saxon viewpoint – Slavonic, Austro-Germanic and Catholic on the one hand, Arab and Islamic on the other.

Jančar's epic novel is set in the mid-18th century, during the reign of Empress Maria Theresa. The events we witness are woven around a journey – the last officially sanctioned pilgrimage from the Slovene provinces to the cathedral at Kelmorajn (Cologne), while in the background a war rages between Austria and Prussia. And at the heart of the novel is a classic eternal triangle: between the heroine Katarina Poljanec, the 30-year old unmarried daughter of a castle steward, with whose erotic imaginings the story begins; the peacock, a strutting officer in the Austrian artillery; and the Jesuit, or rather ex-Jesuit, who has left the order after his traumatic experiences in South America. So, crudely speaking, we have all the ingredients for a 'good read': love and sex, religion, war, a journey of adventure, as well as a beautiful heroine and the two men she is torn between – one dashing, attractive, but not particularly bright or given to introspection, the other more sensitive and capable of love, but 'on the rebound', one might say, from God and tormented by his past. On another level, of course, we have more than simply the story of three individuals, but rather a panoramic portrait of a past age, an age of turmoil when the social and religious certainties of the past were being undermined by the new ideas sweeping across Europe, affecting the lives of all. So while the dilemmas faced by the main protagonists are not all that different from those that might be faced today, the context in which they are made is very different and the consequences far more extreme. The book is also memorable not only because of what it tells us, but also for the manner of its telling and the teeming richness of its imagery – the words seem to cascade off the page, vividly conjuring up a different world. We are, then, dealing with a literary work that can be read and enjoyed on different levels: as a powerful love story, a gripping narrative, or as a beautifully constructed, finely written portrait of a past age, that offers insights into what is constant in the human spirit and an understanding of how what we are and become is shaped by the world around us.

Although in popular terms, Jančar would probably be classed as a 'difficult' writer, this need not present a problem with regard to reaching a wider public. Readers are surely willing to make a great "effort after meaning" in Bartlett's (1932) sense, if they feel they are going to get sufficient return for their effort or, to draw on relevance theory, if the communication seems relevant, i.e. "the contextual effects achieved when it is optimally processed are large" and "the effort required to process it is optimally small" (Sperber, Wilson 1986: 153).

So where, then, might the difficulty lie? The gap between the Slovene and Anglo-Saxon cultural spheres should not present an uncrossable divide, nor should distance in time, nor possible lack of historical, religious, even geographical knowledge. To begin with, the cultural world of the English-language novel is not

as monolithic as it may seem from the outside and there are plentiful precedents to suggest that even the most 'foreign' or 'exotic' texts can thrive within it. The increasing multi-culturality and openness of the English-speaking world is illustrated among other things by the enormous success in Britain of authors from the Indian sub-continent, such as Vikram Seth, Rohintan Mistry, Arundhati Roy, Salman Rushdie and Michael Ondaatje. Although the language they use may not be all that different – in fact, the English of Scottish writers like James Kelman and Irving Walsh, or an Irish writer like Roddy Doyle, may actually be more difficult for many English readers – in terms of cultural distance there is quite a journey to make to the India (or Pakistan or Sri Lanka) of the mid-twentieth century, when many of these writers' works are set. And in the case of the novel by Ahdaf Soueif mentioned earlier, the journey is an even greater one. Like Jančar's book, this could be described as (quoting from the back cover) "A vivid and passionate love story"; but it is also a portrait of early 20th-century Egypt and an exploration of the struggle between Arab nationalism and Western (in this case British) imperialism. What is interesting from an intercultural perspective is the author's frequent use of Arabic expressions (in addition to characters' names and place names) which remain opaque to the English reader unless he or she is willing to make the effort to read the explanations in the glossary at the end of the book. The following short exchange is illustrative of this:

> 'Sallim silahak ya 'Urabi,' Dr Ramzi says in a low singsong.
> 'Lessa, ya Bey, lessa,' Mahgoub demurs, moving his wazir to protect the king.
> 'Mafish lessa,' Dr Ramzi says triumphantly, moving his horse. 'Kesh malik!'
> 'Lek yom ya Doctor!' Mahgoub says cheerfully, collecting up the pieces, pouring them into their wooden box. (*Map of Love*, 220)

Whatever one's view of this hybrid use of language, it did not stop the book from being described as "a page-turning holiday read" (cover review) and becoming a bestseller.

Now perhaps it might be argued that Islam and the Arab world are currently very topical, which cannot be said of Catholic 18th century Central Europe. However, the success some years ago of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose,* passages of which are strongly reminiscent of *Katarina, pav in jezuit* (or vice-versa), show that this need not be a problem. So what would stop a work like Jančar's succeeding in English? To answer that, we need to say something about translation.

Translation theories concerned with equivalence or equivalent effect are naturally source-text oriented, but a number of scholars such as Gideon Toury (1980, 1995), James Holmes (1988) and representatives of what has been dubbed the Manipulation School[1] (see Snell-Hornby 1988: 22ff), such as Hermans and Lefevere, have strongly criticized approaches that prescribe aspects of translation in

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[1] All translation involves some manipulation of the source text for a certain purpose and translation can also be said to manipulate the target culture (with 'smaller' cultures tending to be affected more – compare,

advance on the basis of the source text and its environment. They suggest that the discipline of Translation Studies should instead take as its starting point existing translations and the way in which they function against the background of the target language and culture.[2] This approach, which is largely concerned with literary translation, depends on a notion of a society's culture as a "polysystem" (cf. Even-Zohar 1979), i.e. a dynamic system of competing systems, some semiotic, some linguistic, constantly in flux. Within this polysystem, a translation of a literary work functions as a literary text in its own right, not merely as a reproduction of another text.[3] Some translations may exert great influence on a culture (such as the Authorised or King James version of the Bible published in 1611), becoming primary texts that introduce new norms, rather than secondary texts that merely uphold the status quo. These norms in turn determine how things get translated and also what gets translated. Toury (1995: 56–57) suggests that we need to analyse translations from two differing perspectives: in terms of "adequacy" in relation to the source text, and "acceptability" to the target audience and as a text among other texts in the target system. When translating, one is not concerned with facts about the reception of the end product (which is not yet there), but rather with assumptions about the prospects of a text which is acceptable to the target end. Translators operate with an awareness of what is acceptable in the target culture, whether the end result will be admitted into the target system or not. So, how do we produce a translation that is both adequate and acceptable?

Over the past few centuries, the predominant trend in the Anglo-Saxon world has been towards fluency and naturalness and to what Lawrence Venuti (1995: 34) refers to as the "invisibility" of the translator and the "illusion of transparency in which linguistic and cultural differences are domesticated" – or made familiar and unchallenging. While acknowledging that there is "a fundamental ethnocentric impulse in all translation"[4] (ibid. 47), Venuti calls for the translator to make an ethical choice for "foreignizing" rather than "domesticating" translation, down-grading the importance of readability and preserving or restoring the foreignness of

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for instance, the use of subtitles in Slovenia with that of dubbing in Germany). Among those with a particular interest in the manipulative power of the translator are those concerned with ideological implications, such as feminist theorists.

[2] The more extreme deconstructionist position, which we shall only note in passing here, is that the source text could actually be characterized as secondary, dependent on translation to spread beyond linguistic borders and gain a broader readership, offering further life to both the text and the author.

[3] However, translation is in itself not a genre: in commonsense terms, a translated novel has to 'compete' not with other translations but with other novels. No-one outside the Slovene cultural sphere or without Slovene connections of some kind – in other words, the majority of the potential readership in the English-speaking world – will read a novel because it is a *Slovene* novel, but because they have heard or hope that it is a *good* novel.

[4] Whether the decisions involved are conscious or unwitting does not really matter here – the translation imposes itself as the original (we tend to assume that a translation is a definitive version) with the result that the original is assimilated into the dominant culture. When it comes to a powerful target language such as English, which enjoys cultural hegemony and prestige compared to a less widely used language such as Slovene, then there can be no doubt that there are risks in the interventions made by translators.

the foreign text, so that the translator and the translation process are 'visible' again. The danger in this is that it may become an elitist procedure, resulting in what Walter Benjamin (1923) called an "interlinear" that operates in the linguistic space between languages, appealing only to the most academic readership – or at least to those familiar with both source language and target language cultures.

In any particular cultural community at any time there will be a prevailing concept of what a good or even an optimum translation is or should be – in other words, there will be reader expectations concerning the relationship between the target text and the original. These expectations need not necessarily be met, but they should be taken into account and it should be made clear by the translator where they are consciously being subverted. The moral responsibility that commits the translator bilaterally to the source and the target sides in the translation process has been referred to as "loyalty" by the functionalist theorist Christiane Nord (1997: 125). When there is a great cultural distance between source and target contexts, and a foreignizing approach is adopted that actually reinforces that impression of distance, then, in effect, the communicative function of the text has been changed, because the source text would not have been distant from the original readers. In most cases, neither the original author nor the reader (nor always, for that matter, the commissioner of the translation) are in a position to check whether a translation is a communicatively acceptable one and thus need to trust that the translator, as a 'partner' in the translation process, will make his or her strategies explicit or apparent to all those involved.[5]

There is no need here to think of domesticating vs. foreignizing as an either-or choice and reproduce the fruitless faithful vs. free debate; it can instead be seen as a cline, with the translator making choices with regard to linguistic and cultural distance not necessarily *for* a whole text, but rather *within* the text. However, it is important to ask what kind of foreignizing we should be concerned with. Readers can accept – even welcome – the exotic, the culturally removed, the difficult: but what they find hard to accept is language use involving apparently unmotivated departures from stylistic norms, register features and genre conventions, which subvert their expectations. Such unwanted formal interference is brought about by the manipulation of source-text structures at the expense of intended meaning – in other words, paying too much respect to the surface features of the text or the lexico-grammatical level. In such cases, the translator may be failing to distinguish between what is stylistically marked by the writer's conscious choices and what are incidental differences between the two languages. In the case of Slovene and English, examples might be the order of sentence elements, Theme-Rheme and given-new patterns, preferences for grammatical or lexical cohesion, and so on. We might also add here the need for the translator to take account of differences

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[5] Is it the traditional absence of trust or confidence, combined with a lack of expertise in translation, that explains why authors tend to insist on close adherence to the source text's surface features?

between socio-cultural norms and rhetorical conventions such as a tendency towards writer or reader responsibility,[6] greater tolerance of digression, recapitulation and repetition,[7] and so on. A failure to take account of differences of this kind may ultimately mean that the reader's processing of the translated text requires more effort than it otherwise would.

Of course, translation "never communicates in an untroubled fashion" – no translation is ideal or even definitive and success in communicating the foreign experience through means of the domestic will always be partial and second-order (Venuti 2000: 468–469). Yet translating can also be seen as "utopian"[8] in that it hopes to build a community around the translated text – a domestic community that shares an interest in the foreign (op. cit. 485). So, to conclude, we can face the reader with cultural and conceptual foreignness and if he or she perceives that the text is relevant in some way to his or her experience (as I believe Jančar's work would be for many readers), then he or she will make the effort required to construct a world around that text. However, if the translated text is too heavily marked by linguistic and textual patterns based on incidental differences between the source and the target languages (in this case, Slovene and English) then the reader may simply decide that the effort – and thus the journey – is simply not worth making.

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[6] These terms come from Hinds' (1987) comparative study of English and Japanese which discusses whether responsibility for effective communicative within the culture is seen to lie primarily with the writer or the reader.

[7] These features were found to be characteristic of samples of academic prose by German speakers in a study carried out by Cline (1987); this contrasted with the linear development favoured by English speakers. Clyne explains the differences by referring to different attitudes towards readability: English-speaking writers strive for this quality, while German writers emphasize content over form and expect the reader to make the connection. English readers may thus feel that German writers are 'pretentious', while English writers may seem 'superficial' to German readers – it all depends what readers are used to and what their expectations are. Although such contrastive rhetorical studies are normally concerned with discursive prose rather than literature, they do have a relevance here. In any case, if we take the working definition of the literary text provided by Beaugrande and Dressler (1981: 185) – that is, a text that presents an alternative to the real world or, to put it another way, an imaginary world of discourse – then 'literariness' is a matter of degree. The reader's approach to any text, including a literary one, will be partly shaped by expectations based on socio-cultural norms.

[8] This idea is taken from Ortega y Gasset's (1937/2000) famous essay on "The Misery and the Splendor of Translation", which is often referred to by those claiming the ultimate impossibility of translation; but the positive side of translation that he also cites is its ability to challenge our cultural assumptions and compel us to try and understand the foreign.

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