

Multiple Im/person/aliz/ations: Four Attempts to 'Get Under The Skin' of Poets While Translating Their Poems

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Introduction

In keeping with the theme of this year's St. Jerome's Day Conference, this essay will offer four personal recollections from two decades of translating: ones that relate to my efforts to get under, or into, the skin of four poets: to forget myself, as a translator, and "impersonate" them. The aim is to give some concrete illustrations of the theme. My first such effort was in retrospect a clear failure, but my undeserved pride at the time encouraged me to continue translating. The other three have been partial successes.

The Failure: Translating a Poem by Anna Akhmatova

In the 1980s I was teaching a course on translation on this campus, in the then Department of Slavic and East European Studies, and the second half dealt with "literary translation." I had before emigrating been for over 5 years a teacher of Russian in a British high school and was still, in the 1980s, a member of the British *Association of Teachers of Russian*. Every issue of their journal had a poetry translation competition; it was in 1986 that I resolved — given the fact that I was teaching literary translation — to try my hand. The assigned task was "Londontsam [To Londoners]" by Anna Akhmatova (1889-1961), one of the best-known modern poets of Russia.

Figures 1-2: Akhmatova¹



¹ The first picture of Anna Akhmatova is a 1922 portrait by Kuz'ma Petrov-Vodkin; the second, a photograph from the same decade; and the third, a photograph from her visit to Oxford to receive an honorary degree in 1965.

To my joy, I was awarded joint first prize.² Although this — very luckily — encouraged me to continue translating poetry, it was actually a hollow victory, for I later found out that my success was far from fully deserved: for I had been quite ignorant of the circumstances of the original poem.

Figure 3: “Londontsam”

ЛОНДОНЦАМ

Двадцать четвертую драму Шекспира
Пишет время бесстрастной рукой.
Сами участники грозного пира,
Лучше мы Гамлета, Цезаря, Лиры
Будем читать над свинцовой рекой
Лучше сегодня голубку Джульетту
С пеньем и факелом в гроб провожать,
Лучше заглядывать в окна к Макбету,
Вместе с наёмным убийцей дрожать, --
Только не эту, не эту, не эту,
Эту уже мы не в силах читать!

Анна Ахматова, 1940 г.

I had assumed that Akhmatova wrote the poem during the siege of Leningrad, drawing her own parallels with the bombardment of London. And I was quite wrong: she was indeed in Leningrad in 1940, the year when the Blitzkrieg began, but had moved (or had been moved) to Tashkent very soon after the Germans laid siege to Leningrad in 1941; her poem therefore pre-dated the siege by about a year. I had, thus, badly misunderstood the background. Worse, I had not read any other poems by Akhmatova before trying this one. This was my first effort, so perhaps I may be excused.

There are, to my knowledge, six published translations into English. In the appendix are five of the six.³ The Hemschemeyer translation is free of *otsebyatina* (“what one contributes oneself”⁴) but does not attempt to capture its rhythm or rhymes. The translations by Muscovite Sergei Roy and the American Stanley Kunitz both exemplify *otsebyatina* to, surely, an unnecessary degree. Neither the other prizewinner nor I avoided our own interpolations, but both of us tried to produce a “poetic” version with a compromise between attention to form and attention to meaning, and we both did, I believe, reasonably

² Both prizewinning efforts, and a commentary, are in Davies, Jesse. 1987. “Report on Poetry Competition No. 39,” *Journal of Russian Studies* 53: 44-46, 1987.

³ The sixth is by Yevgeny Bonver, and is not in my opinion worth a verbatim quote: see http://www.poetryloverspage.com/yevgeny/akhmatova/to_londoners.html.

⁴ A Russian term used, e.g., by Vladimir Nabokov in a well-known article on translation (“On Translating Pushkin. Pounding the Clavichord”. *The New York Review of Books* II, 6 (April 30, 1964). 14-16) and elsewhere, e.g., in *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*, see http://nabokovandko.narod.ru/Texts/Ada_eng02.html.

well. Given my greater experience now, and my better knowledge about Akhmatova, would I — if translating this poem for the first time — allow myself the *otsebyatina* of both “Dunsinane” and the “too short of breath,” both of which are not in the original? Maybe not. And yet I thought, when I translated, that I was producing a version that Akhmatova herself would have produced had she spoken good English — that I was “impersonating” her. Given my misunderstanding of her circumstances, this must have been a misapprehension.

Francè Prešeren

I began translating more in earnest a few years after my purported success with Akhmatova. After translating modern Slovene poetry for another decade, in the late 1990s I joined forces for the translation of a large selection of the poetry of Francè Prešeren (1800-1849) with a literature specialist at Indiana University, Henry Cooper, who had written a book on this poet.⁵ Prešeren is as well-known in Slovenia as is Pushkin in Russia or Shakespeare in the Anglophone world.⁶

Figure 4: Francè Prešeren⁷



Before Prešeren there was little Slovene literature and almost no Slovene poetry; he took on the task of pioneering multiple poetic genres and proving that this language could stand beside any other as a vehicle for literature. He wrote sonnets (including a “wreath of sonnets,” 1835 to show that Slovene could rival Italian); an epic poem of over 500 lines, “Krst pri Savici [The Baptism on the Savica]” (1840); elegies, folk tales, lyric poems, even poetry in unusual metres such as his “Ghazals” of 1846.

⁵ Cooper, Henry R. *France Prešeren*. Boston: Twayne, 1981.

⁶ Our book of translations (*Poems. Francè Prešeren*. Selected and edited by France Pibernik and Franc Drolc. Transl. by Tom M.S. Priestly and Henry R. Cooper, Jr. Kranj: Municipality/Klagenfurt-Ljubljana-Vienna: Hermagoras, 1999) was one of a series of translations published to celebrate the bicentenary of his birth. Others target languages in the series were Italian, French, German, Russian, Spanish and Czech. Prešeren has also been translated into Albanian, Basque, Bengali, Bosnian, Croatian, Hungarian, Macedonian, Mandarin, Polish, Serbian and Slovak.

⁷ No portraits of Prešeren were painted during his lifetime. This 1850 portrait, a reconstruction from contemporaries’ descriptions, was by Franz Kurz von Goldenstein. The photographs are of public monuments — middle: the best-known meeting place in the centre of Ljubljana, and right: a bust located at Prešeren’s birth-place, the village of Vrba.

I can assert with some assurance that as I strove to produce poetic forms of all kinds to clothe Henry Cooper's preliminary versions, I quickly appreciated the scope of Prešeren's achievements. The translations took most of a year, and by the half-way stage I definitely believed that I had begun to think like Prešeren — not, I add, as he did: as a frustrated lonely man yearning for the love of an unattainable woman (for I had not been like that since I was a teenager) but as a poet. His *Wreath of Sonnets* required the usual very intricate rhyme scheme, which had to be achieved using non-contemporary English; and when this was done, his epic poem *Krst pri Savici* [*The Baptism on the Savica*] seemed to go on interminably. A long time before I finished the 26 four-line verses of the *Introduction* and then the 53 eight-line verses of the main part of this poem, I was quite frankly bored with the task, and came to believe that Prešeren must have been exhausted and bored long before he reached the 528th line, also. At a discussion of the translation at the P.E.N. club in Ljubljana, I dared to mention this idea, and although none of the eminent Slovene men of letters who were present explicitly said that they agreed with me, I came away with the impression that they did accept that *Krst pri Savici* is, at least, not fun to read. It was, very definitely, not fun to translate. To the extent that I was correct, I had, to this extent if no other, “become” the poet: I had shared his outlook on poetry. And after a year in his company, this was probably so.

Janko Messner

I now turn to contemporary Slovene poetry, and to Janko Messner (b. 1921), an outspoken, cantankerous, charming Austrian Carinthian Slovene (i.e., a member of the Slovene-speaking minority resident in the Austrian province of Kärnten (Slovene Koroška, English Carinthia)). Messner is known for his strong political views: he was for a long time and still is reviled as a ‘Communist’ by the right-wing German-speaking majority in Austria, and until Slovene independence was labelled a ‘Capitalist lackey’ by Yugoslav Communists.

Figure 5: Janko Messner⁸



⁸ The first photograph is from the web-page <http://www.kultur.at/sec/messner.htm>, used with permission of “Kultur.at”; the second, from a commemoration of Helene Weiss, a Roma killed in a concentration camp during World War Two, web-page <http://www.freiheitskaempfer.at/site-old/kaernten/index.php> by permission of the photographer, Vinzenz Jobst; the third is my own photograph of myself with the poet.

I will discuss his political poetry only, although he has written much besides. Among his many publications that treat political matters, of both prose and poetry, I first mention *Politična pesem — grda pesem? Politisch Lied — ein garstig Lied?*⁹ The title of the book, and of the first line in leading poem, “Monolog z Goethejem [Monologue with Goethe]” is (with a question mark added) a quotation from Goethe, who was in his time considered aloof and uninvolved in politics: “Political poem — a loathsome poem?”¹⁰ In the same collection, “Po Auschwitzu [After Auschwitz]” elaborates on Messner’s approach to political poetry: as a regrettable necessity. Messner’s two poems with my translations:

MONOLOG Z GOETHEJEM

Politisch Lied — ein garstig Lied?

Lahko, če ti je polna rit.

Težko pa je krivico skriti

in verzu uzdo natakiniti.

Dovolite mi, geheimer Rat,

da stisko svojo izpovem:

na svetu ga še zmeraj ni,

ki bi iz svinarije

znal splesti venec

popolne poezije.

Stremuštvu, laž, pogoltnost

ne rifma se pa se ne rima,

a mene, bog mi greh odpusti

(in če mogoče tudi vi),

prav to zanima.

MONOLOGUE WITH GOETHE

Politisch Lied — ein garstig Lied?

Easy for those on Easy Street.

Injustice, though, is hard to hide:

I can’t turn back my verses’ tide.

Allow me, please, geheimer Rat,

to confess my dire need:

There isn’t anyone on earth

who could from obscenity

manage to contrive a wreath

of lyrical serenity.

Ambitiousness, lies, cupidity

don’t scan and do not rhyme;

but that — God forgive my sins,

(and you too, if it may be so) —

intrigues me all the time.

⁹ Messner, Janko. *Politična pesem — grda pesem? Politisch Lied — ein garstig Lied?* Klagenfurt: Drava, 2007. Several of the poems from this collection (including the first two quoted here), with some apolitical ones from elsewhere, are in the trilingual collection: Messner, Janko. *Básne. Pesmi. Poems. Do Češtiny přeložil František Benhart. Translation into English by Tom Priestly.* Klagenfurt: Norea, 1998.

¹⁰ My thanks to Adrian del Caro for his help in this.

PO AUSCHWITZU

Po Auschwitzu
ni mogoče več
pisati pesmi

Tako Adorno

In vendar
jih spet pišejo
po vsem svetu

Po streljih
na Romerja pred oltarjem
je marsikateri vernik
dokončno
obupal nad Bogom

In vendar še v njegovem imenu
terjajo
delo
kruh
mir
vpijejo proti vojni
po vsem svetu

Kako naj človek živi
brez ljubezni
Kako naj bog
brez pesmi
prebije

SINCE AUSCHWITZ

Since Auschwitz
it is no longer possible
to write poems

Adorno says so

And yet
they are being written again
all over the world

Since the shots which
killed Romero in front of the altar
many of the faithful
have finally
despaired of God

And yet in his name
people still demand
work
bread
peace
cry out against war
all over the world

How without love
should a person live
How without poems
should a God
survive

Although I shared many of Janko Messner's political views, I did not share them all, and consequently when translating some of his political poems — most of which are as outspoken as their author — I could not always “impersonate” him very easily. However, where one poem was concerned I shared his views

absolutely. This deals with a gruesome event, the death by guillotine of 13 Slovene-speaking Austrians in 1943: *Dunajska balada* [*A Viennese Ballad*]. I certainly shared Janko Messner's revulsion and horror at the memory of this event because of my own personal acquaintance with people who knew the victims, and even more so after visiting the room in Vienna in which the beheadings had taken place. The victims were twelve men and one woman from the village, and its vicinity, where I have been doing fieldwork for about thirty years; several were related to villagers whom I interviewed for linguistic purposes, many of whom became my close friends.

Figure 6. The "Guillotined Thirteen"¹¹



While translating this and others of his poems I was staying at the poet's house. Alas, he knows some, but only some, English, and his reactions to and suggestions for improvement of my translations often relied on his ancient dictionary, and this resulted in spirited disagreements. When I came to this poem,¹² I was quite pleased with my effort overall, and so was he.

DUNAJSKA BALADA

Na Dunaju je siva hiša
 v tej hiši temna, temna klet:
 pod stropom je preozka niša,
 ne pride skozi njeno žarek bled.

Sredi kleti je giljotina,
 po njo odtočen žleb za kri.
 Z njo si je kljukasta zverina
 tešila volčji gon, strasti.

A VIENNESE BALLAD

A Vienna street. A building dark.
 Inside, a sombre basement room.
 High up, a narrow window stark;
 No rays come through to light the gloom.

And in it stands a guillotine.
 Beneath it, for the blood, a drain.
 With it jackbooted beasts obscene
 Their wolfish passions entertain.

¹¹ Left and right: memorials to the thirteen victims, from the wall of the old church in the village of Sele/Zell. Centre: a photograph of the actual guillotine used, in the *Gerichtskammer*, a room in the Ministry of Justice, Vienna. My own photographs, TP.

¹² Not hitherto published.

Glavé so rezali človeške,
ko da bi zelnjate bilè —
starejše, mlajše, moške, ženske
trdó so padali v čebrè.

Trinajst slovenskih spod Košute,
kot so se dvignile v upor,
še zdaj v trenuktu smrti krute
obtoževalo je umor.

Cigani le v sosedni kleti
in Židje, Rusi, mlad Hrvat
so vsi od groze onemeli,
ko rezknilo je trinajstkrat.

Čez dan to tudi te zaklali
in drugi čuli hrup so, rez.
Tako so narode vkovali
v verigo, v trdno, trajno vez.

.....

Nasilje spet si svet podreja,
Meduza glavo dviga spet,
A od nikoder ni Perzeja,
da šel bi po verigo v klet.

They severed thirteen heads all told
Like cabbages, but spurting blood —
Of men and women, young and old,
In turn each dropping with a thud.

The heads of Slovenes who rebelled
And came from ‘neath Košuta’s rock,
Who, as they cruel death beheld,
Themselves placed murder in the dock.

A Croat youth, some Russians, Jews,
And Gypsies in the next-door cell
In horror numbness all suffused
As thirteen times the knife-blade fell.

And others heard how all day long
Upon those too the blade was gorged.
They nations thus into a strong,
Enduring chain together forged.

.....

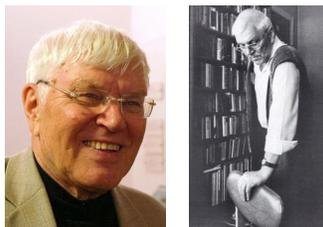
By force once more the world’s subdued,
Medusa lifts her head again,
But there’s no Perseus who’ll intrude
Into the vault to fetch that chain.

However, I very much disliked my first suggestion for the twelfth line — with “thud” to rhyme with a word I wished to use, “blood” — and told Janko that it sounded, to me, anticlimactic, a piece of bathos, and that I should and would try something else. He, however, insisted on “thud”, so “thud” it has remained; I myself was unconvinced, but bowed to my host’s wish. — During the days I spent with Janko Messner I believe that I learned, more or less (as described above), to think like him, and managed to translate as if I was inside his skin. However, there were exceptional instances like this one, where I had to accept his advice against my own judgment.

Kajetan Kovič

I was introduced to the work of Kajetan Kovič (b. 1931) through his children's poetry. Kovič has been a leading figure in Slovene belles-lettres for nearly half a century, as editor, translator (Heine, Mallarmé, Pasternak, Rilke, and others) and author of short stories, novels and poetry.

Figure 7. Kajetan Kovič¹³



Later, I was to translate more of his poetry;¹⁴ here, I will mention his children's poetry only, specifically his 12-poem cycle "Maček Muri in Muca Maca." A colleague, Klaus Detlef Olof, had translated the cycle as "Kater Muri und Kätzchen Matzi" for a German-language CD musical version of the poems, and he (very easily, once I had heard them) persuaded me to produce an English-language version.¹⁵ The cat Muri and his female friend Maca [in my translation: Mury and Matsie] have been the favourite characters in Slovene children's literature for about two decades.

Figure 8. Mury the Cat¹⁶



¹³ The first photo is from the website of the Center za slovenski jezik (Slovene Language Centre) in Ljubljana, by permission of Boža Krakar-Vogel, Director; second, from the web-site of the journal *Gili d'Aquilone. Rivista d'immagini, idee e Poesia*, by permission of Jolka Milič, editor.

¹⁴ Namely, 13 sonnets in Kajetan Kovic *Kaleidoscope* (Ljubljana: Beletrina, 2002) and 9 poems in Drago Jančar & Kajetan Kovič, eds., *Slovene Poets and Writers of the Slovene Academy*. Ljubljana: Slovene section, Slovene Academy of Sciences and Arts.

¹⁵ Kajetan Kovič, *Maček Muri in Muca Maca*. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1975; CD, Ljubljana: Prodok, 1998. Klaus Detlef Olof, *Kater Muri und Kätzchen Matzi*, CD, Ljubljana: Prodok, 2002. Tom Priestly, *Mury the Cat and Matsie-Catsie*, CD, Ljubljana: Prodok, 2004.

¹⁶ The first two pictures are of the original book and CD cover, see note 12. The others demonstrate the popularity of this character: a picture of the Maček Muri snack bar in the main department store in Ljubljana, and a still from an opera based on Kovič's poems. For samples of the music on the CD's, see on-line videos of Neca Falk concerts such as <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4L2H3UILHqI&feature=related>.

I borrowed CD's of both the musical version of the original, and of the German version, and took the advice of Klaus Detlef Olof: not to try to keep too closely to the original, but to (a) keep to the rhythm, so that it could be sung and recorded on a disk, and (b) make it entertaining. "Nothing else matters," is what he, in effect, told me, and I threw the translator's normal caution to the winds. One example: the last few lines last from the poem/song "Jedilni List/On the Menu" about the midday meal which Muri and Maca have "pri Veseli Kravi [Happy Cowie]" restaurant, owned by "The Black Cat":

<i>original</i>	<i>'prosaic' translation</i>
Črni maček — to pomeni	The Black Cat - that means
hitro, dobro in poceni!	quick, good and inexpensive!
In zato pri priči noter,	To which, inside, are witnesses
lačna botra, žejni boter!	hungry godmother, thirsty godfather!
Tu je mleko, tu je kava,	Here is milk, here is coffee,
tu je sir in zelenjava,	here is cheese and green vegetables,
tu je mačji grah v rižoti,	here is cat peas in risotto,
mačje torte in kompoti,	cat cakes and compôtes
in za skadkosnedke sinke	and for sweet-toothed sons
tudi mačje palačinke.	also cat palachinkas.

I was nonplussed by the problem of translating the culinary vocabulary. The translation was destined for the North American (not any other English-speaking) market: what average Canadian or American child would be familiar with compôtes or palachinkas (a type of crêpe), let alone risotto? And earlier in the poem we meet such essentially Central European dishes as žganci (a boiled corn mush) and blood sausages. I might have decided to transplant the menu to North America to solve some of these problems anyway, and Klaus's advice persuaded me to be especially cavalier in this respect. My version:

Blackie's Place is doing nicely:
Fast, and good, and not too pricey.
That's a fact that can't be hidden -
Just ask any cat or kitten!
Here is rice with ham and cat-peas,
Here are pies and here is cat-cheese.
Here are pancakes, here is toffee,
And for big cats fresh roast coffee —

While for kittens there is ice-cream
(And on Sundays even mice-cream).

Publishing such a “loose” version in a journal devoted to translation is a brazen move, I confess; and I must aver that I have not departed and would most probably never depart to this extent from the original in any other translation.

In this instance, I was very clearly not trying to “become” the poet, but (in my imagination) to listen to the lines as if I were a North American child — nothing more; to “impersonate” not the author, but a typical member of the target audience. Three years later, having (as mentioned above) translated some of his “adult” poetry, I was fortunate enough to meet Kajetan Kovič for lunch. I confessed (although it was hardly necessary — he understands English and had read and heard of my version of “Maček Muri”) my translatory transgressions. Not only did he not disapprove: he said that he would, in my shoes, have done something similar. I had not even attempted to write as he would have written, but I had indeed done so: unwittingly, I had “impersonated” him at least to some small extent.

Conclusion

I have presented subjective assessments with respect to my “getting into the skin”, i.e., “impersonating,” four very different poets. I present no algorithm for testing my successes and failures, only my own impressions. I will try to summarize.

In the case of Anna Akhmatova, I naively assumed that I was “writing as she would have written if she had known English,” and I much later realized that this assumption was a delusion. When it came to the poetry of France Prešeren, it was my lengthy and painstaking (and painsgiving, I should add) work with his poetry which led me to believe that I was perceiving it from his point of view — a belief that was in part confirmed, and which I still hold. As far as Janko Messner’s political poetry is concerned, I was more or less successful in “impersonating” him, depending on my personal sympathy with his views: my general feelings about the value of political poetry are probably lukewarm when compared to his, whereas my own personal involvement with the circumstances of the “Guillotined Thirteen”, my acquaintance with some of their relatives, and my visit to the room where the atrocity occurred, — all made my own sentiments about this event at least as deeply-felt, and probably even more so, as the poet’s; therefore, when translating “A Viennese Ballad,” I may even, so to speak, have over-“impersonated” him. And, finally, I appear to have “impersonated” Kajetan Kovič, to some extent, without even trying. With Akhmatova I had tried and failed; with Kovič, I did not try, but (partly) succeeded. A complete reversal!

APPENDIX

Translations of Anna Akhmatova's "Londontsam"

TO THE LONDONERS

Time is now writing with impassive hand
Shakespeare's black play, his twenty-fourth.
What can we do, who know the bitter taste
But here, by the leaden river, re-enact
Those tragic lines of Hamlet, Caesar, Lear? —
Or maybe guide, as escort to her tomb,
child Juliet, poor dove, with songs and torches;
or play the Peeping Tom in Macbeth's windows,
Trembling no less than the hired murderer.
Only not this one, not this one, not this one —
This one we do not have the strength to read.

Stanley Kunitz, 1967

TO LONDONERS

Time as an author all passion forsaking
Writes now as Shakespeare his twenty-fourth play
We, in this terrible banquet partaking
Better Lear, Hamlet and Caesar be taking,
These we will read o'er the river lead-grey;
Better with singing in torch-lit procession
Go with dear Juliet today to her grave,
Better spy briefly Macbeth's evil mission
Tremble along with the hired murdering knave —
Only not this one, not this one, not this one!
Such reading we can no longer brave.

Barbara Ellis, 1987

TO THE INHABITANTS OF LONDON

The twenty-fourth drama by William Shakespeare
Is flowing from Time's dispassionate pen.
But we who take part in this sinister banquet
Would better be reading our Caesar, our Hamlet,
Our Lear by the lead-coloured river again;
We'd be better off at Juliet's funeral,
With torches and dirges attending her death,
Or peering in fear in at Dunsinane's windows
Along with the murderer hired by Macbeth —
Oh, anything rather than this play, than this one;
For reading through this one we're too short of breath!

Tom Priestly, 1987

TO THE PEOPLE OF LONDON

Time now writes this, 24th play of Shakespeare
With an indifferent, merciless hand.
We ourselves take part in this feast of fear —
But we would much rather read, in this land,
Hamlet or Caesar or Lear.
Yes, we would rather watch Juliet's last rite —
Singing and torchlight, last kiss —
Or on Macbeth we might eavesdrop tonight,
Or with an assassin plead, —
Only not this play, not this one, not this!
This we can no longer read.

Sergei Roy, 1988

TO THE LONDONERS

Time, with an impassive hand, is writing
The twenty-fourth drama of Shakespeare.
We, the celebrants at this terrible feast,
Would rather read *Hamlet*, *Caesar* or *Lear*
There by the leaden river;
We would rather, today, with torches and singing
Be bearing the dove Juliet to her grave,
Would rather peer in at Macbeth's windows,
Trembling with the hired assassin —
Only not this, not this, not this,
This we don't have the strength to read!

Judith Hemschemeyer, 1990

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