

Sylvia Visiting Mila: Slovak Translation and Reception of Plath's Poetry: A Brief Preview

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"Plath's poetry and life magnetizes me; I feel somehow kindred with her. And what is it with the fascination with death? I often felt the 'ice-cold hand of death' in her poems and, even more distinctively, in her diary entries – or was it just shaking hands with my own death?" (Haugová "Sceľovať doráňaný svet láskou" 11)

Slovak literature as a "small literature" has throughout all its history been bound to perceive literary translation as one of the most important stimuli of its development. Since its very beginnings, many major Slovak poets have also been high-quality translators of world literature. In the period of literary classicism in Slovakia (flourishing in the first third of the 19th century) it was the greatly significant and talented Ján Hollý (1879 – 1912),¹ Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav (1849 – 1921),² [in realism (1871 – 1905)], still referred to as "the greatest Slovak poet" by some and in the first decades of the 20th century it was Ivan Krasko (1876 – 1958),³ whose "writings became the very touchstone of poetry" (Zambor 27). In the "golden"⁴ 1960s it was the poetic genius Miroslav Válek⁵ and the magical, enormously inspirational and, it almost goes without saying, also heavily imitated group of poets called the Concretists,⁶ whose "position in Slovak poetry was so strong at the beginning of 1960s that the subsequent generation of poets felt the necessity to annul the poetry of the Concretists, to get rid of its impact" (Gavura n. pag.). This tradition continues to the present day. Taking into consideration the brief outline of the history of this duality of Slovakia's

¹ He translated Virgil's *Aenid*, as well as some of his pastoral poetry.

² Hviezdoslav translated works of Russian, German, Hungarian and Polish authors (Goethe, Schiller, Mickiewicz, Petőfi, Pushkin etc.) as well as a couple of plays by W. Shakespeare.

³ His main contribution to translation is his translation of the poetry of a Romanian author, M. Eminescu.

⁴ The 1960s are referred to as "golden" in Slovakia's history after the World War II because the political situation of this decade was significantly freer than in the "schematic" 1950's, when all forms of expression from everyday small talk to the arts were strongly controlled and restricted by the Communist Party. The 1960s (until the unfortunate invasion of the Soviet and Warsaw Pact armed forces in 1968) permitted the existence of a relative freedom of expression, which enabled the arts, including literature, to develop.

⁵ He translated the poetry of significant European poets of the 20th century as well as selected poetry by Gregory Corso. An English translation of a selection of his poems was published in 1996: Válek, Miroslav: *The Ground Beneath our feet*. Trans. Ewald Osers. Ed. Peter Milčák. Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books. 1996. Print.

⁶ They included Ján Ondruš (one of his books of poetry has also been translated into English: *Swallowing a Hair* (*Prehĺtanie vlasu*); 1998; transl. by James Sutherland-Smith and Martin Solotruk), Ján Stacho, Jozef Mihalkovič, Ľubomír Feldek and Lýdia Vadkerti-Gavorníková.

most influential poets, it surely does not come as a surprise that one of the most significant contemporary women poets Mila Haugová⁷ (1942) has also translated several volumes of German, Japanese and American poetry. The present study will focus on her translation of a selection of Sylvia Plath's poetry, first issued in 1989 and entitled *Luna a tis* (*The Moon and the Yew Tree*). In this paper I will predominantly concentrate on how Plath has been reflected in Slovakia's literary history, and what influence her poetry has had on Haugová's own poetic voice.

Experts on her poetry agree that the poetic voice of Mila Haugová changed significantly in her fourth and fifth books of poetry – *Čisté dni* (*Pure Days*) and *Praláska* (*Ancient Love*), issued in 1990 and 1991 respectively, i.e. immediately after her translation of Sylvia Plath's poems. Although Plath's poetry cannot be seen as the only source of the sudden change in the Slovak poet's style of writing (the longer pause in publication, influences of other writers and a significant turn in her personal life have to be considered as well), it apparently had a considerable impact on it. In an interview, Haugová describes her own view of her translating as "a very good substitute activity, because I read, learn..." ("Na slovo s Milou Haugovou" 34).

The intensity with which Plath's work and life struck her can be inferred from the very amount of time devoted to the translation, as the poet states in the introduction to the excerpts of Plath journals she had also translated: she "lived with her poems, journals, short stories, photographs for entire two years" ("Ani zomrieť sa nedá bez lásky" 141). Haugová's first three books of poetry – *Hrdzavá hlina* (*Rusty Clay*, 1980), *Premenlivý povrch* (*A Changeable Surface*, 1983) and *Možná neha* (*A Possible Tenderness*, 1984), although increasing in quality from volume to volume, were still considerably conventional, drawing mainly on older poetic structures of the 1960s and very often predictable and explicit as to the message they conveyed. Her anecdotal poetic voice changed into visionary and fragmentary writings at the beginning of the 1990s (Bokníková "Poetry of Fragments" 41). In her introduction to Haugová's poetry in translation entitled *Scent of the Unseen* (2003), Fiona Sampson, a significant British poet and critic, calls it "hermetic surrealism" presumably because of its fragmentary composition, and the extensive use of dreams and dream-like landscapes (16). However, Slovak literary criticism would certainly object to this term, mainly because of the well-charted and analyzed development of surrealism in Slovak poetry (or, rather, of its Slovak mutation *nadrealizmus*). Nevertheless, Haugová's new style of writing enables the

⁷ Some of her poetry has been translated into English, most recently in a selection entitled *Scent of the Unseen*, trans. by Viera and John Sutherland-Smith and printed in 2003 by Arc Publications in the Visible Poets series.

reader to glimpse the mythical depths of women's history and the poet's personal history at the same time. Although Fiona Sampson compares her to Anne Sexton or Leonora Carrington rather than to Sylvia Plath, it is obvious that some of the peculiarities of her poetic voice arise from her intense contact with Plath's writings.

Although I might have made it clear enough that Haugová is a poet whose writing style has greatly benefited from the styles of others, Plath being only one of them (the poet also draws on Slovak poetic tradition as well as on other writers, including P. Celan, I. Bachmann and J. L. Borges), it cannot be claimed that she herself lacks her own originality. She is certainly not a passive object from the influences of others. A renowned Slovak poetry critic and historian Andrea Bokníková, specializing in women poetry, puts this peculiar synthesis of the voices of others and of her own voice as "an individual, sensitive concept of a 'poeta doctus,'" who "by means of learning, studying mythology and arts substantiate(s) the emotionality" ("Žena ako autorka" 42). Despite Haugová's proclaimed almost word-for-word method of translation, as she puts it herself; in one of the interviews taken approximately at the time she was translating Plath she says: "I do not trust the so-called paraphrases, translations of the principle and I object against shifts in meaning which arise from the restrictions of form, from its slavish transfer" ("Sceľovať doráňaný svet láskou" 11). She does play an active role in choosing what influences her poetry, as well as what she decides to convey by her translation from the original. Marián Andričík, a translation studies scholar and the author of a review of Plath's translation calls Haugová's method of translation "sisterly" (144).

Haugová's individual approach to Plath's poetry can be perceived from the very choice of the poems she chose for her translation. Unlike the translator of Plath's first Czech book by Jan Zábrana,⁸ who kept to the original American edition of *Ariel* (except for the Lowell's foreword), Haugová worked with Plath's *The Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes and was therefore free to select poems for translation according to her taste. Her selection also includes Plath's "transitional" poems, originally printed in *Crossing the Water* ("Love Letter," "I am Vertical," "Insomniac," "Blackberrying," "Last Words," "Mirror," "Crossing the Water," "Among the Narcissi," "Pheasant" and "Event" – the last three appeared only in the British edition and were published in American edition of *Winter Trees*).

Haugová arranged her translations in accordance with *The Collected Poems*, chronologically, so the title poem of her book of translation is "Love Letter". This is not a

⁸ See Plathová, Sylvia. *Ariel*. Praha: Mladá fronta, 1984. Print.

mere coincidence – the translator was free to choose earlier poems as well. Haugová's poetry has from its early beginnings been analyzing, exploring and mythologizing the romantic relationship between a man and a woman to such extent that some critics consider this to be the central topic of her writings. From the few forewords and afterwords to her translation of Plath's works, it is obvious that she chose to interpret Plath's poetry and life through the prism of love as well: "To love and to write. These are the two unconditional requests that had to be fulfilled so that Sylvia Plath could live. When one of them ceases to exist, she opts for death" ("Ani zomriet' sa nedá bez lásky" 141).

Taking a closer look at Haugová's translation of "Love Letter," one discovers that it is – apart from the obviously different language medium – somewhat different, that it leaves the reader with a slightly different "feeling." In this poem, the reader witnesses "(t)he transformation of the speaker through the beloved's passion" (Wagner-Martin 74). The self is introduced at first as if reified into a rock, then it is compared to a snake, then to a March-twigg and the self finally resembles "a sort of god / Floating through the air in my soul-shift / Pure as a pane of ice. It's a gift" (Plath 147). Slovak translation of the poem's final lines is as follows: "Na akéhosi boha sa teraz podobám, / čo letí vzduchom do vrstiev mojej duše / čistej ako kocka ľadu. Je to dar" (Plathová 10). When I attempt to translate it back into English, it reads: A certain god now I resemble / flying through the air into the layers of my soul / pure as a cube of ice. It's a gift. The shift in the meaning of the poem seems very subtle at first sight, but it has a great impact on the whole meaning of the poem. The translation changes the object to which the purity of ice is attributed – in the original it is the self, in the translation it is the soul of the self. By this almost unnoticeable shift, Haugová removes one shade of poem's meaning, one path through which it can be read – she removes the possibility of reading the change as a negative one, as a threat, uncertainty, as a metamorphosis, which "has become ironic: just as she began to bud, she has, instead, died, or been killed" (Wagner-Martin 74). This seemingly insignificant departure from what Plath has to say in her poem appears to be crucial for understanding the whole body of Plath's Slovak translation, and for the way Plath's work is received and understood among Slovak critics, poets and readers (Haugová's translation being the only Plath's Slovak translation published as a separate volume), which significantly influences its chances to inspire Slovak poetry.

Investigating further into Haugová's perception of the message of Plath's poems and life and the attitude she adopts towards them, one discovers, as Bokníková puts it, Haugová's "controversial attitude [towards Plath] even in the subject of death" ("Žena ako autorka" 42). In a 1992 interview, Haugová expresses her stand on this subject with hindsight: "I was able

to follow her up to the last move – to the point when she twisted the gas knob with her children sleeping in the neighboring room. That is where I had to let her go, because I can't do that – I can't go that far" ("Na slovo s Milou Haugovou" 35). Emphasis on life and individual existence in time and space as the highest values can also be found in Haugová's poems of that period (and, in fact, in all her writings) as well. A parallel interpretation of two poems with a similar thematic construction – Sylvia Plath's "Getting There" (included in Haugová's translation) and a poem published in *Praláska (Ancient Love)* in 1991 and to a certain extent inspired by Plath "Masky mŕtvych" ("Masks of the Dead" or "Death Masks") by Mila Haugová – further supports this argument.

In Plath's "Getting There," the speaking subject takes care of the dead: "I shall bury the wounded like pupas, / I shall count and bury the dead." (249). Her female body, portrayed through synecdoches of the deathmask and skirts represents an obstacle to her yearnings, a container that will be useless once she gets "there": "The place I am getting to, why are there these obstacles – / The body of this woman, / Charred skirts and deathmask" (249). Judith Kroll links these lines to the ancient ritual of mummification, in which "(d)iscarding 'old bandages' ... symbolizes resurrection" (168). On the other hand, persona Alfa (denoting a mythical character of "the first woman") as the speaking subject in Haugová's poem is not a mere wearer of a mask, she is the maker of the death masks, which bleed like religious statues or pictures ("Masky znova krváčajú: očné jamky, / spánky, zápästia)" (54). In my translation: "Masks bleed again: eye sockets, / temples, wrists." Alfa carries the attributes of a pagan religious figure – of a wise woman or a medicine woman – except for the production of the death masks, she is stroking her amulets and unifying Eros and Thanatos. The masks, although carrying roughly the same meaning as does Plath's deathmask (a means of maintaining worldly existence), bear an inverted value. Haugová's death masks are not unnecessary burdens – they are sacred and precious and made to preserve, to save the subject and others from vanishing into nothingness; there is no place for "some form of rebirth" (Gill 53) as in Plath's poem.

The different value put on the physical existence by Plath and by Haugová as her translator (in Haugová's poetry most vividly depicted through images of erotic love) influenced further reception and (mis)understanding of Sylvia Plath among Slovak literary critics and writers. One of the reviews of the translation of *Luna a tis (The Moon and the Yew Tree)* sees Plath's poetry as oversensitive, masochistic and even morbid (Fulmeková 120 – 121). But at the same time it hints at the shift the translator made in her view of the poet: "In the poet's selection, Plath appears rather womanly and as such she might as well be one of the

contemporary young Slovak women poets." (Fulmeková 121). In a different review, another Slovak woman poet and Haugová's friend Dana Podracká,⁹ writes: "As I see it, for Plath, death is the house in which the spirit of her soul lives. Plath does not want to communicate with immortality, eternity and cosmos – she communicates directly, face to face with death" (4). And, further on: "Haugová needs to love. Plath needs to be loved. At the end of love there is death. At the end of admiration (Plath) there is a god" (4). The quoted review, or, rather an attempt at a comparative study, clearly favors Haugová's affirmation of life and completely annihilates the point of Plath's poetic self's struggle for self-definition and perfection through purification. It is to a great extent influenced not only by the author's friendship with Haugová, but also by the reviewer's strong ideological stand.

A reserved reception of certain types of literary texts, however, has not been unusual in the history of Slovak literary criticism. As one can infer from famous controversies over some works of world literature (e.g. the dispute over Zola's naturalism at the end of the 19th century) as well as over some Slovak literary works (to mention at least one – a great heated debate arose after the publication of one book of poems by an influential poet of the 1960s, Miroslav Válek; the focus of the controversy was the cynicism, "destruction and nihilism" (Hamada 44). Slovak literary criticism has always been strongly opposed to any signs and traces of negativism, pessimism, extreme individualism or nihilism. Slovak literary criticism has always placed strong emphasis on ethical values and did not have much understanding for exploring the "darker side of man" (or woman). Although this perspective was at times ideologically tinged and reinforced by the prevailing cultural and political atmosphere, e.g. by the atmosphere of the national awakening, Christian nationalism or socialist optimism, the ethical message of the arts had always been understood as its highest value and it is only now, slowly, giving way to accepting plurality. This makes it slightly difficult for a poet like Plath to be unreservedly accepted in Slovak literary contexts. It was certainly made easier thanks to the confusion caused by the search for the renewed "true" values in the years just before the Velvet Revolution and in the following decade. Freedom of speech gave rise to new waves of writers with texts promoting different sets of values (peripheral, feminist, nihilist etc.) partially freeing themselves from rigid literary and cultural canons.

So the poetry of Sylvia Plath did find its way into Slovak literary culture; and not only as a stock in bookshops, but also as an "internal contact" phenomenon – a contact phenomenon which, according to the initiator of comparative literature studies in Slovakia in

⁹ For some of her poetry in English translation see Podracká, Dana. *Forty four*. Trans. Robert Welch. Cork, Ireland: Southword Editions, 2005. Print.

the 1960s, Dionýz Ďurišin,¹⁰ is not just aimed at "informing the reader about the literary work of the translated author, but it becomes an organically integrated creative act of the literary endeavors of the receiving literature" (49). Numerous theatrical performances, using extracts of her poetry, writers' declarations of admiration, poems dedicated to her, recitation of her poems in the biggest national poetry reading contest and vivid discussions of her work and life on Slovak literary websites give sufficient evidence. The most significant writers that declare a certain kind of kinship with her writings are mainly our older female poets Mila Haugová, Anna Ondrejková and Dana Podracká – the "perennial stars in the sky of contemporary Slovak women's poetry since the 1970s" (Valcerová 789). She is, however, one of the favourite poets of a much younger, but very original and talented woman poet Eva Luka (currently being translated into English by James Sutherland-Smith). But, naturally, its most intense imprint can be observed in the poetry of Plath's Slovak translator, as it is undoubtedly co-responsible for the change of Haugová's writing style.

Haugová's contact with Plath – if I continue using Ďurišin's terminology, most accurately classified by his term "impulse"¹¹ – can be substantiated in various ways. A statistical research, using data from the Slovak National Corpus and the Corpus of Contemporary American English shows that the frequency of almost 130 statistically most marked keywords in the translator's selection of Plath's poems increased 1.2 times in the two Haugová's books published immediately after she translated Plath. Some poems bear a palpable, undiluted sign of an intimate contact with Plath's writings, bordering almost with imitation. They are mostly poems first published in magazines in 1987 and 1988 (and republished – sometimes with certain modifications – in her two following books), i.e. at the time when Haugová was deeply immersed in translating Plath. Some lines of the poem "Pictures, dreams," published in 1987 and then republished in *Čisté dni* (*Pure Days*) are a good example of this direct contact:

Rytmické prenikanie červenej,
narušená bieloba hladkého povrchu praská...
Sama.
Neviem nájsť jednoduché slová,
ale zvieratá a deti ma milujú.

Vietor neúnavne rozsieva semená.

¹⁰ His theoretical concept of comparative literature has also been translated into English in Ďurišin, Dionýz. *Theory of Literary Comparatistics*. Bratislava: Slovak Academy of Sciences, 1984. Print.

¹¹ For further reference see Ďurišin, Dionýz. *Problémy literárnej komparistiky*. Bratislava: Veda, 1967. Print, Ďurišin, Dionýz. *Theory of Literary Comparatistics*. Bratislava: Slovak Academy of Sciences, 1984. Print or Juvan, Marko: *History and poetics of intertextuality*. Trans. Timothy Pogačar. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2008. Print.

V kameni spí môj kvet." ("Čisté dni" 13)

In my attempt at English translation the lines of Haugová's poem read:

Rhythmical penetration by the red,
corroded whiteness of the smooth surface is breaking...
Alone.
I can't find the simple words,
but animals and children love me.

The wind seeds ceaselessly.
My flower is asleep in a rock.

The lines echo the expressive breaking of the color red through the white in Plath's "Tulips":
"The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here. / Look how white everything is, how quiet,
how snowed-in. / ... / The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me." (Plath 160 – 161). Also, the last line of the quoted passage alludes to Plath's "Love Letter" – to the transformation the self undergoes in it.

Subject's transformation as one of the most striking motifs of Plath's poetry is one of the elements that strongly appealed to Haugová. Her fascination by the change can be seen in a passage from an untitled poem, printed in *Čisté dni* (*Pure Days*):

pod kožou
telo priestor pohyb
...
stvorím sa
strácam sa
zanikám
bolest' sústredená na jediné miesto
zvliekam sa z kože
strácam perie
vymieňam krv
mením sa na vtáka spevom (*Čisté dni* 39)

My translation of these lines of the poem:

under the skin
body space movement
...
I create myself
I perish
pain centred into one spot
I'm shedding my skin
loosing feathers
changing blood
I'm changing into a bird by singing

The process of transformation as freeing the subject from expectations and demands of others, is, in this poem, inseparably linked to pain and stripping the body of outer layers and with a certain kind of pulsating sensation, just like it is in Plath's *Fever 103°*:

Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern—

...
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise—

...

(My Selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)—. (Plath 232)

Haugová's fascination with transformation, presumably initiated by Plath's poetry, became a steady characteristic of the picture of her own poetic self in her writings, staying with it long after she had finished translating (we may e.g. glimpse the queen bee from "Stings" in her picture of the "winged woman" in the title of her 1999 book). I could give more examples of Haugová's inspiration by one of the world's most original poets that Plath undoubtedly is, but I think the point of my paper has been made – that despite all the tensions between the original and the translation, despite certain irreconcilable differences between two geographically, temporally and culturally remote writers, it is undeniable that we witness strong reverberations of Plath in her successor's poetry. The poetic dialogue between two strong poetic individualities is creative, and will doubtless be inspirational not only for Slovak poetry.

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