"Literary translators preserve the richness of the Slovene language"

An interview with Vesna Velkovrh Bukilica

You translate into Slovenian, one of the 'small languages' in Europe, i.e. a language with relatively few (native-)speakers. For countries with a 'small language' as its official language, translation is of special importance. How relevant is book translation in Slovenia?
Of course, translation is of paramount importance for the culture of any nation, regardless of its 'size'. (Just imagine English-speaking readers not having access to German or Russian literature – or vice versa.) But for 'small' languages, translation can have a fundamental role in constituting its own literature, as was the case in Slovenia. It goes beyond the spreading of new concepts and ideas; it forces us to explore and refine our own linguistic resources.

In Slovenia, having been a part of the multilingual Austrian empire for many centuries, most people in the past were familiar with German, because it was taught in schools. Many intellectuals – those who tended to introduce new ideas – spoke or at least read several other languages, too. Yet it was arguably through translations that the Slovene language fully tapped into its own resources, developed or perfected the verbal tools needed for full cultural and, later, political autonomy (which is a paradox only in appearance) – i.e. for new growth from *within*. And today, in a visually overloaded but linguistically considerably impoverished world, it is no exaggeration to say that it is literary translators who are probably the most efficient *de facto* keepers of the original richness of the Slovene language.

How is this reflected in the position of the translator in Slovenian society (in terms of rights, fees, status etc.)?
I remember reading reviews of translated books that were published in widely read

Slovene magazines before and during WWI. Often, the reviewers' attention to the details of the translations was stupendous (even going as far as offering well-substantiated alternative solutions – delving deep into both the source and the target language – when necessary).

Nowadays, such an in-depth analysis of translations is practically non-existent (except within the context of traductology courses, obviously) and it happens quite often that in book reviews the translator is mentioned almost as an afterthought – as if the book had somehow translated itself, in a sort of august, mysterious parthenogenesis.

But there have been positive changes, too. In the past two decades or so, naming the translator on the cover itself has become the norm. And since this nation reveres books – at least in theory – being introduced as a literary translator tends to garner respect and some sort of admiration among people from all walks of life. But translation fees are lagging considerably behind salaries and living costs, which may be a more realistic measure of the true status of translators in the eyes of 'society' in general.

How was the Slovenian language affected by nationalistic tendencies during and after the Balkan wars? Does this affect your work as a translator?

The Slovene language in Slovenia itself (as opposed to its already limited use in various federal institutions, such as the army) was never under any direct threat. It couldn't have been – after all, it's been a distinct language since at least the 10th century (when the oldest preserved document of the language, the *Freising Manuscripts*, was produced) and survived a thousand-years under multilingual political entities.

What *was* under attack was the coherence of the cultural 'memory' – in effect, the very cultural identity – of the nation. In 1983, it was proposed that school curricula throughout the then -Yugoslavia use a common basic 'template', in which the amount of material assigned to the history and culture of each of the (six) federal republics was to be based on the *percentage* its people represented within Yugoslavia - (NB Yugoslavia had 20 million inhabitants; Slovenia had two million.) Which means that important personalities and developments, essential to the specific culture of some of the nations comprising the common country, were to be expunged, obliterated from the memory of future generations. This was an important spur to revolt (and not only in Slovenia), leading directly to the idea of complete political independence, which was achieved eight years later.

You once called words "both a prison and a space of freedom". Could you explain what you mean by this?

By 'prison', I meant the fact that humans appear unable to think whatever is not worded – a reality that seems curiously neglected or misunderstood in everyday life. Wittgenstein said it exactly 100 years ago: "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world." It's not merely about semantics, about individually conditioned understanding of expressions – it's about concepts of the world, and our

'reality', itself. Words are the instrument of reason; but reason is not the *only*, or truest, mode of cognition we have.

It is by rearranging words in creative ways – poetry does this best – that we can begin to open some 'cracks' in the brick walls of our realities. In this sense, words are a space of (relative) freedom.

And of course, words can be a powerful means of releasing the heavy, bronze-like weight of certain emotions – such as intense gratitude. Or joy. Or the burning slag of anger. Emotions that *need* verbal expression to escape their own tail-biting circuit and perhaps yield some sort of fruit. Sadness, on the other hand, can be deeply silent, far beyond words.

How do you see the relationship between an original work and its translation?

I subscribe to the school of thought that a translation has to be as faithful to the original as possible – including stylistic faults. In my opinion, it is not the translator's place to act as the original's 'editor' – certainly not without the author's explicit and specific consent.

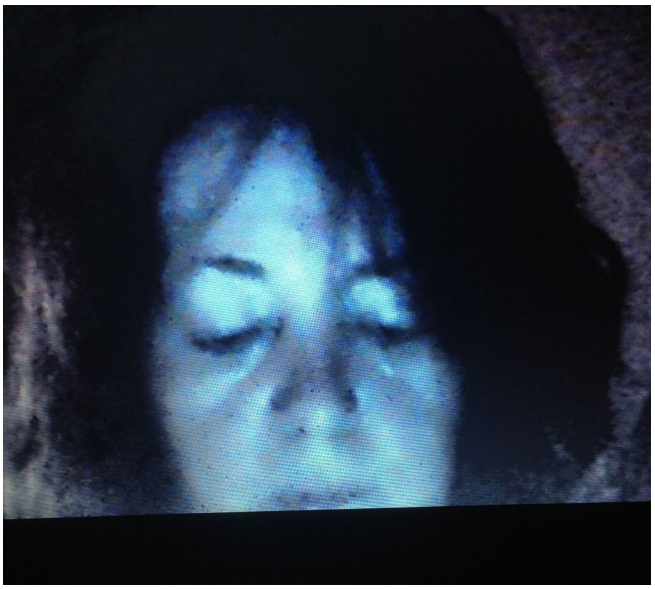
Sometimes a text can be easily improved – so it becomes a better autonomous literary text than the original – but as a *translation*, it will not be a good one. And vice versa, a good translation of a mediocre original will inevitably be a mediocre text itself. I am especially averse to 'ironing-out' any stylistic kinks of the original, simplifying – in effect, depleting – the original so as to make it 'more readable'.

In my opinion, one should strive to make a text exactly as 'readable' as it was originally intended to be. I believe even errors on the author's part (I don't mean typos, obviously) should be considered very carefully – and respected, unless they are of a kind that would seriously harm the integrity and credibility of the text. I know many people are averse to footnotes, but often a discreet explanatory footnote might be much preferable – more loyal, to both the author and the reader – to over-editing the text.

> *"Awareness of linguistic diversity brings a measure of tolerance"*

You grew up with many different languages, Slovenian, Montenegrin Serbian, Spanish among others. Is language diversity important, and do you think 'smaller languages' should be stimulated, protected?

I grew up bilingual from birth, and growing up in South America from age five gave me Spanish, too. Ever since that age I've been interested in translation (probably due to my mother's smiling, patient insistence that every sentence I babbled in Spanish I also repeat in Slovene). A curious and telling anecdote (although I am not yet sure quite *what* is it a telling of): when I was around eight years old, I wrote a short story about a girl, illustrated it, then sewed it together into a proper little 'book' – but on the cover I identified myself as the *translator*. I remember the feeling; somehow, it felt more 'fancy' to be a translator. Very curious. Aged 14, I did my first translation (never submitted



***Vesna Velkovrh Bukilica** is an art historian by profession, with a special affinity for early medieval art and conceptual art, and has worked extensively as a journalist, too. Since the late 1980s she has translated some 50 books, mostly fiction. She also loves subtitling: "The technical – spatial and temporal – limitations help tighten the expression, forcing one to convey both the meaning and the tone as succinctly as possible."*

Vesna Velkovrh Bukilica
Photo: Private Archive

for publication, of course). It was a poem by Srečko Kosovel, a fantastic Slovene poet, which I translated into Spanish.

Other languages followed, as is probably normal under such circumstances. And of course, living in Slovenia (which has two additional official languages, Italian and Hungarian), only a short trip away from countries in which other languages are spoken, linguistic diversity is the only thing I've ever known.

Of course, the same is true of many European communities – and it is one of the most precious assets we Europeans have. You don't have to actually speak those other languages: the presence, and awareness, of linguistic diversity in itself eventually brings about some measure of tolerance, far beyond any political gesturing. It also brings about a deeper understanding of ourselves and our own language.

Languages that are more exposed to the oversized influence of culturally more dominant languages, should be protected, no doubt about it – but protected in the sense of ensuring their existence as functional living organisms, not as folkloristic 'museum' items, to be trotted out on special occasions, as a political symbol of (perhaps) faux-diversity.

Language, any natural language, is possibly the only direct, living and breathing link to the history of the environment and the community from which it grew. Which is why I am also a fervent believer in the fostering of dialects, for example.

How does your multilingual background affect your view on your profession as a literary translator?

For complicated personal reasons, I often regret taking this professional path. At the same time, I am fully aware that probably no other profession would have made me grow so much – in all directions, including the most important one: towards my own core, such as it is – as this one. Whatever I regret, it is in no small part thanks precisely to this profession that has forced me to transcend myself in unexpected directions, deepening and widening my capacity for reflection. In other words, there is nothing to regret, really. Not even this particular regret itself.