

Slovenian 19TH Century literary responses to the Poetry of Lord
Byron
Byronism on the the Slovene Territory in the 19th century

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Abstract

The article examines the influence of lord Byron's poetry through the translations into the Slovenian language in the 19th century. Byron is analyzed through the translations and cultural mediation of the poets dr. France Prešeren, Jovan Vesel Koseski and Josip Stritar, who all, particularly Prešeren, contributed to the development of the Slovenian Romantic Revival movement and Slovenian literature in its own right within the Habsburg and later the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Lord Byron's poetry enabled Slovenian poets and translators to articulate their own national/political identification within the multinational empire.

Keywords: English romanticism, lord Byron, poetry translation, the Habsburg monarchy

Studying verse translation always means being aware of the many parallel processes that shape a culture at a given point of time, taking into account the economic, political, social and “metaphysical” needs implicit in the choice of texts for translation and consequent cultural dissemination. This dimension has been all too often ignored in investigations of various translation processes, even though it would substantially enrich the general knowledge of a cultural history (Bassnett 1991; Maver 1991), for the role of cultural exchange and cultural diffusion by verse translation is undeniable. This study is based on the

results of my detailed research of 19th century byronism in the Slovene cultural space (Maver 1989; 2005), concentrating on the metalinguistic complexity of a particular verse translation into the target language and its significance in a metatextual sense in terms of a modified cultural understanding and valuation of Byron's originals. Regardless of the complex ambiguity of the metalanguage of verse translation, its importance in a metatextual sense, i.e. in terms of (inter/trans) cultural appreciation and understanding, remains unchallenged, as, for example, propagated in the polysystem theory by Toury and Hermans (Hermans 1985) or the more recent interdisciplinary or "integrated approach" in translation studies.

This is why this analysis of the translations of Byron's verse is first and foremost macrotextual, for it is intended to point to some of the specificities of Slovene translations from English Romantic poetry in the 19th century and the socio-political reasons for them. It stresses the metalinguistic complexity of a verse translation into the target language (Slovene) and its significance due to a different cultural reading and understanding of the (English) original. The role of the translator is of particular importance in this regard, as described recently by Lawrence Venuti and his concept of the "invisibility" of the translator. Venuti from the point of view of cultural studies approach researches the foreignizing and/or domesticating tendencies in the process of creating a (verse) translation (Venuti 1995). There were three major 19th century translation projects from Byron's verse into the Slovene language that shall be addressed here, the first one by the most important Slovene Romantic poet, the "father" of Slovene verse and the founder of its national literary tradition, Dr France Prešeren (*Parisina*), the second by Fran Jeriša (*Hebrew Melodies*), and the third one by Jovan Vesel Koseski (*Mazeppa*). All three of them took for translation lord Byron's works, which subsequently also influenced their own verse production and literary orientation.

Until 1830 there had not yet emerged a proper (pre-)Romantic movement in Slovene literature. Even the early poetic works by France Prešeren and his first publications in the Slovene language journal during the Habsburg period in the Slovene lands (an independent state since 1991), *Kranjska čbelica* (The Carniola Bee), in 1830, cannot be considered

as genuinely Romantic (Kos 1987). The period during 1810-1830 in Slovene literature can best be described as one of Enlightenment sentimentalism or “delayed” Enlightenment which was very slowly breaking into the new Romantic sensibility. However, it is generally accepted that the period between 1830 and the revolutionary year 1848 (Prešeren published his poems in this period), which coincided with the “spring” of nations throughout Europe, marks the Slovene high Romanticism as the leading movement in Slovene literature, delayed with regard to Britain by some three decades. In art it is best represented by France Prešeren’s fine lyrical poetry that aimed at and indeed greatly contributed to Slovene national unification and identification, and also by the broad Europe-oriented literary criticism and polyhistorical knowledge of his friend Matija Čop (1797-1835), Prešeren’s friend and advisor (Burian 1940; Jurak 2000).

Just as was the emergence of the Slovene Romantic Revival somewhat delayed in comparison with English Romanticism, there were dated pre-Romantic elements to be found in Slovene literature, interestingly enough, even after the year 1848 in the Habsburg and from 1867 onwards in the dual Austro-Hungarian monarchy throughout the second half of the 19th century, when decadence and realism started to emerge in a felicitous literary mixture. Individual national literary histories very frequently deal with translations in their early periods, because many literatures often begin with translated or adapted works. In Slovenia it was the period of Reformation that represented the beginnings of literature and in which translations predominated. The first ever published translation from English poetry into Slovene, however, was Jožef Žemlja’s translation of Thomas Gray’s poem “An Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (“Sloveča elegija g. Graya, iz engleškiga ravno u tisti meri”; “The famous elegy by Mr Gray, in exactly the same metre”) from 1843 (Maver 1992). Despite its late publication it can nevertheless be considered a delayed echo of pre-Romantic literature, together with the less influential pre-Romantic “ossianism” in Slovenia. The translator modified the translation of Gray’s original to such an extent that it can be described as a “cultural invention”: the source text is modified to suit the demands of the then pre-1848 period as regards the linguistic, cultural, political context of the multinational Habsburg monarchy. The

translation, despite its deficiencies and adaptations, represented an important impetus for the emerging Slovene Romanticism and Slovene “high” artistic literature *per se*, which tended to emphasize language as the main form of national existence through its foremost literary figure Dr France Prešeren. His poetry represents the coming-of-age of Slovene literature. The translation-like nature of the early Slovene national revival culture/literature (during the first three decades of the 19th century) may be considered as a specific instance of a general European cultural pattern in a number of smaller nations, which extends beyond the sphere of sheer translation.

In the 18th century the Slovene-speaking lands, between the Alps to the North, Northern Adriatic and Friuli to the West, the Hungarian plains to the North east and Croatia to the South, belonged to the Habsburg monarchy. The empire was introducing fewer and fewer much needed social reforms and was forced to yield the Slovene territory to Napoleon in 1809. The period during 1809-1813 saw the French rule during which time Slovene intelligentsia got better acquainted with the ideas of the French revolution and accepted some of them as their prime goals, for example the one that aristocracy should lose its power in favour of the rule of the bourgeoisie. In that period Ljubljana became the capital of Illyrian provinces that included also parts of Dalmatia and parts of other neighbouring countries (cf. Charles Nodier and the journal *Télégraphe Officiel*). The Slovene intelligentsia and *literati* accepted the French rule with a relative enthusiasm, because it represented, in comparison with the Habsburg rule, a milder form of political and cultural domination, one that made possible the emergence of the idea of Slovene national revival. This idea articulated itself politically very clearly in the crucial year of 1848 with the idea of a unified Slovenia, a unification of the Slovene lands into a single political entity. These endeavours were put under severe political pressure (especially in culture through the introduction of strict and political censorship) after the fall of Napoleon and throughout the first half of the 19th century, particularly during the so-called Metternich anti-revolutionary regime. Such were the times in which the first translator and admirer of Byron (and his political ideas) into Slovene, Dr France Prešeren, became the herald of “free-thinking” ideas of the Slovene national revival and because of that also a

politically suspect person, which is why censorship frequently prevented the publication of his poems. He feared the same in connection with his translation of Byron's *Parisina* that he left unfinished, possibly also for this very reason.

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1. Dr France Prešeren (1800-1949) was educated and trained as a lawyer, but was never allowed to practise it independently, because of his liberal political ideas and strong national Slovene orientation. His main period of creativity as a poet falls between 1828-1840 when he produced his most significant works (e.g. *Soneti nesreče* – Sonnets of Unhappiness; *Sonetni venec* – A Wreath of Sonnets, 1834; *Krst pri Savici* – The Baptism at the Savica, 1836) published in the then politically very much controlled Habsburg empire for the fear of national movements. His *chef d'oeuvre*, the poem "Zdravljica" (A Toast), was for the first time published in 1844 and represents the most important Slovene political poem stressing the ideas of national liberation, democracy and tolerance in the world at large, and it has become the official Slovene national anthem only recently. Prešeren's relation to European Romanticism (Kos 1987) was, because of the German-speaking milieu, understandably directed more especially towards the German Heidelberg school of poets, and indeed to Byron from among the English influences.

Josef Hilscher (1804-1837), a German living then in Ljubljana was an acquaintance of Prešeren (Maver 2005) and published many translations of Byron in German newspapers then published in Ljubljana (e.g. *Illyrisches Blatt, Carniolia*). Hilscher was at the time considered the best translator of Byron into the German language and published numerous translations; he later moved from Ljubljana to Milan in Italy where he soon died of consumption. It is reasonable to believe, although no explicit written proof of this exists, that Prešeren became interested in Byron also through Hilscher (and Matija Čop), since he started translating Byron's *Parisina* after the return from his study in Vienna in 1833 (*Parizina* MS 471/5, The Manuscript Department of the National and University Library in Ljubljana). However, the unfinished translation was published only in 1849 (Prešeren, in *Pravi Slovenec*), therefore

immediately after 1848 when the first politically more liberal Slovene journals and newspapers emerged in Ljubljana. Prešeren translated only twelve of the twenty sections of *Parisina* and the translation is good, despite certain cultural differences he introduced, but it shall not be discussed here on a microtextual level. The reasons for not finishing the translation may be sought in his letter to his friend Čelakovsky (dated 9 April 1833), in which he writes that he is afraid of censorship, which might not let the translation be published: "Now I am preparing a translation of Byron's *Parisina*, which I will probably not be able to have printed in Carniola, and it is also for this reason that I do not hurry with the translation too much". To be sure, this particular Byron's verse tale (first published in 1816) that speaks about an incestuous love in Ferrara among the d'Este family, is clearly not one of Byron's best known works, but it did influence several Slavonic poets (e.g. Pushkin).

Prešeren in his translation of lord Byron's *Parisina* (Parizina; Byron) expressively visualized the original and performed a few minor mood shifts, he namely introduced into the translation a more free concept of love, the importance of the struggle against social norms and the belief in the social equality of people. Why did he not finish the translation still remains unresolved, although censorship was certainly an important reason (although perhaps not the main one) and it shows just how strongly political and cultural life was controlled in the Habsburg empire. It is also very likely that he simply did not find his work on the translation of *Parisina* quite as important as his own writing (Paternu 1976). Regardless of this incomplete translation, only published after his death in 1943 and then republished several times, Byron's influence on Prešeren's own writing remained strong. Prešeren was particularly influenced by Byron's satirical poetry and the *ottava rima* which he saw used in *Don Juan*. Especially the Byronic hero (Črtomir in *The Baptism*) as a social rebel, who is in search of social and personal happiness, appealed to him. Many of these traits can be seen in Prešeren's greatest epic poem *The Baptism at the Savica*, the first major Slovene mythopoetic epic poem about the early Christianization of Slovene lands. Thus it can be concluded that byronism entered the Slovene cultural space at the front door through the poetry by France Prešeren, which shows just how much Byron decisively influenced European literary and

political history, especially the nations within the multinational Habsburg monarchy (among others including the Slovenes, the Czechs), and elsewhere in Europe: the Poles, the Italians, and of course the Greeks, who were striving for independence and political articulation of their national identity from under the Turkish rule.

2. The translation of lord Byron's *Hebrew Melodies* (Hebrejske melodije) is the second major translation project of Slovene Romanticism and byronism carried out by Fran Jeriša (Jeriša 1852), who published his ambitious project in instalments in *Novice* in 1852 (in altogether no less than 89 instalments, 10-99). Jeriša (1829-1855), who is practically unknown in Slovene literary and cultural history, was also a lesser Romantic patriotic and lyrical poet in his own right. He died of cholera at an early age of 26, or else he would have probably developed into a major 19th century verse translator from English into the Slovene language. Since *Hebrew Melodies* (originally published in 1815) were intended for musical accompaniment (see Byron's note in the Advertisement and his modelling on Thomas Moore's *Irish Melodies*), it is understandable that the metrical scheme of the poems is very regular and consistent and he succeeded in producing a smooth-flowing, rhythmical movement of verse. Jeriša's lengthy introduction to the translation is significant for revealing at least some of the problems Jeriša encountered during the process of rendering *Hebrew Melodies* into Slovene. He writes that these "songs" were composed to be sung which is why one should not look in them for "perfect rhymes, for only dashes can sometimes be found". He uses the original iambic tetrameter, which however at times includes spondees and pyrrhics and is less consistent in observing the rhyme scheme, where he often uses dashes to fill in for the irregularities.

Jeriša points out that he tried to stick to the original metrical scheme, although in many places "the wonderfully compressed shortness of the English language" prevented him from faithfully rendering the original into Slovene, so he deliberately "loosened" the metre. He goes on to say in the introduction: "The poems are the feelings and individual sighs of the *unhappy nation* (italics are mine) – the clear drops in which is reflected a pale dawn of happier times..." (Jeriša 1852: p. 250). The

Jews referred to by Jeriša as an unhappy nation would in his own and the then readers's political context clearly strongly relate the Slovene nation. This was relatively soon after the revolutionary year of 1848 and the renaissance of nations in the empire and throughout Europe perhaps really anticipating and hoping for "happier times", within a "unified" Slovenia? This is perhaps why Jeriša decided to take this particular Byron's text for translation in the first place, because of its common reference points and symbolical socio-political connotation for the Slovene public. Although there were three more Byron's poems translated into the Slovene in the second half of the 19th century ("Vision of Belshazzar" from *Hebrew Melodies*, "Adieu, Adieu My Native Shore", "To Inez"; Varl 1859; Flegerič 1874; 1877) they can be considered isolated cases as regards the dissemination of byronism in Slovenia.

3. Eight years later, in 1868, the minor Slovene poet Jovan Vesel Koseski (1789-1884) translated Byron's verse tale *Mazeppa* (Mazepa Jovan) into the Slovene language (Koseski 1868). Koseski was a Slovene poet born in today's Trieste on the Adriatic Sea (in the 19th century an important Slovene (multi)cultural city, Trst) and followed the sentimental preromantic strain and the rational outlook of the Enlightenment, the period when the very first poems in Slovene were produced. His position was something of a politically more conservative "older" romantic, who nonetheless also strove to strengthen Slovene national consciousness. Upon the publications of the translation as a supplement booklet to the (politically more conservative) Slovene newspaper *Novice*, edited by Janez Bleiweiss in Ljubljana, Josip Stritar fiercely attacked Koseski and his long and detailed analytical article represents an important turning point in the development of Slovene literary criticism (Stritar 1868). He exposed Koseski as a bad translator of Byron and indeed a lesser poet and after this publication Koseski's fame and influence as an "old Slovene" exponent started rapidly to decline as that of his counterpart the liberal Prešeren diagonally started to rise. Koseski's byronism thus indirectly gave an impetus to the romantic and politically quite different cultural development of the Slovene literary tradition since 1868, which has still not been emphasized enough in Slovene literary criticism. Josip Stritar (1836-1923), the most important Slovene literary critic of the second half

of the century, was the first to show Prešeren's true artistic merit and through lord Byron discredited Koseski's fake poetic fame. Stritar was himself a poet with a strong influence of *mal du siècle* (*Dunajski Soneti* – The Vienna Sonnets, 1872).

Stritar started his acerbic attack on the translation by saying that he will himself try to translate a few stanzas to show that "Byron's poem can be translated in exactly the same metre" (Stritar 1868: 96). This statement is important, since Stritar reproaches Koseski for having changed Byron's (Koseski hailed Byron as "one of the first poets of the world") metrical and rhyme scheme into an *ottava rima*, which he simply happened to like. This forced him to change the original, add new things and the translation can practically be regarded as an adaptation. Stritar correctly concludes that the text is in some places completely "incomprehensible", since Koseski downright invented words to achieve rhyming at his own free will, translated directly, word for word, to the detriment of the content, had no literary taste, and the like. The translation is, however, more interesting in the macrotextual sense, being the third major translation project from English Romantic poetry into the Slovene in the 19th century. Koseski obviously chose this verse tale for translation for its socio-political communicative value, to appeal to the then readers within the given political context. To this end he most likely himself decided to underline Byron's verses in the translation "Justice for everyone!" altogether three times. This is indicative of his pan-Slavonic wish to gain justice, freedom, independence, free political organization, freedom to use the national language(s) for all nations within the Austro-Hungarian empire.

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On the basis of the analysis of byronism and the three major verse translations from English into the Slovene language, it can be concluded that the translators (Prešeren, Jeriša and Koseski) who decided to embark on translating Byron's work were subsequently to some extent also influenced by the poet in their own verse production and literary orientation. Byron's poetry and byronism as the broad concept of cultural, national and political mediation and influence, through its translation,

namely resulted in a fashionable trend in the then Slovene lands within the empire and after 1848 significantly influenced the development of the Slovene Romantic Revival started in 1830. Byron's poetry opened up for Slovene poets-translators the possibility of their own national, linguistic articulation and, by extension, the individual national political identification within the Central European Habsburg (and then Austro-Hungarian) empire. Critical receptions of these translated works, especially in the case of Koseski in 1868 (implicitly echoing the 1867 reform(s) of the empire into a dual monarchy), also show the ongoing struggle between the "older" and the "younger" generation of Slovene 19th century poets and literary critics, which can in certain ways be compared with the British Older and Younger Romantics. It reflects the struggle between the persistence of the ideas emanating from the Enlightenment throughout the second half of the 19th century and the emerging Romanticism, both of which supported, albeit each employed different ways of achieving it, the nation state and the (political) concept of the "unified" Slovene lands.

Byron's poetry was in the 19th century the only English Romantic poetry better known in Slovenia, which most certainly has to do with his struggle for democratic ideals, for an individual freedom from social constraints and for the freedom and political independence of nations. Although Byron has been for a long time better known and critically more appreciated on the Continent than in England, the revolutionary as well as the artistic content of his work is nowadays more readily acknowledged in the reexamination of his work (Curran 1996). In order to avoid and to go beyond unilateral one-sided purely literary interpretations and analyses, this analysis was made in the context of intercultural and international influences of Byron's oeuvre. This helps to avoid the cultural and literary reduction in examining the total effect of a verse translation in the target culture: translators and translations are always cultural mediators, which is a much broader view than the traditional positivist concept of a literary influence. Byronism in the Slovene lands within the Habsburg monarchy (Slovenia as a political entity only came into existence in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia after the Great War, became independent in 1991 and part of the European Union in 2004) is yet another aspect of the various national language(s) of romanticism and byronism in Europe in the 19th century. Byron's poetry and the aftermath

of byronism through its translations, resulted in an influential trend in the Slovene linguistic and cultural space in the 19th century and significantly contributed to the development of the Slovene Romantic Revival. Lord Byron's poetry opened up for Slovene poets the possibility of their own national literary articulation and political identification within the Habsburg and later the Austro-Hungarian empire.

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