

MEDIATOR BETWEEN TWO CULTURES: LOUIS ADAMIC'S TRANSLATION OF ALOJZ KRAIGHER'S SHORT STORY INTO ENGLISH

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At the beginning of his literary career Louis Adamic translated a number of Slovene literary texts into English. In the first place there was Ivan Cankar whose long short story *Hlapec Jernej in njegova pravica* he even published as a tiny book¹ besides ten other short stories and vignettes which appeared in various papers and magazines.² Henry A. Christian assesses Adamic's literary beginnings as follows,

»Adamic published original material in Pearson's Magazine while he was still in the army; but for the first few years in San Pedro he faced his military duty by day and struggled with English grammar in the evening, and much of his work consisted of translations of Slavic authors. When in 1925 he became a clerk in the municipal port pilot's office, however, he had a job which allowed him more time to write. He became a regular contributor to the several Haldeman-Julius publications and continued to place his translations in Our World, The Living Age, the Chicago Slovenian daily Prosveta, and other similar periodicals. One Slavic author whom he often translated was Ivan Cankar.«³

The 1920s were, indeed, the time of Adamic's apprenticeship both in terms of English, the subtleties of which Adamic had yet to learn as well as his literary career. Adamic was persistent and obviously set himself a clear goal to become an American author right early. Nevertheless, he was aware of his own limitations and indirectly admitted that the whole »translation period« was for him

¹ Vanguard Press, 1926.

² See J. Petrič, *Svetovi Louisa Adamiča*, Ljubljana: Cankarjeva založba, 1982, pp. 10–11.

³ Henry A. Christian, *Louis Adamic: A Checklist*, The Kent State University Press, 1971, p. XXII.

little more than exercise to achieve the verbal expertise he needed as a writer in his own right,

»In my early teens, between 1910 and 1913, just before I came to America, while a student in Lublyana, Ivan Cankar was my favorite author (and in some ways he is to this day). He was then at his apex as a creative writer; an authentic genius; a novelist, poet, dramatist, essayist, social critic, polemicist, and – with Oton Zupanchich – an important factor in the development of the Slovenian language as a means of communicating the subtlest and deepest feelings and most complex thoughts. Writing, he practically created a new language, fluid, limitless in its possibilities of expression and profoundly intimate (which, unfortunately, makes it difficult to translate him adequately into another language), yet completely understandable to everyone who knew the words or materials out of which he made them.«⁴

By the time he translated his first Cankar story, »Simple Martin«⁵ based on the story »Bebec Martin«⁶ Adamic had spent less than eight years in the United States, the first years of which could not have been particularly educational in terms of learning English: the first two years he worked in the mail room of Frank Sakser's New York Slovene-language paper *Glas naroda* from where he advanced to the editorial office. Then, in 1916, he quarreled with Sakser and left the paper. The next few months he supported himself with odd jobs. Then, in December 1916, he enlisted in the army with the purpose of becoming a naturalized citizen (which he did), and was discharged in January, 1923. That period, no doubt, represents the beginning of Adamic's Americanization in every respect, but particularly so in the period after his discharge from the army when he lived in San Pedro, a little seaport town not far from Los Angeles. He became a close observer of public life in the city and wrote many an article on social issues for the *Haldeman-Julius Monthly*. His interest in social aberrations was not coincidental; in fact, it was deeply rooted in his personal life. Although he was not the child of a desperately poor family – on the contrary, his parents were relatively well-off – survival in Carniola was hard for a big family like theirs and Adamic was no stranger to hard work and self-denial. It is a well-known fact that he remained a »hard-working peasant« throughout his life, a veritable workaholic.

⁴ Louis Adamic, *My America, 1928–1938*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1938, p. 131.

⁵ It appeared in *The Living Age*, Dec. 24, 1921, pp. 773–75.

⁶ First published in *Slovan*, 16 (1917), 67 and reissued in the same year in Cankar's collection *Podobe iz sanj*.

Another legacy of his youth was his lifelong interest in matters concerning small people – be it social, political or any other.

When we survey his translations and wonder whether he had chosen the texts to be translated after a careful consideration or rather haphazardly, we cannot but observe that Adamic made a distinction between, say, his translations of Ivan Cankar and some other, less charismatic but more socially committed, even »proletarian« authors. Cankar, an »untranslatable« author as he was, he treated with more respect which shows in his attempt to follow the original more closely if compared with some other authors who fell prey to his adaptation (this included cutting the text – not always for its »untranslatability«), in short, he used those texts to test his skills as a writer-in-becoming. I am pretty sure this was done without Adamic fully realizing it, especially when, in his ambition to issue a book of his translations,⁷ he revised them again and again regardless of the original.

Let us have a look at Adamic's translation of Alojz Kraigher's short story »Martin Klobasa« which was published under the title »Builders« in 1924.⁸ Already the title of the English version suggests adaptation. The name Martin Klobasa would tell nothing to American readers and they would not be tempted to read the story; the new title was thematically more suggestive but not true to the original.

How come Adamic selected the above text? Part of the answer may lie in his fascination with literary naturalism. Alojz Kraigher (1877–1959) was its foremost representative in Slovene literature. Adamic was attracted to naturalistic authors, especially in the 1920s, seeing in them the predecessors of big social changes that he, at that time a socialist sympathizer, believed inevitable and necessary. In January 1927 Adamic wrote a critical article on Theodore Dreiser for the *Haldeman-Julius Quarterly*.⁹ The article, one of the worst pieces of critical writing Adamic ever wrote, reveals Adamic's inability to understand Dreiser's work, in particular his pessimism which must have been in striking contrast to his own contagious optimism. In Dreiser he saw a critical radical (!), a patriot, yet a fatalist... Without really knowing why, he read most of his novels despite

⁷ See J. Petrič, *Naši na tujih tleh*, pp. 39–47.

⁸ *The Living Age*, Feb. 2, 1924, pp. 225–28. Based on the original published in the *Ljubljanski zvon*, 1923, pp. 280–94.

⁹ Theodore Dreiser: An Appreciation: He Looks at Life Honestly, Calmly, Sympathetically, Helplessly, *Haldeman-Julius Quarterly*, Jan. 1927, no. 2, pp. 93–98.

(or perhaps just because of) the fact that Dreiser was blacklisted as immoral at the time.

Another reason for Adamic's choice of Kraigher's story might have been his reading of Nietzsche. Though Adamic was no professed expert on the latter, he nevertheless repeatedly referred to him (even in his Dreiser article).¹⁰ The idea of the »superman« obviously appealed to him: one of his own short stories is titled »Superman«¹¹ and he also translated Josef Svatopluk Machar's Bohemian story of the same title into English.¹² Martin Klobasa, the protagonist of Kraigher's story no doubt corresponds with the idea of a superman – a »peasant king« who nevertheless ends tragically.

Adamic's short introductory remark to his translation of Kraigher's story foreshadows his translating procedure: what he finds of a particular interest in Kraigher's story is that »he gives an insight into that yearning for the soil which has led to the breaking-up of the big estates in all the new countries of Central Europe.«¹³ Accordingly, Adamic focuses on certain parts of Kraigher's story and does not translate the whole.

The original speaks about a peasant named Martin Klobasa who falls ill and calls for a doctor one cold winter night. His brother Andrej fetches the physician on his sleigh. The doctor diagnoses pneumonia but remains optimistic despite the patient's obvious bad condition partly because he yields to the sick man's pleading. After his departure, Martin mentally reviews his life – his motherless youth under a dominant father, the old man's tragic death, Martin's subsequent marriage and birth of two children (who are still small), his evolving plans to build for himself and his family a true peasant kingdom – part of which he has already realized. But there is a lot to be done yet. Above all he wants to build a new house for the family. However, his dreams will not come true. The patient's condition deteriorates rapidly, the doctor – who has just woken up from a nightmare – is summoned again but cannot help Martin anymore.

¹⁰ Adamic, however, knew some of Nietzsche's work and was even willing to write about it. On February 8, 1929 he wrote a letter to Glenn Hughes, the editor of University of Washington Chapbooks, offering him to write a pocketbook titled »Nietzscheism in America«; the book would deal with the influence of Nietzsche in the U.S.

¹¹ *American Mercury*, 15, December 1928, pp. 438–49.

¹² *The Living Age*, December 8, 1923, no. 414, pp. 469–473.

¹³ *The Living Age*, February 2, 1924, 320, 4152, 225.

The story is told in the third person singular by an omniscient narrator who knows everything, even the protagonist's most intimate thoughts, emotions and feelings. It is based on a double conflict – the protagonist's agonizing confrontation with death as well as the doctor's desperate battle with his conscience. The plot is quite complex as it involves Martin's retrospective summary of his life, personal achievement and future plans. Besides the protagonist who is a fully drawn character, his antagonist, the nameless doctor, is a round character as well. He is a man devoted to his profession, on call round the clock, yet unable to face reality in a critical moment. The narrator gives detailed descriptions of the epic space that are typically naturalistic – however only those directly linked with Martin's fate are included. Fate is namely what determines his life and neither he nor the self-sacrificing doctor is able to beat it. The narrator steadily and gradually strains the psychological tension through numerous foreshadowings: Andrej's nightmare concerning his brother being buried alive, the sick man's visible exhaustion, the doctor's nightmarish dream of Martin's death.

Already a brief comparison of the original and Adamic's translation reveals a major difference in length – the translation being much shorter. A comparison of paragraphs – randomly chosen as my intention is simply to illustrate Adamic's predominating strategy – reveals that Adamic in fact translated only little. The major part of the text is adapted, which means that words, phrases and even whole sentences and paragraphs are omitted or new ones are added. Adamic wanted to relate an interesting story and he had American readers in mind when he translated/adapted it. Elements that seemed too much »local color« were simply omitted or replaced by something more neutral (they were probably too difficult to translate anyhow). Parts of the text that are essential for they not only create emotional atmosphere but foreshadow the tragic outcome, have also been left out, e.g. the fearful echoing of the doorbell in the hall of the doctor's house when Andrej comes for him for the first time. Let us quote a section of the opening passage and its »translation« to illustrate the above thesis:

»'Hii, fuksa, – po zdravje voziš, ne po smrt! – Ee, prama, – nikar se ne obešaj nanjo, ko se nam mudi!' – se je jezil izpod sršečih brkov, pokritih z ivjem, in dvignil luč, da bi pregledal cesto pred seboj.

Kobili sta močnejše suvali z gobci in se prestopali hitreje, sopihajoč navzgor in tu in tam zdrsavajoč s kopiti po spolzki cesti.

Na razpotju je krenil voznik na stransko pot in ustavil pred pritlično, precej gosposko hišo, ki se je zmrznjeno stiskala pod nekoliko prenizko streho. Vrgel je

plahto preko konjskih hrbtov, posvetil z lučjo k vratom in pritisnil na gumb električnega zvonca.

Tenko in drdrajoče je zazvenelo iz hiše, prestrašeno odmevajoč po veži in vzbujajoč tesnobo, ko da kliče nekdo na pomoč. Voznik se je ozrl po oknih in čakal, da se kdo prikaže. Pogled se mu je za trenutek ustavil na stekleni črni deski, s katere so nerazločno pobliskavale zlate črke zdravnikovega napisa.¹⁴

»'Hey, Brownie, old girl, get up! You're on an important errand!' shouted the man in the sleigh through his frozen moustache. 'And you too, Blackie, don't try to hang yourself on that old lady by your side! Get up!' He swung his whip impatiently and then lifted the lantern to see the road ahead of him.

The animals increased their pace, desperately jerking their heads up the hill, and now and then slipping on the smooth, frozen road. At the crossroads the driver turned off on the little side-road and presently halted in front of a small, rather prosperous-looking house that lay huddled in a clump of trees. He quickly threw a couple of blankets over the steaming mares, took the lantern, and hastened toward the door, where he pressed the electric button.

As the sharp, thin sound of the bell cut into the stillness of this comfortable dwelling and then died away, the man's gaze first paused for a moment on the gold letters of the doctor's shingle above the door and then turned to the windows, to wait for a light to appear in response to his call.¹⁵

Adamic's adaptation includes new information, e.g. in the last paragraph he speaks about the doctor's »comfortable dwelling«, the driver waiting for »a light to appear in response to his call« whereas he leaves untranslated phrases like »Kobili sta močnejše suvali z gobci« and »ki se je zmrznjeno stiskala pod nekoliko prenizko streho« – to mention just the most obvious incompatibilities.

The worst mistake made by Adamic, however, was his decision to leave out the whole concluding section of Kraigher's story including both Martin's retrospective review of his life, personal achievement and plans and the doctor's emotional quandary knowing that, once again, he may have promised too much and that, in fact, the patient's chances to survive are practically nonexistent. Thus he completely changed the nature of Kraigher's story which, on the one hand, focuses on the final reckoning between the protagonist's life intentions and his fate but on the other hand presents a deep psychological conflict of the antago-

¹⁴ Martin Klobasa, *Slovan*, 16 (1917), 280.

¹⁵ Builders, *The Living Age*, February 2, 1924, 320, no. 4152, 225.

nist, a good-hearted but weak person who defies fate although he knows there is no hope. This, second part is wholly missing in Adamic's version of Kraigher's text. Indeed, he almost wrote a new short story that centers around the first conflict – the disillusionment of a man who, on his way to success, must give in to death.

The question is why Adamic chose such a drastic short-cut to present a Slovene text to the American readers. In my opinion part of the answer is his inadequate knowledge of English at the time. Kraigher's naturalistic expression must have been too demanding for Adamic then. Why would he omit a passage like,

»Martin Klobasa je bil koščten in mršav mož. Oči so mu ležale v globokih, temnih jamah. Jaremnice so mu štrlele iznad udrtih lic in koža se je svetlikala na njih; pa je bilo videti, ko da se razpenja dvoje koščtenih jarmov od oči do ušes.«¹⁶

But there are, no doubt, other reasons for Adamic's unique »translation method«. As far as Kraigher's short story is concerned, his personal understanding of the text might play an important role. Adamic namely compared it with Prežihov Voranc's »Borba«¹⁷ which he translated as »Land Hunger«,¹⁸ in both texts he saw as the most important man's elementary struggle for survival – his struggle to provide food, acquire land and other property. So, it seems, other things were less important and could be left out.

Still another reason for adaptation may have been the pressure of the editors who demanded short short stories. Among Adamic's correspondence there is a letter written by the editor of *The Living Age*, Victor Clarke,¹⁹ who informs the author that he has been forced to shorten a translated short story of his to 5,000 words so as to fit into the allotted space. Clarke was no exception, other editors required short, powerful texts, too.

And finally, once the translations had been done, Adamic regarded them as his own »products«. When he gathered the texts for his book of translations²⁰ he corrected the texts, even the ones previously published in papers and magazines, in an attempt to polish his style, no longer paying attention to the original.

¹⁶ *Slovan*, 16 (1917), 284.

¹⁷ *Ljubljanski zvon*, 1921, pp. 49–53, 113–117, 164–169, 237–240.

¹⁸ *The Living Age*, February 17, 1923, pp. 417–25.

¹⁹ Dated February 2, 1923.

²⁰ There actually exist two versions: one from the early 1920s and another, the so-called »Whipple selection« from the early 1930s. There may even have been a third version that got lost in the fire of 1951.

Adamič's adaptation of Kraigher's story substantially changed the meaning of the story and it failed to transfer the original stylistic and formal characteristics. The new text is a free version of Kraigher's but nevertheless remains recognizable. Despite the shortcomings of Adamič's version the author has the first attempt of a translation of any Kraigher's text into English to his credit and this is no small achievement. The leading representative of Slovene naturalism was thus introduced to American readers and, when the story was reprinted by the *Prosveta* on September 22, 1926 to Americans of Slovene origin as well.

POVZETEK

**POSREDNIK MED DVEMA KULTURAMA: LOUISA
ADAMIČA PREVOD KRAIGHERJEVE KRATKE
ZGODBE V ANGLEŠČINO**

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Na začetku svoje literarne kariere je Louis Adamič prevedel v angleščino več slovenskih kratkih zgodb, največ Cankarjevih. Objavljal jih je v raznih ameriških literarnih revijah ter na angleških straneh slovensko-ameriškega časopisa Prosveta. S prevajanjem je preizkušal svoje znanje angleškega jezika, hkrati pa je z izborom tematike - zgodbe bodisi pripovedujejo o tegobah in stiskah malih ljudi, o ponižanih in zatiranih bodisi o problemih bogatašev - vsaj delno potešil svoje zanimanje za odklone v človeški družbi, najsi bo socialne, politične ali kakršnekoli že. Še posebej ga je privlačil kontrast bogastva in revščine z vsemi posledicami za človeško psiho.

Leta 1924 je prevedel in objavil kratko zgodbo Alojza Kraigherja "Martin Klobasa" - v prevodu "Builders". Pri tem izboru je pomembno vedeti, da je bil Adamič ljubitelj naturalistične književnosti in še posebej oboževalec del Theodora Dreiserja.

Njegov prevod je bolj adaptacija kot prevod, saj je izpustil dobršen del besedila; osredotočil se je na "materialni" konflikt osrednjega junaka, izvirajoč

iz dejstva, da zaradi bolezni in bližajoče se smrti ne bo mogel dokončati svojega dela. Drugi del zgodbe, ki zadeva psihološki konflikt junakovega zdravnika, pa je praktično v celoti izpuščen.

Razlogov za takšno priredbo besedila je lahko več. Adamič je imel pred očmi ameriškega bralca, ki je zahteval zanimivo, napeto zgodbo. Elemente, ki so preveč pokrajinsko značilni, je preprosto izpuštil. Največjo napako pa je storil, ko je izpuštil celoten zaključek zgodbe, v katerem so zajeti junakov retrospektivni pregled lastnega življenja ter načrti za prihodnost pa tudi zdravnikov notranji boj, zavedajoč se, da je spet enkrat pacientu obljubil preveč. S takšno skrajšavo je Adamič povsem spremenil značaj Kraigherjevega dela. Lahko bi dejali, da je ustvaril novo zgodbo o razočaranem kmetu, ki se mora na svoji poti k uspehu predati smrti.

Drugi razlogi za takšno svojsko metodo pa so lahko Adamičevo razumevanje besedila kot elementarni boj za obstanek, pritisk urednikov revij, ki so zahtevali kratke kratke zgodbe in slednjič tudi Adamičeva poustvarjalna žilica, ki mu ni dala miru in ga je silila v vedno nove popravke že prevedenih besedil – brez ozira na izvornik.