

Šťastná, Zuzana

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ZUZANA ŠŤASTNÁ

## THE CZECH FACES OF JOHN DONNE

### Abstract

John Donne's poetry has held a special fascination for generations of readers, and, as Antoine Berman states in his *Pour une critique des traductions*, it is no less of a challenge for translators. The Czech reception of Donne's poetry starts after the twentieth-century Donne revival in the English-speaking countries, and to date six translators have been more substantially involved in the rendering of his poetic works into Czech. Their choice of texts for translation, treatment of form and aesthetic preferences illustrate their widely different motivations and approaches to translational, ranging from a deep scholarly interest in the poet's work to a spontaneous unschooled translation intended for private use and spiritual sustenance.

### Keywords

*John Donne; translation reception; translation criticism; Czech translations*

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John Donne's poetry has held a special fascination for generations of readers, and has always posed a formidable challenge to translators. In his *Pour une critique des traductions: John Donne*, Antoine Berman has used Donne translations into French to offer an inspiring model of translation criticism. In an unpublished PhD dissertation written in Russian, Anton Nesterov has examined the available Russian translations and the overall impact Donne has had on Russian poetry, especially through the work of his admirer and translator Joseph Brodsky. Both Berman and Nesterov present their own versions of Donne, describing the qualities of his poetry they consider important and potentially enriching for their vernacular literary contexts. Closely analysing the translations and considering the circumstances in which they originated, they try to determine to what extent the rendition of these qualities has been successful.

Drawing on my PhD thesis, this article adopts a similar strategy, discussing the Czech translations of Donne. Out of the many aspects which Berman finds relevant for judging a translation, I will focus only on the translators' profiles and their reasons for rendering Donne into Czech. After examining *what* they translate, i.e. which facets of Donne's personality and writing they consider interesting, I will also briefly comment on their specific contributions to the *how* of Donnean translation. First, however, let me outline the chief features of Donne's poetics that I will refer to in examining the translations.

Compared to Britain, the reception of Donne's poetry in most European countries is relatively recent. In his lifetime, appreciation of his poems was a sign of refinement: they circulated in manuscript among the cultured elite and in the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century we still find echoes of his poetics in the works of other authors, a notable example being Marvell's 'Definition of Love'. However, throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century and, with some exceptions, the Victorian era, Donne was out of favour with the majority of critics and readers. The following sample of a 1763 "rewriting" of his famous 'Canonization' in the *Gentleman's Magazine* throws some amusing light on the reasons:

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>For godsake hold your tongue, and let me love,<br/> Or chide my palsie, or my gout,<br/> My five gray haire, or ruin'd fortune flout,<br/> With wealth your state, your minde with Arts improve,<br/> Take you a course, get you a place,<br/> Observe his honor, or his grace,<br/> Or the Kings reall, or his stamped face<br/> Contemplate; what you will, approve,<br/> So you will let me love.</p> | <p>Forbear thy grave advice, and let me love<br/> Or lay on nature, not on me the blame:<br/> Can words the venerable snow remove<br/> From age's head or quench a fever's flame?<br/> As soon the winged hours at thy request<br/> May cease to flow, as love forsake my breast.</p>  |
| (Grierson: 14)  | <p>Let others labour to be rich and great:<br/> I envy not the happiness that springs<br/> From wealth abundant, or the blaze of state,<br/> The prince's whisper or the smile of kings<br/> Do thou ambition's dangerous charms adore,<br/> But let me kneel to beauty's softer power.</p> <p style="text-align: right;"><i>(The Gentleman's Magazine: 472)</i></p> |

Donne's colloquialisms and gritty concreteness (gout, five gray hairs, ruined fortune) have given way to polite generalities. The stream of exasperated imperatives has been regulated and partly transformed into vague rhetorical questions. The nervous irritability of the first few lines, with their varied length and shifting stresses, has been smoothed out: "get you a place" has become "ambition's dangerous charms adore".

This example points to some of the objections raised against Donne in the period between roughly the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and his revival in the 1920s. While revealing what grated on eighteenth-century ears, it also highlights the very qualities for which Donne was praised in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These include his dramatic realism, the artfully simulated spontaneity of his speakers, the skillful

drawing of readers into the poem by throwing them *in medias res* and forcing them, from the clues provided, to guess at the particulars of the situation and at the nature of the speaker-addressee relationships. The interpretive effort demanded of the reader in the first stanza of “Canonization” is substantial; we quickly move from one context to another, each evoked by just a few words: the speaker’s alleged deficiencies, grave in the eyes of the world but irrelevant to himself if only he is allowed to love, the ironic advice given to the addressee(s), the image of the court fleetingly evoked by “his grace” and “King’s real [face]”, the topic of money hoarding, implicit in the contemplation of the king’s “stampèd face” etc. The stanza shows not only the dynamism of Donne’s lines, but also his ability to make use of the most diverse stuff of everyday life (from all too common diseases or graying hair to coins, and – in the second stanza – merchant ships, soldiers or legal disputes). Judith Scherer-Herz (2007: 106) relevantly notes that W. C. Williams’s claim in “Patterson” that “there are no ideas but in things” has a particular resonance for Donne. Moreover, all these “stubbornly concrete” words and experiences are always forming new wholes in his poems, fused more or less successfully by the heat of the imagination.

Donne has also been praised for his special blend of spontaneity and reflection, earnest emotion and play. One moment he is extremely simple; it seems his speakers are almost choking with serious emotion.

She’is all States, and all Princes I,  
Nothing else is

One of them declares in “The Sunne Rising”, as if too moved, too exultantly happy, to utter more than these few words. But as we learn just two lines down, his emotion has neither tied his tongue, nor paralyzed his brain cells to any significant degree, since, in the following passage, he seems to be safely back in his more intellectual and playful mode, apostrophizing the sun and advising it on its work schedule:

Thou sunne art halfe as happy’as wee,  
In that the world’s contracted thus;  
Thine age askes ease, and since thy duties bee  
To warme the world, that’s done in warming us.

(Grierson 1912: 11–12)

After this extreme simplicity, there comes a rather convoluted sentence: the love that seemed almost overwhelmed by its own force becomes a love playfully patronizing. Moreover, the imagery of the poem is fraught with ambiguity, with the speaker simultaneously exalting himself and his lover above all worldly splendour, yet repeatedly using that allegedly superficial world of wealth and power as a source of images for his love. There really seems to be no mystical “unified sensibility” in Donne, but rather a frequent flashing to and fro between various modes of thinking and feeling.

One of these modes that deserves special mention is what Leishman (103) calls “restless itching ingenuity”, a compulsion to be witty, even in a manner irrelevant to, or conflicting with, the overall argumentative and emotional drift of the poem. These instances, even though the poems in which they occur are not always Donne’s best, are particularly interesting to look at in translation, since their treatment may tell us a lot about the translators’ general aesthetic preferences.

### **The beginnings of Czech reception of Donne**

Due to Donne’s fall from grace in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, whose effects lasted well into the 19<sup>th</sup>, the first translations of his poetry in most European countries closely follow the 1920s revival of interest in his poetry in the English-speaking world. This is commonly associated with the editorial work of Herbert Grierson and T. S. Eliot’s reaction to Grierson’s anthology *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century* in his famous essay “Metaphysical poets”.

In the Czech lands, the echoes of the Metaphysical revival combine with the more general surge of interest in the Baroque in the 1920s and 1930s. This influence comes mainly from the German-speaking countries, where the interest in Baroque sensibility gradually spreads from the field of art history (Wölfflin) to literature. Under this influence, Czechs rediscover their own Baroque literary tradition, and leading intellectuals of the interwar Czechoslovak Republic also write more broadly about the European literary Baroque: in 1935 a prominent literary critic, F. X. Šalda, publishes a long essay on the European Baroque and the literary historian Václav Černý follows suit in 1938 with his “Essay on the Baroque in Poetry” (*Esej o básnickém baroku*). While both these literary figures are Romance language specialists and Donne is not at the centre of their attention, his first Czech translations are, to some extent, also a product of this general fascination with Baroque aesthetics.

### **E.A. Saudek: Donne’s colloquial and dramatic voice**

Donne’s first Czech translator, E.A. Saudek, exemplifies the merging of the German (“Baroque”) and English (“Metaphysical”) influences. Growing up in Vienna, he imbibed German cultural influences from an early age, went on to study the German language and literature at Charles University and eventually published a highly successful selection of German Baroque poets. But his introduction to Donne in the 1920s was due to his friendship with René Wellek, then his fellow student in Prague, who was reading for a degree in English literature at Charles and was no doubt familiar with the latest developments on the English literary scene, including the revaluation of Donne’s poetry.

Though Saudek managed to translate only seven poems, he was, in the words of a fellow translator, Aloys Skoumal, “obsessed with Donne” and “meant to

translate much more” (Skoumal 1965: 27, my translation). Judging by his choice of Donne’s secular poems (‘Apparition’, ‘Woman’s Constancy’, ‘The Flea’, ‘Twicknam Garden’, ‘Good Morrow’, ‘The Relic’), it is clear that he was taken especially by Donne’s dramatic qualities, the argumentative vehemence and colloquial directness of the speaker’s voice. And it is primarily the tone of this voice – earnest, teasing, satirical or self-dramatizing – that his translations set out to preserve.

The poems Saudek chose mostly use the complex Donnean stanzas with variable line length, in which the tempo quickens or slows down in close relation to meaning and emphasis. He was apparently experimenting with different approaches to Donne’s intricate metrical and rhyme schemes: his rendering of *The Flea* is, formally, as close to the original as a Czech translation can get. This, however, takes its toll: the artificiality of word order in the Czech version and the occasional archaism may create a certain detachment in the readers so that they become passive observers of the speaker’s argumentative fireworks rather than active, curious participants in the situation who would be compelled to speculate on the identity and character of the addressee. Part of Donne’s charm – the drawing of the reader into the world of the poem – may thus be lost.

As a future accomplished translator of drama (namely Shakespeare), Saudek may have realized this danger. In any case, in his other translations he treats the originals quite boldly, loosening both metrical and rhyming constraints – without obliterating the patterns completely – to gain more maneuvering space and remain as true to the *tone* as possible. The relative freshness and directness of his versions create a real sense of intimacy and of a shared world in the more serious poems (“Good Morrow”, parts of “The Relic”), and manage to convey much of the sarcasm or subtle mockery in the more playful ones. He realized it was wiser to try to recreate the same sense of an organic unity of form and meaning than to preserve the form itself, and this realization is the main inspiring feature of his early attempts.

It seems that his translations, published in the literary magazines of the 1930s and later reedited, served as a true introduction to Donne for a whole generation of readers: in an article written to commemorate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Saudek’s birth, a leading theatre director, Ota Ornest, mentions specifically this handful of poems, remembering how much the translator’s “masterful rendering” of them broadened the literary horizons of contemporary young readers (Ornest 1984: 5).

### **Czech Donne in England**

The other two early translators of Donne worked in exile during the early 1940s and were more directly influenced by the English literary milieu. The young Jewish refugee and budding poet Josef Lederer (1917–1985) studied English literature in Swansea and later at King’s College, London. Libuše Vokrová-Ambrosová (1907–1997), Pánková by her pen name, who worked as a prose translator and

literary editor before the war, was in direct contact with Donne's former champion T. S. Eliot: she translated two of his *Four Quartets* about the same time as Donne's poems.

The first, very slim volume of Donne's poetry in Czech, which was eventually published in London, was to be a collaboration of the two translators. Unfortunately, they fell out over some of Pánková's corrections to Lederer's part of the selection (Langer 2006: 5–7, 311), and she eventually replaced his four translations with her own.

### Joseph Lederer: a Donne scholar

Lederer's translations remained in proofs<sup>1</sup>; only his 'Ecstasy' later appeared in *Obzor*, a literary magazine of the Czech exile community, alongside his first long article on Donne (Lederer 1944). Even though the other texts were apparently never finalized and had no impact on the Czech reception, Lederer's work is as inspiring for potential future colleagues as Saudek's, for he, too, highlights an important aspect of Donne.

His very choice of poems is excellent: 'Valediction Forbidding Mourning', 'Ecstasy', 'Nocturnall upon St. Lucy's Day', and the sonnet 'Batter my Heart' all represent the very best of Donne. It is also quite telling, because all these are poems of "extreme" emotional experience: perfect love, total emptiness and despair, or, in the case of Donne's holy sonnet, an anguished cry for mystical experience. It has been said of Donne that "he is only capable of present emotion [...] His energy is often strained in an effort to carry and then maintain emotion [...] at an acme of intensity, for 'his first minute, after noone, is night'". Even the quieter moments of his poems "seem to crystallize into a state of permanence, though not of stillness: the very pulse of life is caught in a throbbing instant" (Ellrodt 2000: 112). Lederer seems to be especially drawn by this feature of Donne. Some passages in his translations stand out, in comparison with later versions, by his consistent preference for the continuous, or progressive, verbal aspect, which has the very effect of arresting the moment and opening it up to eternity. Thus in Lederer's translation of 'Valediction Forbidding Mourning' the lovers' souls are expanding and the perfect circle is being drawn by the compasses as though in a state of perpetual present, before the reader's eyes. This enhances the arresting, memorable quality of Donne's famous images, especially in comparison with the rival translations, which often focus on the result of the action in the future rather than on its "here and now".

The intensity of emotional experience is also the leitmotif of Lederer's article, which introduces Donne to the Czech expatriate community. The article shows its author already as a Donne scholar in the making, a promise he did fulfil. Following the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948, he chose to remain in England and eventually wrote a PhD thesis titled "The Manifestations of the Baroque in the work of John Donne". He published on Donne in English and

French and played a considerable role in introducing Donne to French readers: his long article “*Toutes ses maîtresses profanes. Réflexions sur la poésie érotique de Donne*” is one of the key contributions to the Swiss edition of critical essays on Donne that Berman mentions in his overview of French reception. It is a sad paradox that Lederer, with his profound understanding of Donne’s work, could do so little for the poet’s reception in the Czech lands: apart from his early Czech article, his only other contribution was his role as advisor to a later translator, Hana Žantovská.

### **Libuše Pánková: Donne as a contemplative poet**

As has already been mentioned, the first, very slim book of Donne’s poems in Czech translation was the work of Libuše Vokrová-Ambrosová (pen name Pánková), a woman active in the Czechoslovak Pen Club and the first translator of T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. With an afterword by Herbert Read, it appeared in 1945 in “Evergreen Series” – a joint publishing project of the Czechoslovak and British PEN Clubs. The selection seems to have been prepared in close contact with English Donne scholars – Pánková knew Eliot, with whom she consulted the difficult passages of ‘Little Gidding’ and ‘East Coker’, and also visited Herbert Grierson in Edinburgh (Ambros 1960: 90). Read’s afterword emphasized Donne’s modernity and affinity with contemporary poets.

The choice of poems in this volume is strikingly different from Saudek’s. The irreverent side of Donne is all but missing (its only examples being “Go and catch a falling starre” and, to some extent, “The Relic”), and quite a few poems are meditations on death or the decline and decay of the world<sup>2</sup>. Since Pánková was in charge of Evergreen Series, we may assume that the selection was made mostly by her, with Lederer’s input and the likely guidance she would have received from her English literary acquaintances. It seems that the choice was influenced both by the general atmosphere of crisis – the early 1940s – and, more specifically, by Eliot’s meditative poetry. It is particularly striking how the translator uses the two ‘Anniversaries’, occasional poems Donne wrote on the death of his patron’s daughter. Donne treats the topic with his typical relish for hyperbole, the figure of the dead girl serving only as a vehicle for comments on the decaying state of the world and for expressing the epistemological anxiety of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century (“The new philosophy puts all in doubt...”). Despite the extravagance of their claims, however, the Anniversaries contain powerful passages that can be taken out of the original context and given new relevance. Pánková does exactly this: she seems to be using Donne, to a large extent, to comment on her own times, especially the war apocalypse and the precarious state of the old world (in her afterword to ‘East Coker’ in Czech, she mentions that she translated the poem “in five evenings when bombs were falling on London”, and Donne must have been translated in much the same atmosphere). This comes to mind when reading passages such as this:



We seeme ambitious, Gods whole worke t'undoe;  
 Of nothing hee made us, and we strive too,  
 To bring our selves to nothing back; and wee  
 Doe what wee can, to do't so soone as hee.

(Grierson 1912: 236)

Snad vzpurně chcem vzít Boží dílo zpět –  
 Bůh nás hnět z ničeho, a my zas hned  
 se ženem do nicoty navrátit.  
 A jako on chcem v díle rychlí být.

(Donne 1945: 19)

Tellingly, Pánková ends her selection from the 'First Anniversary' with a passage that might well have been taken from Hamlet:

Thus man, this worlds Vice-Emperour, in whom

All faculties, all graces are at home (...)

This man, whom God did woove, and loath t'attend  
 Till man came up, did downe to man descend,

This man, so great, that all that is, is his,

O what a trifle, and poore thing he is!

If man were any thing, he's nothing now

(Grierson 1912: 236)

What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason,

how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an Angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world!

The paragon of animals! And yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?

(Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2)

The primary readership targeted by the selection were Czechoslovak exiles in London: it seems that the intention was also to encourage them to read Donne in the original, since the name of every poem in the table of contents is followed by its English title and the name of the group to which it belongs, e.g. *Holy Sonnets* or *Elegies*. To some extent, then, this was also an educational project, cementing cultural relations with the host country.

It was partly due to the quarrel between the two translators that the publication was delayed and the book only appeared in 1945. By that time, obviously, the Czechoslovak community in London had more pressing things to discuss than translations of John Donne. The impact of the collection is therefore likely to have been minimal, both among the London exiles and in the post-war Czechoslovakia, as only few of the 750 copies found their way to the Czech market. Interestingly, though, one of these few copies ended up in the hands of the 22-year-old Jiří Levý, a future translation studies scholar. Reviewing the book three years after its publication, Levý somewhat surprisingly links Donne to Rilke: "Donne's present relevance owes much to the wave of Rilkean abstractness in poetry, which has in recent years culminated in what may be called the poetry of the fourth dimension, poetry of time. This tendency (...) is prominent e.g. in Eliot's *Four Quartets*," he writes, continuing with an explanation of Eliot's links to Donne (Levý 1948, my translation). Levý's understanding of Donne as an *abstract* poet meditating on time is rather curious, though understandable, given the selection's emphasis on the Anniversaries. It is hard to imagine that any such assessment of Donne's significance could be based, for example, on the pieces chosen by Saudek. This underscores how important the very act of *selection* is for introducing a poet into a literary culture where (s)he is virtually unknown.

Apart from the choice of poems, another striking feature of Pánková's volume is its extreme formal dogmatism. Though talented, Pánková was inexperi-

enced as a poetry translator and, working in exile, had little to lean on regarding past translations of English iambic verse into Czech – a language with a dearth of monosyllables and stress fixed on the first syllable. She not only copies the number of metrical stresses in each line and the rhyme scheme, but denies herself any leeway in translating Donne's masculine rhymes. In contrast to Saudek, whose formal freedom offers more phrasing options, enabling him to stay closer to natural speech and the seeming spontaneity of Donne's speakers, Pánková twists the syntax and trims the words in the manner of Czech 19<sup>th</sup>-century poets to make them fit Donne's original patterns. The result is, at times, a needlessly antiquated rather than consciously archaizing diction, which contradicts the collection's ostensible emphasis on Donne's modernity. On the whole, Pánková's translations are interesting for the same reason as Saudek's, namely because they illustrate the supreme importance of the basic *formal* choices which, if made unwisely, may completely obliterate the most remarkable qualities of the original. There is also an interesting correspondence here with Berman's book, which criticizes the formal choices made by Donne's French translators Fuzier and Denis.

### **Josef Hrdlička: Donne with a George Herbert face**

The first really focused attempt at a Czech Donne – an attempt that produced more than a few poems and was motivated by a clear emphasis on a particular side of the poet – was made in the early 1960s by Josef Hrdlička. Hrdlička, now a Catholic minister and former auxiliary bishop of Olomouc, translated the complete cycle of Donne's *Holy Sonnets* and one of his hymns. In his case, however, the circumstances were rather unusual. There was no external commission and, originally, no intention to publish. Born in 1942, Hrdlička started translating when he was in his early twenties: a young Catholic, he was not allowed to study theology, earned his living in manual jobs and began his work on the devotional poetry of Donne, Herbert and others as both a spiritual exercise and a defiant gesture against the Communist regime. He maintained contacts with Catholic intellectuals opposing the regime and his translations of Donne were favourably judged e.g. by Jan Dokulil,<sup>3</sup> a well-known priest and poet who had been hiding for seven years from the Communist police and subsequently served a prison sentence. In an afterword to Hrdlička's selection of English spiritual poetry, Hrdlička's friend, another Catholic minister, testifies to the importance these poems had for the persecuted Catholics in Communist Czechoslovakia:

It was an invisible struggle we waged on the spiritual plane, a struggle that formed us and led us toward the undeserved gift of ministry [...] What role did these translations play in it? They were definitely oases, springs that gave us strength and helped us find our bearings in that struggle. For it was impossible to read both this poetry and the one we were given at school without ending up in a spiritual schizophrenia. You had to choose just one. [...] I know Josef

Hrdlička never intended to publish his translations: they were meant for private use and his own spiritual seeking.

(*Démant a slza*: 6–7, my translation)

Hrdlička's translations of Donne eventually appeared in two anthologies of English devotional and spiritual poetry: *Démant a slza* [A Diamond and a Teardrop, 1999, 2007] and *V souhvězdí slávy* [In the Constellation of Glory, 2011]. The two books also include other Metaphysical poets, Hopkins or Eliot. In Hrdlička's own words, his decision to publish was motivated by his pastoral work with young people and the hope that for some of them his translations could play a similar role the original texts had played for him (*Démant a slza*: 7).

With respect to Donne's *Holy Sonnets*, this assumption is not exactly an obvious one. They draw on Ignatian spiritual exercises, but they also have a strong Calvinist streak and many of them are permeated by a strong, almost debilitating fear of the Last Judgment rather than spontaneous trust in God's love and mercy. When Donne does speak of the latter, he often sounds doubtful rather than inspired, repeating the doctrinal truths to reassure himself. Therefore, for all their power, it is not easy to imagine these texts providing spiritual guidance or reassurance to very young people. But this is precisely where we encounter the most interesting feature of Hrdlička's translations.

First, it is important to remember he was working in a very specific situation, without any formal training and also without the usual support of secondary literature: the copy of Donne's poems he had was only sparsely annotated.<sup>3</sup> It is therefore understandable he occasionally mistranslates Donne's complicated lines – but there is a “method” in these mistranslations. A close reading seems to suggest that his translations reflect his own spiritual need when, at twenty and living in a hostile environment, he had to fight and argue *for* his God rather than *with* Him, as Donne sometimes does. In numerous places, then, his translations attenuate the speaker's dread of the Last Judgment or underline the “loving” aspect of God's relationship with man, giving Donne's arguments a more straightforward, less wavering and self-tormenting tone. There are numerous examples of this – one of them at the very beginning of Sonnet II (Westmoreland Sequence):

As due by many titles I resigne  
My selfe to Thee (O God); first I was made  
 By Thee, and for Thee, and when I was decayde  
 Thy blood bought that, the which before was thyne;

(*Variorum* 7: 11)

The speaker's opening argument is a strictly doctrinal one: God has claims over him because of the Creation and Christ's sacrifice: therefore he *cannot but resign* his sinful soul to Him. In Hrdlička's translation of the first sentence, it is the speaker who actively chooses God in the face of external opposition (an opposition easy to identify if we imagine the young translator in the role of the speaker):

Ať kdo chce nároky si na mě číní,  
jen Tobě, Bože dám se za podíl.

(*Démant a slza*: 20)

Whoever may claim their rights over me,  
I will only give myself to Thee.

(my back-translation)

A more marked example of Hrdlička's shifts is provided by the first eight lines of the sonnet *Wilt thou love God*. This, again, is a theological argument designed to convince the speaker's soul of God's love, but phrased in a typically Donnean manner, emphasizing God's greatness and the extent to which He *lowers* Himself to man in his far-from-obvious and, indeed, miraculous grace. One is reminded of John Carey's comment on how Donne, a poet who coined the word *superinfinite* in English, liked to baffle his flock by mathematical approximations of God's infinity (Carey 1983: 127–128):

Wilt thou love God as he, thee? then digest  
My Soule, this holsome meditation:  
How God the Spirit, by Angels wayted on  
In heauen, doth make his temple in thy brest.

The father hauing begott a Sonne most blest,  
And still begetting, (for he nere begone)  
Hath daignd to chuse thee by adoption  
Coheir to his glory, and Saboths endles rest.

(*Variorum* 7: 16)

Toužíš, má duše, Boha milovat,  
jak tebe on? Ztiš se, rozjímej skrytě,  
vnímej ten pohled lásky, kterým žrjí Tě  
sám On toužící chrámem svým tě zvat.

Neváhal Otec svého Syna dát,  
stále jej daruje, On uhostí tě,  
vždyť dědic slávy jsi a Boží dítě,  
máš dostat vše, co On jen může dát.

(*Démant a slza*: 33)

Do you, my soul, wish to love God  
as He you? Calm down, meditate in seclu-  
sion,  
perceive that look of love with which He  
watches you:

He Himself, who longs to call you His  
temple.

The Father did not hesitate to give His son,  
and is giving him still, He will welcome you,  
for you are the heir of glory and God's child,  
all He can give is destined to be yours.

(my back-translation)

Donne's original is truly a "holsome" meditation, which, on its strictly literal level, seems to emphasize that God, "by Angels waited on" and "having begot a son most blessed", does not really *need* man – and that He still *wants* him is a wonder that should be constantly and gratefully pondered. Hrdlička's translation presents a completely different tone: God's independence and splendour ("by Angels waited on") is replaced by a "look of love", His autonomous action ("make a temple in thy breast") by a *longing* to be admitted to the human heart. The remaining shifts are equally telling and do not need further commentary. In Hrdlička's hands, the whole octave undergoes substantial emotional modernization and God's love for mankind becomes much more the fulfilment of a *mutual* need. At the same time, the shifts all but deprive the poem of the characteristic imprint of Donne's personality. The Orwellian "face somewhere behind the page" becomes almost unrecognizable – or closer, perhaps, to that of George Herbert.

The second feature of Hrdlička's translations is that he occasionally ignores even very obvious literary devices, replacing them with his own and concentrating on the message. A striking example is his rendition of the first four lines of the sonnet *This is my playes last scene*. It is hard to imagine a more conspicuous figure than the hypnotic repetition of the words "last"/"latest" in this quatrain, a repetition that apparently served to focus the mind, preparing it for meditation

on the last things. And yet, in Hrdlička's translation, the repetition disappears. The original lines, looking, Janus-faced, both backward and forward, both on a life "idly yet quickly runne", and toward the great unknown, become all anticipation: both regret and fear vanish as the hypnotic chiming of "last" is removed.

|   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <u>This is my Playes last scene</u> , here heav'ns<br>appoint | Dobíhám k cíli, nebes předpověď<br>dí o poslední poutnické mé míli. | <u>I am running toward the finish line</u> . The<br>prophecy of heaven |
| My Pilgrimages last mile, <u>and my race</u>                  |   | speaks of the last mile of my pilgrimage.                              |
| <u>Idly, yet quickly runne, hath this last pace</u> .         | Vše minulo, z <u>dálek jen krůčky zbyly</u> .                       | All is past, <u>only little steps are left of distances</u> .          |
| My spans last inch, my minuts latest point.                   | čas žití v pouhé minutě se zhléd.                                   | a lifetime is reflected in a minute.                                   |
| ( <i>Variorum</i> 7: 7)                                       | ( <i>Démant a slza</i> : 24)  | (my back-translation)  |

Here again the principal message – I shall soon “see face to face” – remains, but shorn of its subtler psychological aspects that make the poem, recognizably, the work of Donne.

The two last examples are among the most marked shifts. On the whole, the liberties Hrdlička takes with the original do not make his translations inferior as works of art and devotional texts. In a letter addressed to me he openly concedes<sup>3</sup> that he often did not attempt to find equivalents for Donne's "riddles". Instead, he strove to express the essential with greater clarity, and some of his translations (e.g. his rendering of the sonnet *O to vex me*) fully vindicate this approach. The later translators, who both have a literary background, occasionally get so distracted by learned allusions or parallels with Donne's secular poetry that they fail to capture the spiritual intensity of the main argument, which is where Hrdlička usually does not fail. If his texts are sometimes flawed as representations of Donne's mental world, they are also fascinating as an example of translation in action: a situation where the process of translation serves basically the same purpose as the writing of the original text, providing spiritual food and focusing the mind for meditation on a particular topic. In a way, Hrdlička's *Holy Sonnets* may be the most truly "living" Donne in the Czech cultural environment, taking into account their influence on both the translator and the recipients among whom they privately circulated. They also illustrate the importance of the *context* in which a poet is placed by his or her translator. As opposed to the last two translators, Hrdlička sees Donne primarily as a link in the chain of English spiritual poetry, paying less attention to his intensely individual features, mental habits and psychologically motivated master-images, so perceptively described by Carey and Ellrodt. On the other hand, the translators intimately familiar with Donne's secular poetry occasionally pursue the psychological and the literary at the expense of the spiritual.

### Hana Žantovská and Zdeněk Hron: the polarities of translator aesthetics

The last two translators, Hana Žantovská (1921–2004) and Zdeněk Hron (\*1946), both compile selections that try to be at least partly representative of the most

popular groups of Donne's poems, i.e. *Elegies, Songs and Sonnets* and *Holy Sonnets*, though there is little or no prose included. These two most important translation attempts are separated by a gap of twenty years (1967, 1987). I would argue, however, that the more recent achievement, by Zdeněk Hron – which was reedited in 2014 and therefore seems the more successful of the two – is not just an ordinary retranslation, but what Anthony Pym (1998: 82) calls an *active re-translation*, a rival translation that seeks to present a different version of the poet. I will therefore speak of the two selections more or less together.

Hana Žantovská is the older of the two translators and the one who provided the Czech literary scene with the first really substantial introduction to Donne. This introduction came in the 1960s when the general relaxation of the political and cultural atmosphere in Communist Czechoslovakia opened another window of opportunity for all things “Baroque” (the conception of the Baroque prevalent in Czech literary scholarship is quite broad). Apart from anthologies of Czech Baroque writing, the 1960s came up with an ambitious anthology of European Baroque poetry, including both Western and Slavic authors. Its editor Václav Černý, previously mentioned in connection with the 1930s Baroque revival, was a mentor to Žantovská (Žantovská 2002), and it was probably he who sparked her interest in Donne as he needed new translations of the Metaphysical poets for his anthology. In 1967 Žantovská published a separate selection of Donne's verse titled *Extáze* [The Ecstasy], which includes some *Elegies*, most of the *Songs and Sonnets*, sixteen *Holy Sonnets* and all the three hymns.

Žantovská was already an experienced literary editor and poetry translator, but had only done Romantic and Victorian poetry before Donne. With the Donnean project, she was venturing into a new territory. This is one of the most important differences between the two translators: for Zdeněk Hron, Donne is one of the focal points of his more general interest in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century poetry; he translated Raleigh, Shakespeare and many others. Žantovská, according to her daughter, regarded Donne as the greatest challenge of her career<sup>4</sup> and consulted her versions with both Joseph Lederer and a leading Czech translator, Jan Zábřana. Her translations were therefore more of a collaborative project, and the wealth of critical input from other people perhaps accounts for what might be called their more “objective” character. One definite result of this approach is that there are fewer obvious mistakes in interpretation in her translations than in Hron's. The second important difference between the translators is that Hron is also a poet, while Žantovská gave up writing poetry early on.

Hron's most important selection of Donne's work, *Komu zvoní hrana* [For Whom the Bell Tolls], was published exactly 20 years later, in 1987, but his interest in Donne likewise began in the 1960s when he was a student of English Literature at Charles University. His translation project seems more ambitious because, apart from the three above-mentioned groups of poems, it presents additional facets of Donne's work: both ‘Anniversaries’, ‘The Storme’ and ‘The Calme’ and several ‘Paradoxes’. It is definitely more personal – both the selection from Donne and Hron's anthology of English 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century verse,

also including Donne, are accompanied by his own essays which are not purely informative and academic: his descriptions of Donne's style are genuinely lyrical. It is also important that he has been familiar with Donne's poetry since his student years and his own poetic style may have been influenced by him. One review of Hron's own verse explicitly mentions this affinity:

Like the works of "Baroque" poets, Hron's texts combine robust earthiness and physicality... with a subtle, refined play of meanings and signs – akin to Donnean evaporations of wit – irony and grotesquely warped sarcasm with transparent ease and simple ardour.

(Matys: 18, my translation)

From my own reading of Hron I would conclude that he definitely shares with Donne an obsession with the anarchic power of words, their capacity to breed unforeseen, sometimes subversive associations.

As the above description reveals, both Donne and Hron place a strong emphasis on contrasts, and Hron himself repeatedly emphasizes dissonance and conflict in Donne's style:

If you want to describe the structure of Donne's poems in present-day terms, you must call him a modernist poet: the dissonances you hear in his experiences and opinions also grate in his poetic expression.

In Donne's expression, the vulgar mixes with the spiritual, the physical with the eternal.

(Hron 1978: 20–21, my translation)

There is always something faintly parodic about Donne's lyrics.

(Hron 1987: 192, my translation)

In "Reading and rereading Donne's poetry", Judith Scherer-Herz writes about the difficulties of imposing a coherent interpretation on some of Donne's poems: "There are readers who want to hold it all together, to argue that everything fits, and there are those for whom the centre does not hold as stanza and figure flare out and fly apart." (2007: 102). This is a crucial point, for the difference between the two reader attitudes seems equally to apply to our last two translators.

At the beginning of my article I have briefly mentioned the emphasis Scherer-Herz tends to place on the specific weight of Donne's words and their real-life referents – each bringing with it its own little world of connotations: "It is as if the idea begins to form *after* the words have been given their head, allowed to run free, invite in their friends, make the poem" (Scherer-Herz 2007: 102, italics mine). I have also pointed out the changes of tone, often subtle, as in *The Sunne Rising*, but sometimes abrupt and grating, as when Donne's compulsion to be witty reasserts itself and his "restless itching ingenuity" demands to be scratched. Mario Praz says that Donne will always appeal to readers "whom the rhythm of thought itself attracts by its own peculiar convolutions" (Kermode 2005: 120).

The details of the texture, the peculiar convolutions of thought in motion, as one word begets another and all together beget an argument that is “sometimes discarded, sometimes triumphantly reasserted” (Scherer-Herz 2007: 102) are an essential element of the pleasure of reading Donne. However, too much focus on detail also represents a potential centrifugal force. The balance between digressive heterogeneity and basic argumentative and emotional coherence is sometimes precarious even in the original, and since a translation cannot rely on the reader’s familiarity with Donne’s mental universe and usually needs room for explanations, the typical ambition of a translator is likely to be to “hold it all together” at the expense of potentially divergent and anarchic details.

This translation strategy is indeed dominant in the work of Hana Žantovská. In her translations, the clarity and coherence of what is being said and felt by the speaker tends to be more important than the inflections of the voice that is saying it. She is capable of translating the most dynamic passages that convey irritation or excitement in measured, majestic, well-balanced alexandrines: in the opening of Donne’s “Canonization” quoted at the beginning of this article, *her* speaker seems to be reciting rehearsed lines rather than speaking spontaneously, as suggested by Donne’s simple syntax and varied line length. She also imposes a strict hierarchy on the stylistic devices, discarding or simplifying to make room for explanations. By contrast, Hron as a poet pays closer attention to individual tropes and figures, is reluctant to reduce the more abstruse images to interpretations of their supposed meanings and relies more on the reader’s interpretive effort. His rival translation clearly goes for the voice’s tone: expands the expressive range, especially by adding more directness, almost bluntness. In this respect, he is clearly superior to Žantovská’s translations e.g. in Donne’s provocative defenses of promiscuity such as “The Indifferent”. Hron’s version of Donne’s “Oh we are not [true], be not you so, Let me, and do you, twenty know,” loses none of its naughty *épater-le-bourgeois* character. His second line reads “Oba spát můžem s dvaceti” [we can each sleep with twenty (people)], while Žantovská’s decorous “měj si na tom dosti, / že můžeš jako já vybírat po libosti” [be content that you, too, can choose at will] completely misses the point of this sparkling exercise, which is, of course, not to make serious lifestyle recommendations, but to let the reader experience “a wicked pleasure” in thinking how shocking these lines would seem to poor So-and-so (Leishman 1961: 154).

By giving more autonomy to idiosyncratic detail, Zdeněk Hron occasionally allows it to undermine the coherence of the whole, so that stanza and figure indeed “flare out and fly apart”. In Donne’s elegy ‘On his Mistress’ a lover is dissuading his beloved from joining him in his travels disguised as a supposedly male page:

Temper, O fayre Love, Loves impetuous rage;  
 Be my trew Mistres still, not my faignd Page.  
 I’le go, and, by thy kind leaue, leaue behind



Thee only worthy to nurse in my mind  
Thirst to come back...

(*Variorum* 2: 246)

Though the basic mode of the poem seems serious, passages such as this stand out by the artificiality of their diction, and others by the speaker's bizarre, almost grotesque imaginings as to what may befall the addressee. Trying to find a viable interpretation of the whole, Peter DeSa Wiggins perceptively suggests that we may be witnessing an actual parting during which the protagonists try to dispel their sadness by hyperbolic play. The "theatrical" quality of the diction might be alluding to contemporary plays such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, in which women indeed did dress as boys to follow their lovers (Wiggins 2002: 71–72). Zdeněk Hron perceives the artificiality, but inflates it out of proportion: by preserving all the showy syntactic figures at the expense of the message in the fourth and fifth line, he produces a version at once more stylistically awkward and more narcissistic that virtually rules out any real emotional involvement on the part of the speaker.

A very clear example of the divergent approaches is provided by Hron's and Žantovská's translations of Donne's "Epithalamion Made at Lincoln's Inn". While this is not one of Donne's best poems, it is a characteristic early and less refined example of the heterogeneity mentioned earlier. Critical opinion differs on whether it was meant seriously, and only contains some awkward passages due to the author's inexperience, or whether the whole poem is a conscious parody of the epithalamic genre (for the two contradictory opinions see Novarr and Dubrow 1956).

Most of the poem is a perfectly ordinary marriage song: it praises the bride, wishes the newly-weds well and hints at what is to come at night. There is, in my opinion, not enough evidence for its supposed parodic character. There are, however, several slightly bizarre passages where the speaker is being curiously lascivious about the bride, or openly satirical in his comments about the wedding guests. It is very instructive to look at how the translators deal with these dissonant tones. Hana Žantovská glosses over most of the incongruities and produces a largely conventional example of the genre. Her version tones down the awkward lasciviousness of describing the bride's "warm, balm-breathing thigh", as well as most of the satirical remarks, including one that seems to cast doubt on the bride's virginity. Hron, on the other hand, virtually revels in the ambiguity of the poem and not only retains, but emphasizes all the details that go *against* the genre decorum.

Žantovská's concern for argumentative and emotional coherence and Hron's predilection for idiosyncratic detail and peculiar convolutions of Donne's thought produce varying results. Žantovská is hardly ever incomprehensible, but does not always convey the sense of an agile mind thinking in real time, and tends to treat Donne's images as replaceable illustrations of the underlying "idea". She is strong in conveying the religious wonder of love, but its various undercurrents – and there are always undercurrents in Donne – are often lost on her.

Hron, a poet whose own style is not alien to Donne's, seems ideally positioned to "correct" the deficiencies of the earlier ground-breaking translation, as he is keenly aware of the very qualities Žantovská occasionally suppresses. However, he refuses to impose any kind of hierarchy on the effects he is pursuing, and since his translations are also plagued by obvious mistakes, the result is often questionable: incomprehensible, too literal, or too crude.

The two most representative Czech selections of Donne's verse thus occupy opposite positions: in one, the desire to make everything fit together is too strong, while in the other the concern for basic logical and emotional coherence is sometimes missing. There is, then, still an unoccupied middle ground waiting for a new translator, who can draw inspiration from both Saudek and Lederer, and learn from the polarities of Hron and Žantovská. And there is also an interesting research ground offered by Hron's own poetry. Hron may not always manage to do justice to Donne in his translations, but it remains to be seen to what extent this Renaissance poet has infiltrated his own original work, as has been the case with Joseph Brodsky in Russia, or Yehuda Amichai in Israel.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Michal Jareš from the Institute of Czech Literature for providing me with a transcript of these proofs, including Pánková's revisions. The original typescript is kept in the archives of Matica slovenská in Martin, Slovakia, among the posthumous papers of Theo Florin.
- <sup>2</sup> Apart from 'Valediction Forbidding mourning', 'Ecstasy' and 'Nocturnall', three poems that were, originally, to be supplied by Lederer, and the two playful poems ("Goe and catch" and "The Relic"), the selection includes extracts from Donne's two 'Anniversaries', three *Holy Sonnets*, 'Hymn to Christ on Author's Last Going into Germany', 'Lecture upon a Shadow' and the elegy 'His Picture'.
- <sup>3</sup> Personal communication with Josef Hrdlička, letter of 25 January 2014.
- <sup>4</sup> E-mail communication with Irena Murray Žantovská, 27 September 2010.

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ZUZANA ŠŤASTNÁ studied Russian and English at the Institute of Translation Studies, Charles University in Prague. Since the mid-1990s she has worked as a translator, editor and teacher of translation. Her translations include George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, George Orwell's *Burmese Days*, poems by Sylvia Plath and Shel Silverstein. Her translation of Silverstein's *A Light in the Attic*, in collaboration with Stanislav Rubáš and Lukáš Novák, received the 2015 Magnesia Litera Award for the best translation of the year. Her major research interests are Donne's poetry and the poetry and essays of Marina Tsvetayeva.

Address: Zuzana Šťastná, Ústav translatologie FF UK, Hybernská 3, 110 00 Praha 1, Czech Republic.  
[email: z.stastna@centrum.cz]