

## THE EARLIEST TRANSLATIONS OF EMILY DICKINSON'S POETRY IN SLOVENE

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### Abstract

The article addresses the issue of the earliest translations of Dickinson's poetry in Slovene. Only 6 of the total number of 19 poems, translated into Slovene by Vatro Grill, were published in his 1979 memoir *Med dvema svetovoma* (Between Two Worlds). The other 13 poems included in Grill's manuscripts were never published. In the first part of her article, the author briefly surveys the translations of Dickinson's poetry into Slovene by Mart Ogen, Aleš Debeljak, Ivo Svetina and Miklavž Komelj. In the second part, the focus is on Grill's translation of two poems by Emily Dickinson whereby the translator's ability to capture the meaning of Dickinson's verse is measured against Mart Ogen's translation of the same poems.

In the late 1970s I received a call from Mrs Mila Šenk, the editor-in-chief of Slovene language yearly almanac for Slovene emigrants, the *Slovenski koledar*. She was searching for someone knowledgeable in Slovene-American cultural history in order to prepare for publication a 1,000-page-long manuscript, a memoir, written by Vatroslav (Vatro) Grill<sup>1</sup>. Grill was a Slovene-born lawyer who had been living "between" the U.S. and Slovenia<sup>2</sup>; besides holding a government job in Cleveland, Ohio, he had spent many years serving as editor-in-chief of the Slovene language newspapers *Enakopravnost* (1919-36 and 1943-57), *Napredek* (1946-51), and *Nova Doba*. He was also active in the Cleveland-based Slovene language theatrical group *Ivan Cankar*, both acting and directing. When he retired from his positions, he visited his homeland several times. In 1963 he and his wife Anne spent almost the whole year in Slovenia. Upon their return to the United States, they bid farewell to Cleveland and moved southward, to California to be closer to their sons' growing families as well as to enjoy the benefits of a warm climate. And so it turned out that Grill, in his advanced age, "began to court the muses" (Manuscript 640). He began to read extensively and play the violin, he resumed drawing after years of abstinence, as well as devoted himself to poetry in an attempt "to comprehend its secrets" (Ibid.). Emily Dickinson

<sup>1</sup> The book was published under the title *Med dvema svetovoma* (Between Two Worlds) by Mladinska knjiga in Ljubljana in 1979.

<sup>2</sup> Grill was born in 1899 in Soteska near Moravče (Slovenia) and died in 1976 in Santa Clara (California).

had been his favorite poet for years and although he had toyed with the idea of translating some of her poems into Slovene, he never found the time to do so. At the time, Dickinson's poetry had not yet been translated into Slovene (641). No wonder, for this 19<sup>th</sup> century poet who "looked inward at her own experience" (Koloski in Lewicki 78) to compose her enigmatic, fragmented, epigrammatic poetry remains a serious challenge to translators worldwide. Her poetry that breaks the rules of traditional poetics pointing towards more modern trends of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, has puzzled the readers as well as prospective translators who realize that any translation of a Dickinson poem depends in the first place on the translator's interpretation of it. Multi-layered and ambivalent as her texts are, they are frequently seen as a test of the translator's abilities. If we speculate on why Grill chose to translate some of Dickinson's verse, the above may well be the case.

### EMILY DICKINSON IN SLOVENE TRANSLATION

Aside from Grill, other Slovene translators shunned Dickinson's verse.<sup>3</sup> Relatively little has been translated so far. The first translations were published almost 100 years after the original: in 1988 Mart Ogen published a selection of 96 Dickinson poems titled simply *Emily Dickinson*. Ogen chose to follow Dickinson's example of not titling her verse. In the "Contents", he arranged the translated poems by using the Johnson number "as given by Thomas H. Johnson's 1955 edition of Dickinson's complete poems" ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Emily\\_Dickinson\\_poems](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Emily_Dickinson_poems)) adding in brackets his Slovene translation of the first line. In the book, however, the poems are only numbered.<sup>4</sup> This is followed by Ogen's 33-page-essay on Emily Dickinson and her work that also includes Ogen's translation of poem 306. The essay itself is divided in three parts. In Part I, titled "*Uganka Emily Dickinson*" (The Enigma of Emily Dickinson), Ogen speaks about the genesis and subsequent fate of Dickinson's poetry, mentioning some details concerning Emily's habit of binding her books in tiny notebooks as well as sending some of them by mail to her best friends. In Part II of his essay, titled "*Puritanska upornica*" (The Puritan Rebel), Ogen proceeds by focusing on Emily's Puritan heritage, reminding the reader of her predecessors' tendency to keep a spiritual (or written) diary in order to evaluate their chances of redemption in a given moment. According to Ogen, this represents Emily's major inheritance: "...this constant, terrifying awareness of the position of one's soul, that oscillation of disposition between cheerful certainty and the anguish of dark despair" (Ogen 107, my translation). This lengthy chapter reviews Emily's life including the

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<sup>3</sup> Reception of Dickinson's poetry in Slovenia has been researched by Polona Godina in her 2004 M.A. thesis *Romantic elements in the poetry of Emily Dickinson*. An excerpt of the thesis was published in the *Acta Neophilologica* 37. 1-2 (2004):25-38, under the title "Selected American and Slovene critical response to the work of Emily Dickinson".

<sup>4</sup> 8, 67, 99, 106, 165, 169, 207, 211, 214, 216, 237, 239, 250, 252, 255, 262, 271, 275, 277, 280, 287, 290, 293, 314, 315, 322, 341, 365, 378, 398, 410, 419, 452, 461, 465, 496, 501, 508, 510, 511, 512, 520, 528, 539, 550, 556, 599, 612, 615, 657, 633, 664, 670, 673, 686, 700, 709, 712, 721, 724, 744, 747, 754, 767, 789, 812, 822, 856, 872, 875, 883, 906, 915, 928, 943, 945, 1084, 1099, 1100, 1129, 1150, 1162, 1175, 1219, 1261, 1281, 1322, 1323, 1453, 1543, 1581, 1599, 1617, 1677, 1712, 1732.

lives of her closest family and friends, both male and female. Ogen concludes with the difficult birth of Emily's first posthumous collection of verse published in 1890, the one that went through 11 printings in two years. In Part III, "Pesnica" (The Poet), Ogen exposes Dickinson's use of language as the element that most of her admirers find unique (117). However, according to Ogen, it is Dickinson's attitude towards the English language that distinguishes her from the other poets (118). Ogen compares Dickinson's relationship towards language with her attitude towards Puritanism – in both cases it is respectful towards its "vivacity of meaning" but disrespectful and even revolutionary towards the emptiness of overused words and ways of expression (Ibid.). Ogen stresses Dickinson's originality and creativity vis-à-vis the English language, providing examples from her poems. He further on speaks about Emily's revolutionary use of punctuation that has often been misinterpreted and/or underestimated by various editors. In terms of form, most of Dickinson's verse take up the form of religious hymns and religious verse in general. Dickinson's poems are predominantly four-line stanzas composed of eight- and six-foot lines respectively, in iambic and trochaic meter. Ogen particularly stresses the difference in length of words between English (short) and Slovene (long); consequently Slovene religious verse tends to be longer – alternately eleven- to fifteen- and seven- to nine-foot stanzas. The above, says Ogen, was his principal guideline in the translation process (121).

Ten years later Niko Grafenauer published three poems by Emily Dickinson in his anthology *Orfejev spev* (1998). The translators included Aleš Debeljak, who translated poem No. 915, "Faith is the pierless bridge" (*Vera – je brezbrežen most*), Ivo Svetina (290, "Of bronze- and blaze" – "*Iz bronca – in žarenja*") and Miklavž Komelj (67, "Success is counted sweetest" – "*Uspeh se zdi najslajši njim*"). The mode of selection of poems to be published in the above anthology was as interesting as it was innovative: Grafenauer contacted 32 contemporary Slovene poets asking them each to select 10 favorite poems in any language. Each poet was further asked to write a short explanatory essay concerning the difficulty (or ease, for that matter) of choice to be published along with the translations. In his piece, the poet Milan Jesih said the following:

*Izbral sem samo med pesmimi, ki jih lahko, čeprav z izdatno pomočjo prevoda, ali prevodov, in slovarjev, preberem v izvirniku/.../ Naj omenim, da sta mi bili za prevajanje pesmi Emily Dickinson z začetnim verzom I died for Beauty, numerirana s 449, in Dylana Thomasa And Death Shall Have No Dominion pretrda oreha, prva zaradi neposnemljive eliptičnosti, druga pa zaradi silne nežnosti izraza. (Jesih in Grafenauer 383-4)*

I selected exclusively from among the poems that I can, albeit with extensive help of the translation or translations and dictionaries, read in the original /.../ Let me mention two poems, one by Emily Dickinson – beginning with *I Died for Beauty*, Number 449, and Dylan Thomas's *Death Shall Have No Dominion*, as being overly hard nuts to crack, the former due to its inimitable elliptical nature, the latter on account of its mighty tenderness of expression (*My translation*).

Jesih's self-critical words echo the sentiment of a number of his fellow poets mentioned beforehand. Dickinson's poetry was far from being everybody's choice. Poets-translators were puzzled by her ambiguous, multi-layered verse that had, over time, been analyzed and interpreted every which way. I believe one of the greatest stumbling blocks for the translators was the poet's manner of composition whereby the contents determines the form and not vice versa. Dickinson's is no traditional poetry in terms of figurative elements. In her M.A. thesis Polona Godina analyzed the formal characteristics of Dickinson's poetry pointing out the relative absence of rhyme and, consequently, her use of "substitutes" – such as various rhetorical, syntactic and semantic devices. Dickinson's fondness for neologisms, her use of well-known words in "inappropriate" positions, her grammatical experimentation along with the use of archaic expressions, has become proverbial. Godina also stressed Dickinson's repeated use of parallelism that has been much used in Slovene folk poetry as well (96) - "a structural arrangement of parts of a sentence, sentences, paragraphs, and larger units of composition by which one element of equal importance with another is similarly developed and phrased" (Holman 318).

## VATRO GRILL'S TRANSLATIONS OF DICKINSON

The manuscript of Vatro Grill's memoir contained 19 poems by Emily Dickinson in Grill's translation. My task as the editor and reader of Grill's memoir back in 1978 was to eliminate repetitions, create a temporal sequence of events, select photographic material, eliminate parts that might be legally questionable, correct Grill's Slovene – in short, make a readable book out of a mass of relatively unsorted material. At the time I thought 19 Dickinson poems too many to illustrate Grill's ability as translator therefore I selected six poems to be included in the following order<sup>5</sup>:

- 82, "*Zimski so popoldnevi*" (There's a certain slant of light)
- 1322, "*Svilna nit te ne reši*" (Floss won't save you from an abyss)
- 449, "*Za lépo sem umrla*" (I died for beauty)
- 288, "*Jaz sem nihče*" (I'm nobody)
- 1409, "*Zloga tovor*" (Could mortal lip divine)
- 441, "*Pismo svetu*" (This is my letter to the world)

The translations were published without being modified except for one poem, viz. "I'm nobody", where Grill originally used a double negation translating the first line (and the title) as "*jaz nisem nihče*" (my emphasis). The above poems were the first Slovene translations of Dickinson's verse to be published ever.

In an extensive footnote, Grill adds some information about Emily Dickinson's life in Amherst. He refers to it as "relatively uneventful" (513) pointing out Emily's predisposition to isolation and "weirdness" (Ibid.) "*Skrivnost njenega samotarstva se je pojasnila šele po njeni smrti, ko je sestra v njeni sobi odkrila skrbno sešite zvezke njenih pesmi.*" (The mystery of her seclusion was cleared up only after her death when

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<sup>5</sup> Grill used the first lines as titles and I follow his example.

her sister detected carefully sewn notebooks in Emily's room containing her poems) (Ibid., my transl.). Grill mentions the 1955 complete edition of Emily's poetic works, without mentioning Johnson's name, as the one that was made possible with the Harvard University's purchase of Dickinson's complete literary opus. Grill further says that none of the poems are titled or dated but "*.../proučevalci njenega dela so po vsebini in po pisavi s precejšnjo gotovostjo dohnali časovno zaporedje nastanka*" (with relative certainty researchers of her work have been able to reconstruct, on the basis of the contents and Emily's handwriting, the temporal sequence of her work) (Ibid.). Grill also mentions Emily's letters that shed light on her poetic work as well as reveal her dislike of the Puritan environment (Ibid.). He concludes by saying that no final verdict on Dickinson has been pronounced yet and adds that according to some (!) critics Dickinson represents the greatest American poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Among her qualities Grill underlines Dickinson's originality of imagination as well as her surprisingly condensed poetic expression. "She was without any doubt a good half of the century ahead of her time" (514, my transl.).

Grill translated the following poems by Emily Dickinson:

82, "*Zimski so popoldnevi*" (There's a certain slant of light)

254, "*Up mala stvarca*" (Hope is the thing with feathers)

1322, "*Svilna nit te ne reši*" (Floss won't save you from an abyss)

1624, "*Ne malo presenečeno cvetlico*" (Apparently with no surprise)

245, "*Držala sem dragulj*" (I held a jewel in my fingers)

162, "*Spe k tebi reka moja*" (My river runs to thee)

249, "*Divje noči*" (Wild nights! Wild nights!)

211, "*Počasi, raj!*" (Come slowly, Eden)

1099, "*Zapredek stiska*" (My cocoon tightens, colors tease)

764, "*Slutnja*" (Presentiment is that long shadow on the lawn)

— "*Kdo je oropal gozd*" (Who robbed the woods)<sup>6</sup>

1732, "*Življenja vrata*" (My life closed twice before its close)

449, "*Za lépo sem umrla*" (I died for beauty, but was scarce)

— "*Vihar strahovito mel je zrak*" (An awful tempest meshed the air)<sup>7</sup>

111, "*Ni mar čebeli*" (The bee is not afraid of me)

288, "*Jaz nisem nihče*" (I'm nobody! Who are you?)

476, "*Le zadovoljnost in nebo*" (I meant to have but modest)

1409, "*Zloga tovor*" (Could mortal lip divine)

441, "*Pismo svetu*" (This is my letter to the world)

I will follow up with a comparison of Vatro Grill's translation of Dickinson poems # 1099 and #1322, "My cocoon tightens"<sup>8</sup> and "Floss won't save you from an abyss"<sup>9</sup> with Mart Ogen's version. Unfortunately, no other poems translated by Grill have also been translated by Ogen, Debeljak, Svetina, or Komelj.

<sup>6</sup> The poem is printed on p. 34 of the collection mentioned below that was originally in Grill's possession. It is *not* listed in the Internet version of Johnson's list (Wikipedia)

<sup>7</sup> Printed on p.66 of Linscott's selection but not listed in the Internet.

<sup>8</sup> For the English version I used Robert N.Linscott, ed. *Selected Poems and Letters of Emily Dickinson*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959.

<sup>9</sup> This poem was not included in the above selection. I took it from the Internet: (<http://www.repeatafterus.com/print.php?i=1616&PHPSESSID=bacba19ce4e466697471...> ).

1099

My cocoon tightens, colors tease  
I'm feeling for the air;  
A dim capacity for wings  
Degrades the dress I wear.

A power of butterfly must be  
The aptitude to fly,  
Meadows of majesty concedes  
And easy sweeps of sky.

So I must baffle at the hint  
And cipher at the sign,  
And make much blunder, if at last  
I take the clew divine.

1099 (Vatro Grill's translation)

*Zapredek stiska, barv namig  
Me sili kvišku nekam;  
Skrivnostni neki čut za krila,  
prezira to obleko.*

*Metulja sila mora biti  
Do léta rodna želja,  
Iz veličastnosti livad,  
Se léta v nebu sklepa.*

*Namig na čelu gube terja,  
ob nakazilu znaka,  
pomot veliko se obeta  
kjerkoli sled božanska.*

1099 (Mart Ogen's translation)

*Zapredek moj se zateguje – Barve dražijo -  
Tipaje se za Zrakom trudim -  
Nedoločljiva možnost, da mi zrasedo Peruti,  
V nič daje Obleko, ki jo nosim –*

*Metulja Moč in predanost je  
V Sposobnosti letenja -  
Kraljevskost Travnikov vsebuje  
In prek Neba drsenja -*

*A prej naj bi še razvozlavala Namige,  
Ugibala pomene Znamenja,  
Se mnogokrat zmotila, če naj prejela bi nazadnje  
Ključ božanskega-*

The above poem is allegorical, one of the many records of "Dickinson's pilgrim's progress of the soul" (Williams in Blake, Wells 258). Dickinson employs the metaphor of the cocoon's evolution in the process of becoming a butterfly to speak about the transformation, the growth of her soul. The image of the inflated cocoon along with the vision of the new butterfly's future power and freedom serves the speaker as the formula to express her yearning "for freedom and for the power to survey nature and feel at home with it" (Marcus 78). The poet's last stanza however, cuts short the optimism of the previous two stanzas revealing the poet's well-known tendency "to see herself as small and lost and doubtless doomed" (Sewall 158). Her belief in God's immanence leads her towards the contemplation of nature, as well as her own self, to find a hint of how to achieve the best possible transformation of her soul. But the hints are vague, the signs unclear and her soul has once again been taken to the verge of the incomprehensible. It is the Puritan tendency to dwell on spiritual life that presents the main topic of this poem, (a theme not unknown to some of Dickinson's contemporaries, particularly Hawthorne).

Formally, the poem displays some of Dickinson's well-known poetic devices that characterize her poetry in general: elliptical, epigrammatic diction, irregularities of rhythm (although the conventional iambic tetrameter alternating with iambic trimeter is clearly discernible) and irregular rhyme.

A comparison of Dickinson's original poem with Ogen's translation reveals differences visible upon first sight: the mere count of syllables in Ogen's translation is higher as already foreshadowed by Ogen in his essay on Dickinson. Furthermore Ogen chose to capitalize all nouns (unlike Dickinson) thus visibly exposing the key words of the poem. Putting the particularities of form aside, it is obvious that Ogen's rendering of Dickinson's poem 1099 captures the meaning well. The basic difference between the two poems, however, lies in Ogen's inability to duplicate Dickinson's ambiguity, particularly in the last two verses of the second stanza. Of the two poems, Ogen's is much easier to understand and his choice of dashes, otherwise so characteristic of Dickinson's poetry but not used in this particular one – is, in my opinion rather superfluous.

In comparison with Ogen, who strived toward clarity of expression as well as the resulting clarity of meaning, Vatro Grill's rendering of poem 1099 captures one element of Dickinson's poetry well, viz. the ambiguity. The count of syllables reveals Grill's attempt not to spoil the tetrameter/trimeter iambic scheme used by Dickinson. In this way Grill stood before an insoluble problem as the length of Slovene words exceeds the length of English counterparts. In order to overcome these self-imposing limitations, Grill had to search for short words. This explains his choice of the word "čut" for "capacity" (adequately translated as *sposobnost* by Ogen) in the third line of the first stanza, as well as reducing "the dress I wear" (4/I) into "to obleko" (this dress - well translated as *Obleko ki jo nosim* by Ogen). Grill's understanding of the first two lines of the second stanza differs from Ogen's, for he implies that the power of the butterfly must be (or perhaps *may be?*) its *inborn wish* to fly; Ogen, on the other hand speaks about the butterfly's power and *surrender* (added by Ogen) as contained in its *ability* to fly. The last two lines of the second stanza represented a challenge for both translators, the most problematic aspect being the verb "concedes". My understanding is that the verb "concedes" refers to "the aptitude to fly" thus "the aptitude to fly" *conceding* "the meadows of majesty". Grill's understanding of the two lines is ambiguous for I cannot decipher the meaning of the verb "sklepa" used in his translation of line four. Ogen, however, translated "concedes" as "contains" (*vsebuje*) linking the meaning to the second line, viz. "the aptitude to fly".

Grill's desire not to spoil the form led him to depersonalize the last stanza. The first-person speaker completely disappears; the cold, impersonal third person singular speaker struggles to capture the poet's meaning in terse, clipped language but, in my opinion, sadly fails to do so. Dickinson's first line is thus rendered as, roughly translated, 'the hint requiring the forehead to wrinkle at the sign of the omen'. The closest to Dickinson's meaning is Grill's rendering of the third line where he speaks about a number of mistakes that will probably be made. His translation of Dickinson's last line, "if at last / I take the clew divine" as "kjerkoli sled božanska" (wherever trace divine) is suggestive of Dickinson's elliptical language but does not capture the mean-

ing of Dickinson's verse. Ogen's translation of the last stanza, on the other hand, is precise in terms of meaning, leaving the reader no doubt whatsoever.

1322

Floss won't save you from an Abyss  
But a Rope will—  
Notwithstanding a Rope for a Souvenir  
Is not beautiful—

But I tell you every step is a Trough—  
And every stop a Well —  
Now will you have the Rope or the Floss?  
Prices reasonable-

1322 (Mart Ogen's version)

*Svila nas ne reši iz prepada,  
Vrv pa—  
Čeprav, seveda, Vrv kot Spominek  
Ni nič posebnega.—*

*Povem vam pa, da vsaka je stopinja  
Brezno—  
In vsak postanek je Vodnjak —  
Kaj boste torej vzeli, Vrv ali Svilo?  
Poceni dam —*

1322 (Vatro Grill's version)

*Svilna nit te ne reši iz globin,  
ampak vrv te bo,  
čeprav vrv kakor nekaj za spomin  
zgleđa manj lepo.*

*Toda rečem ti – vsak korak je slepilo,  
in vrtinec vsak oddih.  
Boš mar volil vrv ali svilo?  
Cene zmerne obeh.*

The above poem demonstrates the poet's use of imagery (floss, rope) that is seemingly unrelated to the idea she wants to express: far from being the center of the universe, human existence is vulnerable. Dickinson ironically suggests two approaches to the predicament, one *aesthetic* and the other *practical* but none perfect. Her irony reaches the climax in the last stanza with her direct address challenging the reader to take his/her choice.

Dickinson's highly irregular meter in a way absolved the translators, especially Grill, from counting the feet too much. Ogen's translation follows the original closely whereby Ogen uses both capital letters in places where Dickinson uses them – to expose all nouns - as well as the dashes to indicate inconclusive thought. In the last verse of the poem, Ogen manages to convey Dickinson's meaning although he uses a different Slovene phrase for "Prices reasonable", changing Dickinson's impersonal statement into a personal one ("*Poceni dam*" – roughly translated as 'I am selling cheaply'). In the second stanza, Ogen had to decide between the formal and informal address ('you' as second person singular (*ti*) or third person plural (*vi*) in Slovene), which is otherwise nonexistent in English. Whereas he chose the more detached formal *vi*, Grill selected the more intimate *ti*. Grill's translation of Dickinson's first stanza captures the meaning well in spite of his decision to replace "abyss" (*prepad*) with a somewhat less fearful synonym "*globina*" (depth). In the second stanza, however, the meaning is obscured by Grill's choice of Slovene equivalents for "Trough"

(*slepilo*= illusion) and “Well” (*vrtinec*= whirlpool). His translation of the final two lines is adequate in terms of meaning although he adds “*obeh*” (of/for both).

## CONCLUSION

Do Grill’s translations of the Dickinson poems examined successfully reveal the meaning of the original? My interpretation, which deliberately bypassed a close analysis of the poetic devices used by the two translators, discloses Ogen as a far more successful translator than Grill. The result is not a surprising one: Grill was an amateur who after having enjoyed reading Dickinson’s verse so much hoped his translations would enable his fellow Slovene Americans (whose English was not as good as his) to become acquainted with the poet. His intentions were of a purely practical nature. The value of his versification is thus mostly historical for he was the first Slovene translator of Dickinson’s verse ever. Mart Ogen, on the other hand, is a poet who performed his task of translating Dickinson’s verse professionally, following the nuances of Dickinson’s fine poetic craft with the precision and know-how of a poet.

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