

## JOSEPH CONRAD IN SLOVENE TRANSLATIONS

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### Abstract

Joseph Conrad gained public admiration for the romantic glamour and atmosphere of his tales of the sea, of distant coasts and exotic locales, while his fellow artists and literary critics praised his superb use of language, his writing style, and his narrative techniques. The following chronological account of translations and critical responses to them and of the discussions about the life and work of Joseph Conrad show, that in Slovenia, too, Conrad is considered to be one of the greatest novelists in the English language.

Józef Teodor Konrad Nałęcz Korzeniowski (1857-1924), who, becoming a naturalized British subject in 1886, changed his name to Joseph Conrad, is seen as one of the most interesting and influential novelists of the twentieth century. He spent nearly twenty years as a sailor and did not begin writing novels until he was nearly forty. His literary career is commonly divided into three periods: a short early period of largely Malay fiction ending in 1896; the major phase extending from 1897 to 1911; and his later period (considered by many critics) of transition and decline, extending from 1911 to his death in 1924.

Conrad persistently experimented in the form of the novel. The devices he resorted to – such as character doubles, thematic recurrences, parallel situations, shifts in narrative sequences, central narrators, recurring symbols – had all been used by his predecessors, as Frederick R. Karl points out in his *Reader's Guide to Joseph Conrad* (1970), but the arrangement of his material and the force of his vision established him as one of the most influential and discussed modern authors writing in English.

The first to introduce Joseph Conrad to Slovenian readers was Matej Šmalc. His translation of one of the five *Tales of Unrest* (1898), "Lagoon" ("Laguna"), and the accompanying article "Inozemski pregled" ("An account from abroad") were published in the literary magazine *Ljubljanski zvon* in 1927, just three years after Conrad's death.

Šmalc briefly presents some facts about Conrad's biography and work, touching upon the issue (rarely mentioned by Conrad's English language critics) of the attitude of the English towards Conrad's literary work:

Srečeval je v kolonijah vse vrste tipov in jih gledal kot Anglež; Anglija, vladarica nad valovi, mu je bila vzor človeške organizacije, slava in moč

Anglije vse, kar je vredno občudovanja. In vendar so njegova dela baš Angležem nekako tuja – kontinentalna, slovanska<sup>1</sup> (Šmalc 256).

Thirty years later this was no longer the case, according to the critic Scott-James (*Fifty Years of English Literature 1900-1950*, 1956), who wrote:

The mixture of French manner and Slav feeling, of classicism and mysticism, of order and unrest, of hardness and fineness – the earth-bound and the other-worldly – this at the last appealed to the romantic yet practical English when they had learnt to appreciate his subtle, nervous, expressive style (Scott – James 62).

The second of Conrad's works brought to the attention of Slovenian readers was one of his latest novels, *The Shadow Line* (1917) (*Senčna črta*), translated by the well-known Slovenian poet Oton Župančič in 1931. Shortly after its publication by *Tiskovna zadruga* two articles followed, offering a brief summary of the novel and a short evaluation of Conrad's style and mood - Miran Jarc's article "Joseph Conrad - Senčna črta" ("Joseph Conrad - The Shadow Line") appeared in the magazine *Dom in svet* while Jožko Prezelj's contribution appeared under the same title in *Ljubljanski zvon*.

Jarc shares his opinion about Conrad's writing style with those critics who find that "nekaj čudno svojstvenega diha iz Conradovega dela – prelivanje resničnega in sanjskega sveta, pa tako tesno, da ju ne ločiš več"<sup>2</sup> (Jarc 517), something that recollects Russian authors, particularly Dostoevsky.

Despite Conrad's denial of any similarity to Dostoevsky (literary critics like Neville H. Newhouse and Frederick R. Karl cite evidence of Conrad's distaste for Dostoevsky, "a grimacing, haunted creature" (Conrad in Newhouse 51), "confused and insane" (Conrad in Karl 42)), it is evident that a deep disappointment with life characterizes all Conrad's writing. His personality reveals "mrkega, težkega duha, ki se venomer protivi, ki z nezaupanjem in sumnjo sprejema življenje"<sup>3</sup>, concludes Jarc (Ibid.).

Jožko Prezelj agrees with Jarc that one can sense a melancholic Slav soul behind Conrad's naturalistic pessimism. Prezelj speculates that Conrad is less romantic than Robert Louis Stevenson: "/.../ nima tistega idealnega optimizma, ki tako zelo zbližuje Stevensonova duši mladostnika ali človeka, objokujočega izgubljeni raj" "/.../ pri Conradu stoji v ospredju človek s svojo krizo, s svojo skrito bolečino"<sup>4</sup> (Prezelj 315,316).

Prezelj continues his analysis by praising Conrad's skilful use of language: "z redkimi, toda mojstrsko izbranimi besedami zna pričarati tako rekoč pred naše telesne

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<sup>1</sup> He met in the colonies all sorts of types and looked at them as an Englishman. England, master of the waves, was to him an ideal of human organization, her glory and her power everything worthy of admiration. Yet his works were somehow alien to the English –continental and Slavic.

<sup>2</sup> something strangely unique breathes out of Conrad's work – a distillation of the real world and the world of dreams, yet so murky, that you can no longer distinguish them.

<sup>3</sup> a gloomy, troubled soul, always disturbed, accepting life with distrust and suspicion.

<sup>4</sup> /.../ he has no such ideal optimism that so strongly draws Stevenson towards the soul of the youth, or that of a man, mourning after the lost paradise" /.../ in Conrad the individual with his crises, with his hidden pain stands forward.

oči čaroben videz sveta in življenja”<sup>5</sup> (317). He is also fascinated by Župančič’s translation: “čudovito skladen, mirni ton pripovedovanja in bogati, izbrušeni jezik mojstra Župančiča zares kar najbolj pravilno odražata tudi v slovenskem prelivu Conradovo osebnost”<sup>6</sup> (Ibid.).

What is more:

Župančič je prav srečno nabral v besednem zakladu naših pomorščakov množico tistih mornarskih strokovnih izrazov, ki pri nas Slovencih iz izvestnih razlogov niso narodna last, ter nam tako pokazal, kje naj oplajamo v primeru potrebe svojo jezikovno domišljijo, preden se odločimo za drzne neologizme<sup>7</sup> (Ibid.).

Maja Novak is the recent translator of *The Shadow Line* (*Senčna črta*) (published in 1997 in the collection for young and adult readers *Albatros*). In his short accompanying note Dušan Čater points out that Conrad’s young heroes (with strongly individualistic characters) very often find themselves in foreign places, in the middle of fatal events, between treachery and confidence, solidarity and loneliness, usually incapable of solving the ethical problem they have to face (Čater in Conrad 1997: 136). These are the virtues, which, in Čater’s opinion, place Conrad at the very top of European realist literature (Ibid.).

In 1933, the poet and translator Griša Koritnik rendered into Slovene one of Conrad’s most popular sea-stories, *Typhoon* (1903) *Tajfun*. Its publication by the publishing house *Evalit* received no critical response. By the end of 1935 two other Koritnik translations appeared (in instalments from 5 September to 25 October) in Slovenia’s national daily *Slovenec*. First was the short story “Gaspar Ruiz” from the collection *A Set of Six* (1908) followed by some chapters from the novel *Youth* (1902) (in 1952, Slovenski knjižni zavod published the complete translation of the novel, unfortunately no longer available to readers).

It was Ljubica Rodošek who, after nearly forty years, offered to young readers an abridged and adapted translation of this well-known story (rendered in Slovene as *Mladost*). Interestingly enough, the book was published the same year (1997), in the same collection (*Albatros*), and with the same author of the accompanying notes (Dušan Čater), as the previously mentioned *The Shadow Line*.

Čater comments on two authors, who, in his opinion, influenced Conrad’s writing – Dickens and Flaubert:

S prvim ga povezuje povsem stvarno popisovanje dogodkov s precejšnjo mero humorja in s smislom za grotesko ter močno karikiranje likov, pri

<sup>5</sup> with scarce, yet masterfully chosen words he knows to conjure (so to speak) right in front of our eyes a magic vision of the world and life.

<sup>6</sup> the marvelously congruent, calm tone of narration and the rich, polished language used by master Župančič reflect very accurately (in the Slovene rendering) Conrad’s personality.

<sup>7</sup> Župančič very fortunately depicted out of the seamen’s vocabulary a variety of those nautical expressions that we Slovenes (for various reasons) cannot consider as national property. By doing so, Župančič showed us where to fecundate (in case of necessity) our linguistic fantasy before we decide to use audacious neologisms.

Gustavu Flaubertu pa je Conrad občudoval njegovo opisovanje pozitivističnega opazovanja dejstev ter natančno dokumentiranje dogodkov<sup>8</sup> (Čater in Conrad 1997:64).

A further investigation into Conrad's 'presence' in Slovenia shows that August Petrišič translated *Lord Jim* (1900), one of Conrad's best known novels, as early as 1937 (reprinted twice, lastly in 1975).

In her course book *Angleški roman 1830-1920 (The English Novel 1830-1920)*, Meta Grosman dedicates the chapter about Conrad to some important English critical responses to *Lord Jim* as well as to the analysis of the narrative structure of the novel. In her view it is

only during the second and further readings that the reader begins to notice hints and suggestions interconnecting individual elements in this novel as well as individual symbols and their development, together with the complexity of suggested meanings (Grosman 133).

Twenty years had to pass before the rest of Conrad's major works appeared in Slovene. In 1958, Božo Vodušek translated *Nostromo* (1904), Conrad's longest novel (it took him two years to finish it). Mirko Jurak, who published his critical response to the translation in the magazine *Naši razgledi* in July 1959, included his *Nostromo* critiques in two of his books: *Od Shakespeara do naših sodobnikov* (1983), a collection of critical essays and notes on English, American and Australian literature, and in his practical reader about British, American and other authors in English *Literatures in English 2* (1994).

Jurak points out that before the public acclaim, Conrad gained appreciation from his contemporaries like James, Wells, and Crane, "saj se že v prvih Conradovih romanih kaže njegova sposobnost za opisovanje narave in odlično opazovanje ljudi, ki nam jih pisatelj predstavlja s čopičem impresionista"<sup>9</sup> (Jurak 1983:92).

Conrad was a great master in describing human character, continues Jurak,

znal je odkriti notranje vzgibe in nagone, ki včasih vodijo človeka po na prvi pogled čudnih poteh. V teh osebah najdemo več kot samo njihove življenjske zgodbe: nevsiljiva je Conradova etika, ki obsoja zlo"<sup>10</sup> (93).

Jurak dedicates the last part of his critical note to Božo Vodušek's splendid translation (in some points even exceeding the level of the original):

Prevajalec je pokazal izredno gibkost pri izbiri besednega gradiva, tako

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<sup>8</sup> a completely realistic inventory of events, with a good deal of humour and a sense of grotesque as well as a strong characterization of figures connect Conrad and Dickens while in Gustav Flaubert Conrad admired the positivistic observation of facts and accurate documentation of events.

<sup>9</sup> since Conrad's first novels already show his ability to picture nature and his excellent depiction of people whom the writer presents with an impressionist's brush.

<sup>10</sup> he was able to discover the inner impulses and instincts that sometimes lead the human along (at first glance) strange paths. In these people we find (much) more than just their life stories: Conrad's ethics, condemning evil, is unobtrusive.

da je znal poiskati ustrezna slovenska rekla za tiste odtenke izvirnika, ki bi jih na primer angleški bralec lahko ločil po intonaciji, v slovenščini pa bi bili z dobesednim prevodom zgubljeni. Zelo pomembno je tudi njegovo prizadevanje za uvajanje občevalnega jezika v knjižno slovenščino, ki je prevajalcu brez dvoma uspelo<sup>11</sup> (Ibid.).

It was in 1966 that Jože Dolenc rendered *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897), one of Conrad's most faithful documents of life at sea, into *Črnc z 'Narcisa'*. Dolenc, too, dedicates his accompanying notes to a brief analysis and chronology of Conrad's life and work.

He agrees with those critics who state that Conrad's stories seem romantic

predvsem zato, ker v njih opisuje ljudi in kraje, ki so za nas nenavadni, neznani; drži se jih mik in čar eksotičnosti; zunanji pečat jim dajejo stvari, kot so pustolovščine, spletke, izdaje, nasilje, skrivnosti, nevarnosti in strah<sup>12</sup> (Dolenc in Conrad 1966: 159)

nevertheless, the reader is not so overwhelmed by this as by the manner "kako pisatelj globoko zakoreninjenemu pesimizmu postavlja nasproti trdno vero v možnost zvestobe, prijateljstva, požrtvovalnosti in veličine"<sup>13</sup> (Ibid.).

In addition, Dolenc believes that "dela, ki so bila napisana s težavo, s trudom, počasi, včasih naravnost z muko, terjajo od bralca pazljivosti, če hočemo slediti vsemu dogajanju in uživati ob njem"<sup>14</sup> (160).

On the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Conrad's death (1984) the publishing house Prešernova založba from Maribor published Conrad's most important novel *Heart of Darkness* (1897), rendered into Slovene as *Srce teme* by Mart Ogen (who in 1986 also translated *Victory*, (*Zmaga*) one of Conrad's last novels (1915)).

In addition to some already well-known opinions about Conrad's writing, included in his accompanying notes, Ogen also makes the point that:

kljub dejstvu, da je Joseph Conrad pisal v slogu in na način, ki se je močno razlikoval od poglavitnih struj v romanopisju njegovega časa, velja pri večini kritikov in literarnih zgodovinarjev za največjega prozaista zgodnjih desetletij našega stoletja. V angleško prozo je vnesel novo in plemenitejšo zvrst moderne romantike in to s svežim, poživljajočim

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<sup>11</sup> The translator showed a special resilience in choosing the verbal material so that he knew to find adequate Slovene expressions for those shades of the original that an English reader could (for example) distinguish by intonation, yet in Slovene would be lost by a literal translation. The translator's (undoubtedly successful) effort to introduce the language of intercourse into literary Slovene is also very important.

<sup>12</sup> above all because in them he describes people and places that are unusual, unknown to us; they possess the charm and spell of the exotic; they are externally veiled by matters like adventure, intrigue, betrayal, violence, mystery, peril, and fear.

<sup>13</sup> with which the writer confronts deeply rooted pessimism with the strong belief into the possibility of faithfulness, friendship, self-sacrifice and grandeur.

<sup>14</sup> works that have been written with difficulty, slowly, sometimes in true torment, demand the close attention of the reader in order to follow all the events and enjoy them.

pisanjem v jeziku, ki ga je spoznal šele kot odrasel človek (vse življenje je govoril z močnim tujim naglasom)<sup>15</sup> (Ogen in Conrad 1984: 143,144).

Ogen concludes that *Heart of Darkness* is a text that still generates hundreds and hundreds of interpretations because of its lyric exhibition of the inner complexities of the psyche (Ibid.).

The last of Conrad's works translated into Slovene (both by Miha Avanzo) are the two political novels from Conrad's middle period – *The Secret Agent* (1907) and *Under Western Eyes* (1911). The former was published by Mladinska knjiga as *Tajni agent* in 1989, the latter appeared in the Cankarjeva založba collection XX. *Stoletje* in 1994 (under the title *Z zahodnimi očmi*).

Mirko Jurak provided the translation of *The Secret Agent* with excellent and detailed critical notes. He makes the point that the main reasons why Conrad's writing still remains in the centre of critical attention and is permanently included in the contemporary English literature canon throughout the world are:

izvrstna tehnika, ki privlači bralce, intenzivno podajanje snovi ter kritične življenjske situacije, ki junaka zaradi napačnih odločitev ali tragičnih napak često pripeljejo v tragičen položaj, iz katerega pa se lahko reši z ohranitvijo svoje človečnosti in medčloveške solidarnosti, pogumom in vztrajnostjo<sup>16</sup> (Jurak in Conrad 1994: 348,349).

Jurak also suggests that besides Flaubert, already mentioned by Čater, there were two other writers who influenced Conrad's work: Guy de Maupassant, master of objective realism, and Henry James, psychological realist. But in contradistinction to both writers, explains Jurak,

Conrad ne gradi svojih romanov na logičnem, dramatičnem zaporedju dramatičnih situacij, na premočrtnem razvoju zgodbe, temveč izbira posamične epizode, ki so z junakom neposredno ali posredno povezane, jih kontrastira, razvija do določene stopnje, nato pa jih poveže med seboj in jih končno sestavi v mogočen sklepni akord<sup>17</sup> (349).

Jurak concludes his evaluation of the novel expressing his thought that

v marsikaterem pogledu je roman prava klinična analiza družbenih razmer dvajsetega stoletja, ne le njegovih totalitarizmov in revolucij, temveč

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<sup>15</sup> besides the fact that Joseph Conrad wrote with a style and in a manner that was very different from the main movements in novel writing of his period, most literary critics and historians consider him as the greatest prose artist of the early decades of the twentieth century. He invested in English prose a new and nobler type of modern romanticism, with a fresh, revived writing in a language he learned only as an adult (he spoke with a strong foreign accent all his life).

<sup>16</sup> an excellent technique, which appeals to the reader, an intensive handling of material, and crucial life circumstances. The hero's wrong decisions or tragic mistakes brought him into a tragic situation, out of which he could save himself only by preserving his humanity and interpersonal solidarity, courage and persistence.

<sup>17</sup> Conrad does not build his novels on consistent, dramatic subsequence of dramatic situations, on the straightforward development of the story, he chooses particular episodes with which the hero is directly or indirectly connected, he contrasts, develops to a certain level and then links them together, finally joining them into a mighty final accord.

tudi prispodoba usodnih odločitev, ki so jih ljudje – ne junaki po naravi – morali sprejemati v vsakdanjem življenju in ki so jih tako ali drugače tudi usodno zaznamovale<sup>18</sup> (358).

Two other (very brief) critical responses followed the translation of *Under Western Eyes*, one by Milan Markelj, whose article “Novih pet XX. stoletja” (“The New Five of the book collection XX. stoletje”), was published by the local paper *Dolenjski list*, the other, written by Tone Smolej, entitled “Z zahodnimi očmi” (“Under Western Eyes”) appeared in the general interest magazine *Tribuna*.

Smolej makes the point that “v tem poznem in manj znanem Conradovem romanu smo priča značilni absurdni situaciji, ki je tipična za rahlo ironičen ton Conradovega pisanja”<sup>19</sup> and that the novel is “mojstrovina, ki na pretanjen način opisuje rojstvo krivde, njen razvoj, pokoro, pričakovanje kazni ter njeno sprejemanje”<sup>20</sup> (Smolej 29).

Shortly before the eightieth anniversary of Conrad's death (4 August 2004) a reprint of the Slovene version of *Heart of Darkness* appeared in the collection *Vrhunci stoletja*. The translator and essayist Miriam Drev wrote about it just previously in her article (published in the national paper *Delo*) “Morski klativitez pluje po reki skozi pragozd” (“The Sea-Vagabond Sails up the River into the Jungle”). She focused on two of the characteristics of Conrad's writing. Firstly she highlighted the central theme of his fiction:

Conradovi romani soočajo zahodnega človeka, predstavnika osvajaalne kulture, ki s trgovsko grabežljivostjo prisvaja dobrine tujih celin – vendar v njegovih knjigah vsakič le posameznika z lastnimi karakternimi značilnostmi – z ljudstvi, živečimi po drugačnih načelih<sup>21</sup> (Drev 13).

She continued by evaluating the writer's narrative technique, which is refined,

besede uporablja kot mrežo, s katero kolikor je mogoče natančno zajema pomene, z zelo modernim čutom za to, da bo celo v gostem tkivu povedanega ostal prostor za preoblikovanje zgodbe v njeno rahlo drugačno različico<sup>22</sup> (Ibid.).

Conrad's figure of master-mariner/story-teller intrigued Dušan Fabe, who dedicated part of his doctoral dissertation *Semantični vidiki angleške pomorske terminologije*

<sup>18</sup> from many points of view the novel is a genuine clinical analysis of the social conditions of the twentieth century, not just of its totalitarianisms and revolutions, it is also an allegory of fatal decisions that people – not heroes by nature – had to make in their everyday lives and which, in one way or another, fatally marked them.

<sup>19</sup> in this late and less known Conrad novel we are delivered a characteristic absurd situation, typical in its slightly ironic tone of Conrad's writing.

<sup>20</sup> a masterpiece, which in a subtle way describes the birth of guilt, its development, penitence, expectation of punishment, and its acceptance.

<sup>21</sup> Conrad's novels confront the western man (representative of the conquering culture, which through trading rapacity appropriates the goods of foreign continents), yet the individual always has his own personalized characteristics — with the people, living by other principles.

<sup>22</sup> he uses words as a net, with which he grasps (as accurately as possible) the meanings; he has a very modern sense for keeping (even in a very dense tissue of the told) some place for the transformation of the story into its slightly different variation.

ter vprašanje slovenskih ustreznih (2002) (*Semantic Aspects of English Maritime Terminology and the Question of Slovene Equivalents*) to the analysis of some selected Slovene translations of Conrad's works. Fabe opted for Conrad because

predstavlja izviren in zanesljiv vir terminološkega gradiva, kajti avtor sam je bil morda največji poznavalec pomorskega izrazja v angleškem jeziku in hkrati tudi eden največjih književnikov angleškega leposlovja v začetku 20. stoletja<sup>23</sup> (Fabe 6).

What is more

z izrednim posluhom za jezik, kar je sicer redka lastnost morjeplovcev, je predstavljal idealen primer simbioze stroke in jezika. Izjemno je bil pozoren zlasti na pravilno rabo strokovne terminologije. Morda toliko bolj, ker mu angleščina ni bila materni jezik. Hkrati s trdim delom in neizprosno vztrajnostjo je ustvaril zahtevno branje za vsakogar. Tisti pa, ki so se lotili prevajanja njegovih del, zaslužijo še posebno priznanje<sup>24</sup> (Fabe 175).

The translations of eight novels, analyzed by Fabe (*Tajfun, Mladost, Nostromo, Črnc z "Narcisa", Lord Jim, Srce teme, Zmaga, Senčna črta*), appeared during a long period of time – from 1933 to 1997. Fabe estimates that during these decades many new maritime terms appeared, confirming that language is a living organism.

Fiction is thus merely the art of writing

ki ni neposredno povezana s stvarnim svetom, pa vendar je prevajanje leposlovnih del, katerih dogajanje je umeščeno v specifično, četudi izmišljeno, strokovno okolje, zelo trd oreh za vse prevajalce. Problemi, s katerimi se pri tem soočajo, so večplastni<sup>25</sup> (203).

Translating Conrad's fiction raises a fundamental question, maintains Fabe: "kako v ciljnem jeziku ohraniti razmerje med poetiko (stilnimi izraznimi sredstvi) in realističnim "odslikavanjem" dogajanja oz. resničnega sveta, kajti oboje se v njegovih delih medsebojno prepleta<sup>26</sup> (204).

Fabe's analysis focused explicitly on maritime terminology. As he points out, he would like his corrections and proposals to be of some help for the future (courageous

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<sup>23</sup> it represents an authentic and reliable source of terminological material, as the author himself was probably one of the greatest experts in nautical terminology in the English language and at the same time one of the greatest figures in the English literature of the early twentieth century.

<sup>24</sup> with an extraordinary sense for language, otherwise a rare characteristic of mariners, he represented an ideal case of professional and linguistic symbiosis. He was extremely attentive particularly to the correct use of professional terminology. Maybe even more so as English was not his mother tongue. With hard work and inexorable perseverance he created demanding reading for everyone. Those, however, who have undertaken the translation of his works, merit special recognition.

<sup>25</sup> which is not directly connected with the real world, yet the translation of fictional works with stories, placed in a specific, although fictitious professional environment, is a very hard nut to crack for the translators. Problems, with which they are confronted, are thus multi-layered.

<sup>26</sup> how to preserve in the target language the relation between the poetics (stylistic means of expression) and the realistic "depiction" of events or the real world, as both intermingle in his works.



enough) translators of Conrad's works that still wait for translation into Slovene (in particular his first two novels *Almayer's Folly* (1894) and *An Outcast of the Island* (1896).

To conclude, a very fresh reprint of *Tajni agent* (*The Secret agent*) for the collection *Vrhunci erotike in napetosti* (published in April, 2005) proves that the Slovene public is still well aware of the special place this extraordinary writer has in the world's literary heritage.

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The author's translations from Slovene into English are in the footnotes.

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