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CZECH TRANSLATIONS OF *THE ANCIENT MARINER*: WHAT WERE SLÁDEK'S ERRORS MENTIONED BY JOSEF PALIVEC?

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* (published first in 1798, in *Lyrical Ballads*) has provoked translators of all generations. Until this day, five translations into Czech have been published: by Josef Václav Sládek (1896), Josef Nesvadba (1946), Josef Palivec (1949; a smaller part published 1948 in a magazine), Václav Renč (1965) and Petruše Máchová (1984).

A lot could be – and has been – written about the five translations. It is not the purpose of this paper to evaluate or judge their formal solution or its perfection. We would like to look at the correctness of two of these translations as regards the interpretation of the source text meaning.

In the afterword to his translation, Josef Palivec explains his reasons for re-translating the *Ancient Mariner*. In addition to the general comment that 'Czech poets should make an attempt at this ballad of Coleridge's from time to time, as they used to do with Poe's *Raven*', he analyses Sládek's version, the only one he was aware of when working on his translation:

'I keep reading his verse and I cannot help admiring the ingenuity with which he was overcoming difficulties. He is a master. If it was not for the two extraordinarily important places where in his rendering – I don't know for what sleepiness – the sense of the original is completely inverted, it would be better to publish his translation anew because it is very accurate. (...) I do recommend to the reader who will take a fancy to Coleridge's ballad that he turn back to Sládek once a while, too. He, who stops at him, always leaves him enriched with a valuable experience' (my translation).

Palivec does not state where the two crucial errors occur in Sládek's translation. It is therefore the purpose of the present paper, to find them and compare the solutions offered by the two translators.

Some slight shifts in meaning result inevitably from the notorious problem of the semantic density of English being higher than that of Czech. Levý (1963)

lists four methods Czech translators use to deal with this problem. The only one that the five translators of Coleridge did not use is adding one syllable to the meter (as they all decided to strictly maintain the form of the original). However, they make use of all the three remaining methods: they (a) use shorter, especially monosyllabic words, which rather influences the stylistic level of the text than its meaning, shifting the language towards the archaic and/or poetical (e.g. *sled* 'stopa', *pal* 'pálení', *jih* 'jižní vítr', *zbit* 'zabít' in Sládek's translation; '*Bod, klubko par? Ne bod, toť tvar!*' in Palivec); (b) add lines (though this is considered to be typical of J. V. Sládek, in *Ancient Mariner* it is Palivec who adds two verses in 3/16 and 4/11 and one verse in 4/13. Sládek actually reduces stanza 7/21 by one verse); (c) leave out some meanings or condense more meanings into one expression. Together with the influence of available rhyme pairs, this is the main source of small changes and shifts in emphasis or in the way meanings are expressed.

These small changes, however, appear in all translations and could hardly be called errors. The errors mentioned by Palivec should be of a different nature; it should not be difficult to recognize the two passages in the text where Sládek 'completely inverts' the meaning of the original. As we have to take into consideration not an 'objective' shift of meaning (because Palivec might have been wrong in his interpreting the meaning of the source text), but rather Palivec's view of such shifts, the easiest way to find the two spots seems to be to compare the two relevant translations: Palivec must certainly have invested a lot of effort into finding a different solution that would express a different, presumably correct, interpretation of the source text.

A clear misinterpretation – and most probably one of the two instances mentioned by Palivec – is as follows (5/21–22):

The Sun, right up above the mast,
 Had fixed her to the ocean:
 But in a minute she 'gan stir,
 With a short uneasy motion -
 Backwards and forwards half her length
 With a short uneasy motion.
 Then like a pawing horse let go,
 She made a sudden bound:
 It flung the blood into my head,
 And I fell down in a swound.

Sládek relates the pronoun *she* to the Sun instead of to the ship:

Teď stojí přímo nad stěžněm
 kruh slunce zlatoskvělý;
 leč pojednou se nejistě
 a krátce zatetelí;
 to v před a v důl o délky půl

se krátce zatetelí.

Pak skokem oř jak divoký
se vrhlo přes nebe;
a srazilo mi k hlavě krev
a já pad' bez sebe.

Palivec (as well as the other translators) translates correctly:

Nýt Slunce, přímo nad stěžněm,
loď přibil k mořské pláni:
jak sval se však loď vzepjala
v úporném zabírání -
půl délky zpět, půl délky vpřed
v úporném zabírání.

Pak koráb vyrazil jak oř,
jenž poznal, že už smí:
vtom krev mi vhrkla do hlavy, -
já pozbyl vědomí.

It is, however, impossible to decide which of the other differences is the one that Palivec had in mind. The stanzas where Sládek and Palivec differ noticeably are as follows:

1/18 (and the same difference in 2/2)
And a good south wind sprung up behind;
The Albatross did follow,
And every day, for food or play,
Came to the mariners' hollo!

Sládek:
Vál dobrý jižní vítr v loď,
v něm Albatross plul za ní
a sléтал hrát a zob si brát
na plavců zavolání!

Palivec:
Jih přejně hned loď sunul zpět,
a jako dobrý známý
albatros – hou! hej holahou! -
jídal a hrál si s námi.

Palivec adds the information about the ship being driven back to the north. This can hardly be considered a crucial difference: this conclusion is fully logi-

cal and is expressed explicitly in the marginal notes that Coleridge adds to his poem (*'the ship... returned northward'*).

3/8

And I had done a hellish thing,
 And it would work 'em woe:
 For all averred, I had killed the bird
 That made the breeze to blow.
 Ah wretch! said they, the bird to slay,
 That made the breeze to blow!

Sládek:

Já pekelnou jsem spáchal věc
 a všechny pojal děs,
 neb každý mnil, že jsem ptáka zbil,
 jenž dobrý vítr nes'.
 A každý vzkřik': »Aj pekelník,
 jej zbit, jenž vítr nes'!«

Palivec:

Pekelnou věc jsem udělal,
 ta přízeň odstraší:
 však kdekdo lál, on ptáka sklál,
 jenž vítr přináší.
 Ať pojde sám! Sestřelit nám,
 co vítr přináší!

The second line is rendered rather freely by both poets: *to work (a person) woe* means 'to inflict distress or trouble upon them or to do harm to them'. Palivec is closer to the original meaning, but Sládek's version is still in accordance with the situation and was probably dictated by the rhyme.

3/15

One after one, by the star-dogged Moon,
 Too quick for groan or sigh,
 Each turned his face with a ghastly pang,
 And cursed me with his eye.

Sládek:

V tom svitu jeden po druhém,
 jak vzdech mu v hrdle mřel,
 tvář v mukách na mne obrátil
 a očima mi klel.

Palivec:

Při svitu Luny zářící,
slédované tou družicí
přespřiliš rychle pro povzdech,
hle, zkrúšen, jeden za druhým
mne měří chmurným okem svým
a klne v bolestech.

One of the instances where Palivec decided to add two lines to obtain space for the more accurate rendering of the concise English *star-dogged moon*. This metaphor corresponds with the end of the previous stanza that speaks of *...the horn'd Moon, with one bright star / Within the nether tip*. Even though a hand-written note with a new version of the previous stanza found in Palivec's manuscripts¹ proves (as well as the extension of the scheme itself) that he considered this passage important, Sládek's omission of this theme can hardly be seen as crucial.

4/6

I looked to Heaven, and tried to pray;
But or ever a prayer had gusht,
A wicked whisper came, and made
My heart as dry as dust.

Sládek:

Já k nebi, chtěje modlit se,
však než jsem ruce vztáh',
zlý šepot přišel, vysušil
mé srdce jako prach.

Palivec:

Jen se mi chtělo pomodlit,
zlý našeptavač, ach,
to vytušil a vysušil
mé srdce jako prach.

All translators understand correctly the archaic *or ever* (= *before ever, before even...*, or simply *before*), but Palivec offers a questionable interpretation of the agent of the action described in the second verse. His version seems to suggest that there was another party – an evil ghost? – present ('našeptavač'), while Coleridge's wording enables a more straightforward reading: it is the Mariner himself who whispers, as the wicked whisper came to his mind sooner than the

1 It elaborates on the expression *star-dogged moon* by moving it to this stanza: '... drobounká hvězda jako psík / za Lunou šapká odespod, / tam, kde je dolní cip.' This hand-written note is quoted in Palivec (1993), p. 335.

words of the prayer. The other three translators select this interpretation quite clearly:

Nesvadba:

A vzhlédnú k nebi, modlit se
 hrdlo se zadrhne
 jen zašeptám. To jako prach
 na srdce usedne.

Renč:

Já k nebi vzhléd: než modlitba
 mi přešla přes hrdlo,
 rouhavým šeptem na sám prach
 mi srdce zatvrdlo.

Máchová:

A chtěl jsem prosit. Modlitba
 však nešla přes ústa.
 Srdce pod slovy rouhání
 kamenem zarůstá.

If this was to be considered the other 'error' Palivec had in mind, we could hardly agree with him. On the other hand, Sládek's solution – as well as the original – offers both interpretations mentioned above, so that Palivec could have found the one he preferred if he wanted to.

15/1

It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek
 Like a meadow-gale of spring -
 It mingled strangely with my fears,
 Yet it felt like a welcoming.

Sládek:

On zved' mi vlas, on vál mi v tvář
 jak z jara na stráni -
 mne pojal strach, však bylo to
 přec jako vítání.

Palivec:

V mé vlasy hrábl, vál mi v tvář
 z luk jarním závanem -
 V můj strach se divně přimíchal,
 však cosi jihlo v něm.

Whichever of the above mentioned differences (or still another one that we might have left unrecognized in the text) Palivec meant by his comment – and whoever is responsible for it – it cannot spoil the pleasure of reading any of the Czech translations. The poetical mastery of their work is more important than minor mistakes in the informative level of the text discussed in this paper. On the other hand, any such misunderstanding makes a difficult text even less comprehensible. Let us close this brief survey of the *Ancient Mariner* in Czech with a passage where all five translators fell into a simple trap:

6/16

The harbour-bay was clear as glass,
So smoothly it was strewn!
And on the bay, the moonlight lay,
And the shadow of the Moon.

Sládek:

Jak zrcadlo se rozkládal
ten chobot v šíř i v dál
a světlem, stínem lunný svit
tam bleskotal a plál.

Nesvadba:

Zátoka, čistá jako sklo
snad vítat též nás chce
a kolem ní svit měsíční
a stíny měsíce.

Palivec:

Má rejda měla rovnou hlád
z tak čisté perleti!
Svit měsíční se zhlížel v ní,
stín Luně vzápětí.

Renč:

Zátoka čistá jako sklo,
pokojná hladina.
Tvář měsíční se zhlíží v ní
a v stínech zhasíná.

Máchová:

Záliv do hladka zbroušený
je čistý jako sklo.
Světlem i stínem měsíce
se v něm teď zalesklo.

They have overestimated the romantic mood of the scene or the overall atmosphere of the ballad so that they were not suspicious about the improbable combination of light and shadow (especially when there is nothing present in the scene that could throw a shadow). If translating a more straightforward text they would have probably consulted a dictionary: in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, they would have found the two lines in question as an illustration for a less frequent meaning of *shadow*: 'a reflected image'.

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