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Between Sound and Silence: Alice Munro's Critical Acclaim in Slovakia

Jana Javorčíková

Abstract

The article presents results of research focused on the reflection of Munro in Slovakia after 1989 and on the peculiarities affecting the process of selection, translation, publication and dissemination of Munro among Slovak readers prior to and after she received the Nobel Prize. A part of the research lies on the media, print media and literary criticism coverage of Alice Munro before and after 2013; a special emphasis lies on the philosophy of Zelený kocúr, a recently established yet increasingly significant publishing house that justifies its choice of authors by their “universality” and “readability” for the Slovak readership.

Résumé

L'article présente les résultats d'une recherche axée sur la réflexion de Munro en Slovaquie après 1989 et sur les particularités affectant le processus de sélection, de traduction, de publication et de diffusion de Munro parmi les lecteurs slovaques avant et après la remise du prix Nobel. Une partie de la recherche repose sur les médias, la presse écrite et la couverture des critiques littéraires d'Alice Munro avant et après 2013. Un accent particulier a été mis sur la philosophie de “Zelený kocúr”, une maison d'édition nouvelle mais de plus en plus importante qui justifie son choix d'auteurs par leur “universalité” et “lisibilité” pour le lectorat slovaque.



Alice Munro has been one of the most widely discussed Nobel Prize winners, both because of the genre she works in and because of the world she depicts and the topics she chooses.¹ According to the Nobel Prize website, the motivation for awarding the prize to Munro was recognition of her standing as a “master of the contemporary short story.” As the site points out, Munro “has dedicated her literary career almost exclusively to the short story genre”; in fact she was the first author awarded the prize of whom this could be said, and the award was widely regarded as also being recognition of the short story genre itself. The setting of her stories is also individual. Again quoting the Nobel Prize site, “She grew up in a small Canadian town; the kind of environment that often provides the backdrops for her stories.” Within this largely self-enclosed, self-limiting milieu, she examines “relationship problems and moral conflicts” and demonstrates “the impact that seemingly trivial events can have on a person’s life” (“Alice Munro: Facts”). In other words, she reveals the universal within a very specific “provincial” Canadian setting.

Her audience is not generally the broad reading public, but rather more discriminating readers; it is indicative that most of her stories first appeared in *The New Yorker*, by general consensus the most influential literary and cultural magazine in the Anglo-American world.

Nevertheless, though increasingly known, and translated, worldwide, Munro had a particularly close relationship to her reading public in Canada. That she was the first Canadian recipient of a Nobel Prize in Literature was a cause for great celebration: in the words of her publisher Douglas Gibson, “All of Canada is just delighted by this news ... it’s as if all of Canada has won the award” (Gibson 2013). Her coming to the Slovak literary scene, however, has met with pragmatic as well as artistic hurdles and would not be possible had not a new and progressive publishing house, Zelený kocúr, intervened. In this article we would like to follow the fascinating appearance of Alice Munro on the Slovak literary scene.

Slovak reception of Alice Munro

Internationally, Alice Munro has been a well-known and bestselling author since the 1970s. The Slovak reception of Alice Munro, however, has come rather late, and has unexpected peculiarities, ones that affect many translations of foreign novels in the region formerly known as the Czechoslovak cultural environment (Otrúslová, 116–117). From 1918 Slovakia was part of Czechoslovakia and almost all readers understood both the Slovak and Czech languages. When the two countries split politically

1) For these reasons, for example, the German literature critic Denis Scheck referred to the selection of Munro as “a sensational choice” (Scheck 2013).



into two independent states in 1993 the linguistic situation did not change radically, at least where Slovak readers are concerned: most are still quite familiar with Czech, and the politics of translations is often affected by this fact. Czech and Slovak publishing houses often compete for the reader and try to provide translations as soon as possible.

This unusual linguistic situation is reflected in the case of Munro. Three individual short stories have been translated into Slovak and published. Two of these appeared in literary journals aimed at the more discriminating reading public: “Something I’ve been Meaning to Tell You,” in *Aspekt* (1997), and “Nettles,” in *Revue svetovej literatúry* [World literature revue, 2002]. The third short story, “The Stone in the Field” was included in a unique collection of English-Canadian short stories entitled *Tichá hudba* [Quiet music, 2000]. Nevertheless, the first complete collection of Munro’s short stories was not published in Slovakia until 2014, eleven years later than the first translations of a collection into Czech. So far, three of her short story collections have been translated into the Slovak language, and seven into Czech. The relationships between these translations can be seen in the following table:

Munro's collections (dates first published)	Czech translations (dates published)	Slovak translations (dates published)
<i>Something I've Been Meaning to Tell You</i> (1974)	<i>Už dávno ti chci něco říct</i> (2003)	No Slovak translation
<i>Open Secrets</i> (1994)	<i>Veřejná tajemství</i> (2017)	No Slovak translation
<i>The Love of a Good Woman</i> (1998)	<i>Láska dobré ženy</i> (2015)	<i>Láska dobrej ženy</i> (2015)
<i>Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage</i> (2001)	<i>Nepřítel, přítel, ctitel, milenec, manžel</i> (2009, 2nd ed. 2014)	<i>Nenávisť, priateľstvo, zväzanie, láska, manželstvo</i> (2015)
<i>Runaway</i> (2004)	<i>Útěk</i> (2011, 2nd ed. 2014)	No Slovak translation
<i>Too Much Happiness</i> (2009)	<i>Příliš mnoho štěstí</i> (2013, 2nd ed. 2014)	No Slovak translation
<i>Dear Life</i> (2012)	<i>Drahý život</i> (2014)	<i>Ako o život</i> (2014)

The table makes clear a fundamental difference between Czech and Slovak translations. Munro was first translated into the Czech language in 2003, and three more titles appeared before the Nobel Prize announcement in October 2013. On the other hand, all the Slovak translations of Munro’s collections of short stories followed the Nobel Prize award, being published in 2014 and 2015. It would appear that the Slovak publisher did not knowingly try to compete with the Czech translations. Of the three



collections of stories that exist in both Czech and Slovak translation, in only one case (*Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*) did the Slovak translation appear after a gap of some years following the Czech translation. Otherwise, the other two paired collections (*The Love of a Good Woman* and *Dear Life*) saw the light of day almost simultaneously in the wake of Munro being awarded the prize; it is highly likely that the publishers communicated their selections to each other.

The story of how Munro's translations made their way to the Slovak book market is also fascinating. All three translations were published by a visionary new publishing house, Zelený kocúr, founded in 2012. Their editorial philosophy, as summarized by their chief executive Aurélie Gulászi in an interview conducted in 2017, is "to publish high quality authors, but ones perhaps less well-known in Slovakia ... we would like to add to the book market what is clearly missing from it... We want to publish significant works of world literature in good quality translations, well edited, so we work with the best translators and editors" (Javorčíková 2017). In its approach, Zelený kocúr differs from the common pragmatic editorial policy of commercial publishing houses.

In addition to their attempt to "fill the blank spots in the Slovak book market" (Javorčíková 2017), one of the criteria is the current critical acclaim accorded to specific works of literature. They try to bring these books to the Slovak reader as soon as possible. This is clearly reflected in the case of Munro. The reasons that led Zelený kocúr to the inclusion of Munro's fiction in the editorial plan certainly included personal preferences (Gulászi points out that the publishers themselves were "ardent readers of Alice Munro, disappointed that none of her works had been translated into Slovak" (Javorčíková 2017). But clearly there was also the fact that she had won the Nobel Prize, as an author who is a Nobel Prize winner is a marketable item. This is reflected on the covers of the volumes published by Zelený kocúr, which sport a special red sticker proclaiming the author as a Nobel Prize winner. Nevertheless, the overall sales of Munro's novels in Slovakia have been oscillating between 200 to 300 copies per title, which is below the turnover usual for bestsellers published by Zelený kocúr. (Gulászi states that their most successful best-seller reached a monthly total of 700 copies.) However, Munro's books continue to sell and the same trend is expected for the future; that is why another translation of her prose is being prepared at the moment (of *Runaway*, another title that has already appeared in Czech). It should be pointed out that the publishing of Alice Munro in Slovak translation has been supported by the Canada Council for the Arts. This, according to Gulászi, is a great help in publishing unknown or challenging authors, both of which apply to Munro in the Slovak context (Javorčíková 2017).

The paucity of translations of Munro's short stories into Slovak corresponds with another surprising trend in Slovak literary discourse – the very modest number of critical-analytical studies of Munro's work, either in serious journals offering literary



and translation reviews or in online blogs and commentaries. Among the respectable number of otherwise quality encyclopaedias of world literature available in Slovakia after the 1990s, paradoxically only Procházka and Sříbrný's *Czech Slovník spisovatelů (Velké Británie a britského společenství)* [Dictionary of authors (Great Britain and the British Commonwealth), 1996] brings information about Munro. Moreover, this publication also includes a literary-historical review of the development of Canadian literature in English. Older generations of Slovak researchers, however, still benefit from their bilingualism and thus this dictionary is one of those few sources that include Canadian authors among world authors. Interestingly, a notable Slovak literary scholar and translator, Marian Gazdík, supports this idea of a common Czechoslovak book market and readership when among new acquisitions on "our [i.e. Slovak] book market," he also lists new Czech translations (Gazdík, 211). The aforementioned publication, *Tichá hudba*, represents another print source the Slovak reader can consult to find out about Munro, as it includes bionotes. Finally, Slovak readers, perhaps to fill the vacuum of quality literary reviews in the early 1990s, were provided with a word-to-word translation of an *The Independent on Sunday* review originally written by Claire Tomalin in 1990 in a Slovak literary journal *Revue svetovej literatúry* (Tomalin, 190). The publishers of the volume did not specify the translator. Later, brief biographical information was presented by the same literary journal accompanying the translation of Munro's short story "Nettles". Thus, to get acquainted with Munro, Slovak readers and scholars have to rely on translations of foreign reviews, rare Slovak print sources, Czech print sources, or the Internet.

Critical studies reflecting Munro's work are also scanty in Slovakia. The above-mentioned translator of Munro, Marian Gazdík, has written several studies where he explores the unpredictable genius of Alice Munro. Gazdík also authored a critical study in the 2000 English-Canadian short story collection which analysed the artistry of authors selected for the anthology; however, major attention is paid to Margaret Atwood, while the other authors (Margaret Laurence, Leon Rooke, Alice Munro and twelve other prominent Canadian authors) are given only secondary attention (Gazdík, 205–211). Gazdík, however, does note an important fact – the serious absence of critical studies on Canadian authors and Canadian literature in general in Slovakia – and points to the very illustrative mistake of the otherwise reliable literary critic Danica Teremová-Hollá, whose analysis of Munro and Gallant was published in 1997 under the title "American Short Stories" (Gazdík, 210).

The Slovak popular press responded promptly to Munro's being awarded the Nobel Prize in 2013. Immediately after the award was announced in October 2013, Matúš Kvasnička published a review of Munro's life and artistry entitled "Alice Munroová vtesná do poviedky celý román" [Alice Munro can squeeze a whole novel into a short story], in the Slovak national daily *Pravda*. In his article, Kvasnička recalls another



Canadian(-born) author, Saul Bellow, who won the prize in 1976, and also quotes Munro's initial reaction to her nomination. Kvasnička also refers to the Czech translator Alena Jindrová-Špilarová and the Czech critic and reviewer Jan Rejžek. The author disagrees with the Czech reviewer Rejžek, who called Munro a Canadian Chekhov. He further mentions the future plans of the Czech publishing house Paseka to translate Munro's stories. Attentive readers cannot fail to notice that the article relies significantly on Czech sources and translations. A year later Aňa Ostrihoňová in her article for the same daily, *Pravda*, entitled "Reality is Escape" attempts an analysis of Munro's short stories and draws parallels with her personal life. However, like Kvasnička, Ostrihoňová relies on Czech translations and even presents a list of Munro's books translated into Czech since 2003. Neither she nor Kvasnička points out the absence of Slovak translations of Munro's prose.

The low number of Munro translations inevitably leads to a complete lack of translation criticism related to her work. In the widely recognized nationally-circulated journal *Kritika prekladu* [Translation criticism], which has been published at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica for over five years, no review of Munro's stories has ever been published. However, the editors of the journal were appropriately alarmed by this information and promised to publish a review of the translations of Munro's short stories into Slovak within a short time. Nevertheless, at the time of writing of this study, the author did not register any other print media publishing a review of Munro's Slovak translations.

Authors publishing blogs and reviews in Slovak on the Internet have paid Munro a little more attention. The information webpage *Aktuality.sk*, notable for its promptness in providing information, immediately announced Munro's being awarded the Nobel. However, the actual information was limited to a brief bio; a link was also provided to a live stream from the actual announcement. Detailed information was lacking. Various commercial webpages, especially online bookshops (e.g. the Slovak publishing house Panta Rhei), also include in their list of authors a short bio and bibliography of Alice Munro. Panta Rhei employs the literary critic and book reviewer Veronika Vaňková for brief audio-reviews of their new publications. In about three minutes, Vaňková presents Munro's Slovak translation of *Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage*, where she points out Munro's ability to depict "common people" who live most uncommon lives (Vaňková 2015). Even though the webpage is commercial and directed at increasing book sales, it is a comfortable medium providing lucid yet cogent reviews of novels under current discussion. The webpages of Panta Rhei and *Aktuality.sk* represent the two most distinctive types of Internet texts about Alice Munro.



Conclusion

Before it could reach the Slovak reader, Munro's intellectual prose had to overcome many artistic as well as practical obstacles. On the one hand, Munro undoubtedly appeals to the reader, whether that reader is international or, in our case, comes from the specific cultural context of the former Czechoslovakia. For example, detailed descriptions of life in Canada make her books very attractive to local readers, who learn not only about the Canadians but, surprisingly, also about the life of immigrants (for example, in the short story "To Reach Japan" from her collection *Dear Life*, Munro mentions a second-generation immigrant to Canada who was carried across some mountains by his mother in order to get out of Soviet Czechoslovakia into Western Europe, though the father remained behind). Slovak readers learn about life in small-size Canadian towns, their social codes and taboos, morality and lifestyle, all of which are very different and quite exotic to the Slovak reader.

Another reason for Munro's attractiveness to the Slovak reader is her message, which is broad, universal and goes beyond the Canadian context. Munro is a great advocate of civil and women's rights; in her inconspicuous way of writing, she almost indirectly, as a marginal footnote, mentions tiny yet important details in relationships between men and women, their rights to be treated and even talked to equally. The reader is led to understand that various formal ways of separating men and women indicate a much stronger separation in the lifestyle and morals of the 1950s. Munro also notes that in those days (meaning the 1950s) "feminism" was not even a word people used. Again, the reader is to understand that, as there was no word for the phenomenon, there perhaps was less sensitivity to gender issues in general.

On the other hand, Munro creates strong and independent women characters who, in spite of the times and morals, decide to live authentically. In "To Reach Japan," for example, the readers follow Greta, an impractical poet who, however, decides to live as freely as possible, to choose her sex partner without a wedding or even a relationship, freely on a random meeting in a train. The reasons for Munro's openness regarding injustice in gender issues is perhaps rooted in her childhood. She remembers

I never thought of it being important, but I never thought of myself as being anything but a woman, and there were many good stories about little girls and women. After you got maybe into your teens it was more about helping the man to achieve his needs and so on, but when I was a young girl I had no feeling of inferiority at all about being a woman. And this may have been because I lived in a part of Ontario where women did most of the reading, telling most of the stories, the men were outside doing important things, they didn't go in for stories. (Munro 2013)



Through these and many other topics, Munro clearly raises a critical voice for the equality of the sexes, only one of her many topics that resonate among Slovak readers.

There are certainly international authors who are more easily marketable than Alice Munro in small and specific book markets such as the one in Slovakia. She challenges the reader's intellect as well as emotions, but thanks to the visionary publishing house Zelený kocúr that does not hesitate to publish even challenging authors, writers such as Alice Munro reach their Slovak readers.

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