

## Slovenia. A Nation of Poets?

Slovenia, like many, many other small nations, claims to be a nation of poets. If you have four Slovenians in a room, it is said, you are guaranteed to have three poets. Since not every Slovenian scribbles verse, these statements are obviously not literal but metaphorical or illustrative. But even then, what does it mean to be a nation of poets? To possess a poetic soul or to have some vague linguistic sensitivity as your birthright? To be blessedly born into a language that lends itself perfectly to poetry?

I first heard this “nation of poets” quip, or perhaps read it in some guide book, before I moved to Slovenia ten years ago. Since then numbing reality has supplanted my imagined Slovenia and I no longer see rhymesters of a melancholic Slavic stance on every street corner. I’ve learned Slovenian in the meantime, not perfectly, but enough that I have to wince when I hear their language battered and abused by politicians, bureaucrats and academics. I am now doubtful that this tiny country is any more a “nation of poets” than Canada or Germany (that land of supposed “*Dichter und Denker*”). Each year seems to bring Slovenia closer to the murky no man’s land of globalized, digitalized, consume-me-now culture.

And yet, any amount of time spent in Slovenia lends credence to the claim that they *are* a nation of poets. There are poets on statues in every town; they chose poets to adorn the sub-section of the now-shaky euro; and road after road is named after what they call a *pesnik* (the other day I took a wrong turn in Ljubljana and before I could right myself I’d passed two streets named after men famous for their verse, not their conquests on the battlefield). More heartening still is that most Slovenians can name a living poet and recite a line, stanza or entire poem from their canonical poets of the past. For all my scepticism toward any essentialist statements about what makes a nation, the public presence of poets and the general awareness of language and literature in Slovenia continues to astonish me.

Unlike other nations in the area, Slovenians never had a kingdom or state embracing all their people (for the curious or forgetful, Slovenia is an Alpine country bordered by Italy, Austria, Hungary, and Croatia. Just over a third the size of Nova Scotia, it has a population of approximately 2 million). The Republic of Slovenia, which is celebrating its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year, includes lands formerly ruled over by the Habsburgs, the Venetian Republic, and Hungary, among others. In other words, until 1991, for centuries Slovenians had their capital in places where a different language is spoken.

Canada has nothing on Slovenia when it comes to survival. It is incredible that the people were not assimilated by the ruling Habsburgs, or the language gobbled up by Croatian, which has more speakers and as a Slavic language is quite similar. At no time in its 900-year history did Slovenia possess a kingdom of its own, and that is why Slovenians look to language and literature rather than a mythologized golden age, as their identity benchmark. This history partially explains the Slovenian fascination with language and with literature.

Looming over Ljubljana’s main square is a large statue of France Prešeren (1800-1849), their national poet. It is almost as if Prešeren’s entire existence was as a harbinger of the day nationhood would converge with statehood. Though Prešeren

died a century-and-a-half before the Republic of Slovenia was born, and though his massive statue was erected one hundred years ago, his likeness now stands over independent Slovenia's capital – as if capital and nation grew into the poet, as if Prešeren and his statue took dominion all around.

Slovenia's national anthem is taken from his eight-stanza "*Zdravljica*" or a "Toast" to the new vintage; it is a drinking-song of sorts. Here's Janko Lavrin's translation of the seventh stanza, the one sung before international football matches and on public holidays:

"A Toast"

God's blessing on all nations,  
Who long and work for that bright day,  
When o'er earth's habitations  
No war, no strife shall hold its sway;  
Who long to see  
That all men free  
No more shall foes, but neighbours be.

This is an unusually pacific national anthem, and bizarre in that it does not even mention Slovenia. No bombs bursting in air or even standing on guard for Canada; "A Toast" could be read as a worldwide plea for peace, ushered in with a healthy glass of wine.

Here's the original:

Žive naj vsi narodi  
ki hrepene dočakat' dan,  
da koder sonce hodi,  
prepir iz sveta bo pregnan,  
da rojak  
prost bo vsak,  
ne vrag, le sosed bo mejak!

Translating poetry is always a hunt for the lesser barbarism, for sacrificing the least as you coax words and thought from one language into another. Lavrin sacrifices little and his translation is fair and flows reasonably well in English, well enough to be chosen as the official translation. However, as with any translation, there are problems. Though Lavrin's "Toast" could be sung in English, it doesn't *feel* like the original. (The goal here is not to skewer Lavrin's translation but to highlight a very few of the specificities of translating from Slovenian.)

Before going into three or four specific problems – as a roundabout way of introducing the flavour of Slovenian – here's a literal non-verse translation:

Long live all those nations  
That yearn to see the day  
when, wherever the sun walks,  
conflict from the world will be driven out,

so that compatriot[s],  
each, will be free,  
[and] not the devil, just a neighbour, and a border-dweller will be.

Some of the problems with the official translation are lexical: “nations” sounds less meaty and visceral than the Slovenian “*narodi*” (which can also mean “peoples”), and “earth’s habitations” sounds airier and more abstract than “where the sun walks” (or, more colloquially and naturally, “where the sun shines”). But this is just the usual problem of register, and in the translator’s painful search for words that rhyme, these are relatively minor concerns.

The archaic adverbial “*hrepene*,” in the second line, is a more serious problem: “yearning” and “longing” are too weak, “desire” and “wanting” too sensual. As novelist Drago Jančar has written in a fine essay on what it means to write in the language of a small nation, even behemoth languages like English and German “have nothing that might be similar to the word ‘*hrepnenje*,’ which is endlessly more than ‘longing’ or ‘*Sehnsucht*.’” Perhaps the Slovenian “longs” in a way that includes a 900-year wait for statehood. We outsiders can only guess.

Lavrin clearly spotted the trouble-spots of the last line (“*ne vrag, le sosed bo mejak!*”) and, like many a good translator, ran like hell from it. “No more shall foes, but neighbours be” is a good solution. Literalists might argue that “*vrag*” means “devil,” but that sounds comically harsh in English, especially when “foe” or “enemy” is the clear implication. The real difficulties are the nearly-synonymous “*sosed*” and “*mejak*.” Both can mean “neighbour,” though “*mejak*” is an agent noun formed from the Slovenian for border or frontier (“*meja*”). Thus, “the guy who lives just on the other side of the border” or “the guy who lives on that line marking *my* turf or fiefdom from his” would be fine equivalents; they are, however, metrical stink-bombs.

The beauty of much traditional Slovenian poetry lies in its simple forms, in old-fashioned, indigenous Slovenian words rather than Latinate derivations and loan-words. Historically, much of the finest poetry consisted of folk forms and ballads; simple and beautiful in the original, they can ring simplistic, shallow, in translation, almost like schoolyard rhymes. Lavrin’s translation of the national anthem goes perhaps in the other direction: elevating gorgeous simplicity to occasional abstraction.

Slovenian poetry is like a private literature, for a private and intimate audience of at best two million speakers. This smallness leads some Slovenian writers to wonder *what if* they were born in London rather than Ljubljana, in Paris rather than Ptuj? It also leads some to the curious belief that they are “victimized from birth” because they are writing in a minor language.

To quote again from Jančar’s essay on what it means to write in a small language, this sense of being a victim can lead to an unhealthy obsession with the world beyond Slovenia: “Today many of my colleagues concern themselves more with seeking out translators and foreign publishers than with their sentences, and some devote more time to such matters than to reflecting, reading and writing. And not a few of them blame their lack of recognition in the world on the fact that they write in the language of a small nation.” Jančar seems to be having a good jab at the would-be Dan Browns, the almost-J.K. Rowlings, and others with delusions of sales-grandeur rather than

poets, but there is some truth to the sense of injustice. Good writing, regardless of the language in which it's written, deserves to be heard and a small language entails fewer ears to hear.

Historically speaking, Slovenians have been used to linguistic chauvinism and being condescended to or simply ignored. At the time of their "Linguistic Awakening" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fatuous debates raged over the value of languages, with many a nationalistic German-speaker convinced of the paltriness of Slavic languages (a case in point: the Prague-born linguistic philosopher Fritz Mauthner would have rhyming competitions with his Czech schoolmates to "prove" that his mighty German was superior to their birth-idiom). While today no intellectual publicly belittles other languages, in the world context Slovenian writing continues to suffer from a dependence on translation and a paucity of capable translators with an adequate knowledge of Slovenian.

There is, however, much consolation for Slovenians because they know the beauties of their language are truly appreciated by a very few. This is the delight of the rare and the intimate. Indeed, intimacy is built into the language itself. Where most languages are satisfied with a singular and a plural, Slovenian has a dual to express "the two of us" or "the two of you" or "the two of them." This "dual form" is a dream for love poetry, not least because "*midve*" immediately indicates "the two of us, both female..."

Slovenian could make short work of the first line of Eliot's "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" ("Let us go then, you and I"): "*Pojdiva*" would get the message across. With that delightful brevity in mind, and with a final reminder that the works reproduced here are a communion between poet and translator, let us go then – *pojdiva* – into some Slovenian poetry.

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