Slobodan Drenovac: Književno prevođenje i književni identitet

One of the best plays in postwar Croatian and Yugoslav literature is Ivo Brešan's *The Performance of Hamlet in the Village of Mrduša Donja*, which I translated as *The Stageplay of Hamlet in the Village of Lower Jerkwater*. It is in itself a challenge to the translator because it embodies all those special problems that often seem so intangible when translating from a minority language with a national context into a dominant language such as English. The fresh and authentic vernacular that Brešan uses is the crude, vulgar speech of the Dalmatian hinterland, where God and Jesus are more often mentioned as colloquial swear-words than as saviors.

The village itself is a godforsaken place, and the name (Donja Mrduša) bears this connotation. I wanted to emphasize this to an English-speaking public, and that is why Donja Mrduša became "Lower Jerkwater," an informal expression for something backward, small, and insignificant., like, for example, a jerkwater town. I encountered the same problem with the names of the characters of the play. In the original version their names bear a touch of the comic or ludicrous, and most of them are more or less metaphorical. The play would lose much of its humor and grotesqueness if the translator were to leave them as they were in the original. To English-speaking theatergoers or readers, names such as Mate Bukara, Mara Miš, or Šimurina mean nothing, but it is quite a different matter when these same characters are referred to as Matt Jughead, Mary Mess, and Big Simon...

After finding solutions for the title and characters of the play came the problem of selecting the most appropriate dialect. I should point out that the characters in the original play speak a regional dialect, predominantly rural, but which also carries traces of modern communication media. The setting of Brešan's *Hamlet* is the postwar period, a time of rebuilding the war-torn country, establishing collective farms, and so on. At that time, the radio had a profound influence on local speech, introducing new words that were becoming the common phraseology of the time, particularly the idiom of political and propagandistic terminology. In the dialect spoken in the play, there is a merging of rural and urban dialects. Here is a typical example, from the first scene of *Hamlet*, at a meeting of the local activists of the People's Front Organization, when one of the village big-shots urges members to undertake actions to encourage cultural activity:

Pipe down comrades, please! We'll come to that, too. Jis' gotta be patient! Don't go about thinkin' koolchur and ejoocation is somethin' like floggin' a dead horse. They're modern notions, ya unnerstan'? ... Progressive, ya bet yer life... Take, sorta, how d' capitalists before d' war didn' give a hang 'bout us peasants, git me, never dreamed of enlightenin' us, instead they held us kinda in darkness an' ignorance like we was a bunch of dumb bunnies. But today, comrades and lady-comrades, our people's government frets over our becomin' koolchured so's we kin, say read 'n' write, it brung highjeen right here inta our village, and eemancipation, and letrification and industrialization and all the rest of dat koolchural and ejoocational stuff. So ya see, comrades, we gotta lend a helpin' hand to dese here efforts...

The audience is made aware of this mixture, of the subsistence of two dialects within the dialect of this region. As a translator, my initial dilemma was whether to translate the play into British or American English. I chose American for two principal reasons: (a) my better knowledge of American regional dialects than of British; and (b), because American English is more remote from the English of Shakespeare than British English. The playwright achieves the effects of the absurd, the funny, and the grotesque through linguistic deflections. Word plays, double entendres, and slight deviations of meaning are essential elements of the play. In a way, Brešan's *Hamlet from Lower Jerkwater* is a "balkanization" of Shakespeare. The Balkan peninsula is often taken as a synonym for something backward, divided into small, hostile units. Inhabitants of the Balkans, however, usually do not have such a cynical attitude toward the part of the country they themselves come from, yet they too are prone to scoff and ridicule certain other parts of regions of their country as "balkanized!" Such geographic and linguistic catcalls are by no means restricted to the Balkans; they are shared by almost all the countries in the world.

The major regional dialects in the United States have traditionally been called the New England, the General American, and the Southern. My predilection for the Southern dialect lies in the fact that it struck me as closest to the regional dialect used in the play. This is because the dialects spoken in the south of the U.S. are alive with mixtures of rural and urban speech and slang. In making this choice, I think I've found the best formula for re-creating Brešan's text to make it acceptable to the English-speaking public without losing the pungently humoristic and grotesque impact of the original.

In Brešan's play, Shakespeare's tragedy remains one of its vital components. The Jerkwater villagers are rehearsing a performance of *Hamlet* as part of the People's Front cultural and educational program, a characteristic campaign in the early postwar years in Yugoslavia.

In this context, the structure of Shakespeare's tragedy is made to adapt to the ideological premises of socialist realism, premises filled and inspired by the "epic" decasyllable. The colorful, juicy colloquial speech that characterizes both the mentality and the dialect of the backwater community proved to be of great value to the author while the comic effects arose from the contrasting of this language with the learned, yet not properly understood, phrases of the then-current politics.

What appears at the start as a mere account of an amateur performance is transformed into a play in itself (a play within a play). Lower Jerkwater has a cast set aside for Hamlet, if not on the stage, then off it. Under the pressure of regional experience and the "state of affairs," a literary fact is transformed into a fact of life. The tragedy becomes a commentary, a testimony. As a tale of crime, *Hamlet* is no less impossible in Lower Jerkwater than it is in the state of Denmark.

I've explained the use of dialectal and substandard speech, but I still find it hard, even impossible, to describe exactly how I transmitted Brešan's spirited, undisciplined decasyllables as his Jerkwater peasants interpret *Hamlet* the way they see and experience it. Let's take Matt Jughead (in the role of King Claudius), as he introduces himself to the public. In English it goes like this:

Lissen folks, 'cause I'm a helluva King

My bangin' fist slams with a swing

Under me everythin' squeals, hisses, groans

People, cattle, sticks, and stones.

Only 'Amlet , that fuckin' pee-wee squirt

Pursues me like as if I was dirt

But I'm gonna bring all dat to a stop

And with two whams knock off his top.

Or this grotesque decasyllabic parody, which is an allusion to Hamlet's famous "To be or not to be":

Is I is or is I ain't, goddamn!

Ain't sure who I is nor where I am

Or I'm gonna be or I'm not gonna be

Or even a graver fate'll best me.

Hey, king, into yer face I spit and slap

Fer tramplin' people's rights and other crap!

C'mere ya feather-brained asshole screw

And then we'll see who'll flop who.

When my pigsticker gives ya a rip

Ya can spare the doctor his trip.

Ya ain't gonna enjoy our labor's fruit

Instead you'll just plainly be kaput ...

In Brešan's play, Hamlet's longing for his dead father runs like this:

Omelia, my peacock,

My mind's run amok,

Cause gone is my Paw,

My Paw, you good father-in-law ...

To which Angie, alias Ophelia, alias Omelia, seeks a reply:

Oh 'Amlet, ya darlin' son of a gun,

Tell me who blew him to kingdom come?

We all remember Shakespeare's:

Ophelia, get thee to a nunnery!

In the Lower Jerkwater version the line is:

Omelia, run off to a monastery,

Grow old and never marry!

Translating is sometimes a more tedious creative linguistic effort than writing an original text, but an artistically successful venture in translation is actually a kind of original in itself. Literary translating is a process of recurring creation: a re-creation of the original within the framework of some other, different literary and linguistic culture. I hope that I have managed to create a work which will seem like the original to English-speaking theater-goers or readers. If I have succeeded in doing that, then I've fulfilled the assignment that is expected of the translator of modern drama.

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