The Czech Reception of G. M. Hopkins's Poetry

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It took a long time until Hopkins's poetry was made available to English readers and a similar complicated course it took to get to the Czech public. The present paper attempts to trace the principal stages of the Czech reception of his poetry and to mention some technical problems of translating his verse into Czech. The complete and perhaps definitive edition of Hopkins's poems was published as late as 1990, i.e. more than a hundred years after his death, and the year 1995 saw the publication of the first substantial Czech selection. The reasons for the difficult genesis of Hopkins's poems, refusals of Victorian editors to publish them, their considerably delayed publication, and controversial early reception are well known and have been discussed in many biographical and critical studies (Ruggles 1947; Fraser 1967: 294-297; Mánek 1996; Schmidt 1999: 550-559). In this country, there were two kinds of obstacles. The extrinsic ones included ideological and political barriers built by the totalitarian regimes from the 1940s to 1980s, and a serious intrinsic obstacle was the complex nature of Hopkins's prosody and language. On the other hand, Hopkins's Catholicism was an important element facilitating the early and most recent reception. The major part of Czech essays and articles on Hopkins and most of the attempts at translation of his poetry have been written by Czech Catholic-oriented writers and published in Catholic-oriented periodicals which they edited.

Czech readers first learned about Hopkins's poems and life from reviews, short critical essays, and reference books; only finally there came translations. The first English selection of Hopkins's verse was published as late as 1918 by his life-long friend Robert Bridges, the then famous poet laureate. He had included a small number of Hopkins's poems in several anthologies prior to that date, but they escaped any attention of readers and critics. The 1918 edition attracted some readership in England, which resulted in the publication of a larger selection in 1930 (Hopkins 1930). At the same time, the first biography of Hopkins was published (Lahey 1930). His poems inspired the leading young poets of the 1930s, and the influential critic F. R Leavis hailed him as 'one of the most remarkable technical inventors who ever wrote', and continued 'had he received the attention that was his due the history of English poetry from the nineties onwards would have been very different' (1972 [1932]: 119).

The beginning of the Czech reception of his poetry also started in the 1930s. Both above-mentioned publications were immediately reviewed by Aloys Skoumal (1904-88), at that time a fresh graduate from Charles University and later one of the most distinguished Czech translators from English, in one of the first issues of the newly established literary magazine *Poesie* [Poetry] published in Ostrava from 1931 to 1934 (Skoumal 1931-32). *Poesie* was established to provide a medium for writers living in northern Moravia and Silesia and to further the development of literature in the area, but it quickly developed to include a broader spectrum of writing (Zizler 2000). Its principal contributors were a loose group of regional writers led by Jan Strakoš (1899-1966; Brabec 1991), a well-educated Catholic priest, grammar-school teacher, and literary critic, one of those clergymen who strove to modernize the Church, which got him into trouble with his superiors. His artistic theory was based on

abbé Henri Bremond's (1865-1933) concept of 'pure poetry' (*poésie pure*), which was widely discussed in Czech literary circles at that time (Bremond 1926, 1935). Strakoš conceived of literature as an act of intuitive, mysterious transcendental experience and stressed its generally valid, eternal spiritual values. Many features of Hopkins's poetry thus obviously corresponded with the programme of the editors. Drahomír Šajtar's book *Poesie 1931-1934: historie jednoho časopisu* [Poetry 1931-1934: the history of a magazine, 1995] discussed the content and history of the magazine in great detail and also outlined the portraits of its contributors. Besides original writing, the magazine also published translations, focusing mainly on Slavonic and Romance literatures. Translations and essays on English and American writers included mainly the Romantics Shelley, Keats, and Poe.

Skoumal informed his readers of the discovery of a new poet and the two books, Hopkins's poems and Lahey's biography. He admitted the difficulties the reader could experience at first, but stressed Hopkins's originality and experimentation, and valued positively his contribution to English poetry, particularly to poetic language and prosody: 'He is such an original poet that at the first contact it is nearly impossible to understand him. But in spite of all apparent experimenting wilfulness, it must be admitted that he is a poet to his fingerprints. His religious fervour approaches that of Crashaw and at the same time he is able to capture tender and transient sensual beauty in a manner that reminds us of Keats. […] His originality of verse which often verges on bold experimentation at the expense of comprehensibility ranks Hopkins among the major creators of a new English poetic language, which remains to be born. By the way, the peculiarities of the structure of his verse and the violence of his expression are always based on his theoretical studies of the nature of English verse, especially its rhythms' (Skoumal 1931-32: 143). Neither Skoumal, nor any other contributor to the magazine attempted to translate any poem.

At about the same time Hopkins was noticed by Czech academics. In his books on contemporary English and American literature, Otakar Vočadlo (1932: 166; 1934: 46) acknowledged him, together with Emily Dickinson, as one of the forerunners of twentieth century poetry. He also briefly mentioned the existing controversial academic publications on Hopkins.

First translations of half a dozen of Hopkins's poems were published in the late 1930s and 1940s. It was the Catholic poet Jan Zahradníček (1895-1960) who was the first to translate four poems, e.g. *The May Magnificat* and *The Soldier*. He also accompanied one of them with a short article (Zahradníček 1938) in the literary magazine *Akord* [Chord], stressing the harmony of Hopkins's religious fervour and fresh sensual depiction.

Another penetrating and cogent essay including three short translations was published in *Vyšehrad*, another Catholic literary magazine, in 1947 by Ladislav Cejp (1910-1959; Levý 1960), an Anglicist and, at that time, a Marxist-oriented critic. According to Cejp, the central theme of Hopkins's poetry is 'the meeting of the soul and God'. He says: 'It is ecstatic poetry but it does not turn aside from the world. It is centripetal poetry, which finds its end in God. Thus, though its goal is infinite, its course is finite. Therefore it is poetry of joy and celebration. […] It is poetry of internal certainty and therefore a song of faith' (1947b: 258-259). He also paid attention to the stylistic and prosodic qualities of his verse: 'The meeting of God and the poet is the theme of this poetry full of baroque surge, where an agitated movement devours the form, where a shout stifles a speech, where a pause breaks a melodious line' (Cejp 1947b, 258). To illustrate his account, he also translated several short specimens from Hopkins's poetry (Hopkins 1947). Cejp (1947a, 1950) mentioned Hopkins also in two more essays, one on contemporary English poetry and the other on the rhythms of English verse. At approximately the same time, in 1948, Hopkins's (1948) early poem *The Habit of Perfection* (*Roucho dokonalosti*), translated by Karel Offer (1909-68), was placed in the front of his anthology of twentieth century English poetry.

The political events of 1948 and the cultural policy of the 1950s made it impossible to publish Hopkins's poetry in Czech, but substantial information about him and his work was included in several outlines and histories of English literature translated or written by Czech scholars (Evans 1948: 71; Stříbrný 1987: 513-514; Grmela 1988: 190-191). In spite of these difficulties, the Catholic poet Ivan Slavík (born 1920) and the Germanist Rio Preisner (born 1925) went on translating. In the culturally slightly more liberal 1960s, they managed to publish three poems (Hopkins 1965a-c) in the magazine *Tvář* [Face] in 1965, but the publication of an anthology of Hopkins's poetry which they prepared for 1971 was suppressed. However, Rio Preisner, who emigrated to the West after the Soviet intervention in 1968, managed to print a modified anthology in Rome in 1970 (Hopkins 1970; cf. Šulc 1995). In 1995, all 40-odd translations they made, including the variants from the Rome edition, were finally published in Prague (Hopkins 1995). The anthology was accompanied by an essay by Ivan Slavík (1995) written for the destroyed 1971 edition.

The publication elicited a considerable number of reviews and articles on Hopkins, focusing on the spiritual, linguistic, and prosodic aspects of his poetry. The reviewers included both poets and academics. They hailed the anthology as a great achievement of the translators and an enrichment of Czech knowledge of literature in English and presented a lot of information about the poet and his position in the development of modern English poetry (Matys 1995; Pokorný 1995; Toman 1995; Trávníček 1995). 'G. M. Hopkins has finally been made available in Czech […]. Ivan Slavík and Rio Preisner managed to translate something that in essence resists translation' (Beran 1996). No Czech reviewer, however, mentioned recent accounts of gender and sexuality in the circle of Hopkins and his Oxford and Catholic contemporaries which stimulate new critical discussions in present-day British and American literary scholarship. Another question has also remained unanswered—whether Hopkins's poetry can be placed in any Czech literary context.

The extrinsic political and ideological obstacles have thus been removed, but the intrinsic one, i.e. the complex nature of Hopkins's language and prosody, has remained. It is usually a substantial help for translators as well as readers if they can find at least partial support in the literary techniques already existing in the original literature written in the target language. Some of Hopkins's compounds, new coinages, shifted meanings, sound patterns, and figures of speech can find certain parallels in the rather exclusive poetry of three Czech poets who in the search for new means of poetic expression made use of extreme possibilities of the language. Vladimír Holan (1905-80) and Josef Palivec (1886-1975) should be mentioned in the first place. A less known author who in the first third of the twentieth century developed a very idiosyncratic poetic diction was František Bíbl (1880-1932; Hájková 1985), a translator of Keats, Byron, and other English poets, who published his own poetry under the pseudonym of Hermor Lilia (1982). It is a characteristic fact that a selection of his poems was edited by Ivan Slavík. The literary techniques these poets employed and their possible affiliations with Hopkins's poetry certainly deserve further detailed research.

More difficult problems to solve are Hopkins's prosody and syntax. Hopkins restored some elements of the stress rhythms which existed in older English poetry and made use of the interplay or counterpoint with conventional metre. For his technique he coined the term 'sprung verse' or 'sprung rhythm'. According to Philip Hobsbaum 'sprung verse […] is in fact the norm in much English verse, whereby the pattern of heavy stress is the determining factor while the number of light syllables in proportion to those that are stressed is a variable' (1996: 189). G. S. Fraser values Hopkins as 'the great modern innovator in pure stress verse' (1970: 25) and he also maintains that 'pure stress metre is natural to our language' and that in English poetry 'stress rhythm has never died out' (1970: 16). Both scholars draw the line of development from Anglo-Saxon and Middle English poetry to Auden and other modern poets.

In original Czech poetry, however, pure stress verse is a rarity, these lines are usually perceived as either irregular syllabic-accentual or free verse. Perhaps the best known and partly successful attempts to create Czech accentual verse were made by Otakar Theer (1880-1917) at the beginning of the twentieth century (Hrabák 1970: 122-123). Also, the role of alliteration in Czech poetry is not so significant and is not so related to stress as in English prosody so Hopkins's alliterative patterns cannot be fully appreciated. Pure stress verse and alliteration have been used mainly in Czech translations of Old Germanic Poetry (e.g. *The Edda*) as since the Czech National Revival Czech translators have been anxious to produce fully adequate versions of semantically difficult texts, foreign meters (including quantitative and stress poetry), rhyme schemes, and poetic fixed forms.

The intricate structure of Hopkins's poetry forces the Czech translators to make various shifts and find specific solutions. The following two passages illustrate how they cope with the difficulties, how they struggle to render both the meaning and the form, how difficult it is to integrate the meaning, rhythm, rhyme and sound patterns and achieve comprehensibility. Note the two different interpretations of the last line of Cejp's and Slavík-Preisner's version of *Hurrahing in Harvest*, and the efforts to achieve fluency and comprehensibility in the Rome and Prague versions of *Duns Scotus's Oxford*.

> And the azurous hung hills are his world-wielding shoulder
>   Majestic—as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet!—
> These things, these things were here and but the beholder
>   Wanting; which two when they once meet,
> The hearts réars wíngs bold and bolder
>   And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.
>   *Hurrahing in Harvest*, ll. 9-14. Hopkins (1968: 31)

> Azurné vrchy—jako vzmach paže světovládný.
> Jeho—jak silný hřebec, velmi fialově mdlé.—
> To vše, to vše zde bylo, jen svědek nebyl žádný.—
> A když ti dva jednou střetnou se,
> Srdce rozepne křídla v prostor hladný.
> A vyrve, půl vyrve zem zpod Jeho nohou boky své.
>   [Untitled], Hopkins (1947: 258). Translated by L. Cejp

> Toť jeho svět držící ohromné rámě—azurem
> věnčené vrchy, hřívnatý hřebec, v odstínu fialkovém.
> Ty věci, ty všechny věci tu byly a držitel než
>
> chyběl; když oba se střetnou, rozpíná též
> statečně srdce svá křídla, svá křídla statečněj mnohem
> a vrhá mu napůl, vrhá mu pod nohy zem.
>   *Jásání o žních*, Hopkins (1995: 74). Translated by I. Slavík and R. Preisner.

> Towery city and branchy between towers;
> Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmèd, lark-charmèd, rook-racked, river-rounded;
> The dapple-eared lily below thee; that country and town did
> Once encounter in, here coped and poisèd powers;
>   *Duns Scotus's Oxford*, ll. 1-4. Hopkins (1968: 40).

Věžaté město, zvětvené od věže k věži,
okukané, obzvoněné, ozpívané, okrákané, obtékané,
skvrnitý boltec lilie na dně; kde venkov a hradby
se střetaly kdys, vyvažují se protivné síly;
       Duns Scottův Oxford (Rome version 1970), Hopkins (1995: 105)
       Translated by I. Slavík and R. Preisner.

Věžaté město a s větvemi uprostřed věží!
Kukačkou kukající, zvoněné, krákorané, švitořené nad
řekou, s pihami na oušku lilií, kolbiště jedenkrát
venkova s městem, dvou soupeřů vyvážených zde ztěží.
       Duns Scottův Oxford (Prague version 1995), Hopkins (1995: 28)
       Translated by I. Slavík and R. Preisner.

For the time being, Slavík's and Preisner's translations finalize the hitherto Czech reception of Hopkins but let us hope Hopkins's poetry will remain a challenge for future translators.

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