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## FRANTIŠEK NEVRLA'S TRANSLATION OF *HAMLET*

František Nevrla (1898–1982) occupies an extraordinary place among Czech translators of Shakespeare.\* Condemned and neglected during his lifetime, and buried in oblivion since then, he still is a significant figure in the Czech history of translating Shakespeare: his indefatigable effort, unallayed by the boycotting critics and translators of his time, made him the first Czech ever to translate the entire works – all 37 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 narrative poems. With the exception of eight early translations published by the DILIA Agency in typed booklets, the work has remained in manuscript. No serious critical study has ever been written about it.

From a 'distance' of four decades, Nevrla's translations are by no means condemnable as they were made to seem. They represent a special approach to translation, outside the political interpretations of the 1950s and 1960s, and unaffected by the contemporary critical vogue. Their merit lies both in the rather conservative use of language and in a great emphasis laid on the music and dynamics of the spoken word.

This article is devoted to František Nevrla's translation of *Hamlet* of 1963. The author of the article edited and annotated the text from Nevrla's papers (deposited in the Literary Archive of the Museum of Czech Literature), and prepared it for publication in Větrné mlýny Publishers, Brno (published in 2005).

František Nevrla was born on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1898 in Kojetín, Moravia, to a working-class family. He had a talent for languages and music, writing short stories as well as composing music. During World War I, however, he was sent to the front and offered an alternative: to study to become a military veterinarian. After his studies at the universities of Vienna and Brno, he served in the army in Košice

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(Slovakia), Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad, Bohemia), Prague and elsewhere, until his early retirement in 1955 when the mounted troops and cavalry were disbanded. He spent the rest of his life in Prague, where he died in 1982. He married Blažena Veškrnová from Třebíč (Moravia), a professional tennis player; they remained childless. Nevrla was fluent in German, spoke French and had some knowledge of classical languages. His knowledge of English was, surprisingly, always limited; he developed a substantial level of passive English, but could never speak the language actively.

Shortly before his retirement in 1955, Nevrla claims to have been irritated by two events and provoked into attempting his own translations. One occurred when reading a Czech translation of a Shakespeare play; the volume lacking several sheets, he felt an impulse to read it in German and re-translate it. The other event is coincidental, though no less anecdotal; at a production of *Julius Caesar*, Nevrla was offended by – in his view – Saudek's unbearable Czech translation that the actors spoke. Upon that, Nevrla started translating the play from German. Saudek became, and was to remain, the pivotal negative delimitation of Nevrla's endeavours. (See also Drábek 2005.)

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Erik Adolf Saudek (1904–1963) was a leading figure in the Czech translation of Shakespeare. Student of the influential translators and theorists Otokar Fischer (1883–1938) and Vilém Mathesius (1882–1945), he published his early translation of *Julius Caesar* in 1936; the text was also produced at the National Theatre that year. It was a manifestation of a new wave of Shakespeare translation, as advocated by Fischer; stress was laid on the aesthetic aspect of the translation, as well as on the use of modern, contemporary language. The function of translation was no more that of an absolute rendering of the original. Fischer famously wrote in a lecture of 1929:

Neříkám, že by nemohlo být i překladové dílo aere perennius. Ale bylo by povážlivé a přečeňující chtít překládat pro nesmrtelnost. Spokojme se tím, abychom překládali pro současnost. Žádný překlad není nenahraditelný; žádný není nepřekonatelný; žádný není takový, aby nemohl být zdokonalován. (Fischer 1965: 282)

[I do not claim that there is no translation *aere perennius*. However, a desire to translate for immortality would be most daring and overambitious. Let us be content with translating for the present. No translation is irreplaceable; none is insuperable; none is such as cannot be perfected. – All the Czech quotations translated by P.D.]

This doctrine inspired a generation of Shakespeare translators, most notably Bohumil Štěpánek. Fischer himself led the way with his groundbreaking translation of *Macbeth* of 1916. E. A. Saudek was one of the few.

After the war, Saudek became an active, almost militant Communist, and obviously changed his translator's *credo*; he revised his pre-war translations, became a dramaturge of the National Theatre after the Communist *coup d'état* in 1948,

and acquired a central position in the literary, dramatic and translators' circles in the country. Up to his untimely death in 1963, he had translated "only" fourteen Shakespeare plays. (His translation of *Troilus and Cressida*, which he left unfinished, was completed by his friend Aloys Skoumal.) As an influential figure of the theatre, his translations dominated the Czech stage in the Cold War era. This monopoly came about not only because of the indisputable qualities of Saudek's works (which surprisingly bore no mark of his communist ideology), but also because of his political activities: people felt compelled by his belonging to the authoritarian Party, as well as overwhelmed by his personal charisma. The translations themselves combined modern language with baroque vocabulary stemming from the influential late 16<sup>th</sup>-century Kralice Bible.

Nevrla was politically inactive; his only motives were literary and cultural. His translations were always motivated aesthetically. In 1956, he approached Professor Otokar Vočadlo (1895–1974), asking him for help. Vočadlo was a leading figure of Czech Shakespeare studies, and as a right-wing thinker and distinct figure of the antebellum capitalist Czechoslovakia, was expelled from Charles University and forbidden to lecture. Vočadlo welcomed Nevrla's translations, encouraging him to continue as well as criticizing his work severely for its imperfections. As a scholar, he was prudent in assessing the new translations; in his pivotal essay of 1959 on the Czech Shakespeare tradition, he omits mentioning of Nevrla among other modern translators, although he mentions the "more pregnant... alliterative title *Marná muka milostná* of a recent translation by F. Nevrla" of *Love's Labour's Lost* (in the commentary to Sládek's translation of the play; Vočadlo 1959: 633). While Vočadlo was busy working on the edition of Sládek's Shakespeare, he slowed down his revisions of Nevrla's work. Between 1956 and 1959, however, he managed to revise a number of the translations. Vočadlo made several attempts at promoting the translations and placing them in the theatre; for several reasons, most likely political, none of the texts were produced. Nevrla, in his curriculum vitae of 21<sup>st</sup> March 1977 (three years after Vočadlo's death), summed up the collaboration: "Profesor Vočadlo pokládal mé překlady za nejlepší po Sládkovi, ale nemohl mně pomoci, protože zastával západní ideologii." [Prof. Vočadlo considered his translations second best after Sládek's but could not help me as he was a supporter of western ideology.] The only successes of these years were the publications of *The Tempest* (in 1957) and *The Winter's Tale* (1959) in the typed copies at the DILIA (Theatre and Literary Agency). Neither of these publications was particularly welcomed by Vočadlo; Nevrla was hard-headed in having them issued, the result being that *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale* are some of the weakest translations he made.

In a letter of 30<sup>th</sup> April 1959, Nevrla writes to his first collaborator that Dr Jan Čaha, a translator and critic, promised to introduce him to "one Dr Albert [sic], also an *ex*-professor". From that year onwards, Nevrla worked with both Vočadlo, whom he regarded as the greater authority, and Professor Jaroslav Albrecht (1911–1979). After World War II, Albrecht was moved from Prague to Olomouc, where he helped establish Palacký University. For personal reasons

(some materials claim it was due to his alcoholism), he was prevented from working in Academia. For Nevrla, Albrecht became an important man, supporter as well as reviser of his translations. He also tried his best to interest directors in his translations. In that, however, he was as unsuccessful as Vočadlo had been. Although both Nevrla's collaborators read through all of the translations, it was only *King Richard II* that eventually reached the stage in 1961. The play was produced by a minor touring group, Státní zájezdové divadlo, directed by Tadeáš Šeřínský (1917–1985). The production, however, became a huge success, reaching some 107 performances. Unfortunately, this success as well as the production were never taken very seriously and received little critical attention.

In May or June of 1963, Nevrla completed the translation of Shakespeare's entire work, 37 plays and all the poems. The translations were read through by one of the collaborating academics. The DILIA published six more plays, *King John*, *King Richard II*, *King Richard III* (1960), *King Henry VIII* (1962), *King Henry V*, and *Troilus and Cressida* (1963). Those were, again, typed mimeograph copies that were offered to theatres, but never sold publicly.

Apart from the 1961 production of *King Richard II*, none of Nevrla's translations was ever produced on the stage. Until his death in 1982, Nevrla tried to publicize his translations and make himself heard, eventually having himself entered in the Guinness Book of World Records as the first Czech ever to translate Shakespeare's entire work. This attempt at final recognition – in 1972, when Nevrla was 74 years old – was, I believe, little more than an act of desperation.

Among the many translations that remained in manuscript, is Nevrla's translation of *Hamlet*. In his diary of about mid-1963, he mentions that he completed work on the play on 30<sup>th</sup> September 1962. It was done shortly before the completion of the entire Shakespeare works, which were finished some time in June of the following year.

However, the history of the translation was more complicated and is connected to Emil František Burian (1904–1959), director and composer, and leader of the D 34 Theatre Company, one of the greatest figures of Czech theatre. As early as July 1959, Nevrla writes to Otokar Vočadlo:

Tedy asi před 3 týdny mně telefonovala Z. Kočová z D 34 (EF Burian) jestli nemám přeloženého Hamleta. Řekl jsem, že nemám, poněvadž jsem si jej nechával až nakonec. No, že EFB by chtěl můj překlad. Na to jsem řekl, že bych jej mohl v krátké době dodat. A ona, že mne koncem týdne zase zavolá. Ale od té doby se **neozvala**. Také říkala, že B. je v nemocnici, jak jsem se pak dověděl, byl prý operován na žlučník.  
[Some three weeks ago, I had a phone call from Z. Kočová of D 34 (EF Burian); she asked me if I had translated *Hamlet*. I told her I hadn't because I was saving it for the end. Well, EFB would like to have my translation. I replied I could provide it in a short time. And she said she would call back toward the end of the week. But she *hasn't* since. She

also said B[urian] was in hospital, and as I heard later, he had a gall-bladder operation.]

Zuzana Kočová (a pseudonym of Liběna Kočová) was Burian's principal collaborator in his final years, and became the director of the D 34 Theatre after Burian's death. Obviously, the interest of Burian's D 34, one of the most progressive theatre companies in the country, was a promising prospect for Nevrla. Not surprisingly it was for him a redletter day. As for Burian's procrastination, Nevrla postulated the following reason:

A teď k tomu komentář:

Především, jak se o mně dověděli a jak se rozhodli chtít můj překlad? Tedy to nevím, ale mají můj překlad LLL, který sám považuji za velmi zdařilý a možná že četli mé Sonety v novinách.

Tak já jsem ihned přeložil 2 obrazy z Hamleta a poslal jsem to tam, i s různým propagačním materiálem pro své překlady. Odpověď nemám. A teď má „teorie“.

Asi týden p[ro] té rozmluvě přineslo Svob. slovo článek o programu D 34, kde byl ohlášeno mj Hamlet (překladatel neveden.) Tedy patrně B. chtěl hrát Hamleta, když v ND byl Urbánkův Hamlet, jak jsem se dověděl, definitivně odmítnut.

Ale zrovna předevčírem byl opět v Č. Slovo článek o klasice v divadlech, kde se uvádí mj, že ND přece bude hrát Hamleta (asi v Saudkově překl., to nevím.) A D 34 [ž]e prý má Hamleta „ve výhledu“, tj asi ne přímo v této sezoně, nebo až na konci. Zdá se tedy, když se v D 34 mezitím dověděli, že ND bude H. hrát, že svého Hamleta odložili. A to bude asi důvod, proč mne zatím nevolali, protože to asi nespěchá. To jsou ovšem jen mé dedukce a domněnky. Ale pro mou mizerii stačí, že o mně **vědí** a že **chtějí** můj překlad.

[And now my commentary:

First of all, how did they learn about me and what led them to want my translation? That I don't know, but they have my translation of *LLL* [*Love's Labour's Lost*], which I myself take for a great accomplishment, and perhaps they have read my [translations of the] Sonnets in the newspapers.

And so I immediately translated 2 scenes from *Hamlet* and sent it to them, along with various promo materials about my translations. Haven't received any answer. And now my “theory”:

About a week after the phone call, the paper *Svobodné slovo* brought out an article about the programme of the D 34, which, among others, mentioned *Hamlet* (name of translator omitted). Perhaps then, Burian wanted to produce *Hamlet* when the National Theatre finally rejected Urbánek's [translation of] *Hamlet*, as I learned.

It was the day before yesterday that the Č. *Slovo* again printed an article

on the classics in the theatre: it mentions that the National will produce *Hamlet* anyway (Saudek's translation, perhaps; I don't know). And the D 34 "plans" *Hamlet*, i.e. not in this season, or perhaps towards the end only. It seems then that when the D 34 heard the National wanted to do *Hamlet*, they put off theirs. And that may be the reason why they still haven't phoned me, as it is not urgent. Those are only my deductions and assumptions. In this misery of mine I am happy they do know about me and do want my translation.]

E. F. Burian was not fated to be the one to end Nevrla's misery. From what can be gathered, Burian's plans for *Hamlet* seem to be one of the many passing ideas that were not pursued further. He died on 9<sup>th</sup> August, less than a fortnight after the letter, never realizing his plans for *Hamlet*. Nevrla was waiting for encouragement from Burian, and it is unclear whether it was at this time that he started working on the translation of the play. In the above letter, he adds, though:

No, ať je to jakkoli, není vyloučeno, že v dohledné době necháme všeho a budeme se zabývat Hamletem!  
[Be it as it may, it is not impossible that shortly we will stop everything else and will devote ourselves to *Hamlet*!]

In the extant letters from August 1959, there is no other mention of *Hamlet*. Vočadlo was working on the supervision of Nevrla's translation of *Timon of Athens*, angry that Nevrla had used the earlier translation by Bohumil Štěpánek for his inspiration:

Ten Váš překlad Timona mi jde na nervy a dělám to s nechutí. Kdybyste aspoň byl vyšel ze Sládka, ale dělat to z třetí ruky! [...] Mrzí mě, že jsem se v to uvázal. Chtěl jsem Vám pomoci z louže, když jste si tím překladem tak ublížil, ale nebude-li K. Jan lepší, nebudu s tím ztrácet čas.  
[The *Timon* translation of yours is getting on my nerves, and I do it reluctantly. If only you had worked from Sládek [Sládek's translations are very accurate], not from third-hand! ... I am sorry I promised to do it. I wanted to help you in your bad luck, given you caused yourself so much harm with that translation; but if *King John* is no better, I won't waste any time with it.]

Nevrla's *Timon* was anonymously reviewed at the DILIA; the review rejected the translation on all points. Vočadlo disagreed radically with the review, but never managed to modify the consensus. It was only later that both he and Nevrla learned that the reviewer was Aloys Skoumal, friend and ardent supporter of the Saudkian cult.

From the extant indices, it seems that Vočadlo became easily discouraged by failure and obstacles. Nevrla cheers him up in his own way:

Jinak Vám přeji, abyste překonával svůj sklon ke skepsi. Myslím, že je vždy lépe věřit raději o něco víc než méně. Jinak by člověk opravdu musel s tím vším „praštit!“

[Anyway, I wish you good luck in overcoming your aptness to scepticism. I think it's always better to hope a little more than less. Otherwise, one would have to quit it altogether!]

Several days later, in a letter of 11<sup>th</sup> September 1959, Nevrla mentions that he sent his translation of *King John* to D 34, but got no reply. It seems likely then that he stuck to his original plan and got round to translating *Hamlet* only in 1962.

In 1962, Nevrla collaborated with Albrecht, so it is likely that Albrecht supervised and corrected the translation. On the whole, it is a careful work, with only a very few mistakes. Those are of two kinds: one kind are inexact readings or undeciphered puns; the other are unwitting omissions (dropped lines or passages).

To give an example of inexact readings, Nevrla translates the phrase *the rivals of my watch* (1.1.14) as *those who watch **after** me* rather than ***with** me*. Similarly, the command *Do* [strike it with your partisan] *if it will not stand* (1.1.144) was rendered *Sekni, když neuhne!*, i.e. *Strike if it will not give way!* In the final scene, Hamlet says to Laertes *I'll be your foil, Laertes* (5.2.252), punning on the word *foil*: (1) sword (*foil*, which is used at line 250); (2) the notion of a rival or counterpart; and (3) the metaphor of a backdrop or “background against which a jewel shows more brightly” (Jenkins 1982: 409; footnote to l. 5.2.252). Nevrla translates, in a pedestrian and uncanny way: *Jsem plášťik* (I am a cloak / mantle), unwittingly activating misleading associations that the Czech expression raises. Such shortcomings as these had to be corrected in editing the translation for print.

The passages Nevrla omits could have been skipped either when translating or when typing the fine copy from the foul papers. As the manuscript translation of the play is not extant (or has not come to light yet), it cannot be decided which is the case, although the latter seems more likely as Albrecht would perhaps have noticed when comparing Nevrla's first version with the original.

Nevrla represents the conservative approach to translation – a fact which also limited his chances of success in the 1950s and 1960s, a period which revered progressiveness and the avantgarde. The admirers and supporters of his work were often the older generation – or those politically sidelined – such as Vočadlo or Albrecht. Among them was the old director Karel Dostal (1884–1966), who exchanged letters with Nevrla in mid-1961 about the yet-incomplete translation of *Othello*. When Nevrla sent him the translation of Act 1 within a week, Dostal was sorry not to be able to take it: the actors had had their parts for some time already, and it was too late to change the translation. “I think,” writes he in his reply of 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1961, “you made a mistake leaving Shakespeare's pivotal dramas to the end.” Karel Dostal, one-time artistic director of the National Theatre

in Prague, was 77 when he wrote the letter, and was not hiding the fact that at his age he would have little further opportunity to work on Shakespeare.

Nevrla's translation of *Hamlet* is particularly exact in the rhythmical aspect. He was known to be almost obsessive about the rhythm and cadence of the original and worked hard to render the acoustic qualities of Shakespeare's words in Czech. At a time which was interested in the politically and otherwise *engagé* interpretations of the plays, Nevrla would provoke his rival translators by claiming that a translation must have as many syllables as the original; no wonder then he was not very welcome in debates and discussions on translation. In many ways, he attempted to introduce the work into Czech in as close a translation as could be achieved – not necessarily in words, but rather in style and cadence. His main objective was *style*, which he understood as “the ability to win the listeners' attention” (in a note about himself on the eve of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday; dated 6<sup>th</sup> February 1973). His translating methods were also far from those generally accepted as “correct”. He writes about his own in a *curriculum vitae*, dated 21<sup>st</sup> January 1960:

Podstatou tvoření je vždy **nápad**, nikoli kombinace. Věta vyvstane v myslí celistvá, hotová a definitivní. Takto inspiračně bleskem vzniklá věta je vždy nejpůsobivější zapůsobit na posluchače. Špatného překladatele lze přirovnat k hráči mariáše, který před vynesemím sahá na pět různých karet: nebude z něho nikdy dobrý hráč, který musí mít pevný (třeba i nesprávný) plán hry. Způsob práce nejlépe (kupodivu!) vyjádřil B. Smetana, který kdysi řekl: „Nejprve je mlhovina: pak začnou vyvstávat přesné obrysy.“ Nejhorší způsob je hledat „pěkná“ nebo „poetická“ slova: slovo musí být prostě **vhodné!** Při tvoření čtyřverší ze Sonetů je ovšem třeba někdy přehodit pořadí slov třeba až dvacetkrát. Nejčastěji vyvstal první verš definitivně a téměř vždy k němu našel rým, aniž jej musil měnit.

[The principle of artistic creation is always an *idea*, not negotiation. A sentence appears in the mind as a whole, in a final and definitive form. The sentence, created in this inspirational, immediate way is always more apt to affect the listener. A bad translator may be likened to the player of *Marriage* who touches five different cards before pulling out the right one: he will never be a good player; a good one has to have a fixed (although incorrect) plan for the game. The working process has best been expressed by Bedřich Smetana (surprisingly!), who once said: “In the beginning there is a mist; then the exact contours start to appear.” The worst way is to look for “nice” or “poetic” words: a word must simply be *appropriate!* When creating quatrains in the Sonnets, it is sometimes necessary to change the word order as many as twenty times. Often the first line appeared in the final reading and almost always he found a rhyme for it without having to make any changes.]

Nevrla was intuitive, and perhaps close to the Romantic idea of the divinely-inspired genius. His talent was undoubted. Even less was he willing to adapt to the

requirements of his times. His complete translation of Shakespeare is a solitary achievement in the Czech language, special not only for its intrinsic qualities, but also for the position of its translator, who was doomed to oblivion. A couple of his sonnet translations were published in the newspapers; otherwise, he was to remain an utter outsider. Symptomatic is the note that he attached to his letter of 30<sup>th</sup> July 1959 to Otokar Vočadlo:

Ted' jsem také překládal pro jednu solistku z ND cykly písní z němčiny. Bude to zpívat na koncertech a snad i v rozhlase. Honorář: pár cigaret. [I have just translated some song cycles from German for a soloist at the National. She is going to sing it at concerts and maybe on the radio. My honorarium: a couple of cigarettes.]

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Some of the biographical information was given me by Nevrla's wife, Blažena Nevrllová; Jan Burian (the son of E. F. Burian); Marie Boková (a specialist on E. F. B.); Marta Kučirková (a close friend of E. F. B.); Prof. Bořivoj Srba (an E. F. B. specialist); Dr Břetislav Hodek; Prof. Milan Lukeš; and Prof. Zdeněk Stříbrný. I would like to express my thanks for their help.

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