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Unpublished Translations of Poe's *The Raven* by František Nevrla

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The article introduces nine versions of an unpublished translation of E. A. Poe's *The Raven* by František Nevrla, coming from the translator's estate. After a brief introduction to the history of translating the poem into Czech, the nine versions by Nevrla, produced in the years 1956-57, are briefly described. (Full facsimiles of the material were made available on a web page.) The following commentary concentrates mainly on the final version of Nevrla's *Havran*. It points out the most prominent features of the translation, and compares it to the versions produced by the translator's contemporaries.

Introduction

Translating Poe's *The Raven* was always extremely popular with Czech translators. Ján Vilikovsky (2002: 112) claims that this was so because of the attractiveness of its subject as well as of the fact that it "offered the translator the opportunity to prove their formal virtuosity"¹. Alois Bejblík and Rudolf Havel published their seminal book on the subject in 1985 under the title *Havran: Šestnáct českých překladů* ('The Raven: Sixteen Czech Translations'; hereafter referred to as Poe 1990). It contains sixteen translations of *The Raven*, four parodies, Alois Bejblík's history of Czech translations of the poem, and Rudolf Havel's detailed analysis of the sixteen reprinted versions.

The real number of Czech versions is much higher than sixteen, however, and can hardly be established exactly. In the editorial note to the book, Bejblík, drawing on Kamill Reslers's bibliographical lists, also mentions five full or partial translations that he knew about but was not able to obtain (i.e. Jiří Karásek, Václav Petrželka, Emanuel Lešehrad, Josef R. Marek, Jarmila Fastrová), and four more that he and Rudolf Havel had at their disposal but did not include in the book (František Nevrla, Radvan Horný, one unknown translator, and

František Raban); from each of these four versions, they only quote the last two stanzas. Since Bejblík and Havel's book appeared, two more Czech translations have been published: one by Miroslav Macek (who came up with a new title *Krkavec* in an attempt to correct the traditional Czech rendering) in 1992, and another by Martin Pokorný in 1997. Still two more anonymous versions could be found on the Internet at the time this paper was being written. For an attempt at a list of Czech versions, see Rambousek and Krajník (2005).

Bejblík (Poe 1990: 201) states that his and Havel's criterion for including a translation was that it had been previously published; however, they decided to include two translations that did not meet this requirement, namely those by Rudolf Černý (completed 1952) and Ivan Slavík (completed 1953), because the two translators "published translations of several books and thus influenced in some way the history of our translation practice"². This additional criterion still excluded František Nevrla, who was working on his translation approximately at the same time, i.e. in the 1950s. The 1950s were the time with the longest interval between two published translations of *Havran* (Resler 1948–Kadlec 1964) although there were four translations that originated in this period (Černý, Slavík, Horný, and Nevrla). When the versions by Bejblík and Havel were published in 1985, it was too late for them to fulfill the standard role of a text in a culture (although Slavík's text was previously broadcast on Czech radio in 1979, cf. Poe 1990: 157), and the texts by Nevrla and Horný were never published in full. It seems, however, that considering his vast work in the field of translation, František Nevrla would have deserved an equal treatment by Bejblík and Havel, i.e. including the full text of his final version.

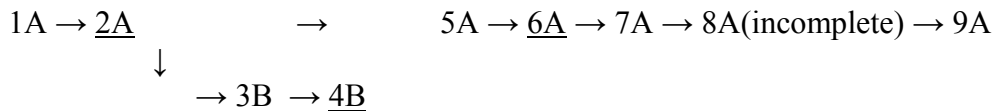
The material and its author(s)

The present paper is based on Nevrla's literary estate offered by his family to Pavel Drábek for his work on the corpus *Kapradí* (Drábek, 2004); Drábek kindly passed to me the part dealing with *The Raven*. This part of the estate includes altogether nine typewritten versions of the poem, one of them incomplete (Nevrla only finished the first three stanzas)³, and five letters between Nevrla and Kamill Resler. A detailed list of the material is given in Rambousek and Krajník (2005).

Both Nevrla and Resler are remarkable figures in the history of Czech literary translation. **František Nevrla** (1898–1982) was a prolific translator, probably the first to translate the complete dramatic works of William Shakespeare. His position as a Shakespearean translator is yet to be evaluated as he is largely unknown to the public – his translations were rarely printed⁴ or staged. In translating Poe's *The Raven*, he produced in fact not one, but nine versions of the poem; he sent some of them to Kamill Resler – an established expert on translating the poem – for commentary. **Kamill Resler** (1893–1961) was a prominent Prague lawyer who defended many writers in their disputes, and gained much credit for the highly professional and ethical way in which he defended K. H. Frank when he was appointed his *ex officio* advocate after World War II.⁵ Besides his professional career, he was also a translator and bibliophile who published his own translation of *The Raven* together with a bibliography of the previous translations. He sent the translations back to Nevrla with detailed notes and commentaries. The material therefore offers an interesting insight into the way the two translators understood the poem and the translator's task.⁶ Limiting an edition of Nevrla's translation only to the final version would deprive the material of this informative potential; as it is not possible to present it in full in printed form, it is made available on the internet (see Rambousek and Krajník 2005).

The individual versions were stored in a random order in the estate but their chronological succession was easy to establish: the handwritten notes by both Nevrla and

Resler provided enough clues (as they were usually incorporated in the next typewritten version); furthermore, some of the versions were dated, and so were the letters. Two basic lines can be traced in the nine versions; the different versions will be referred to by labels in which numerals reflect chronology and the letters A and B denote the two lines. The succession of the nine versions can be represented as follows:



The scheme shows that Nevrla produced a radically different version in two variants after the first two attempts, and then – following Resler's advice – went back to further develop the original version. Underlined type indicates which versions were sent to Resler and have been preserved with his comments. The first two lines of the poem are quoted below to illustrate the differences between the versions:

- 1A Vzpomínám si na to jasně, v prosinci to bylo vlastně,
pohaslého ohně třásně kreslí v oknech strašidla:
- 2A Vzpomínám si na to jasně, v prosinci to bylo vlastně,
záře ohně, jenž již hasne, kreslí v oknech strašidla:
- 3B Vzpomínám si na to jasně, v prosinci to bylo vlastně,
záře ohně, jenž již hasne, kreslí v okně dech svých čar:
- 4B Vzpomínám si na to snadno, prosincové bylo chladno,
záře ohně jak na plátno kreslí v okně dech svých čar:
- 5A Vzpomínka je na to stálá, v prosinci se věc ta stala,
ohně zář, jež z kamen sálá, tančí v oken prostorách:
- 6A Vzpomínka mně v duši vstala, v prosinci se věc ta stala,
ohně zář, jež z kamen sálá, straší v oken prostorách:
- 7A Vzpomínka se/mně v mysli vzňala/vzplála, v prosinci se věc ta stala,
ohně zář, jež z kamen sálá, kreslí v oknech strašidla: /strašidelně plápolá – vrávorá/
- 8A Vzpomínka mně v mysli vzplála, v prosinci se věc ta stala,
oheň, který z krbu sálá strašidelně v oknech vzplál:
- 9A Vzpomínka je na to stálá, v prosinci se věc ta stala,
ohně žár, jenž z kamen sálá, na okně se promítal:

Nevrla's translation

In the following, the final text by Nevrla is compared to those by Černý and Slavík; Horný's text is not available. Although all three texts – in accord with the Czech translation tradition – maintain the formal features of the original (i.e. meter and rhyme), they still differ substantially in the way they realize them.

Rhyme

Černý claims (Poe 1990: 153) that his translation focuses on naturalness and fidelity of meaning, and sacrifices the rhyme to a certain degree, using assonances instead of full rhymes. Even if the assonances (*navozoval/rozmar*) are not too frequent in the text, they

represent a deviation not only from the original but also from most other Czech translations. Slavík and Nevrla stick to the common practice of using full rhymes.

Meter and rhythm

The most striking difference lies in the way the translators handle the borders between the half-verses. Slavík suppresses this border between the fourth and the fifth foot by placing it in the middle of a word⁷ eight times, Černý twice. Nevrla's approach is completely different. He not only completely avoids this way of suppressing the division between the half-lines, but actually stresses it: he uses very few enjambments in this position. Most of his half-lines represent separate semantic units. This is illustrated by the number of punctuation marks found in this position: Nevrla uses a punctuation mark 69 times in the 90 line divisions, which is significantly more than Slavík (42) and Černý (43).⁸ As a result, Nevrla's observance of the meter becomes almost too strict, making the text sound rather monotonous: for Poe's original, the corresponding number would be 52 (36 punctuation marks, plus 16 instances where English differs from Czech in not using punctuation between two separate semantic wholes).

Naturalness, fluency

As stated above, Nevrla does not resign on exact rhymes (as Černý does), and sets himself the task of matching the half-lines with semantic units. The price he has to pay for these formal restrictions is sometimes the smoothness of the text: he does not avoid clumsy and unnatural collocations and images (*dveří svár* – used to rhyme with 'času spár'; or 'ohně zář, jež z kamen sálá, straší v oken prostorách'); these instances are more frequent than in Černý and Slavík. However, similar lapses are found with the other translators as well (Ivan Slavík uses *staré svazky kající* in the first stanza to rhyme with 'a víc ne', and Vítězslav Nezval, to meet the needs of 'víc už ne', uses not only 'svazky vědy prastaré a záslužné' (where 'záslužné' is added but acceptable), but also 'havran z dob, jež jsou tak záslužné'.

Nevermore

The rendering of Poe's refrain *Nevermore* sometimes seems to attract almost too much attention in the discussions of translations of *The Raven*. However, the prominence of the expression in the poem cannot be denied, and is stressed by Poe himself (1846: 165). Nevrla enriches the already existing Czech renderings with a novel solution, found in several variations in his successive versions. Below, they are illustrated by the ending of stanza 14:

1A, 2A: „Nikdy,“ havran krákorá.
3B, 4B: „Nikdy,“ křičí v času spár.
5A, 6A, 7A: „Nikdy,“ havran krákorá.
(8A),⁹ 9A: „Nikdy,“ havran krákorál.

The change from 7A to 9A, i.e. introducing the past tense, was inspired by the following remarks by Resler in his letter of 6 June, 1957:

I see the Soviet rhymes as the main drawback. Soviet rhyme cannot be used in a poem from the first half of the 19th century, and one that lays so much emphasis on form. (Letter 5 in Rambousek and Krajník, 2005; my translation)¹⁰

By "Soviet rhymes" he meant the rhyme type (more commonly known in Czech as *useknutý rým* – 'cut-off rhyme') in which one member of the rhyming pair ends with a consonant while the other ends with the rhyming vowel (e.g. *stíne* – *klínem*, pointed out in Resler's letter).

Such rhymes were common in Russian and Soviet poetry but were considered imperfect in Czech and often perceived as a mark of a translated text.¹¹

Resler further remarks:

Your contribution to the translations of The Raven lies in the completely original refrain “krákorá” which, while not meeting the requirement of musicality comparable to the English “nevermore”, still possesses musicality to a high degree, certainly more distinctly than “víckrát ne”, “marný blud”, “nikterak”, “ni jedenkrát”.¹² (ibid.)¹³

And he continues:

The shortcoming of the refrain “krákorá” lies in the fact that it ends in a vowel which has to be veiled rather than emphasised. The soviet rhymes “prostorách”, “prách” etc. further increase the weakening effect of this “a”, add to its quantity, and thus spoil the tone of the stanza and the qualities of your refrain. If you manage to overcome this difficulty, we shall have one very nice translation of The Raven more. (ibid.)¹⁴

There are, however, objections that Resler failed to raise: (1) Nevrla's solution removes the Raven's speech – and, with it, the semantic focus – from the most prominent position, i.e. the rhyming position at the end of the line; (2) the sound qualities characteristic of the raven are demonstrated in the verb rather than in the actual speech produced by the raven; (3) these sound qualities, although definitely present, rely on the verb *krákorat* ‘to caw’, which is commonly used in Czech when referring to the voice of a raven, rook or crow, and is in itself of onomatopoeic origin; consequently, the sound play is perceived as conventional in Czech; (4) the end position of the verb *krákorat* stresses even more the shift present in many translations, as Vilikovský points out (2002: 115-6): “Poe's raven does not caw, it *talks*.” [...] Poe invariably introduces the raven's *Nevermore* by the archaic (and therefore “high”) verb *quoth*”.

As a result, the effect of Nevrla's refrain is much weaker than that of the original. However, it is worth noticing as a novel strategy in dealing with the refrain. In the history of Czech translations, the strategies can be summarised as follows:

1. finding a suitable word/sentence uttered by the Raven – the most common approach (for an overview of refrains, see Rambousek and Krajník, 2005)
2. leaving the word *Nevermore* in English – 1 translator (Dostál-Lutinov)
3. using several different sentences for the Raven's speech – 1 translator (Dagmar Wagnerová; she deliberately changes the bird into an intelligent being that responds reasonably to the poet, cf. her afterword in Poe 1990: 136)
4. Nevrla's solution – rephrasing the line (literally “Never,” the raven cawed’) so as to move the signal verb into the rhyme position
5. Miroslav Macek used a similar strategy in his version published in 1989. His solution (“Krkavec zas/však kráká: ‚Ne.‘”) eliminates the main drawback of Nevrla's wording – the semantic focus remains at the end of the line; this is achieved by using a shorter form of the verb (*krákat* instead of *krákorat*). However, the raven's speech is extremely short and lacks both the onomatopoeic qualities and the fatality of the original.

The last two stanzas as quoted by Bejblík and Havel

As mentioned above, the last two stanzas quoted in Poe (1990) are the only part of Nevrla's translation published so far. While stanza 17, as quoted in the book, corresponds fully to version 9A (with purely formal adjustments in the use of punctuation marks), two differences are found in stanza 18. The editors state they received Nevrla's version on 15 Jan 1967 (Poe 1990: 204), ten years after most versions quoted here were produced (although 9A might have been written much later than the other texts). It is therefore possible that Nevrla changed the text once more before mailing it to Bejblík and Havel. However, the nature of the differences suggests that they were brought in by careless copying rather than the translator's intention. In the following text, the differences are emphasized:

9A

Ale havran neodletí, stále sedí, tvor ten kletý,
na Pallady bledé soše, na dveřích, kde dříve stál;
jeho oči blesky planou, d'ábelské z nich *hrozby vanou*,
stín se klade na zem stranou, kam jej plamen přikoval;
zda se zvedne stín mé duše, již jas k zemi přikoval?

"Nikdy", havran krákorál.

Bejblík and Havel (Poe 1990: 204)

Ale havran neodletí, stále sedí, tvor ten kletý,
na Pallady bledé soše, na dveřích, kde dříve stál;
jeho oči blesky planou, d'ábelské z nich *hroby planou*,
stín se klade na zem stranou, kam jej plamen přikoval;
zda se zvedne stín mé duše, již jas k zemi přikoval?

„Nikdy,“ havran krákorál.

The identical internal rhyme (*planou – planou*) is hardly intentional: identical rhyme is used in another position in the rhyming scheme of *The Raven* (at the end of lines 4 and 5), and Nevrla was well aware of this. Similarly, the idea of 'flaming graves' (*hroby planou*) is a shift in meaning that is almost certainly not intentional.

Conclusion

The limited scope of this article does not allow for a more detailed analysis. Many more aspects of the translation could be discussed, e.g. further aspects of rhythm and rhyme, the euphonic qualities, and above all the interpretation of Poe's text. The development of the text as evidenced in the nine successive versions represents a separate topic: the texts provide instances of errors removed as well as introduced, minute corrections and changes aimed at balancing the form and the meaning, and valuable comments from Resler.

Therefore, only preliminary conclusions can be drawn at this point. Nevrla has produced a text that is ambitious in form and proves the translator's formal mastery. In some places the metric scheme is implemented too rigorously, and the text lacks some of the tension between the prescription and its fulfillment found in Poe. Both its lexis and syntax point to a rather archaic, formal language; the translator sets himself goals different from his contemporaries Slavík and Černý, sometimes sacrificing fluency and civil sound for the sake of form. The text will certainly not become a live text of *Havran* today – that position is, rather surprisingly, held by the 1928 version by Vítězslav Nezval, in spite of occasional criticism and the numerous translations that came after it. Nevrla's translation is, however, a valuable contribution to the manifold Czech readings of the poem.

Endnotes

- ¹ My translation of „poskytovala překladateli příležitost podat důkaz formální virtuozity.“
- ² My translation of “[...] publikovali několik knižních překladů jiných a zasáhli tak určitým způsobem do dějin našeho překladatelství.”
- ³ Some of them are preserved in two copies, one of which usually contains handwritten notes and corrections by Nevrla and by Kamill Resler.
- ⁴ Several of his Shakespearean translations were published by Dilia in 1959–1962.
- ⁵ This aspect of Resler's life is described in Tunys (1995).
- ⁶ It should be also noted that it was not only František Nevrla to whom Kamill Resler served as critic and advisor. Ivan Slavík, too, sent his translation to him in 1955 and received comments and advice from him which he then incorporated in the final version (Ivan Slavík, quoted in Poe, 1990: 157).
- ⁷ Bejblík quotes *Leo/noro, pluto/novské, bezna/děje* (Poe 1990: 53). More examples could be added, e.g. *zlopo/věstný, obrá/til jsem, na so/še či, strnu/lé a*; there are 9 instances in the text.
- ⁸ A comparable number – 71 instances – is found in Wagnerová (Poe 1990: 130); in her case, the distribution was probably influenced by the fact that she changed the layout of the poem, presenting each half-verse on a separate line. Jaroslav Vrchlický (Poe 1990: 89), who rearranged the lines in the same way in the book edition, only used punctuation 50 times in this position. However, this version was preceded by a magazine version (Poe 1990: 172) with the original layout.
- ⁹ 8A only consists of the first three stanzas but the rhyme endings suggest that it was the first attempt at the final solution.
- ¹⁰ „Vidím jako hlavní újmu sovětské rýmy. Sovětského rýmu v básni z první poloviny XIX. století, která klade takový důraz na formu, nemůžeme užít.“
- ¹¹ Cf. Vlašín et al. 1977, entry “Rým useknutý”
- ¹² Resler refers to the translations by Vítězslav Nezval, O. F. Babler, Eugen Stoklas, and Rudolf Havel, respectively
- ¹³ „Vaším přínosem k překladům Havrana je zcela původní dozpěv "krákorá", který sice nevyhovuje úplně požadavku hudebnosti úměrné anglickému "nevermore", ale má hudebnost značného stupně, rozhodně výraznější než "víckrát ne", "marný blud", "nikterak", "ni jedenkrát".“
- ¹⁴ „Dospěv "krákorá" má nevýhodu v tom, že má na konci samohlásku a je tedy třeba ji spíš zastírat než zdůrazňovat. Sovětský rým "prostorách", "prách" a pod. ke slovu "krákorá" zeslabující vliv tohoto "a" ještě zvyšuje, prodlužuje jeho znění, maří tak vyznění sloky a klady Vašeho dozpěvu. Zdaří-li se Vám překonat toto úskalí, budeme mít o velmi pěkný překlad "Havrana" víc.“

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