TRANSLATOLOGICA PRAGENSIA VIII

IN THE IMAGE OF THEIR MUSE

The Pinnacle of Czech Poetry with a Western and Eastern Touch

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ABSTRACT

May, an 1836 poem by the Czech Romantic poet, Karel Hynek Mácha (1810–1836), is undoubtedly the most famous and most influential piece of Czech poetry. The poem has, however, never gained much popularity with reading audiences abroad, despite a plethora of translations into a great many languages. This paper focuses on the utmost achievement of Czech poetic discourse as viewed from the Russian and English, or Eastern and Western, perspectives. First, it briefly recounts the history of the poem's reception at home, from its outright rejection and criticism, lasting exactly one hundred years. Second, it examines the poem's poetic qualities, sketching its setting and plot to show the context and subtext, and juxtaposes some of the main passages of the original with their different versions in English and Russian, attempting to reveal Mácha's poetic potential, or Muse. Third, it follows up on two empirical studies by a Czech scholar, Jiří Levý, revealing how the poetic potential, or Muse, of the respective translators have been moulded by their target language cultures, especially in terms of Romantic fatalism, the stock-in-trade of Romantic poetry, coined by George Gordon Byron, and the religious spirit as captured in the works of Russian nineteenth-century writers. The comparative reading also reveals, as a kind of side effect, how translation as such may enhance our understanding of the source text.

INTRODUCTION

Written in 1836 by Karel Hynek Mácha and having shaped the course of Czech poetry like no other poem since, *May* belongs to the few poetic masterpieces generally labelled as untranslatable. As in the case of other great European Romantic poems, its special flavour is drawn, by and large, from the language itself. Yet, it is not altogether "Czech", at any rate, in terms of its lexis. In Mácha's days, his mother tongue was still an imperfect tool. The poet had to adapt and stretch it to fit his imagination, involving unheard-of images of contrast and paradox. Difficult though it must have been for him to write poetry in Czech, he was always able to turn a phrase. If he lacked the right expression, he would invent his own, borrowing from Polish or German, the two languages of his non-Czech poems. And, above all, he coined new images on the basis of the works of other European poets, especially those of George Gordon Byron, opening up his poetry to spiritual tendencies and thought from abroad.

The language of *May* has become part of Czech poetic diction over the years, and the poem's imagery is perceived as a prime example of Czech literary discourse. It was

adopted and imitated very often, and often with little success. Ripped out of context, Mácha's images were degraded time and again into poetic platitudes. Thus, according to many, any kind of imitation of *May*, including a translation, is doomed to failure and cannot compare with the original in greatness or in influence.

Indeed, *May* has never become very popular with foreign readers, despite its reputation at home as the most anthologized piece of Czech poetry. Russia is perhaps the most striking example of this. Despite more than forty years of a communist-imposed friendship between the peoples of the former Soviet Union and former Czechoslovakia, we can see only a very small acquaintance with Czech culture among the Russian general public today. One of the best informed scholars when it comes to Czech literature in Russian translations, Sergey Skorwid, has noted that the true dialogue of cultures between Russians and Czechs is not feasible due to "various stereotypes on both parts, marked by carelessness" (Skorwid 2007: 19).[1] He begins his detailed report on the Russian reception of Czech literature during 2006 and 2007 with a somewhat older finding, documenting his main point by a quotation from an October 1990 issue of a favourite Moscow evening daily:

> The Russian audience cannot boast exceptional knowledge of Czech literature since the shelves of our bookstores do not offer a wide variety of Czech authors. And so, the Moscovites may now learn more about Czech poetry thanks to a special occasion: Moscow has been visited by Karel Hynek Mácha, a poet of romantic inclination, well-known in the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic. (Skorwid 2007: 12)

Having shown some morbid tendencies both in his life and poetry, Mácha would most certainly be delighted by this resurrection from the dead. The ignorance though speaks for itself. Curiously enough, it is in sharp contrast to the untiring effort of translators who ventured upon rendering the Czech poet's masterpiece. In Russia alone, from 1871 to 1960, seven translators in total attempted to introduce *May*, in whole or partly, to the Russian-reading audience, including a renowned poet of symbolism, Konstantin Balmont. The history of English renditions started more than sixty years later, in 1932. Yet, they comprise seven as well, including an unfinished version by a great English poet, Stephen Spender.[2] Beside the complete translations into Russian (4) and English (6), the poem has been reproduced in Bulgarian (3), Chinese (1), Croatian (1), Esperanto (2), French (3), German (7), Hungarian (2), Italian (2), Japanese (1), Polish (2), Slovak (1), Slovenian (3), Sorbian (1), Spanish (2), Swedish (1), Ukrainian (3) and, quite unexpectedly, Bengalese (1).[3] Altogether, in the context of Czech poetry, the number of translations of *May* is most probably unparalleled, a fact which has so far never been examined to my knowledge by Czech or other researchers.

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[1] The English translation of the quotations from Skorwid's paper is mine.

[2] Both Balmont and Spender have translated only some parts of the poem.

[3] The figure in parentheses indicates the number of complete translations into the respective language.

I have gathered all the English and Russian complete translations of the poem for comparison, six and four respectively.[4] The collection as such is worth a few comments. While each of the Russian renditions has been published in an anthology or a periodical, four of the English translations (Ginsburg, McGoverne, Pargeter, Sulak) were published as separate books. Furthermore, all the Russian versions appeared outside the source language culture (Vilnyus, Uzhgorod, Moscow), addressing primarily the Russian-reading audiences abroad, whereas three of the English versions (McGoverne, Pargeter, Sulak) were published in Prague, targeting the English-reading audience in the source language culture. Most of the English (Ginsburg, McGoverne, Harkins, Pargeter, Sulak) and Russian (Bokhan, Nedzelsky, Lugovsky & Golemba) translations are accompanied by prefaces and/or various remarks. Although these texts vary both in kind and in degree, they will be used here as a valuable source of data for comparing the respective translations.

My comparative reading follows up on the works of Jiří Levý (1926–1967), the founding father of what has later become Czech Translation Studies. Aside from his many theoretical and methodological reflections on translation, discussed in his masterly books *The Art of Translation* (1963, 1983)[5] and *Czech Theories of Translation* (1957, 1996), he also wrote a number of empirical studies, including a review of Mácha's *May* translated into English only (Levý 1950) and a study where he briefly, but right to the point, comments on *May* in its English, French, German, Italian, Polish and Russian versions (Levý 1949/1950, 1971). While examining Levý's acute observations on translation shifts in the poem's poetics and meaning, I want to look at the English and Russian renderings he could not comment on,[6] treating them as a special (and often underestimated) way to get deeper insight into the semantic and metaphorical complexities of the source text.

AN UNTIMELY POEM

Having come out in 1836 in 600 self-published copies, half a year before its author's death (at the age of 26), *May* had to survive about a hundred years of stout criticism, varying from semi-literate rage and mockery to informed, albeit negative, assessment. Ultimately, these critical voices had one thing in common. Time and again, they complained that Mácha's poem was alien and un-Czech, from its setting to its imagery and reflections:

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[4] The English renditions examined here include the following: 1. Roderick A. Ginsburg (1932); 2. Hugh H. McGoverne (1949); 3. Edith Pargeter (1967); 4. William E. Harkins (1987); 5. James Naughton (2000); 6. Marcela Sulak (2005). The Russian versions analyzed in the current paper are as follows: 1. Dorofey D. Bokhan (1930); 2. Yevgeny Nedzelsky (1936); 3. B. V. Lugovsky & A. Golemba (1959); 4. David Samoylov (1960).

[5] After its first appearance in Czech (1963), this fundamental opus on the art of literary translation came out in German (1969), Russian (1974) and Serbo-Croatian (1982) (Jettmarová 2011: xvii). In 2011, its English edition was published by John Benjamins Publishing Company.

[6] Levý (1971) examines *May* in two English (Ginsburg, McGoverne) and two Russian (Bokhan, Nedzelsky) translations, briefly mentioning two incomplete versions (Balmont, Spender).

> In the 1870s, Josef Durdík provided meticulous evidence of this. Finally there was proof: it was now possible to pigeonhole Mácha as an "imitator of Byron." […] Durdík found exact correlations to many of Mácha's verses providing concrete references to particular lines of *Lara*, *Corsair* and *The Prisoner of Chillon*, thus depriving them of their disturbing mysteriousness. Then it was easy to go on in the analysis and to prove that Mácha's plot was "thoroughly un-Czech", the individual motifs were "un-Czech", that Mácha's landscape was totally foreign and that Mácha's philosophy, as it was put by the great Czech historian and politician Palacký "did not contain any ideas." (Jedlička 1992: 23)[7]

By the time Mácha put his masterpiece into print, the Czechs had been living under the grip of Austrian rule for several hundred years. They had a growing urge to be seen and heard in the multi-ethnic Hapsburg Empire they were part of. The best of them spent their lives building their nation's identity, encouraging all the like-minded to join in the struggle for the Czech cause. It was a time of the nation's revival, or rebirth, marked by a strong nationalist approach to practically everything, from the writing of poetry to cooking. Josef Jedlička, a Czech writer and scholar hushed by the communists, makes a noteworthy account of what this revival, in fact, was all about:

> The Czechs have usually regarded only the small, untiring, everyday work as proper patriotism. There has always been so much to do: to reform the Czech spelling, to publish a dictionary, to found schools and associations, to organize physical exercises, to write Czech cookbooks, to translate foreign literature, to fight in the Austrian parliament for one's nation, to learn how to manage communal affairs […]. (Jedlička 1992: 21–22)

Obviously, the poem's timing was wrong: during the nation's awakening, consisting mostly of petty patriotic work, a certain Mr Mácha appears with a poem dealing with universal issues of life and death in a deeply personal manner. These metaphysical aspects, as reflected in the poem's imagery, are yet to be discussed in greater detail. For now, suffice it to say that Mácha's verses resembled nothing written in Czech so far, with one exception only: that of Fridrich Bridel, a great poet of the Czech Baroque era. His imagery is also of unexpected and powerful contrasts. A Jesuit priest and missionary by profession, Bridel had, however, one single answer to his queries as a human being: I am nothing, while God is everything. Unlike Bridel, Mácha had no definite answer of this kind. In fact, his inner doubts and struggles had led him to paradoxes that must have sounded very sacrilegious or, at least, unorthodox. In his notebook, we read: "I love a flower because it will wither, a beast because it will die, a man because he will pass away and be no more, because he feels he is going to perish forever; I love – nay, more than love! – I humbly bow to God, because he does not exist." (Mácha 1986: 286)[8]

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[7] All quotes from Jedlička's essay are taken from a slightly abridged English version by Jan Čulík.

[8] The English translation is mine.

In this light, it should come as no surprise that Czechs have for a long time lagged behind in understanding Mácha's poetry: "Having encountered a lack of understanding for Mácha among the Czechs, the poet's friends and colleagues, especially Karel Sabina and J. J. Kolar, turned to the local Germans who before 1848 showed major interest in the new-born Czech literature. The German journal *Ost und West*, issued in Prague, became the center of this new spirit of Mácha in the German language." (Polák 1940: 216) Consequently, it was the Germans who adopted *May* first, publishing a translation as early as 1844, only eight years after the poem's first appearance in print.[9]

In 1936, a century after *May*'s first publication, a distinguished Czech literary critic, František Xaver Šalda, wrote a seminal study which finally did justice to Mácha's masterpiece. He and his followers eventually succeeded in bringing about the poet's rise to fame, winning general recognition for his *May*. There is, however, something more to the poem's popularity than sole literary analyses, no matter how penetrating they are:

> … if we analyse the features which make up the Czech national character – we cannot ignore Mácha. On our behalf, he has expressed something hidden, something denied – a part of his work has deeply affected us, although we did not really want this. Mácha has defined the ultimate achievement of Czech lyrical poetry – once and for all, his work is the most superior example of the genre. He offered us himself as an embodiment of authenticity, rebellion, and heroism of the intellectual. (Jedlička 1992: 19)

The "authenticity, rebellion, and heroism of the intellectual", of which *May* is the most shining example, at any rate in Czech poetry, is something we can hardly analyse in translations. And yet, there is a way to deal with these general characteristics of the poem. We may ask ourselves how these features resound in the language and meanings of Mácha's verses. More particularly, we can trace them along three lines which make Mácha's fundamental opus great poetry: first, it is a complete original, breaking many poetic clichés (which hold up even today); second, it contains a plethora of powerful images, unheard of before its appearance; third, its language is in perfect harmony with its rhythm and melody.

MAY IN TRANSLATION

The music of words

Divided into four cantos and two interludes of 824 lines in total, the poem reminds its English and Russian translators of "an operatic libretto" (Ginsburg 1932: 9), "a song of destiny" (Nedzelsky 1936: 36) or, most often, of "a symphony", the four cantos

[9] For a more detailed discussion of the German reception of *May*, see also Astrid Winter's paper in this volume.

corresponding to the four movements of a symphonic composition (McGoverne 1949: 167, Harkins 1987: 480). McGoverne, for that matter, calls the poem "a May symphony" and suggests names for its individual movements based on the characters and motifs the poem's plot revolves around (McGoverne 1949: 167). Sulak points out "the internal music of the poem" and does not fail to mention Mácha's use of "words that mimic the sounds they depict" as well as his treatment of "silence, as indicated by the long dash." (Sulak 2005: 9, 13–14)

Undoubtedly, a part of the spell *May* holds over its readers is its seductive melody and other sound qualities. While listening to its verses, you may almost forget about its meanings and perceive the whole poem as a kind of music, the music of words. In the following passage, the poet captures the countryside awaking in the morning sun (next to the original, I supply a literal English version taken from Naughton's unrhymed rendition):[10]

A větru ranního – co zpěvu – líbé vání	The morning breeze's sweet – songlike – wafting
tam v dolu zeleném roznáší bílý květ,	Here in the green vale spreads white blossom,
tam řídí nad lesy divokých husí let,	There above the woods directs the wild geese' flight,
tam zase po horách mladistvé stromky sklání.	There bends upon the hills the youthful saplings.
(Mácha 1836)[11]	*(Naughton 2000)*

For the sake of illustration, let's take a look at Ginsburg's and Samoylov's versions of these lines in English and Russian:

As a pleasing song now sounds the early morning breeze,	И веянье ветров, подобных песнопенью,
Scattering the snow-white blooms over the verdant dale,	Уносит из долин предутренний туман,
Guiding the flight of geese, as over the woods they sail,	Над лесом гонит в путь гусиный караван
While on the mountain-side it bends the new grown trees.	И лес на склоне гор приводит вдруг в движенье.
(Ginsburg 1932)	*(Samoylov 1960)*

The verbal music of these breezy lines is very suggestive even to my non-native ear. To an English reader, they may be reminiscent of Wordsworth or Keats, while a Russian reader will most probably think of Pushkin or Lermontov as a parallel. The English rendering, for that matter, is a striking example of the translator's reading, or, more exactly, hearing of the original: "In presenting this Czech 'Romantic Poem' to the English reading public, I feel the need of stressing the musical rather than the poetic beauty of the work." (Ginsburg 1932: 9) Indeed, Ginsburg makes ample use of the sound features English offers, preserving the music of words as a unifying undercurrent.

Ginsburg's success in reproducing *May* with its rhyming and metrical pattern must have been good news for the poem's five English translators to come. The last

[10] Naughton's translation of *May* with lines of varying lengths, disregarding rhymes and metre, is cautiously accurate in line-for-line correspondence in meaning, and I will, therefore, quote it here and elsewhere as a test of verbal accuracy.

[11] The Czech original is quoted according to its critical edition from 1959, the chief editor of which was Jan Mukařovský (Mácha 1959).

two of them, however, took a different course. Both Naughton and Sulak gave up on rhymes altogether (with the exception of coincidental ones), preserving only the line arrangement and, in the case of Sulak, the metre. Sulak explains her approach rather straightforwardly:

> I have not attempted to reproduce the rhyme of the poem […]. The language's seven cases and extremely flexible sentence structure make rhyme sound natural in Czech. […] Since English sentence structure is not as flexible, and since English does not have as many rhyming words as Czech, the contortions of the English sentence would draw undue attention to the mechanics of the poem at the expense of the highly innovative imagery and the natural music of the original. (Sulak 2005: 14)

Aside from these linguistic aspects, she also points out that "rhyme in Czech poetry today does not clash with contemporary sensibility", implying that English poetry of the present is a different case. (Sulak 2005: 14) Her stress on "contemporary sensibility" intimates a presupposed change in translation norms. In fact, what we are witnessing here is a norm-setting assertion which will, of course, be put to the test of time. Future translators of *May* will have to deal with this attempt at setting a new translation norm, the effects of which are best illustrated by Sulak's own rendition. While Naughton preserves only the basic rhythm, adding or omitting a beat here and there, Sulak, in her own phrase, "showcases the meter, and Mácha's skilful flexibility within it." (Sulak 2005: 14) Leaving aside the question of how rhymes work in both languages, I want to point out one thing: deprive Shakespeare's *Sonnets* of their rhymes and all you will get is, in Nabokov's words, "an honest roadside prose." (Nabokov 1998: 37)

I did not find similar attempts in any of the Russian versions. Starting from the 1930 Bokhan version up to the 1960 version by Samoylov, all the four Russian renderings are rhymed, preserving, by and large, the metre of the source text. In view of the fact that the first unrhymed English translation appeared only in 2000, the "unrhymed" change in Russia might yet come with a new translation of the poem. The country has a long tradition along this line, including Shakespeare's *Sonnets*, which have been rendered in pure prose by Kanshin and Sokolovsky and published as early as 1894 and 1913, respectively.

The line arrangement of *May* has been preserved by all the Russian and most English translators of the poem, the only exception being that of McGoverne (1949), who does not respect the line break-up, rendering, for example, four lines of the original by eight lines in his translation (McGoverne 1949: 165) and coining new images and motifs which at times have nothing in common with the original. I believe that McGoverne's translation holds a record for poetry translations, being some 240 verses longer than the original. (Levý 1971: 162)[12]

[12] Levý also remarks that McGoverne's rendering "prefers traditional English pentameter to a four-beat metre which is used in May most often." (Levý 1971: 162)

The imagery

Mácha owes many of his images to the proud Lord of the Newstead Abbey, and echoes of *Lara*, *Corsair*, *Prisoner of Chillon* and, above all, *Parisina* are easily detectable in his *May*. Yet "Mácha's genius", to quote one of the English translators of the masterpiece, "must not be underrated any more than Byron's should be" since Byron has also "modelled himself" on other poets, namely Alexander Pope (McGoverne 1949: 171). McGoverne continues along this line, explaining:

> … as much as I admire the virile and imaginative writings of Lord Byron, I doubt whether Byron could have maintained long lyrical passages as ably as Mácha did. […] In a language quite alien to it, he caught the full force of the Byronic melody; he tempered it with his own feelings, philosophy and spiritual values, and gave to it a greater lyrical flow. (McGoverne 1949: 167, 172–173)

The imagery of *May* is, by and large, the imagery of the maytime countryside. It has been argued, indeed, that the countryside captured in the poem reminds one of Italy or Switzerland rather than the Czech lands or Bohemia, but region is not the main point here. The main thing is that Mácha gave us a great many powerful images which express how we can feel about the Bohemian scenery:

> … in spite of all rationality and all ordinary common sense, in spite of all the pedestrian, pragmatic patriotism, in spite of the homey comforts in which we all wish to live undisturbed, in spite of political manipulation which aims to deny us everything great, strong and authentic, since Mácha's times, above the dark hills, a rosy day arises in Bohemia, the morning breeze's sweet wafting directs the white geese's flight and bends upon the hills the youthful saplings. (Jedlička 1992: 24–25)

Just as Pushkin revealed the poetry of Saint Petersburg to Russians in his narrative poem, *The Bronze Horseman*, Mácha gave Czechs a strong feeling of their homeland. Moreover, he opened the countryside as a gate to the universe. Describing the beauty of a late may-time evening by a glimmering lake, the poet says:

a slunce jasná světů jiných	And the bright suns of other worlds
bloudila blankytnými pásky,	Wandered in azure stripes,
planoucí tam co slzy lásky	Burning there like tears of love
(Mácha 1836)	*(Naughton 2000)*

Reflected on the ripples of the water surface, the stars, or "suns of other worlds", wander across the lake in azure stripes, or bands. The stars are out there, beyond reach, but their water reflections make them appear very close. It is a powerful image, combining different spaces: the space above (*suns of other worlds*) with the one around (*azure stripes*) as well as the one inside (*tears of love*). The beauty of the starlit evening we are witnessing as we read these lines prevails. Yet, Mácha's images always take us

a little further than a plain description would. Here, the poet suggests at least two trains of thought. The first one is rather disturbing: we cannot tell for sure whether the "tears of love" are of happiness or despair. Second, the image of "the bright suns of other worlds" brings in the perspective of eternity which will reoccur in canto two. How did the translators cope with this conceit?

The suns of other worlds appeared
And strayed across the azure spheres,
Gleaming above like love's bright tears

(Ginsburg 1932)

And the bright suns of other worlds –
In heavens' lofty sphere above –
Did wander through their azure zones,
A'flaming there – like tears of love
(McGoverne 1959)

And heaven's clear sun leaned down to take
A road astray in azure deeps,
Like burning tears the lover weeps
(Pargeter 1967)

While bright the planets roamed eternal,
Circling about their azure spheres,
And sparkled there like love's fond tears
(Harkins 1987)

the pristine suns of other worlds
were wandering through the sky's blue band,
as fiery as a lover's tears
(Sulak 2005)

With the exception of Pargeter, all the English translators talk only of stars wandering or straying in the sky. The water reflections got lost in the misleading images of Ginsburg's and Harkins's "azure spheres", McGoverne's "heavens' lofty sphere above" and Sulak's "sky's blue band." Pargeter's "heaven's clear sun" and Sulak's "sky's blue band" bring in yet another confusion as to what time of day it is. Having read only a few lines above "it was late evening", the reader will certainly be at a loss why the sun is still clear and the sky blue. We find a similar type of confusion in the first Russian rendition (the literal English supplied in square brackets here and elsewhere is mine):

И, пробиваясь из-за туч	[Making its way through the clouds
И блеск тревожно разсыпая,	and shedding its gleam unrestfully,
Горел любовью солнца луч,	the ray of sun was burning with love,
Глубь неба ярко озаряя	illuminating the depth of heaven]
(Bokhan 1930)	

The second Russian translation is even more elusive than the original:

а солнц сиянья в мир пречистых	[shining into the world of the immaculate, the radiance of suns
ушли скитаться в голубени,	went wandering into the pale blue space,
горя, как слезный перл влюблений	burning like tearful pearl of being in love]
(Nedzelsky 1936)	

The Nedzelsky version is very abstract. As opposed to Mácha's original image of "azure stripes", it is unclear whether Nedzelsky's "pale blue space" is a metaphor of heaven or waters of the lake. In addition, it contains a completely new image of "the world of the immaculate" which refers, most probably, to the saints, free from the stains of sin. This intrusion of a strong religious element is something we can trace in some of the other Russian translations as well, as illustrated later on in this paper.

The two remaining Russian translations manifest two starkly opposite approaches to imagery translation:

… и горний кров Горел огнями звезд лучистых. И мирозданье раскололось На тысячи лазурных полос В мерцанье озера. Светила Лились, как слезы в горнем храме *(Lugovsky & Golemba 1959)*	[… the roof above was burning with fires of radiant stars and the universe split into thousands of azure stripes in the glimmer of the lake. The luminaries poured like tears in the upper temple]
А в небе дальние светила Чредою голубой блуждали, Как слезы страсти и печали *(Samoylov 1960)*	[And the distant luminaries in heaven were wandering in pale blue line like tears of passion and sorrow]

Lugovsky & Golemba apply periphrasis. Though, analytically speaking, their break-up of Mácha's three lines into six pieces is correct, it lacks conciseness and leaves little to the reader's imagination. Their version is verbose to the point of pleonasm: "the roof above", "stars" and "the luminaries" all refer to the same thing. The Samoylov version, on the other hand, is perhaps too elusive: we cannot really tell whether the "pale blue line" refers to the alignment of stars up above or down below, i.e. on the surface of the lake.

The story

The main hero of *May*, Vilém, has killed his rival who had seduced his beloved Jarmila. Unbeknownst to the main hero, his rival turns out to be his own father. Reduced to two sentences, the story of the poem does sound a bit melodramatic. It is, however, a little more complicated. If you summarize Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, you will also get something rather sentimental. The point is how the tale works within the text, or, more exactly, within the unique fabric of words. This is even more true of poetry because a poet cannot rely on anything but words – there are no actors to pronounce his lines out loud, no props to evoke the setting, no stage lights to illuminate the scene.

Mácha himself throws some explanatory light on the narrative part of his poem in his appendix to *May*: "The tale of this poem, its plot, should not be taken as its most important aspect: only as much plot is given as is unavoidably necessary for the

poem to achieve its primary intention." (Mácha 1959: 53)[13] This feature has also been reflected in some of the English translations, most interestingly the one by Ginsburg, who points out that "the poem must be read with constant reference to one's own inner life, read for its emotion rather than its plot… for its music rather than its prosody." (Ginsburg 1932: 11)

The opening of May is magical. It is a picture of "the late evening on the first of May" by a lake. Surrounded by its banks as if in a tight embrace, the lake's waters are resounding with a secret pain. High above the water surface, a maid is sitting on a rock cliff, eagerly awaiting her lover, "the dread forests' lord." She is waiting in vain. A messenger comes instead to tell her that her lover has been imprisoned and is to be executed on the following day. His dead body will then be broken and entwined in a wheel, on a pole. This said, the secret mediator curses the maid for being the cause of the whole tragedy and departs.

The poem's heroine is left alone and canto one ends with the countryside around and, a second later, as if in an echo, the waters of the lake whispering "Jarmila", a melodious name based on the Czech words for "spring" (*jaro*) and "to love" (*milovat*) or "beloved girl" (*milá*). What happened to the maid after the messenger's hasty departure?

Tiché jsou vlny, temný vod klín,
vše lazurným se pláštěm krylo;
nad vodou se bílých skví šatů stín,
a krajina kolem šepce: „Jarmilo!"
V hlubinách vody: „Jarmilo! Jarmilo!!"
(Mácha 1836)

Quiet are the waves, the dark waters' lap,
All is covered with an azure cloak;
Above the water gleams the white dress's shade,
The countryside around whispers: "Jarmila!"
In the depths of the water: "Jarmila! Jarmila!!"
(Naughton 2000)

Mácha is very sketchy in his depiction of the scene, giving us just a momentary glimpse. We cannot tell for sure what exactly has just happened. As we know, the poet cared little about the plot, i.e. the narrative construction of reality did not interest him much. Instead, he focused on capturing things that pass away, and as they pass away. This poetic feature was much misunderstood by his literary contemporaries who favoured the obvious rather than the elusive. Naughton's solution, though unrhymed, is a very good one: it says just as much as the original. And what about the other English translations? How do they convey the elusive quality of the original?

The waves are quiet 'neath the darkened ledge,
Enwrapped within an azure cloak serene;
A sheer white dress floats on the water's edge,
While nature softly whispers: "Geraldine!"
And the waters' murmur: "Geraldine!" "Geraldine!"

(Ginsburg 1932)

Hush'd are the waves, the wistful waters rest,
All shrouded in the azure cloak of Night;
Above the waters, on their deep, dark breast
Gleams the brief shadow of a dress of white,
And the region round whispers: "Jarmila!"
And the deep waters: "Jarmila! Jarmila!!"
(McGoverne 1949)

[13] The English translation is taken from the Sulak publication of *May*. (Sulak 2005: 121)

Hushed are the waters, dark, forlorn,
In deep dusk all things crouch to cover.
A white dress gleams on the waves that mourn
Over her: "Jarmila!" like a lover,
And the woods sigh: "Jarmila!" over and over.
(Pargeter 1967)

Silent the waves, the dark lap of lake,
All covered as with azure cape;
But on the water a white shape lies –
A dress – the land breathes whispered sighs:
"Jarmila! Jarmila! Jarmila!"
(Harkins 1987))

The waves are silent, a clear blue veil
drapes the dark womb of the lake;
the image of a drowned white dress shines,
the countryside is whispering: "Jarmila!"
And from the water's depths resounds: "Jarmila! Jarmila!!"
(Sulak 2005)

Unlike Naughton, all the other English translators tend to be more explicit than the original, as indicated by the underlined verses. Greater explicitness, strangely enough, is characteristic even of those translators who, in their reflections on *May*, stress "that hazy emotional rather than concretely pictorial effect" Mácha "was severely censured for" (Ginsburg 1932: 9) or "the art of subtle suggestion" (McGoverne 1949: 164). The McGoverne version, for that matter, is (not only here) a colourful display of poetic platitudes (cf. *the deep, darkbreast of the waters*), despite the translator's declared effort to reproduce, in his own phrase, "the inner significance" of Mácha's lines.[14]

Two of the Russian translations are also quite explicit:

Мелькнуло платье – все бездна скрыла.
И слышен шепот вокруг: «Ярмила!»
В глуби звучало в ответ: «Ярмила!»
(Bokhan 1930)

[A dress gleamed – all disappeared in a bottomless depth.
And a whisper is heard around: "Jarmila!"
Deep down it echoed in reply: "Jarmila!"]

Все зашептало вдруг: «Ярмила!»
Мелькнула трепетная тень,
Ее пучина поглотила.
(Lugovsky & Golemba 1959)

[Everything around whispered suddenly: "Jarmila!"
A fluttering shadow gleamed
And she was swallowed by the deep water.]

The difference here is rather in degree than in kind. While Bokhan is a little more delicate in his reproduction of the original image, Lugovsky & Golemba are rather brutal. Both versions, however, turn the elusive image of the source text into a downright suicide scene. This said, the two remaining Russian versions may come as a surprise:

[14] Levý comes to the conclusion that McGoverne's rendering conforms to "the late classicist periphrastic diction", suppressing *May*'s melodiousness as something incompatible with the poetics of classicism. (Levý 1971: 164–165)

отражается белое платье в воде,	[A white dress is reflected by the water,
тихо шепчет окрест: «Ярмила!»	The surrounding countryside whispers silently: "Jarmila!"
В глубях вод: «Ярмила! Ярмила!»	In the depths of the waters: "Jarmila! Jarmila!"]
(Nedzelsky 1936)	

Округу полумгла укрыла.	[The countryside around has been enveloped in twilight.
Мелькнет одежды белизна,	The whiteness of a dress gleams
И шепот слышится: «Ярмила!»	And a whisper is heard: "Jarmila!"]
(Samoylov 1960)	

Nedzelsky's is a sensitive rendition. Though it leaves out the "gleaming" and the "shade", it preserves the right timing of the scene: the girl's dress is reflected by water, i.e. the heroine is still there, standing on the rock. Whispered silently by the surrounding countryside, her name sounds as if in warning. Then it is repeated deep in the water as some kind of a lure. Both meanings, warning and luring, are present in the original. Following Mácha's example, Nedzelsky says as much as needed, not a word more. Thus, in this final scene of canto one, he is able to make the heroine's name resound not only in "the depths of the water", but also in the minds of his readers.[15] The Samoylov version is less thought-out, but it also allows its readers to feel the scene's tensions, avoiding the danger of saying a bit too much.

Canto two takes us into a vaulted prison cell where the main hero is waiting for his death. He sits at a table hewn of stone, uttering his thoughts. In his soliloquy, Mácha once again captures things that pass away, and as they pass away. This time he catches thoughts in the process of thinking, with their arousing paradoxes: a man is endowed with sense and sensibility to grasp all wonders of the world only to be led, at the threshold of death, into "that empty nothingness." Is destiny mocking *May*'s main hero? All the more so in that he, "learning of the fallen maid's seducer", has murdered "his own father, unbeknown."[16] This mocking spirit of destiny, in an explicit form, has been traced by Levý in the McGoverne version of canto two:

The echo of that wild cry roll'd
On, on – and on: each mould'ring wall
Flung back an answ'ring, <u>mocking call</u>
(McGoverne 1949)

These three verses correspond to one single line of the original:

dál, dál se hlas rozlíhá	Further, further, the voice resounds
(Mácha 1836)	*(Naughton 2000)*

[15] Nedzelsky's solution fully complies with his assessment of Mácha's images, employed in canto one, as "ambiguous." (Nedzelsky 1936: 35)

[16] The citations are taken from the Naughton version.

Elsewhere, McGoverne supplied the prisoner's soliloquy with the following line of despair (with no equivalent in the original): "Oh cruel, relentless Destiny!" While missing this particular line in his commentary, Levý further observes that, in this English rendering, at one point "the wind falls hatefully on the prisoner's ear" and at another point, in reference to the heroine, "the stars glanced […] as though they mock'd her sad surmise." In these concoctions, Levý sees "glimpses of the mentality of Byron the egoist who believes to be persecuted by society and nature." The Czech scholar goes on to assert that "this unamiable relationship between a man and nature is un-Mácha like." (Levý 1971: 163) Surely, this relationship is far more complicated: the beguiling images of the surrounding scenery contrast with the main hero's agony as if nature had no mercy on him. However, it is only a hypothesis, one of many. Animating nature in multiple personifications, Mácha depicts it as something which lives a life of its own. One of the questions implied here is how the main hero's life (and its purpose) is interrelated with the life of nature. Once again, it is this elusive quality of Mácha's writing that makes his poem unique. Images of striking contrasts, stirring up questions, increase the tension in the poem. If anything, Mácha is a poet of relentless questions, not of "relentless destiny", as McGoverne has tried to suggest.

The same fatal approach can be traced in the English version of *May* immediately succeeding the McGoverne rendition. It is sufficient just to listen to the main hero's soliloquy in this other translation:

Whose guilt is this I carry?
Not mine! Ah, surely <u>I was bent</u>
<u>A mute, unwitting instrument</u>
<u>God's judgment to deliver</u>.
(Pargeter 1967)

The original reads:

Čí vinou kletbu nesu?
Ne vinou svou! – <u>V života sen</u>
<u>byl jsem já snad jen vyváben</u>,
<u>bych ztrestal jeho vinu</u>?
(Mácha 1836)

By whose guilt do I bear the curse?
Not my own guilt! – <u>Was I perhaps</u>
<u>Summoned here into this life</u>
<u>Merely to avenge his guilt</u>?
(Naughton 2000)

Turning the query of the original into a statement (see the verses underlined), Pargeter lets the main hero arrive at a definite explanation, full of fatalism. Along with the workings of destiny, Pargeter introduces another traditionally romantic image:

And I to nothing – but one more day,
And I to nothing am cast away –
(Pargeter 1967)

The original reads:

<table>
<tr><td>A než se příští skončí den,
v to pusté nic jsem uveden. ––
(Mácha 1836)</td><td>And ere tomorrow’s day has fled,
Into that empty nothingness I’m led. ––
(Naughton 2000)</td></tr>
</table>

Casting someone away versus leading someone into a new, unknown world are two different actions. Pargeter’s solution, evoking the romantic figure of a cast-away, is yet another literary cliché, one of many in her translation. Interestingly enough, Pargeter has also picked up on McGoverne’s Victorian-like verbosity, substituting “the thrush’s shower of pearls” for “thrushes’ noble psalm” (*drozdů slavný žalm*), “sweet white foam of flowers” for “white blossom” (*bílý květ*), “the womb that gave me birth” for “my mother” (*matku mou*), “like bees in swarm his tears come teeming” for “with teardrops swarming” (*slzy rojí*), etc.[17]

In canto three, the prisoner is escorted before the sight of people gathered in a vast multitude to the scaffold. A man on his way to death is, undoubtedly, a recurrent literary image developed with great fervour in Russian nineteenth-century prose where it is most often coupled with Orthodox faith and spirituality. Presumably, it is this spiritual tradition that influenced some of the Russian renditions. The first single trace of it has been pointed out by Levý in connection with the Bokhan version:

<table>
<tr><td>… nehnutý stojí lid,
a srdce každého zajímá vážný cit.
V soucitu s nešťastným v hlubokém smutku plál
slzící lidu zrak obrácen v hory výš,
kde nyní zločinec, v přírody patře říš,
před Bohem pokořen v modlitbě tiché stál.
(Mácha 1836)</td><td>… motionless stand the folk,
Their hearts all plunged in solemn feeling.
In sympathy with the wretch in deep sadness
The people’s eyes blazed upon the summit’s height,
Where now the criminal, gazing into nature’s realm,
Stood humbled before God in silent prayer.
(Naughton 2000)</td></tr>
<tr><td>И в миг замолкли все, стоят в благоговеньи;
И бьются все сердца, все веры жар объял;
Все смотрят в небеса, где солнца свет сиял,
И все слились в одном торжественном моленьи;
Когда преступник сам в глубоком сокрушеньи
Пред Господа лицом с молитвою предстал…
(Bokhan 1930)</td><td>[And all grew still, standing in awe;
All hearts throbbing, all filled with heat of faith;
All are looking into heaven with the sun shining,
And all have merged in solemn prayer;
While the criminal, in deep desolation,
Stood praying before the face of God…]</td></tr>
</table>

Levý notes that “the Russian translation has undertones of the spiritual atmosphere of the target language culture […]: people’s eyes are not turned towards Vilém, the main hero, but towards God; people are not moved by their compassion, but by their piety.” (Levý 1971: 164) In addition, Bokhan fills people’s hearts with the “heat of faith.” Thus, contrary to the original, the Russian rendition puts God, not the main hero, into the centre of the pre-execution scene.

[17] The literal English for the Czech equivalents in parentheses is taken from Naughton’s rendering.

The Nedzelsky version brings in yet another motif typical of Russian spirituality. When the main hero, overwhelmed by thoughts about his life's curse, is observing "the starlit gleam" of the lake, Nedzelsky, unlike Mácha, says:

те искры узник созерцает и к высям боль возводит мост *(Nedzelsky 1937)*	[the prisoner is observing the sparks and suffering builds a bridge to the heights]
Zrak vězně tyto jiskry stíhá, a v srdce bolný vodí cit *(Mácha 1836)*	The prisoner's gaze pursues these sparks, Which bring a pang into the heart *(Naughton 2000)*

Suffering which elevates the spirit of man, "building a bridge to the heights", is completely alien to the original. This ideological shift, however, goes hand in hand with the russianization of the poem's vocabulary typical of Nedzelsky's rendition: the Russian translator uses words enmeshed with the target language culture, substituting "tsarina of waters" (*царица вод*) for "a water lily blossom" (*lílie květ*), "ataman" (*атаман*), i.e. Cossack chieftain, for "the leader of the band" (*vůdce spolku*) and, in the opening stanza of canto three, supplies the epithet "tsar like" (*по-царски*) to evoke the grandeur of the surrounding scenery.

Religious undertones, introduced by Bokhan, are, strangely enough, also traceable in the first Soviet translation of *May* by Lugovsky & Golemba. The co-translators let Mácha's main hero pray "in front of the holy chapel" (the Czech poet never used the word "holy" in his poem) and, as opposed to the original, comment on the place of the execution in the following words: "There is the hillock – there track of sin is put to an end." In their version of canto three, the prisoner is referred to as "a mortal" and often, much more often than in its Czech counterpart, as a "villain" and "murderer." These references accentuate the theme of crime and punishment, characteristic of Russian literature and thought.

Another Russian, or, more exactly, Soviet intrusion in the Lugovsky & Golemba rendering can be traced back to McGoverne's translation. It was, once again, Levý who pointed out that, in this English version, the crowd watching the execution cries out, referring to the main hero: "On to your doom […]!" and the crowd's "murmur" is characterized as "hostile", while the original makes no mention of doom or hostility. The same hostile crowd is presented by Lugovsky & Golemba in their version of *May*. Here, however, the people gathered are hostile to the point of fanaticism:

… Народ, разгорячен, Толпой валит: глаза у всех горят, Ведь нынче здесь преступника казнят! Народ спешит – гудит веселый люд, Растет толпа: придавят – не беда! *(Lugovsky & Golemba 1959)*	[… Blazing with excitement, people Pour down in multitudes: all eyes are flaring, since here the criminal will now be executed! The people haste, the merry folk make noise, The throng is growing: if you get squeezed, no big deal!]

náramný křik a hřmot mladým se jitrem vzmahá,
a valný zástup se z bran mala města valí.
Zdaleka spěchá lid – vzdy větší zástup ten –
vzdy větší – větší jest – vzdy roste tento pluk
(Mácha 1836)

A huge cry and tumult mounts in the young morn,
A great throng pours from the gates of the town.
People hurry from afar – ever greater the throng –
Ever greater – greater – ever grows this troop
(Naughton 2000)

Then the people start shouting:

То он, то он! С большим плюмажем!
Мы шляпу снять ему прикажем!
(Lugovsky & Golemba 1959)

[It's him, it's him! With a large plumage!
We will order him to take off that hat!]

To on, to on! Ty péra, kvítí,
klobouk, oko, jenž pod ním svítí!
(Mácha 1836)

'Tis he, he! The plumes, the flowers,
The hat, the eye that gleams beneath
(Naughton 2000)

Both Russian passages above are marked by fanaticism reminiscent of the early Soviet era: people, "blazing with excitement" and with their "eyes flaring", clamour for immediate degradation of the villain (their enemy) as if his death sentence was not cruel enough. They believe that they are justified to give orders because they are many. These solutions do not, in the least, correspond to the original, but they seem to be fully in tune with the underlying ideology as expressed in the brief introduction to the Lugovsky & Golemba version, asserting that in *May* "the poet has captured the pre-revolutionary moods of the Czech nation." (Makha 1959: 182)

In canto four, seven years after the execution, the poet enters the poem to explain how he learned about its story and how, having been "lured back" by "this sad tale", he revisited the hillock where the execution had once taken place. It is, once again, late evening on the first of May and the may-time scenery evokes the same images of love that the poem had opened with. Then the moon rises, and the poet, with the skeleton and pale skull above on a pole, mourns the passing of time. He repeats a chain of images of his bygone childhood, first used in canto three, which belong to the high points of the whole poem. Let us juxtapose some of them in their English and Russian versions using Naughton's rendering to check the verbal accuracy: "Carried far away by times' rude rage", Mácha's childhood is

zbortěné harfy tón, ztrhané strůny zvuk,
zapomenutý hrob, věčnosti skleslý byt,
vyhasla ohně kouř, slitého zvonu hlas
(Mácha 1836)

Wrecked harp's note, torn string's tone, […]
Forgotten tomb, eternity's fallen dwelling,
Extinguished fire's smoke, molten bell's voice
(Naughton 2000)

Tones of an age-warped harp, sounds of its shattered chords, […]
A grave long since forgot, eternities old scar,
<u>A smould'ring fire's smoke, sounds of metallic chimes</u>
(Ginsburg 1932)

The chords of crumbled harp, the strains of the reft strings, […]
As a long-forgotten tomb, couch in Death's eternal cell,
The drift of a burnt-out fire, the sound of a molten bell
(McGoverne 1949)

The untuned harp, whose strings distil no more delights, […]
The deep, forgotten grave, eternal board and bed,
The smoke of burned-out fires, the scattered bell's chime
(Pargeter 1967)

The tones of battered harp, the sound of broken string, […]
A grave long since forgot, the place where eternity dwells,
The dying smoke of a fire, the molten bell's last chime
(Harkins 1987)

the tone of a broken harp, the sound of a snapped string, […]
forgotten grave, eternity's sunken home,
the smoke of an extinguished fire, the voice of smelted bells
(Sulak 2005)

The Russian translations read:

Разбитой арфы тон, звук порванной струны, […] Могила прошлого – и вечности мерцанье, [Огней угасших блеск, и звон колоколов][2] *(Bokhan 1930)*	[Tone of a broken harp, sound of a snapped string, […] Tomb of the past – and eternity's scintillation, Gleam of extinguished fires and sound of bells]
разбитой арфы тон, звук сорванной струны, […] чертог ниспавшей вечности, могилы след, чад от огня погасшего и колокола глас, перелитого в массу долгим током лет *(Nedzelsky 1936)*	[tone of a broken harp, sound of a snapped string, […] mansion of fallen eternity, remains of a tomb, smoke of an extinguished fire and voice of a bell molten by a long stream of years]
Как арфа смолкшая, утихшая струна, […] Как звон колоколов, расплавленных давно *(Lugovsky & Golemba 1959)*	[Like harp fell silent, string grown still, […] *(this line of the source text is missing)* Like sound of bells molten long ago]
Звук порванной струны, разбитой лютны стон, […] Последний дым костра, зарытой меди глас *(Samoylov 1960)*	[Sound of a snapped string, moan of a broken lute, […] *(this line of the source text is missing)* The last smoke of a fire, voice of buried brass]

Each of these images contains two contradictory elements: the object itself (harp, string, tomb, bell, fire) that has passed away, as indicated by the corresponding past participle (broken, snapped, forgotten, molten, extinguished), and the sound, notion

or fragrance of it which is still in the poet's mind. As if, in his mind, he could still hear, see and smell things that have ceased to exist. Thus, a paradox, or oxymoron, comes into being. Furthermore, through these images, combining concrete objects with abstract feelings and notions, we can experience time and its passing. McGoverne justly remarks that, in this memorable passage, the poet "flings one after another all the glittering baubles, that since time immemorial have been the stock-in-trade of the romantic poets." (McGoverne 1949: 169) However, it is Mácha's treatment of these baubles, not the baubles themselves, that make this passage so powerful.

With the exception of Naughton and Sulak, all the English and Russian translators miss the point here, turning some of the oxymorons into poetic platitudes, as indicated by the lines underlined. Semantically, the most difficult of Mácha's images is the one based on the recurrent notion of eternity, this time used as part of a simile "eternity's fallen dwelling" in apposition to a "forgotten tomb." Taken as a whole, the image is deeply contradictory: no tomb, or dwelling, can exist forever. McGoverne's "couch in Death's eternal cell", coupled with "a long-forgotten tomb", is, perhaps, fine as an oxymoron, but not as poetry, employing yet another poetic bauble, the one of Death, romantically personified by capitalization and two props (a couch and a cell). While the notion of eternity is blurred in this English rendition, two of the Russian translations make no mention of it at all. Eternity, it seems, was ideologically incompatible with the materialist doctrine of the Soviet era, the origin of both of these renderings.

CONCLUSION

My comparative reading of *May*, following up on the findings of Jiří Levý, has shown several things: (1) two of the English renderings of *May* (Naughton, Sulak) give up on rhymes, setting a kind of norm for poetry translation from Czech into English; (2) except for Naughton, all the English and Russian translations, at some point, tend to be more explicit than the original, describing circumstances rather than capturing the elusive qualities of Mácha's images and contemplations; and (3) some of the English and Russian translators come up with solutions that are target culture specific: McGoverne and Pargeter employ the notion of Byronic fatalism, combined with a rather clichéd and over-coloured diction, Bokhan, Nedzelsky and Lugovsky with Golemba bring in undertones typical of Russian Orthodox spirituality, and the Russian co-translators use the motif of a hostile crowd, reminiscent of early Soviet times with its show trials.

Nothing in translation is causeless, and the causes of these particular shifts are obvious. Aside from the objective, or systemic, differences between languages and their respective systems of versification, there are also discrepancies in the literary traditions the translators draw from, and hence in the translators' preconceived ideas about poetry. The comparative reading of Mácha's *May* in its English and Russian counterparts reveals, perhaps more than anything else, how our way of thinking, as reflected in a literary text and its translations, is moulded and hardened by literary traditions and cultures at large, be it in the East or in the West. Mácha's masterpiece,

for that matter, lies at the very crux of Czech cultural identity. Thus, by comparing its different renditions, one may get a better understanding not only of the original text, but also of oneself.

And yet, detailed as my reading has attempted to be, it has still remained limited to just a few lines out of the 824 which make up the entire poem. Labelling some of its translations with a Western or Eastern touch has, by and large, been justified, but it is still only one way of showing how good the different renderings are as poetry. In other words, my paper gives just a partial explanation why Mácha's poetic potential, or Muse, did not succeed in crossing the language boundaries to catch the attention of the reading audiences abroad, a question implied here at the very beginning. It would take a monograph to assess all the translations in question in terms of their many poetic qualities. The present paper, hopefully, provides future authors with a few ideas as to what the points of departure for such a work could be.

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