

PEER GYNT IN CZECH TRANSLATION: A PECULIAR RECEPTION HISTORY

Martin Humpál

As a reading drama in verse, *Peer Gynt* obviously represents an enormous challenge for any translator. There exist five Czech translations of this text in total, of which two can only be of mere historical interest today. Karel Kučera's translation from 1913 is simply too old to appeal to today's reader, and Vladimír Šrámek's version from 1955 was made from German and provides a very imprecise image of the original. The three remaining translations deserve more attention, although one of them mainly for negative reasons.

Nevertheless, for completeness' sake, a few words should be said about the two translations I have already mentioned. The very first Czech version of *Peer Gynt* appeared as a book in 1913, and its author, Karel Kučera, was one of the first Czechs who translated Scandinavian literature directly from the original languages. At this time this practice was still not very common; the majority of Scandinavian works published in Czech, until approximately the 1920s, had been translated from German. Kučera translated from Danish and Norwegian, and his output includes, among others, Ibsen's *Brand*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Master Builder* and even a book of Ibsen's *Poems*. His version of *Peer Gynt* is generally reliable: it is a translation of the complete original text, and in most cases it preserves the original meaning well. At the same time, it is a very poetic version, and some might perhaps say that it is a little too poetic in the sense that the translator often opted for lexical, morphological and syntactic solutions that were, in 1913, already quite archaic. Nonetheless, Kučera's translation was, at the time, certainly a considerable achievement. The text was used in the very first production of *Peer Gynt* in 1916, as well as in two others in 1928 and 1937 (Kadečková, 2006, 156), albeit in heavily abbreviated ways (cf. Mertinová, 2003, 118).

Unlike Kučera, Vladimír Šrámek did not know Norwegian. He is well-known in Czechia mainly for his translations of Greek and Latin classics, but he also translated from German, for example Goethe and Schiller. His version of *Peer Gynt* from 1955 includes the complete text, but is much less reliable than Kučera's rendition. One reason is obviously the fact that this translation from German is twice removed from the original; sometimes it simply veers off too far from the original meaning. In addition, Šrámek's version is not very successful in terms of the Czech style and language fluency. It is therefore not surprising that it was used only once for staging (Kadečková, 2006, 157). In other words, Šrámek's translation had practically no influence on the reception of *Peer Gynt* in Czechoslovakia.

In terms of the theatrical practice between World War Two and today, the most influential translation of *Peer Gynt* had appeared less than ten years before Šrámek's version. The well-known Czech translator Bohumil Mathesius created a version of *Peer Gynt* during the Second World War, and it was published as a book in 1948 (2nd ed. 1949). Mathesius, born in 1888, translated predominantly from Russian. In fact, he was appointed the first ever professor of Soviet literature at Charles University in 1945, and he was the chair of the Department of Russian and Soviet

literature until his death in 1952 (Forst, 2000, 159). However, he also translated from German, French and Latin. His translations were highly acclaimed, especially because of their linguistic fluency. Unfortunately, he translated not only from languages he knew, but also from those he did not know, such as Chinese, Japanese and Norwegian. More precisely, he was one of those translators who sometimes turn into verse a working prose translation done by someone who is familiar with the original language.

This was probably the case of *Peer Gynt*, too, although the extent of the collaboration between Mathesius and Jiřina Vrtišov, the translator of literature from Scandinavian languages, has never been sufficiently clarified. Either Mathesius worked with an unrhymed, literal translation of the text done by Vrtišov, or he mainly worked with the German translation and only asked Vrtišov for assistance with selected aspects of the text.¹ His version of *Peer Gynt* is, however, a very free adaptation, rather than a proper translation. He made some substantial changes. First, he radically abbreviated the text, deleting several parts, including the entire fourth act, and he even added some passages that he invented. In this regard, one can say that Mathesius still belonged to an older generation of Czech translators for whom preserving the integrity of the original text was much less of an imperative than is common today.² Second, the translation is very imprecise and heavily czechified, in the sense that Mathesius filled the text with many words that are too much bound up with the Czech country life. In this the text exhibits clear signs of what Venuti has called “domestication,” i.e., a translation strategy that brings the text closer to the target culture.³ However, Mathesius’s version is written in excellent Czech, and as such it is captivating; it has always been praised for its language qualities. Therefore it has, paradoxically enough, played a rather unfortunate role in the history of the Czech reception of Ibsen. The Czech theaters would stage *Peer Gynt* according to this problematic adaptation for several decades even though a complete and more precise translation became available in the 1960s. In fact, some Czech theaters still use Mathesius’s version nowadays, even when another complete and more reliable translation from the 1990s is available.

In view of this enormous influence, it is necessary to say a little more about this version of *Peer Gynt*. Mathesius does not hide his liberal treatment of the original text: the words “freely adapted” [“voln zpracoval”] appear on the title page, and the book contains an afterward in which the translator attempts to justify the reason he approached the original the way he did. He writes, among other things:

¹ Mathesius only thanks Vrtišov for her “valuable advice and comments” [“cenn pokyny a upozornn”] in his afterword to *Peer Gynt* (Mathesius, 1949, 186), but some sources of secondary literature indicate that his collaboration with Vrtišov may have been quite substantial; see Frhlich, 1998, 61, and Forst, 2000, 160.

² This is a well-known phenomenon that concerns the development of the history of translation in many countries. For example, speaking of translation practices in English translations of older times, Venuti claims that “the firm distinctions that we draw today between original compositions, translations, and adaptations did not obtain. Translators deliberately resorted to rhetorical practices like amplification to develop aspects of the foreign text in accordance with the demands of form and theme” (Venuti, 2008, 57).

³ See, e.g., Venuti, 2008, 15–16 and 19–20.

In my reworking I attempted to rid the dramatic poem of the elements that were only topical in Ibsen's time and to capture its universal human essence and its universal human type. I worked on the text in the winter of 1943/1944, and at that point, in the time of unfreedom, it seemed to me that the most important thing would be to emphasize the rejection of Peer Gynt's fundamental characteristic trait: his halfway-nature, his indecisiveness, for which the Buttonmoulder wants to melt him down like damaged goods [my translation].⁴

However, this does not make much sense as an explanation for the fact that Mathesius leaves out the fourth act, since it is precisely in this part of the drama that Peer's willingness to turn with the wind becomes the most appalling. In any event, the translator also says that he has left out Act Four because it is "inorganic" (184), and he supports his decision by quoting (184) from Ibsen's well-known letter to Edvard Grieg from January 23, 1874, in which the dramatist says in relation to the first-ever staging of the play: "Pretty well the whole of Act Four will be omitted in performance."⁵

As is well known, *Peer Gynt* used to be staged without the fourth act for a long time in many countries, including Norway. However, after Hans Jacob Nilsen's epoch-making staging in 1948 it became obvious that Act Four adds several important dimensions to the drama as a whole. Ever since then, theater directors both in Norway and in other countries came to realize that in order for the audience to appreciate fully the complexity of the text, the theater production must include (at least a substantial part of) Act Four. In this part of the drama Peer no longer appears to be just a young little rascal (as is the image one might gain of him from the first three acts), but a truly despicable human being, a career-minded opportunist without scruples. Thus if the fourth act is absent, one is relatively naturally prone to stage the rest of the text as a sentimental, romantic piece in which Peer's character has fewer blemishes than would have otherwise been the case.

It is precisely this sentimental, romantic perception of the drama that is ingrained in the minds of most of those Czechs who have seen the play on stage. Therefore *Peer Gynt* does not have as high a status as a unique world drama in Czechia as it does in some other countries. The theaters' continual insistence on using Mathesius's text is to blame. For decades Czech theatergoers were not exposed to a more complex interpretation of *Peer Gynt* despite the fact that a new and very competent translation of the entire text of the drama had appeared in 1963.

But before I deal with this later translation, I should still touch upon other problematic aspects of Mathesius's version of the play. I have already mentioned that Mathesius would add certain passages and sentences that are not to be found in the original and that he often used words that are taken from the Czech country life – the text sometimes creates the impression that the action takes place in a typical Czech

⁴ "Ve svém zpracování snažil jsem se oprostit dramatickou báseň od [...] příliš dobových přísad a vyhmátnout její všelidskou podstatu a všelidský typ. Pracoval jsem na něm v zimě 1943/1944, a tenkrát zdálo se mi nejdůležitějším, v době nesvobody, zdůraznit odpor k zásadnímu charakterovému rysu Peera Gynta: jeho polovičastoti, jeho nerozhodnosti, pro kterou ho chce Knoflíkář přetavit jako vadný slitek [...]" (Mathesius, 1949, 183).

⁵ Trans. by Meyer, 1971, 386. The original reads as follows: "Sågodt som hele fjerde akt skal udelades ved opførelsen" (Ibsen, 2008, 177).

village rather than in Norway. One can illustrate both of these problems by the following example. In the scene at Hæggstad in the First Act the character of Steward [Kjøgemesteren] says, among other things, “Come on, now, friends, empty the jug.”⁶ In Mathesius’s version of *Peer Gynt*, the Steward utters more sentences than there are in the original, including the following: “There is enough beer and kolaches aplenty [my translation].”⁷ Apart from such cases of czechifying, one can also speak of general Slavic elements in Mathesius’s treatment of the text. For example, he sometimes uses the word *králevic* (70, 87) for “prince” (“Prins” in the original [Ibsen, 2007, 534, 559]). However, the normal Czech way of translating the word “prince” would be “princ”, the word “králevic/kralevic” is used in the Czech language only in the context of princes from Russia and some other East European countries.

The most problematic omission in Mathesius’s version of *Peer Gynt* is the already mentioned deletion of Act Four. Of the other, minor omissions I would like to mention the absence of the character of the Thin Person / Thin Man [Den magre, en mager Person]. This reduces the number of potential outcomes of human life as they are presented toward the end of the original text, and thus it simplifies the more complex structure of the results of ethical choices which Ibsen created in the play.

The next Czech version of *Peer Gynt* appeared in 1963. This time it was translated as a complete text and directly from the original. The author of this version was Břetislav Mencák, one of the well-known Czech Scandinavianists who had translated several important works from Danish, Norwegian, Swedish and even Icelandic, including some other plays by Ibsen, notably *Brand*. In general, Mencák’s version of *Peer Gynt* provides a reliable rendering of the original: it is rather precise in terms of preserving the original meaning, and it is also very good as a literary achievement. It was available to Czech theaters since 1963, but theater directors ignored it for several decades. They always opted for Mathesius’s version, only exceptionally did they supplement the missing fourth act with excerpts from Mencák’s translation.⁸

One cannot say that Mencák’s text was not easily available. It is true that the first edition was published only by the theater agency Dilia, not by a publishing house with wide distribution, but then again, this was no exception – the majority of plays translated from foreign languages during the Communist era were published by Dilia in limited quantities as books on demand, and Dilia’s function was precisely to serve Czech theaters as a source of translated texts to be performed. Probably assuming that many directors were detracted by the sheer volume of the entire text, Mencák created another, abridged version of *Peer Gynt*, which was published by Dilia in 1973. Like Mathesius’s version, this text can also be staged in one evening, but unlike the former translator’s text, this one contains a substantial part of Act Four. Finally, the entire text of Mencák’s translation was published in the second

⁶ Trans. by Fry and Fillinger (Ibsen, 1989, 18). The original reads as follows: “Nu faar I, Godtfolk, paa Dunken lænse” (Ibsen, 2007, 508).

⁷ “Piva je dost a koláčů haldy” (Ibsen, 1949, 44). The significance and omnipresence of beer in Czech culture certainly needs no commentary; as far as kolaches are concerned, they are the most traditional of all Czech types of pastry.

⁸ The only production of *Peer Gynt* based entirely on Mencák’s version took place, paradoxically, in 1998, i.e., after a newer translation appeared in 1994; see Kadečková, 2006, 159.

volume of Ibsen's *Selected Plays* in 1975, so this time any reader in any part of Czechoslovakia had the opportunity to buy the text in a bookstore or to find it in the local library. Still, directors were either unaware of the existence of Mencák's translation, or they were reluctant to use it, because it provided them with a different conception of the main character than the one they were accustomed to from Mathesius's text. Mencák's translation is perhaps not as fluent and poetic as Mathesius's version, but it could certainly have been used for staging with some adjustments. Despite this, *Peer Gynt* was staged in Mathesius's version until 1994.

In 1994, a new production of *Peer Gynt* had its premiere in the National Theater in Prague, one which was based on a translation made by Josef Vohryzek and Josef Brukner. Like Mencák, Vohryzek was one of the well-known translators of texts from Scandinavian languages, mainly from Swedish, but also Norwegian. Josef Brukner, who is still alive (born in 1932), is a Czech poet who has translated literature from Polish, German and French; he does not know Scandinavian languages but, as he had done on other occasions, he helped Vohryzek give the translation of *Peer Gynt* a poetic touch. The text was published as part of the theater program in 1994 and later it was republished – in a slightly revised version – in a two-volume edition of Ibsen's *Plays* in 2006. This translation is just as complete and accurate as Mencák's, but an argument can be made that it surpasses Mencák's in fluency, thus being even better suited for a theater performance. Therefore the fact that some Czech theaters nowadays still stage *Peer Gynt* according to Mathesius's version is very difficult to understand.

The story of Mathesius's adaptation is a clear example of how a particular translation can influence the reception of a work in a given country. Paradoxically, in the very same year that Hans Jacob Nilsen's staging launched the tradition of anti-romantic theater productions of *Peer Gynt*, Mathesius published a version that led to many romantic productions of the play in Czech culture. The success of this version in Czech theaters was great and long-lasting: it cemented the sentimental-romantic, fairy-tale interpretation of the drama for several decades. While many theaters elsewhere in the world have long discovered the darker, existential dimensions of the play, it is only very recently that Czech theaters have begun to notice such aspects. One cannot assume that a greater number of Czechs would make themselves familiar with the complete version of Ibsen's play by reading it in a book form.⁹ Most people know *Peer Gynt* only from the theater, and therefore the general Czech perception of this drama can change with time only if theaters continue staging it according to the

⁹ Neither the 1975 book publication of Mencák's version nor the 1994 and 2006 book publications of Vohryzek/Brukner's translation could, by themselves, have changed the general perception of *Peer Gynt* in Czech minds. The time when people used to read dramas on printed page in the same way they would read novels, something that was still quite common around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, is long gone. In this regard it seems obvious by now that Mencák's translation has never reached a wide audience. It has only received a certain prestige in academic circles, something which is not completely uncommon, cf. Venuti: "The domestic inscription in translating constitutes a unique communicative act, however indirect or wayward. It creates a domestic community of interest around the translated text, an audience to whom it is intelligible and who put it to various uses. This shared interest may arise spontaneously when the translation is published, attracting readers from different cultural constituencies that already exist in the translating language. It may also be housed in an institution where the translation is made to perform different functions, academic or religious, cultural or political, commercial or municipal" (Venuti, 2000, 477).

complete and reliable translations, be it Mencák's or Vohryzek/Brukner's version. Otherwise the sentimental-romantic, fairy-tale perception of the drama that is ingrained in the minds of most Czech theatergoers will continue to live on.

Works Cited

- Vladimír Forst, "Bohumil Mathesius", in: *Lexikon české literatury: Osobnosti, díla, instituce*, vol. 3, ed. Jiří Opelík. Prague: Academia 2000, 158–162.
- František Fröhlich, "České překlady Ibsenových her", in: *Souvislosti 2* (1998), 59–62.
- Henrik Ibsen, *Brev 1871–1879*. Oslo: Aschehoug 2008. (*Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, vol. 13)
- Henrik Ibsen, *Episk Brand. Brand. Peer Gynt*. Oslo: Aschehoug 2007. (*Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, vol. 5)
- Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*. Trans. Bohumil Mathesius. 2nd ed. Prague: Máj 1949.
- Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*. Trans. Břetislav Mencák. Prague: Dilia 1973.
- Henrik Ibsen, "Peer Gynt". Trans. Břetislav Mencák, in: *Spisy Henrika Ibsena*, vol. 2. Prague: Odeon 1975, 215–412.
- Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*. Trans. Christopher Fry and Johan Fillinger. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1989.
- Henrik Ibsen, "Peer Gynt". Trans. Josef Vohryzek and Josef Brukner, in: Henrik Ibsen, *Hry I*. Prague: Divadelní ústav 2006, 5–171.
- Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*. Trans. Josef Vohryzek and Josef Brukner. Prague: Národní divadlo 1994.
- Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*. Trans. Karel Kučera. Prague: Otto 1913.
- Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*. Trans. Vladimír Šrámek. Prague: Dilia 1955.
- Helena Kadečková, "Peer Gynt: překlady a inscenace", in: *Ipse ipsa Ibsen: Sborník ibsenovských studií*, ed. Karolína Stehlíková. Soběslav: Elg 2006, 151–162.
- Bohumil Mathesius, "O Peer Gyntovi, Ibsenovi a této úpravě", in: Henrik Ibsen, *Peer Gynt*. Trans. Bohumil Mathesius. 2nd ed. Prague: Máj 1949, 181–186.
- Petra Mertinová, "Ibsen na českých jevištích v letech 1878-1918", in: *Disk 4* (2003), 103–119.
- Michael Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography*. Garden City: Doubleday 1971.
- Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge 2008.
- Lawrence Venuti, "Translation, Community, Utopia", in: *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti. London: Routledge 2000, 468–488.

Biographical note

Martin Humpál is a Professor of Scandinavian Literature at Charles University in Prague. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin. He has written the books *The Roots of Modernist Narrative: Knut Hamsun's Novels Hunger, Mysteries, and Pan* (Oslo: Solum Forlag, 1998) and *Moderní skandinávské literatury 1870-2000* [*Modern Scandinavian Literature 1870-2000*, in Czech, together with H. Kadečková and V. Parente-Čapková] (Prague: Karolinum, 2006). Otherwise he has

published articles in various journals including *Edda*, *Norsk litterær årbok* and *Scandinavian Studies*.

E-mail: humpal@ff.cuni.cz

Summary

Peer Gynt does not have as high a status as a unique world drama in Czechia as it does in some other countries. This is due to a historical paradox: in 1948, when Hans Jacob Nilsen's epoch-making staging marked the beginning of a wave of de-romanticized productions of the play, a Czech translation of *Peer Gynt* was published which cemented the sentimental-romantic interpretation of the drama for several decades. This translation/adaptation of *Peer Gynt* was extremely influential, because its language, stylistically speaking, was truly excellent. Unfortunately, the translation is, at the same time, quite inaccurate and, more importantly, severely abbreviated – the entire fourth act is missing. It was only in the 1990s that Czech theaters began to use a newer, complete and more reliable translation of *Peer Gynt*. Thus while many theaters elsewhere in the world have long discovered the darker, existential dimensions of the play, it is only very recently that Czech theaters have begun to notice such aspects. Even today, it is the sentimental-romantic perception of the drama that is ingrained in the minds of most Czech theatergoers.

Keywords

Peer Gynt, Ibsen translation, Ibsen reception, Ibsen adaptation, Czech theater