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Moby-Dick in Slovenia: An Interview with the Translator Jernej Županič

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The Reception of Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* in the Slovenian Cultural Space

An indisputed classic of world literature, *Moby Dick* is many-folded, an unbelievably rich tapestry of the many nuances of human dwelling, an intricate allegory of an individual's fight with nature, of humanity's eternal struggle for self-determination while yet within the horrific jaws of destiny. The novel's core, complex, manifaceted metaphor—the white whale—speaks to readers of manifold times and backgrounds, in the USA as well as in Slovenia.

The novel *Moby Dick* first appeared in the Slovenian language under the title *The White Whale* (*Beli kit*) in 1966 and was translated by a well-known, prolific Slovenian writer and translator Mira Mihelič (1912–1985). The translation might have been motivated by the legendary 1956 cinematic adaptation of *Moby Dick,* which featured Gregory Peck in the role of the unrelenting Ahab. (Indeed, while referring to *Moby Dick* in Slovenia, it is quite common to hear the comment: "Oh, Moby Dick – I haven't read the book, but I do remember the movie.") The writer of the afterword to the new Slovenian translation, Igor Divjak, underlines the fact that Slovenian libraries often catalogue the book in young adult or adventure sections; it's a noteworthy categorization, since *Moby Dick* is famously complicated thematically, a challenging book that leverages a broad literary and cultural background.

Mihelič's translation has not been reprinted and has subsequently become difficult to find. However, in 2022 a younger Slovenian translator and writer, Jernej Županič, embarked upon his own exquisite journey of translating *Moby Dick* into

Slovenian once again. His exceptional work did not go unrewarded: in 2023, he received the Sovre Prize, the highest prize attainable to a Slovenian translator, named for Anton Sovre, one of the most distinguished Slovenian translators (known for his translations of Greek and Roman classical literature). His translation, although full of antique nautical expressions, is modern and enticing and invites the reader to dive into Melville's epic tale full of poetry and philosophical nuances.

In addition to his work as a translator, Županič is a literary critic, prose writer, and poet. He studied Comparative literature and Philosophy. He has translated authors including Jonathan Franzen, David F. Wallace, Taiye Selasi and others and was in 2017 awarded the Radojka Vrančič Prize for young translator. In 2018 he received a Critics' Prize for his first novel *Mammoths* (*Mamuti*).

Interview with Jernej Županič

Alenka Koželj: Sometimes it is interesting to know the motive that leads to a translation of literary work into the cultural space of a different language. Where did the incentive for a new Slovenian translation of *Moby Dick* come from?

Jernej Županič: The incentive was actually my own. A couple of years before the translation was published, one of Slovenia's major publishing houses, Beletrina, was planning to launch a series of world literature classics. I was chatting with my friend Špela Pavlič, one of the editors of the proposed series, and we were brainstorming ideas for books that could be included. Since the publisher was also considering re-translating some previously translated works, I suggested Melville's *Moby-Dick*. At the time, I didn't really have a strong opinion about the existing translation; I just knew that it had been a while since it was published and that the book, despite being Melville's magnum opus, was strangely absent from Slovenian cultural consciousness.

Melville himself, interestingly enough, was not – thanks to Slavoj Žižek and his analysis of Bartleby's famous dictum, "I would prefer not to." [footnote Žižek] So, while Melville was a significant figure in philosophical circles, his most important work had long been out of print and difficult to find. I felt this lack needed to be addressed. The publisher evidently agreed, and not long after, they asked me to take on the translation. I was more than happy to accept.

Koželj: The novel has already been translated into Slovenian in 1966 by Mira Mihelič. Were you influenced by this predecessor when embarking on your own translation?

Županič: I tried not to be. I completed most of the work – the whole first draft – without consulting Mihelič's translation, only referring to her version later when revising my own. This is my usual approach when translating texts that have already been translated. I know that if I looked at the existing version, I might either unconsciously follow it too closely or try to hard to deviate from it, even when it wasn't necessary.

That said, I did make one exception in this case: the famous opening line, "Call me Ishmael", often hailed as one of the greatest opening sentences in literature. I couldn't exactly pretend it didn't exist – it's right there on the first page (Mihelič's translation omitted the Etymology etc. sections of the book). I worked hard to come up with an alternative to the existing version, but ultimately I had to settle on the same translation: "Recite mi Ishmael". Every other option I considered either over-interpreted the original or sounded unnatural.

Koželj: Did you compare your work with the translation of *Moby Dick* in other languages?

Županič: Only a couple of times, and only when I was stuck on a particularly challenging passage. Since I'm not fluent in any other languages besides English, my ability to rely on these translations was quite limited. I think I referred to the German translation a few times and glanced at the French and Italian versions once or twice when even the German one didn't clarify the issue for me.

Koželj: Melville's novel is full of various technical expressions pertaining to whaling. How did you find the convenient solutions in the Slovenian language? Was that a particular challenge?

Županič: Yes, absolutely. The cultural contexts are vastly different – Slovenia has no whaling tradition, and compared to the Anglo-Saxon world, it barely registers as a seafaring nation. While we do have a coastline (about 43 kilometers of it, to be precise), Slovenian maritime vocabulary is very limited. For example, where English has dozens of terms for different types of sails, Slovenian has only a few, and even these are mostly modern terms, borrowed from Italian and generally used for smaller sails on smaller boats (e.g. the genoa sail, the spinnaker, etc.).

Fortunately, I did find a resource that had done most of the hard work here: *Slovenska pomorska terminologija* (*Slovenian Nautical Terminology*), a 2003 diploma thesis by

Rok Sorta, which is available online and which, although focused primarily on modern shipping, was of great assistance to me.

Still, there were cases where I had to improvise. For instance, the English term "right whale" is a folk name for three different whale species, but Slovenian doesn't have an equivalent – it only has technical names for each species, names that are unfamiliar to the general public. I decided to avoid the technical jargon and instead coined a term that captures the same feel as "right whale". I translated it as *pravi kit*, which back-translates to "true whale" or "common whale". My goal was to create a term that felt authentic, like something 19th-century Slovenian whalers might have used, rather than strictly adhering to scientifically accurate terms.

Koželj: Translation often presupposes an in-depth familiarity with at least two cultural spaces. What is in your opinion the role of translation in discovering other languages and cultures?

Županič: Translation has always been a vital way for languages and cultures to interact, and it plays an essential role in the evolution of language itself. At the same time, I believe a translation is most successful when this interface becomes almost imperceptible. In my view, a great translation doesn't "offer a glimpse into an exotic foreign culture". Instead, it adapts the foreign culture so that it feels natural and relatable to the target audience – at least in terms of language.

Of course, when cultural differences are significant, some of this "foreignness" is unavoidable, but I think it's best if it stays at the level of content, not language. What I mean is that I want to translate *Moby-Dick* in such a way that a Slovenian reader can imagine hypothetical Slovenian whalers doing all this, all while keeping the story firmly rooted in its original context. I'm not relocating the narrative to the Adriatic just because it's the sea most Slovenes are familiar with.

Koželj: You are a successful writer in your own right. How does the act of translating affect your own creativity?

Županič: To be honest, not all that much, I think. For me, writing and translating are very distinct activities, and I don't think there's a lot of overlap. Of course, when I'm working on a major project like *Moby-Dick*, I do spend a lot of time immersed in the book's theme and motifs, and some of that inevitably finds its way into my writing. For instance, I'm sure my poems from the past three years feature more whales than

they would have if I hadn't translated Melville. But I don't feel the influence runs much deeper than that.

That said, I've noticed some changes since I started translating Shakespeare (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* and some of the sonnets). The rhythm of my poetry has changed somewhat, leaning towards a more flowing iambic structure – not metrically precise, but influenced nonetheless.

And thus, my perspective on this might evolve. Ask me the same question in a year, and my answer could be quite different.