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Henry R. Cooper, jr.

Univerza v Indiani, ZDA

APPRECIATING PREŠEREN'S "WREATH OF SONNETS"¹

Članek skuša dati angleško govorečim bralcem potrebno osnovo za branje Prešernovega Sonetnega venca (1834), da bi lahko v njegovem novem prevodu v angleščino (1999) v celoti cenili strukturno, tematsko in literarno kompleksnost slovenskega izvirnika.

This paper seeks to provide English-language readers with the necessary background information about France Prešeren's "Wreath of Sonnets" (1834) so that they might more fully appreciate in the recent (1999) English translation the structural, thematic, and literary complexities of the Slovene original.

Ključne besede: France Prešeren, Julija Primic, Sonetni venec, ritem, rime, pesemske prvine

Key words: France Prešeren, Julija Primic, Wreath of Sonnets, rhythm, rhymes, poetic elements

What do English readers need in order to appreciate France Prešeren's poetic masterpiece, "A Wreath of Sonnets" (1834)? Three things, in my opinion: an understanding of the poems' complex structure, an awareness of the poems' intricate themes, and an appreciation of the poems' alluring images and powerful emotions. And, of course, they need a translation that conveys as fully as possible all these qualities. It is the purpose of this brief introduction to describe the first three things. And it is up to the readers themselves then to decide if the translation Tom Priestly and I devised in 1999 lives up to the expectations thus formed.²

Structure

Prešeren's "Wreath of Sonnets" is, in brief, a sonnet of sonnets, arranged in such a way as to show its perfect unity. And Prešeren's sonnets themselves are of the absolutely classical, Petrarchan kind: eight lines – an octave – followed by six lines – a sestet – all in iambic pentameter (an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, five times in the line), with an eleventh, unstressed syllable coming at the end.

¹ Reprinted from "Commentary", in France Prešeren, *Sonetni venec/A Wreath of Sonnets*, transl. by Tom Priestly and Henry R. Cooper, Jr., illustrated by Valentin Oman (Klagenfurt – Ljubljana – Vienna: Mohorjeva založba, 2000). If anyone wishes to understand the extent of my debt to Boris Paternu, let him read this "appreciation" of mine. From my first halting steps in studying the Slovene language to my coming to grips with "The Wreath of Sonnets", arguably one of the greatest masterpieces of Slovene and world literature, Boris Paternu has been both a mentor and an inspiration for me. It is therefore with great pleasure that I offer this short piece to him on the happy occasion of his eightieth birthday and that I wish him *Ad multos annos*!

² First published in France Prešeren, *Pesmi/Poems*, selected and edited by France Pibernik and Franc Drolc, with an afterword by Henry R. Cooper, Jr. (Klagenfurt – Ljubljana – Vienna: Hermagoras-Verlag, 1999), 81–109.



The rhyme scheme of the octave is invariable: the first, fourth, fifth and eighth lines follow one pattern, while the second, third, sixth and seventh lines follow another pattern. The conventional notation for this pattern is *abbaabba*; many poets, Prešeren included, separate the first four lines from the second, so *abba abba*. The sestet, on the other hand, introduces a new pair of rhymes but avoids rhyming couplets – two *a*'s together, or two *b*'s – preferring instead to alternate rhymes, so that the odd numbered lines have one rhyme scheme, while the even have another. Conventionally, with a break again in the middle, this pattern is called *cdc dcd*. So Prešeren's sonnet cycle comprises a unity first and foremost because each of the poems in it looks, scans, and rhymes exactly in the same way.

But there is more. The last line of the first sonnet of the cycle is repeated as the first line of the second sonnet, and the last line of the second sonnet is repeated as the first line of the third, and so on throughout the cycle until the fourteenth sonnet, whose last line is none other than the first line of the first sonnet. In effect, when the last becomes first, one sonnet echoes another, and not just because of the repetition, although that is very powerful and perhaps the most obvious linking device within the cycle. The sonnets are also linked by rhyme, for the even-numbered rhyme of one sestet, the fourth and final rhyme of any one sonnet (the *d* of the *cdc dcd*), becomes the first rhyme of the following sonnet (the *a* of *abba abba*). Nor does the interweaving stop there. It is a characteristic of the classical Petrarchan sonnet that the octave develops a thought or emotion, and the sestet in some way resolves it. When the last line of one sonnet is the first line of the following sonnet, then the resolution of one sonnet becomes the thought, emotion or *proposition* of the next. Thus a 'chain of thought' binds the sonnets together as well, and moves them forward inexorably, from proposition to resolution to new proposition, until the final resolution becomes, lo and behold, the cycle's initial proposition. That circularity, which results from the linking of sonnet to sonnet and end to beginning, distinguishes this cycle from other sonnet cycles, and makes it into a *sonnet wreath*.

And yet there is more. In the very first sonnet Prešeren notes that his theme is "thrice-sung". Given the repetition of first and last lines, fourteen lines of the cycle are in fact "twice-sung" in the course of the work. But Prešeren fashioned out of these repeated lines a third "song". This fifteenth sonnet, which consists of the first line of each of his fourteen sonnets, in order, he designated as his "master sonnet": he used the Italian word *Magistrale* for it, in deference to its Italian, specifically Sienese, origin (our translation calls it the "Master Theme"). And masterful it truly is, for it contains every resolution-become-proposition of the entire cycle, and yet it makes sense by itself. That is to say, its own proposition leads to its own resolution. It not only sums up the entire cycle whose wreath-like "interwovenness" it literally embodies, but it also crowns the cycle like a wreath, in that it reveals for all to see what is uppermost on the poet's mind: his poetry written in Slovene.

And still one final structural element makes Prešeren's sonnet wreath unique. The first letter of each line of the fifteenth "Master Sonnet" reveals, when read downward, who the object of Prešeren's affection was: Julia Primic, a Ljubljana damsel whose family – bourgeois, straight-laced and humorless – were scandalized by Prešeren's



presumption in pursuing her and then by his supreme bad taste in naming her publicly. But that is just sad history. The poetry of this feat is what dazzles. In addition to the very precise metric demands of the sonnet form, and the equally rigorous requirement that a sonnet cycle develop an argument, and the particularly difficult task of assuring that the "master sonnet" itself makes sense, Prešeren imposed on his artistry one more constraint: it had to share a secret. In other words, in the "Wreath" Prešeren proved he was the consummate craftsman of poetry on *all* its levels. Only when we realize that do we come to understand what a complex and demanding structure the "Wreath of Sonnets" represents.

Themes

It is by now a commonplace of Slovene literary criticism that three themes intertwine in the "Wreath of Sonnets": the poetic, the erotic, and the patriotic, and that Prešeren was deeply interested in them all. Even a casual reading of the cycle, in the original or in translation, confirms its concern for poetry: the word "poem", "song" (which can also mean "poem" in Slovene), "poetry" or "poet" occurs in every sonnet but one, and in that sonnet "poems" are referred to by pronouns. Furthermore "poetry" or its metaphoric equivalent, "flowers", is either the subject or object of every sentence of the "Master Theme". By poetry Prešeren meant something very specific: Romantic, lyric poetry, in the grand tradition that began in Greece with Orpheus, continued in Italy with Petrarch and Tasso, and was alive and thriving in his own day, but not, however, in his own country. In that regard Prešeren's "Wreath" is very self-conscious: it not only speaks about poetry, but intends to prove that it itself is high Romantic, lyric poetry written in Slovene, a language judged heretofore incapable of expressing little more than peasant affairs. Or, to put it in the poetic terms he himself uses, Prešeren wanted to demonstrate that Mt. Parnassus and the Haemus and Rhodope Ranges of Thrace, the ancient sites of the muses and of Orpheus, were Slavic lands, no different from the Slovene Alps themselves. The Alps lack but one thing, however: those who would tend and protect the delicate flowers of Slovene poetry that Prešeren himself has planted on the heights. For nurturers he turns to Slovene women, who comprise the "erotic" theme of his work.

It is wise to understand "erotic" in very old-fashioned, indeed even pre-Romantic terms, however. While he is frank in confessing his feelings of love for the young woman to whom the work is addressed, Prešeren is never explicit in his desires and longings, nor does he seem to have any plans to achieve his goal of winning her. Rather he sighs and weeps, regrets and mourns, wanders around town, steals glances, and writes poetry. He upbraids "haughty girls" for disparaging Slovene in favor of German, that is true, and of course he does expose his beloved to public notoriety by naming her. But that is as far as the "eroticism" goes in these poems. There is no genuine sexual tension in the "Wreath". But there is a call to duty: Slovene women should bear and raise Slovene-speaking children, just as the poet creates and sings Slovene poems. There is no celebration of the pleasure that conceiving and raising these children might afford their fathers and mothers, just as the poet himself seems to find no joy in practicing his craft:





on the contrary, writing poetry for Prešeren was fraught with pain and difficulty. No, the only rewards lie in the fame the poet will win and in the restoration of “the good old days”, before the Slovenes – or perhaps all the Slavs, since it is not always clear which Prešeren is referring to – were subjugated by foreign conquerors. A major theme of the “Wreath” is yearning, and Prešeren does indeed yearn mightily, but Julia, it seems to me, is not the object of his yearning: in Prešeren’s mind she is but a metonym for it. He may have thought he wanted Julia, but in fact he yearned for, maybe even lusted after (if erotic terminology need be used), fame, recognition, success, vindication of himself as a Slovene Romantic poet, and then, after all that, whatever else fame might bring with it, including a wife, a home, and a family – a domesticated eroticism, as it were. Julia is in the poem to provide the fame (Prešeren says so specifically), but he never mentions the possibility of her providing the family or the connubial joys that might come therewith.

If, as I suggest, the erotic theme in Prešeren’s masterpiece is not quite what some might infer at first, no such confusion exists about the patriotic strain of the “Wreath”. Slovenes are to be found in the first and last lines of the cycle, while Slovene women, Carniolans, Carniola, and the collective noun *slovenščina* are used elsewhere as synecdoches for Slovenia – itself never mentioned! The purpose of the poet is to plant the seeds of poetry throughout the country, and especially at the highest elevations he can reach. Here and there he suggests that his country is not particularly hospitable to this enterprise: its glaciers, rocky cliffs and cold winds all too easily destroy any young growth that may sprout. But well intentioned Slovenes, especially Slovene women, since Slovene men have had their hands full protecting their lands from the Turks and the Franks, among others, might tend these precious but delicate plants until they bloom. And if they do, they could transform the country from a glacial wilderness into a warm and productive land where zephyrs blow. Prešeren is pessimistic, however: the first eight or nine sonnets raise the hopes of happier times for all Slovenes, but the final five or six recognize that that hope might be futile, that the poet might have to settle for just one Slovene woman – Julia – to care for his poems. Such a resolution would be enough for him, he thinks, but then he has doubts even about her: the “Master Theme” shows the poet almost completely defeated and humbled before his unheeding lady.

But Prešeren’s patriotism is nothing if not rich and nuanced, and it speaks well of independent Slovenia that it chose a Prešeren poem, “The Toast”, for its national anthem. Despite the pessimistic tone of the “Wreath’s” conclusion, the fact remains that Prešeren did compose a marvelously complex and successful sonnet cycle. Even despite Julia, who turned (or was compelled to turn) her back on him, his poems not only survived but thrived in Slovenia’s brisk mountain air. The “Wreath” is a great celebration of Slovene potentiality, perhaps the first really conscious such celebration in all Slovene history. For the earliest Slovene writers, the Protestants of the sixteenth century, promoted their language mostly as a vehicle for their religion, and the Slovene Enlighteners who preceded Prešeren championed Slovenia as a part of the republic of reason or the Napoleonic new order. It was Prešeren who perceived the country’s innate and inalienable qualities, but without chauvinism or xenophobia. Prešeren transmuted the poetic *belief* in a people’s right to develop its language into a poetic *vehicle* for



the expression of life's highest and profoundest sentiments, and further into a political *credo* that made a nation's poetry into a declaration of national independence. He did not live to see this happen, but the "Wreath" is a monument to his faith that it could and would.

Imagery

And now for some final words on imagery. Images abound in the "Wreath", and they are of various kinds: corporeal (heart and eyes, lips and breasts, to name but four); astronomical (the sun and its rays, the stars and their heavens); chronological (midnight, dawn, spring, winter); meteorological (breezes, blasts, snow, hail); geographical (snow-capped peaks, protected meadows, Carniola, Thrace); historical (Orestes and Diana, Samo and Pippin); but above all they are horticultural. That is to say, Prešeren not only speaks of gardens, but his cycle becomes a virtual garden, full of buds, *kali*, blooms, *cvet*, *cvetje*, *cvetlice*, and flowers, *rože*, *rož'ce*, *rožice*. After the words for "poem" and "poetry", these are probably the most frequent words, and images, in the cycle, and for good reason: they are metaphors for Prešeren's poems. Planting and sprouting seem to be the work of the poet himself, for he creates and then publishes his delicate verse. Nurturing and protecting are the work of others, particularly of Slovene women, for they are charged with reading and appreciating his verse. Many forces conspire to destroy the poet's flowers before they can be put in the women's care: the icy indifference of his fellow countrymen, the rocky soil of the local language unaccustomed to being put to such use, the hail of foreign styles that threaten to overwhelm the country, and the snowstorms of scorn that "haughty girls" heap on presumptuous poets. But other, beneficent forces are at work, too: tears that water, eye-beams that warm, bees that spread the sweetness (let us not forget that the journal in which Prešeren first published his work was called *Kranjska čbelica*, "The Carniolan Bee"), and above all protected areas – gardens – where alone his "flowers" can flourish safely. And what are these gardens but the hearts – a word mentioned in virtually every sonnet in the cycle, and if not mentioned, then alluded to – of Slovene women? Like the sonnets themselves, Prešeren's images also intertwine: no one category of images exists in isolation from any other, nor can one category be understood without reference to the others. Their variety is complemented by their unity, just like the sonnets. If Slovene poetry can take root in the hearts of Slovene women, then the poet has succeeded in his most important endeavor, wherever else in life and love he may have failed.

And speaking of failure, we would be remiss if we concluded before mentioning one last category of words in the "Wreath", the one that expresses emotions. If the words connoting poetry are all without exception positive in the sonnets, and the words connoting nature, the human form and history are largely positive, the words that speak of the poet's emotions are the opposite: they are overwhelmingly negative. Love, joy, happiness of course do figure in the poems from time to time, as do hope, glory and even grace. But far more frequently the poet emotes in pain, anguish, fear, anger, oblivion, dissension, strife, conflict, bitterness, despair, disgust, and care, and he is afflicted by wounds, pains, chains, misfortune, sighs, tears, unquenchable desires and





unfulfillable yearnings. The overall effect is grim indeed, but it is intentional. The poet himself says not once but three times that the “Wreath” is a ‘monument of both his pain and his lady’s praise.’ The praise, I would suggest in conclusion, is to be discovered in the structure, themes, and positive imagery of Prešeren’s masterpiece. The pain, on the other hand, lies exposed for all to see – and perhaps share – in the powerful emotive language Prešeren uses throughout the cycle. The greatest challenge in translating the “Wreath” into English is not to duplicate its complex structure, daunting as that in fact has been, but to convey to a modern audience this intense bitter-sweetness of a Romantic poet’s love. Prešeren succeeded in doing this in Slovene; time alone will tell if we have succeeded in English.

POVZETEK

Najnovejši prevod Prešernove mojstrovine Sonetni venec, ki sta ga opravila Tom Priestly in Henry R. Cooper, Jr. (1999), skuša slediti kolikor se da natančno ritmu, rimi in drugim pesemskim prvinam, posebej pesniškim podobam, slovenskega izvirnika. Članek izpostavlja podrobnosti teh prvin. Raziskuje strukturo Prešernovih sonetov, povezavo teh sonetov v strnjeno verigo ali venec, oblikovanje kronskega soneta (magistrala) in akrostiha iz začetnic vsake vrstice v kronskem sonetu. Osvetljuje poetično, ljubezensko in domovinsko temo pesnitve: poetično v trditvi, da ima slovenščina enake pesniške izrazne zmožnosti kot kateri koli drugi knjižni jezik; ljubezensko ne le v pesnikovem hrepenenju po Juliji Primic, ampak tudi po priznanju in uveljavitvi kot največji slovenski romantični pesnik; in domovinsko v opevanju domovine, ki bi bila lahko rodovitna podlaga za pesniško izražanje, če bi le njeni sinovi verjeli v to zmožnost. Kar zadeva pesniške podobe, je pesnitev polna navezav na telesno (srce, oči), vesoljsko (sonce, zvezde), kronološko (zora, pomlad), meteorološko (sapice, sneg), zemljepisno (gore, Gorenjska), zgodovinsko (Orest, Samo) in celo vrtnarsko področje (popki, cvetovi, rože, vrtovi). Zadnje je metonimija za srce slovenskih žensk, kjer bi slovenska poezija lahko cvetela v varnem zavetju. Kar zadeva druge pesemske prvine, pa je najbolj izrazito Prešernovo preiskovanje lastnih čustev, posebej bolečine, ki jo občuti od začetka do konca cikla, po drugi strani pa se tudi naslaja ob radosti, ki izvira iz ustvarjanja mojstrovine. To je občutje, ki bi ga angleški bralci lahko prezrli zaradi bolečine, ki ga obdaja, če ga ne izpostavimo in pokažemo, kako izhaja iz izjemne kompleksnosti pesnitve, ki je docela vidna le v slovenskem izvirniku, a vsaj deloma razvidna tudi iz angleškega prevoda.

