

## Queer perspectives in translation studies: Notes on two recent publications

IVANA HOSTOVÁ

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Dethroning truths taken for granted,  
Burning the proponents of traditional taste,  
We tossed formalities to the galleys.

Our friendship was suspicious,  
We were taken for homosexuals, but  
They wouldn't understand that a friend  
was the only thing worth living for.<sup>1</sup>

Štefan Žáry (1967, 20)

The lines in the epigraph come from the collection of poems *Múza oblieha Tróju* (The muse besieges Troy, 1967) by the Slovak author and translator from French, Italian and Spanish Štefan Žáry (1918–2007). It was published during the period of political thaw, a year before the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the forces of the Warsaw Pact. The 1960s saw various and variously conflicting endeavors – a revival of avant-garde and experimental poetics among others – both in Slovak literature and in translations into Slovak. Some of the poetry published during this period is still highly regarded for both its aesthetic and ethical qualities, while some of it serves more as a period document. The writing of Štefan Žáry, who in this book returned to the poetics he and a group of a few other poets modelled on surrealism in the 1930s and 1940s (*nadrealizmus*, lit. “over-realism”), belongs to the latter group.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps more interestingly, in these lyric memoirs of Bratislava during World War II, Žáry describes the intimate bond between the *nadrealisti* being referred to (presumably derogatorily) as “homosexual” by their “others” (presumably the bourgeoisie). In the complex temporal and spatial layering of the collection, the aging poet’s memories of the 1940s are projected over the socialist 1960s, and the emotional sketch of Bratislava, its nightlife, and its bohemia is layered over the much more sober city almost 30 years later. This makes an interpretation of the male bonding, one of the

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central motifs of the book, difficult to temporalize and localize. Was the perceived homosexual nature of the relations between the bohemian poets, critics and painters felt in the 1940s, or was it an interpretive frame that would (also) be actualized during the state socialism? Did this attitude have anything to do with the fact that *nadrealizmus* was inspired by French literature and homosexuality has often been characterized as foreign? (Baer 2020, 3) How should we read the references to the Greek culture in the collection; did translations from Greek for the Slovaks offer “discursive opportunities to reevaluate homosexuality” (67) like they did for other locales? How does our reading of *The muse besieges Troy* change if we know that just two years before the publication of the collection, Štefan Žárý translated a selection of poetry by Pier Paolo Pasolini? Or how is one to read the numerous homoerotic elements such as the mention of a boy who “moistened” the speaker-poet’s “first book with spermatic tears” (Žárý 1967, 44)?<sup>3</sup> Answering such questions would require in-depth research that also takes into account the complicated ideological background and addresses the complex positions that the layering of three wars – the *nadrealisti*’s attack on the city, the Trojan War and World War II – construes in the collection.<sup>4</sup> However, the fact that the poem was published in 1967 made it a part of the public communication space in socialist Czechoslovakia. This calls into question generalizing statements like Eva Spišiaková’s claim, in applying queer theory to the analysis of Czech and Slovak translations of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, that “stories and depictions of male love and devotion [in socialist Czechoslovakia] were not seen as in any way connected to sexual desire” (2021, 20).

The application of queer theory to translation studies has recently brought a number of highly stimulating works, overviews of which can be found in other publications, including Baer (2020) and Spišiaková (2021). In what follows, I will provide a very brief summary of Brian James Baer’s *Queer Theory and Translation Studies* (2020) – indeed an “essential reading of queer translation studies” (Zhengtang Ma 2022) – and then move on to a more detailed analysis of Eva Spišiaková’s *Queering Translation History* (2021) that deals with the cultural space in which I have been active and which I have also been studying for some time.

## OUTLINING A LANDSCAPE OF A QUEER TRANSLATION STUDIES

Drawing on his own observations and on a rich list of publications in gender theory, translation studies, philosophy, (global) sexuality studies, comparative literature and other fields, Baer traces the relationships between queer textuality and queer sexuality and the “transnational circulation of queer texts” (2020, i). He addresses such issues as the construal of modern nation-states as monolingual and heterosexual (4), a narrative which relegated both translation and non-heteronormative identifications to an axiologically secondary position “foreign to the body politic” (53). Baer’s book pays close attention to the politics of framing, arguing for a constant and repeated resistance to any totalizing narratives and an ethical imperative to allow for complexity, shortcomings and failures pertaining to all spheres connected with the topic. Baer calls for the deidealization of queer subjects, translations or the pursuit of academic topics by metropolitan scholars studying sexuality outside the West (166). With re-

gards to the proposal of a queer translation studies, he asserts that not all scholarship addressing same-sex desire is queer in the sense of being “deeply informed by the insights of queer theory” (14). Queer scholarly gazes should not only deal with queer sexuality, but should also challenge existing interpretative structures and provincialize and historicize any claims at universality (18). Baer argues that queer perspectives can be brought into Western academic research if these scholars problematize their own translations which would help them “resist the imperialist dichotomy that associates the subaltern with translation and the metropolitan scholar with original writing” – a move that would result in a recommitting to the “somatics of language and to the linguistic embodiment of ideas and desire” (65).

The intimate way in which research, translation, sexuality and theory mutually inform one another in the volume shows the exciting potential offered by adopting a queer translation studies prism: one might even catch oneself applying it instantaneously while reading the volume. When Baer discusses the failure that haunts the translator’s task (74), he evokes, among others, Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1975, 106) work in which the Russian scholar asserts that each word *pakhnet* (smells) of its previous contexts. The quoted English translation by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (“taste”), however, activates the gustatory sensory experience instead of the olfactory one evoked in the Russian and, unlike the Russian text, also explicitly marks the metaphor as such by wrapping it in quotation marks. Somatic embodiment as a resistance to the subordination of our experience of the world to the logos is another nucleus in which sexuality and text meet, in translation, poetry, research, etc.

Queer attitude encourages both translators and researchers to embrace creativity and make it into an empowering site of resistance. In this respect, Baer invokes Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “middle ranges of agency” (2003, 13), a position that enables one to escape the seeming polarity of compulsion and voluntariness that are both ultimately only manifestations of consumer attitude. Middle ranges of agency, on the other hand, “offer space for creativity and change” (13). Baer advocates for a queer translation practice that “would counter any association of translation with the easy transposability of global capital by firmly grounding it in the materiality and historicity of language, underscoring the contingent and affective dimensions of knowledge production” (2020, 76).

Further issues addressed in the volume include discussions of such topics as metonymy and metaphor, gay anthologies, homosexuality and homosociality, Bildung, subjecthood, class differences, epistemology of the closet, (dis)interest-ness of scholarship, glossodiversity and semiodiversity, mimesis, ethnographic studies or pleasure. At the very end of the chapter preceding the conclusion, Baer invokes Paul B. Preciado’s *Counter-Sexual Manifesto* (2018) and joins the author in the call for “a *planetary somatic communism*, a communism of (all) living bodies with and together with the earth” (qtd. in Baer 2020, 184; italics in the original). All in all, the volume makes an excellent case for a queer translation studies and models it as a field and prism that is capable of critically addressing all spheres of being in the world and activating a radical and subversive potential of translation and research.

## QUEER THEORY LOOKING INTO TRANSLATIONS INTO SLOVAK

Queer theory has been employed by a number of scholars in studies of Central and Eastern European cultures and in research by academics in the countries of the region. However, theoretically well-informed and nuanced scholarship with an in-depth focus on Slovak literature (translated or not) in particular is still extremely rare.<sup>5</sup> The character of the Slovak academic space rarely allows for a high degree of specialization and encourages multi-tasking instead; the situation is to a great degree similar in other areas of professional life, such as specialization in translation. The fact that excellence in research is generally not supported by the existing academic infrastructure has also been observed by Karen Henderson (2019), a British political scientist based at a Slovak university since 2013, who ascribes this among other factors to the low salaries offered by academic institutions. In response to this, researchers often join conceptual domains into larger clusters (with regards to the topic discussed here, this would include feminisms, gender studies, queer studies, sexuality studies etc.) and combine multiple roles – activist, researcher, curator, educator, writer, translator etc. Research that might be conducted by scholars positioned outside of the culture is, on the other hand, hindered by the fragmentary nature of cultural artefacts, complexity and multilingual nature of information flows (Slovak culture is mainly a receiving, import-based one, and as such also incorporates impulses from non-translated texts historically and currently circulating in Hungarian, German, Czech, Russian, English and other languages) and the low accessibility of Slovak resources outside of Slovakia. The last of the abovementioned factors is given by the fact that Slovak is a language with limited diffusion and by the low degree of digitalization as an area that has become more usually than not an opportunity for profiteering from the digital divide rather than a disadvantage to be mitigated. The first concentrated effort to overcome these obstacles and put queer theory into a dialogue with the Slovak – and Czech – translational landscape is Eva Spišiaková's recently-published volume *Queering Translation History. Shakespeare's Sonnets in Czech and Slovak Transformations* (2021). The author grew up in Slovakia, but received her degree at the University of Edinburgh which positions her between contexts. *Queering Translation History* sets out, as the book's paratext asserts, to challenge "normative binaries in contemporary translation studies" by applying "frameworks from queer historiography to the discipline in order to explore shifting perceptions of same-sex love and desire in translations and retranslations of William Shakespeare's *Sonnets*" (i).

The basic argument of the monograph is that (a) counter to expectations (since non-heterosexuality was a taboo topic in socialist Czechoslovakia), translations published before the fall of state socialism contain a higher proportion of male-addressed sonnets than those published in the subsequent decades; (b) this is due to the fact that in the pre-1989 public discourse, non-heterosexuality practically did not exist outside of the medical sphere; (c) after the fall of the Iron Curtain, homosexuality entered the public discourse in Czechoslovakia and the translators of the *Sonnets* took various stances towards the newly-emerged reading frame of male-to-male erotic love. This doubtless is a useful and well-formed interpretative

arc supported by the time-consuming quantitative research Spišiaková conducted, but it is hardly surprising. Many readers will surely be familiar with the expressions of comradeship between men in power during the communist era, best expressed in public kissing (including on the mouth). Similar non-acknowledgement of homoerotic undertones can be noticed in the Slovak translations of Walt Whitman's poetry by Ján Boor, published in 1956 and 1974. Moreover, as the fragment of the poem cited in the epigraph suggests, the matter might be more complex and might require a more nuanced research into period documents (newspapers, literature, imagery) and personal histories (diaries, correspondence, published memoirs, oral histories) that would help identify and explain various conflicting spaces. In her outline of the historical treatment of the non-heterosexual population in Czechoslovakia, Spišiaková (17–18) does hint at these parallel lives (public and private), but in the following chapters of her work, she unfortunately does not consider these and in result fails in building adequately complex analyses. Moreover, it is not only the organization of socialist societies along homosocial lines that Spišiaková mentions that matters in this regard – the extremely high cultural capital of both Shakespeare and Whitman needs to be considered as well. The canonical status of the works (used by the culture to accumulate cultural capital) played a crucial role in the period framing of the texts and bore significant consequences for both publicly allowed scopes of interpretation and for what the actual text might contain.<sup>6</sup> In her discussions, Spišiaková does touch on some of these issues, but not with sufficient clarity. Considering the number of methodological problems, it is difficult to properly assess the author's degree of success at applying queer theory in her research. However, since the book's basic argument is more or less the confirmation of an existing narrative, the research seems to fail in being “queer” in the sense of radical subversion of dominant knowledge structures.

What the volume does provide regarding queer histories, however, is an overview of published oral histories of people identifying as queer and a chronology of legal issues pertaining to the rights of non-heterosexual minorities in Czechoslovakia since 1918, and the Czech and Slovak republics since 1993 (13–27). After World War II, Czechoslovakia had a dual legislation inherited from Austrian and Hungarian law with both systems deeming same-sex sexual acts illegal. Interwar liberatory efforts aiming at the decriminalization of homosexuality were cut short by the rise of fascism and were only briefly renewed after World War II. Homosexuality was decriminalized in Czechoslovakia in 1961, which was earlier than in many other countries, but which was not followed by a public acceptance of displays of affection with possible sexual undertone between same-sex couples or by allowing discussions of sexuality in general to become part of public discourse. After the fall of state socialism, a number of civic organizations and other bodies have been fighting for LGBTQ rights with different results in the two countries. While in the Czech Republic, legal recognition was granted to same-sex unions (although not marriages, and not allowing the couples to adopt children or undergo in-vitro fertilization) in 2006, the Slovak Republic has not adopted any similar measure, but instead amended the constitution to explicitly define marriage as a bond between one man and one woman. In both countries,

civic organizations continue their striving for LGBTQ rights and for a wider societal acceptance of sexual difference with these efforts being more successful in the more secular Czech Republic.

What follows is a discursive reading of *Queering Translation History* addressing such issues as the selection of the corpus, translation history, methodology, linguistics and prosody. In the discussion, I propose an alternative reading of the data gathered by the volume's author.

### The corpus

From the methodological point of view, looking into a translation series as Eva Spišiaková's *Queering Translation History* does, can provide an exciting, multi-faceted ground for investigations into the history of a given linguistic and cultural space. To history, both with a qualifier ("translation", "queer" or other) and without it – since, as Jeffrey Nealon argues, the urgency of a (postdisciplinary) joining of powers across academic fields in order for the humanities to be able to "offer a hermeneutics of (the) situation, tools for producing a kind of cartography that can diagnose and respond" (2012, 194) to the present has become increasingly pressing.

It is a frequent fact pertaining to the character of cultures using a language with limited diffusion that their corpus of translated texts is discontinuous, fragmentary and temporally out of joint – as is the case of the Slovak context (Bednárová 2013, 42; Vajdová 2009, 134).<sup>7</sup> A search for a translation series in a culture like this is not an easy task, and one such example would indeed be one of Shakespeare's works – fragmentary or full Slovak translations of his *Hamlet* span more than two hundred years. Looking at both Czech *and* Slovak translations – a step substantiated by the closeness of the languages and a long stretch of shared history – through a single methodological prism in one volume is one way of alleviating the disadvantage of a culture using a peripheral language (Sapiro 2010) which enables the researcher to speak about its translations in any wider context at all. And, since Eva Spišiaková has ties with the Slovak culture, it appears that this was one of the underlying reasons behind the selection of her corpus, because Czech culture rarely requires a replenishment by Slovak translations; Slovak translations are hardly ever read by Czech readers at all. However, any such endeavor – if it is to be regarded as rigorous – needs to take into account the cultural, linguistic and economic specifics of all cultural spaces under discussion. These might not be big, but disregarding them amounts to not addressing the research topic with sufficient complexity. Knowledge sufficient for ambitious research like Spišiaková's also encompasses other fields, ranging from Shakespearean studies and queer theory through reception studies, Slavic studies, linguistics and literary theory to translation and interpreting studies – to mention just the most pertinent ones.

### The history

A reader familiar with the areas of research outlined above will become suspicious about *Queering Translation History* very early in the book, perhaps on its third page where the author claims that the iambic foot is "ill-suited for being replicated

in a Slavic language” (3). It is true that Czech and Slovak natural speech patterns are not suited for a perfect iambic meter, but this can hardly be said about Russian or other Slavic languages, which do not have a fixed stress on the first syllable.<sup>8</sup> This might seem like a marginal problem, springing perhaps from a reformulation done at the last moment. However, a few pages later, the author states that she had significant problems gathering sufficient background on some of the translators – including two of the three Slovak ones – in her corpus. Since, following Pym (1998) and others, current translation historiography research puts great emphasis on the translator as the agent active in the cultural field, the inability to locate resources on translators Spišiaková mentions creates a serious problem for research like this. However, when scrutinizing her resources, one finds out that these are surprisingly limited: with regards to the Czech translators, she mainly mentions an online database and complains that no such database is accessible for the Slovak translators (8). It is unfortunately true that there is no comprehensive online database of Slovak literary translators, but it is equally true that the Institute of World Literature of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, in cooperation with the publishing house of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, has recently published the two-volume *Slovník slovenských prekladateľov umeleckej literatúry: 20. storočie* (Dictionary of Slovak literary translators of the 20th century; Kovačičová and Kusá 2015, 2017) which provides the profiles of two of the three Slovak translators of the *Sonnets*: Stanislav Blaho (Bubnášová 2015) and Ľubomír Feldek (Zambor 2015). Surely, such omissions do happen, but the ignorance of the research especially aimed at the Slovak context seems to be almost systematic in Spišiaková’s book. It ranges from the lack of knowledge of basic dictionaries of the Slovak language (this also seems to apply to the Czech ones) through the ignorance of such areas necessary for the topic under discussion as prosody (Sabol and Zimmerman 1994; Štraus 2003), resources pertaining to the oral history of translation (Passia and Magová 2015), research on the Slovak translations of the *Sonnets* (Andričík 2013), feminist-inspired research on the translations of Shakespeare’s work (Bžochová-Wild 1998), specifics of the history of gender discourse in Slovakia (Cviková 2014), censorship in Slovak literature (Marušiak 2001; Matejovič 2015) and the 20th-century history of translation in the Slovak cultural space (Bednárová 2013, 2015a, 2015b).<sup>9</sup>

For the sphere of translation during the socialist period in Czechoslovakia, the author mainly relies on oral histories – the interviews with Czech translators collected in Rubáš (2012). Fragmentariness of resources is typical for the historiography of translation in Czech and Slovak cultural spaces during state socialism and reliance on memories and personal accounts understandably has its shortcomings. These can be somewhat amended by comparing as many sources as possible, but this is not the case in *Queering Translation History*. Consequently, a reader with a more in-depth understanding of the context cannot help but see the imprecisions. For example, Spišiaková informs the reader that Czech translators remember the “relatively high pay for literary translations, especially compared to present-day standards” (2021, 41), but does not make further effort to check if the Slovak translators mention similar working conditions. In Djovčoš, Hostová, Perez and Šveda

(2020), Slovak translators specializing in poetry provide mixed information regarding financial remuneration, with one of the interviewees explaining that even though the calculation of the fee before 1989 was based on the number of lines and the number of printed copies and thus virtually fixed, “the final sum varied depending on the position the translator occupied with respect to the state power” (52). At another point, while discussing the print runs in the 1950s and 1970s, the author asserts that the regime opposed magical realism (Spišiaková 2021, 41). While that was officially true in the Slovak cultural space, during the 1960s and the following period of normalization (1970–1989), magical realism (and writing falling under a wider local understanding of the term) was highly popular among Slovak publishers (Barborík 2016; Palkovičová 2017, 59–78).

The superficial knowledge of historical circumstances becomes evident in imprecise formulations, for example: “as the [Czech and Slovak] languages are so closely related and mutually understandable by the majority of the population, it was often decided that it is enough to translate a work into only one of them, and this was in most cases the Czech language” (Spišiaková 2021, 12). Although this to some degree applied for the period of state socialism, the question of the greater volume and popularity of Czech translations over the Slovak ones is a very complex one and the statement certainly does not apply to the post-1993 economic and political situation (see Bednářová 2013, 59–69). If such decisions have been made in the past three decades (and they have), they were based on individual choices made by press owners or translators rather than by any official authority. The complexity of the matter becomes even more apparent when it comes to works no longer under copyright, such as Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*. As Eva Spišiaková’s list of translations shows, during the period of state socialism in Czechoslovakia, when the state determined what got translated and published and what did not, two of the six full-length translations of the *Sonnets* were Slovak, while only one such translation can be found in the post-1993 corpus which includes seven versions.

## Methods

One of the methods Eva Spišiaková used for gathering data was conducting interviews, but she states that she was unable to reach all the living translators who had translated Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* in the past century, even the still prolific Lubomír Feldek. Yet he replied to my enquiry about his translations of Shakespeare almost immediately, saying that he has recently returned to Shakespeare and is currently considering whether the characters of Antonio and Bassanio from *The Merchant of Venice* (1600) should be addressing each other formally or informally (Feldek 2022, email).

The first analytical chapter of Eva Spišiaková’s volume describes the quantitative method applied to the corpus and subsequently moves to a textual analysis of the translations. The chapter “The Master Mistress of My Passion” seeks the answer to the question of how individual translators over the past century handled the linguistic necessity – Czech and Slovak both being inflected languages – of increasing the number of sonnets explicitly expressing the genders of the ad-

dressees. Spišiaková, in hopes of achieving quantifiable and undisputable results, embarked on the time-consuming process of answering the question “Would this poem be equally logically coherent if the reader imagined either a male or a female recipient?” (2021, 54) for all the poems in her corpus and marked them as “male”, “female”, “neutral” and “various” depending on the identifiable gender of the addressee. When it comes to translations, she mostly relied on grammatical gender (reflected in the endings of nouns, adjectives and past tense verbs) in this process. Formally explicit morphological elements provide a useful tool for a sorting of this kind. My random check did not reveal many erroneous categorizations, even though the results do not seem to be exhaustively accurate: Spišiaková marks “Sonnet 143” in Lubomír Feldek’s translation as neutral, but it is in fact addressed to a woman as becomes clear in the penultimate line that – unlike the previous ones – addresses the “you” directly in “Bodaj si to, čo stíhaš, ulovila” (Shakespeare 2014), literally “May you catch [feminine] whatever you are chasing”.

Sorting the English originals, on the other hand, is not that easy a matter and the procedure utilized has inevitably severed individual poems from their contexts to a great extent. Shortcomings of quantitative methods are usually put into perspective by qualitative research employing close reading that follows the discussion of the data. While it is understandable that in order to be able to reach quantifiable results, a clear – and necessarily reductionist – method of one or other kind was necessary, the reasoning and justification behind the one used in the volume does not seem to be convincing enough. The author does provide a discussion of individual sonnets, combining close reading with information provided by the translators in interviews and with other sources, but she does not reevaluate her gendering of the English poems in doing so. This might perhaps not be that problematic in itself – some readings of the *Sonnets* argue that the poems do not necessarily need to form a coherent collection (cf. Traub 2016, 240) –, was it not for the fact that Spišiaková bases the very argumentation behind the selection of the corpus (limiting the texts to encompass complete translations only) on insisting that the *Sonnets* be viewed as a collection (35). Another contradiction in the argumentation pertains to objectivity versus subjectivity of the method. On the one hand, the author rejects various complex interpretations of the addressees’ genders as relying “on subjective interpretation” (54) and therefore not suitable for her use, but in a few lines, she acknowledges the “necessary subjectivity” of her own approach.

### The language

Although translation and interpreting studies has undoubtedly been less concerned with linguistics in the past few decades, attention to language, its forms, variants, materiality etc. doubtless remains a basic predisposition for most research. As it appears, the depth of familiarity with the Czech and Slovak language and linguistics demonstrated in *Queering Translation History* does not seem to be adequate with regards to the aims it wishes to achieve. Some of the minor problems might have occurred as a result of (most probably) not seeking cooperation with a proofreader with the knowledge of Czech and/or Slovak, others run deeper and

have a bearing on the conclusions the author reaches and point to a general lack of adequate guidance in this matter during the various stages of the preparation of the volume. At one point, the text erroneously ascribes grammatical case to one of the nouns in the corpus, asserting that “lásce” is the vocative case (76) while this form in fact is the locative singular of the Czech “láska” [love]. This might be a typographical error – there are more such in the non-English parts of the text (e.g. “ju” instead of “ji” [her] on page 86), but similarly erroneous is saying that the Czech “pychu [sic.]” is in the genitive case (84) – “pýchu” is the accusative form of “pýcha” [pride]. Further minor linguistic imprecisions concern such matters as the semantics of the morphological category of gender, where the author states that the use of the neuter in Czech and Slovak “is considered inappropriate” for adult human beings (51), while it is rather stylistically marked (infantilizing, derogatory, augmentative etc.). Such issues concerning the formulation or an isolated linguistic item should have been pointed out by a consultant or editor and amended before the publication. However, the matter of careless handling of linguistic information becomes more serious when it comes to the interpretation of the corpus on which the author bases her conclusions.

In the second of the two chapters aimed at discussing the particulars of the corpus, “I Love Thee in Such Sort”, Spišiaková looks into translators’ lexical choices concerning the addressees of individual sonnets with the aim to specify the character of love expressed in the poems (erotic, filial, fraternal etc.). This is done to help determine the “two main translation strategies; those that support the reading of the collection as romantic poetry, particularly in those sonnets that are by textual evidence or implication considered as male-addressed, and those that reinforce a non-romantic reading based on friendship and familial bonds, or that suggest that the collection should be read as an abstract metaphor” (2021, 75–76). Frequently used lexemes, as Spišiaková noticed, include “milý”/“milá” – the male and female form of the substantivized adjective most readily translated into English as “dear” in the sense of “a loved one”.<sup>10</sup> While it is true that, as the author states, the primary meaning the dictionaries of the Slovak language give can be summed up as “a person with whom one is in a romantic, semi-formal relationship preceding an official engagement” (77), the relationship between the speaker who addresses the conversation partner as “milý”/“milá” need not in fact be erotic at all. Dictionaries of the Slovak and Czech languages provide a second meaning in which these words are used – a close person or persons in a direct address and someone emotionally close to us or belonging to our familial or close friend circle.<sup>11</sup> This, however, is not just a matter of dictionary definitions – one can notice this ambivalence in the translations themselves, such as in Lubomír Feldek’s translation of “Sonnet 82”. Where the English original addresses the recipient as “love” (Shakespeare 1998, 275), the translator chooses to use the masculine substantivized adjective “milý” (Shakespeare 2014). In the given context, however, the address resonates more with a formal, semiformal, or slightly literary form of address, which is still frequently used in Slovak correspondence, than with addressing an erotic partner – especially since both source and target texts later specify the speaker as a friend. In other words,

the address “milý” in Feldek’s translation of “Sonnet 82” bears with it a memory of an elided noun (since poetry has a tendency towards a condensed expression) – “priateľ” (friend), for example.

However, I do not think that Feldek tried to hide or downplay any possibility of homoerotic reading of the *Sonnets*. In his preface (2014), he mentions the debates concerning the topic and does not comment on these much – he seems to be taking the homoerotic element as just one of the number of scandals (alongside the boot-legging of the first edition, a potential promiscuous love affair, and controversies regarding the status of “A Lover’s Complaint” in the collection) that might intrigue the reader and keep them interested in reading the *Sonnets*.

The reductive understanding of the lexemes “milý” and “milá” in Spišiaková’s discussions is only supported by the puzzlement of the author regarding some of the translations. In Anna Sedlačková’s version, Spišiaková sees a “curious dissonance between the committed, romantic relationship supported by the term *milý* on the one hand, and her frequent emphasis on the non-romantic part of this relationship through the use of *priateľ*” (2021, 82; italics in the original); however, a speaker immersed in the daily use of the Slovak language perceives no such controversy in the text. This critique in no way undermines the possibility of reading the translations as expressions of erotic love. The *Sonnets* in Slovak translation can indeed be, and most possibly also were read in that way. The reservation outlined here concerns the unsubstantiated reliance on false facts only.

### The verse

When talking about poetry in translation – even in more sociologically-leaning research as Spišiaková’s is – the fact that the form can greatly impact the semantics and subsequently any further analysis of translators’ decisions needs to be taken into account.<sup>12</sup> And, undeniably, the author of *Queering Translation History* does try to do so. However, in so doing, she also reveals a lack of any deeper understanding of the matter. At one point, she explains that creating an iambic meter in Czech and Slovak goes against the natural cadence of the speech and forces “translators who aim to retain this foot to use creative choices such as starting the verse with a preposition or a pronoun” (53). Aiming at an iamb in Slovak (and Czech) poetry surely does involve artifice – a perfect iamb, in which the foot break would coincide with the division of the flow of speech or a line into words, would involve using solely one-syllable lexemes. However, a lot of Slovak poetry that does aim at a meter of any kind perhaps paradoxically attempts at creating an iambic “rhythmic impulse” – an expectation that a group of rhythmic items organized in a certain way will be followed by a similar pattern (Žilka 1984, 124). In the case of the iamb, this most commonly amounts to putting the stress on the fourth (and usually also on the sixth) syllable in the line (Štraus 2003, 140). This does not, nevertheless, equal to using a preposition in the first syllable: a monosyllabic preposition preceding a one-syllable noun results in a trochee. When it is used before a two-syllable noun, it is often stressed and creates a dactyl which in turn allows for the fourth syllable in the line to be stressed (cf. Sabol 1972, 131–132; Sabol and Zimmerman 1994). A dactylic foot can be equal-

ly well achieved by other devices – a three-syllable lexeme for example. Using an unequivocally unstressed proclitic (such as a pronoun or conjunction) at the beginning of the line, on the other hand, creates a different effect since it puts the stress already on the second syllable in the line. These details concerning prosody and meter might sound unnecessarily nuanced, but they do have a significant bearing on the level of difficulty with which an iambic-sounding poem can be composed in Slovak. In other words, what most often happens is that Slovak translators use a dactylic beginning of the line (a perfectly natural foot in Slovak) and then continue with trochees (also natural in Slovak speech), occasionally including a line with the second syllable stressed to make the rhythm more distinct. This was one of the ways Lubomír Feldek dealt with the meter in his translations of the *Sonnets* (cf. Andričík 2013, 31).

Metrical and rhythmical characteristics also often lie behind Czech and Slovak translators' decisions to revise their older renditions – systematic theory and criticism of translation in these countries has, after all, largely been founded on theorists addressing the translation of poetry, such as the emblematic *The Art of Translation* by the Czech theorist Jiří Levý (1963, Eng. trans. 2011). Formal poetic attributes play an important role in how the renditions are received (the degree of importance, of course, depends on the current situation in the literary field) and since translators do aspire to be respected in their field, they take these quite seriously. Revisions they make to their translations therefore often concern the meter and rhyme. Eva Spišáková's discussion almost exclusively concentrates on lexical semantics and disregards other goals translators might have been striving for. An example of this is the author's discussion of the two versions of Jarmila Urbánková's translation of "Sonnet 105" (86–87). Spišáková mainly looks at the lexis, which, in some of the quoted fragments indeed does remove a clear hint at an undeniably erotic male-to-male relationship ("můj milý" when not used in address, but in third person can hardly be interpreted different than "my lover [masculine]"). In other places, though, one might rather think that the translator was attempting at strengthening the rhythmic impulse by inserting in the line a word that would without hesitation put the stress on the 8th syllable and support the iambic flow of the poem: Urbánková's first translation of the second line in "Sonnet 105" filled syllables eight and nine with "pro mne" [for me] – a preposition followed by a pronoun – which would put the stress on syllable eight, but with much lesser certainty than the two-syllable noun "přítel" [friend] she used in the newer version.

## DISCUSSION

In the light of shortcomings that can be found in the methodology employed in *Queering Translation History* and in the discussions of individual translators' choices, the main argumentative line of the volume – that the variations in the portrayal of the *Sonnets'* addressees observed in the 15 translations in the corpus spring from the emergence of the public discourse concerning queer desire – somewhat crumbles and urges the reader to ponder alternative interpretations of the data, especially when it comes to translations into Slovak. One of these would be the suggestion to look for reasons specific to the sociology of translation. Two observations spring to mind

in this respect: (1) under stable conditions, a translator's transgression of expectancy norms (Chesterman 1993) may threaten his or her position in the field, and (2) the perceived status of the source text in the target culture to a great degree determines strategies of translation.

Translating Shakespeare during state socialism in Czechoslovakia was a representative act, a bringing over to the culture a highly-regarded classic. The translation of this kind of text required treating the original with a certain reverence. At the same time, the lack of freedom in the public sphere in 1948–1989 Czechoslovakia discouraged non-normative behavior and experimentation (with the exception of the 1960s and late 1980s) – and this to a great extent applied to the sphere of translation as well. With respect to the translations of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* and the genders of the lyric personas outlined in them, the norms, it seems, were laid out by the first few Czech renditions. The transgressive translational choices identified by Spišiaková's quantitative research in post-1989 translations therefore might have just as much to do with the dynamics of the translational field – which in the past thirty years not only allows for novelty and transgression, but under neoliberal capitalist conditions encourages it – as with the discussions pertaining to non-heterosexual erotic relationships. Lubomír Feldek's Slovak post-1989 translation – with regards to the gender of the addressees – to a great degree follows the traditional approaches towards translating Shakespeare. Translated poetry in Slovakia in the past decades has been an extremely marginal and unprofitable genre attracting very few young translator-poets and very slim audiences. While no less than six Czech translators published their attempts at the *Sonnets* after the Velvet Revolution, there was just one such in Slovakia. After the aesthetically deficient and (already at the time of their publication) dated Slovak translations by Stanislav Blaho and Anna Sedlačková, Lubomír Feldek (born in 1936 and working half of his professional life under the conditions of state socialism) most probably aimed at providing the Slovak culture with a translation that would last a few decades and a translation that would satisfy both the specialized and general readership.

## CONCLUSIONS

Every research methodology has its shortcomings and an overly-ambitious topic can sometimes overwhelm the author. This has happened to many of us during the writing of our doctoral dissertations – and Eva Spišiaková's *Queering Translation History* is no exception. However, the painful discovery of the vastness of the unknown that is revealed in research should not result in resignation that leads to getting basic facts wrong, neglecting a thorough research of the literature, making inadequate generalizations, and choosing to consider only part of the phenomena in order to make the object fit the hypothesis. If that happens, making the research public does more harm than good. All this said, it is obvious that the author has tried hard to unite various contexts and did conduct extensive research into many of the areas pertaining to her topic. Also, on comparing her doctoral thesis (2018) with the published volume, it is obvious that Spišiaková revised the text extensively before she allowed it to enter wider discussions. However, it is not only – or perhaps not even primarily – the author that is to blame. The problem seems to have started

with the tutors and reviewers of the thesis who did not consider consulting areas of research with which they were not sufficiently familiar, and continued with inadequate support and guidance from the series editors and other actors affiliated with the publishing house – a publisher which enjoys international acclaim, and as such lends considerable symbolic capital to its authors and products.

In her concluding remarks, Eva Spišiaková asserts that her “results also further emphasise the need to recognise the singular position of Central European countries of the former Eastern Bloc and challenge a simplified binary categorisation of power relations along the lines of the colonial and the colonised” (2021, 103) and expresses the hope that her work will “contribute to a heightened visibility of this frequently neglected area of translation studies and fill some of the blank spaces in Czechoslovakia’s literary history” (103). Unfortunately, due to its neglect of relevant sources, lack of erudition regarding the linguistic, literary, historical and sociological contexts, and only superficial knowledge of phenomena pertaining to theories provided by translation and interpreting studies during the past half century, *Queering Translation History* perpetuates the divide rather than fills the gaps. All in all, while with the growing quantity of academic publications, a considerable amount of current research is dull, uninspired, and/or capitalizing on superficial passing trends, there also seems to be a lack of care when it comes to respecting basic research procedures.

A queer perspective, as can be very well seen in works like Brian James Baer’s (2020), is a deeply ethical perspective that argues for a high degree of self-reflexivity, honesty and a dismissal of what Flaubert would call *idées reçues* – received ideas. An application of queer theory to the study of information flows and power structures, pertaining to such spaces as the Slovak one, requires accessing the culture and its knowledge with sufficient complexity and nuance, but also shedding the protective, paternalistic, and patronizing lens through which the artefacts, events and texts are viewed. This in turn presupposes a reciprocal rejection of the perpetuated role of the (international) victim on the part of the agents positioned within the culture, which should instead strive for a more concentrated, open and critical mobilization of internal resources based on collaborations grounded in mutual respect and a wish to learn – not on existing informal ties. Only in this way a culture like the Slovak one can create conditions for producing more high-quality research – which is often done *in spite of* the existing infrastructure, not thanks to it – that would also be beneficial for international researchers. Inspiring and rigorous work in translation studies and other fields in Slovakia does exist. Nevertheless, as volumes like *Queering Translation History* show, it is largely ignored even by actors that do have a certain degree of background in the Slovak culture, but who are institutionally (and education-wise) based outside of it. What seems to be happening is that both the international Anglophone academic sphere and agents active mainly within individual locales rely on these inter- or transnational actors to help facilitate an ethical informational exchange. However, as numerous cases show (and the book I discussed here is just an example), if we are to achieve that, a significantly more active engagement of all actors – national, international and transnational – is necessary.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In the original: “Detronizovali sme uznávané pravdy, / upaľovali prívržencov zaužívaného vkusu, / oficiálnosť sme vyhostili na galeje. // Naše priateľstvo bolo podozrivé, / pokladali nás za homosexuálov, nevediac, / že priateľ je jediná hodnota, pre ktorú / sa vtedy oplátilo žiť.” Unless stated otherwise, all translations from the Slovak are by the present author.
- <sup>2</sup> With regards to the use of pronouns, I adopted those used by authors themselves and/or those that have been used in paratextual materials in books they authored.
- <sup>3</sup> In the original “zvlažil [...] prvú knihu spermatickými slzami”.
- <sup>4</sup> After the Communist Party assumed power over Czechoslovakia in 1948, *nadrealisti* were very quick to discursively translate their previous subversive attitude so that it would fit with the ideology of the new regime.
- <sup>5</sup> A few scholars based in Slovakia have employed queer theory in their research of literature (cf. Csehy 2016, Demčišák 2015, 2017), but, to my knowledge, not in research of translations into Slovak.
- <sup>6</sup> As has been shown by a number of studies, translations published in totalitarian regimes often allow for greater freedom with regards to poetics, imagery and topics of works than original writing.
- <sup>7</sup> Although Slovak culture is an import-based one, the public also reads non-translated books in other languages and translations into other languages than Slovak (currently mainly in Czech and English) and most translations that come out are aimed at consumers looking for leisure reading (cf. Pliešovská and Popovcová Glowacký 2020). Translations of aesthetically more demanding books – especially when it comes to contemporary authors – depend on small or middle-sized presses which besides competing with the Czech translations, also have various agendas. However, the picture is not as bad as one might get from some of the English-language overviews of the situation. For example, Stephen Romer (2016, 551–552) in his chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, relying probably solely on information provided by a Scottish translator based in Slovakia, asserts that while “Sutherland-Smith (with his wife Viera) has translated some ninety Slovak poets into English (including seven book-length selections) and his own work has been published [...], aside from Matthew Sweeney, whom Sutherland-Smith invited out, and whose anecdotal, surreally tinged work appealed [...], there has been little by way of reciprocal ‘uptake’” However, as shown in an analysis of bibliographies, there have been many more translations and – when considering only translations published in the respective target countries – the number of volumes per capita is comparable (Hostová 2018, 46). However, considering the vast difference between the percentage of translations entering the market in a country like United Kingdom and in Slovakia, that points to the peculiar position which poetry as a cultural product “[r]eleased from the constraint to turn a profit” (Venuti 2011, 127) occupies within individual book markets.
- <sup>8</sup> For further discussion of iamb in Slovak see the section “The verse” in this article.
- <sup>9</sup> I only list a few recent sources on the topic here – the pages of Slovak periodicals in the latter half of the 20th century have seen numerous intense, fruitful and theoretically well-grounded debates on translation, including the translation of Shakespeare. It is, however, to be appreciated that the author of *Queering Translation History* does work with a monograph on Slovak translations of Shakespeare written by Ján Vilikovský (2014), a frequent participant of these debates, translation studies scholar and a prolific practicing literary translator active in the field since the late 1950s.
- <sup>10</sup> *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dear>. Accessed 20 Jan 2022.
- <sup>11</sup> *Krátky slovník slovenského jazyka* (Short dictionary of the Slovak language; Kačala, Pisárčiková and Považaj 2003), *Slovník súčasného slovenského jazyka M – N* (Dictionary of contemporary Slovak language M–N; Jarošová 2015; see [slovník.juls.savba.sk](http://slovník.juls.savba.sk)), *Slovník spisovného jazyka českého* (The dictionary of the literary Czech language; Havránek 1989).
- <sup>12</sup> In order not to diverge from my argumentative line, I abstain from any deeper discussion of the matter of form and content in poetry and from providing an overview of the rich research done with regards to these questions in Slovak translation studies in the past six or seven decades.

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## Queer perspectives in translation studies: Notes on two recent publications

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Queer theory. Translation studies. Peripheral knowledges. William Shakespeare.  
Translation into Slovak.

After outlining the opportunities offered by closely bringing together queer theory and translation studies for an engaged application of trans- or postdisciplinary research, as presented in Brian James Baer's *Queer Theory and Translation Studies* (2020), the article briefly discusses the structural reasons why queer theory has not been much applied to the study of Slovak translated or non-translated literature before the publication of Eva Spišiaková's *Queering Translation History. Shakespeare's Sonnets in Czech and Slovak Transformations* (2021). Subsequently, it provides a critical reading of Spišiaková's volume. The concluding remarks argue that a greater degree of cooperation between agents situated in various locales is necessary.

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Mgr. Ivana Hostová, PhD.  
Institute of Slovak Literature  
Slovak Academy of Sciences  
Dúbravská cesta 9  
841 04 Bratislava  
Slovak Republic  
[ivana.hostova@savba.sk](mailto:ivana.hostova@savba.sk)  
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0901-3759>