

Publishing poetry in translation in Slovakia 2013–2023

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Translated poetry. Publishing practices. Small poetry presses. Survey of translations in Slovakia. Survey of translations 2013–2023.

Poetry's peripheral position in translation affects the book market by leaving its production to small and non-profit presses that compensate for their economic loss with state and cultural subsidies. This has been the reality in Slovakia during the last decade (2013–2023), with most poetry translations published by small semi-professional presses headed by single managers who, in most cases, happen to be authors, poets, and poetry translators themselves. In the period under review, 158 poetry translations were published by 24 presses, four of which published 88 of the collections (55.7%). The most prolific publishers include three presses run by poets – FACE (run by Ján Gavura), Skalná ruža (Juraj Kuniak), and Modrý Peter (Peter Milčák) – while the fourth press is Vydavateľstvo Spolku slovenských spisovateľov (VSSS), the publishing house of the Slovak Writers' Society. Each press has a specific policy of selection for publishing, with the diversity of poets being one of the main criteria, and translators' input being another. Unlike other genres of translation, the English language is not as dominant in the portfolio of the four most prolific presses, followed by Serbian and Polish. A semi-peripheral language position is held by Spanish, German, Hungarian, Norwegian, and Slovenian, but there are also translations from other 13 languages.

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In *Translation Changes Everything*, Lawrence Venuti remarks that “[t]oday poetry may well be the least translated literary genre” that comprises “a tiny fraction of total annual [poetry] output hovering at 5–8%” (2013, 173). He then supports his observation with a brief statistical overview: in 2009, the percentage of translated poetry out of the total number of poetry books published was 5.2% in the US, though slightly higher in Slovenia (11%) and Italy (13.77%) (173). Translated poetry is undoubtedly a marginal matter, and it can hardly be otherwise if non-translated poetry nowadays only meets with limited interest from readers. For Slovak literature, this is hinted at by a brief look at the number of book reviews published over the last ten years in the magazine *Knižná revue* (Book revue)¹: on average out of 120 reviews per year, only ten are of poetry and just two or three of poetry in translation, i.e. less than 3%. *Knižná revue* is a valuable source of information as it considers all genres of new and recent books (fiction and non-fiction, art and commercial), mirroring the current status and tendencies in publishing. Its extensive review section is a relevant indicator of readers’ preferences as perceived by the magazine editors. Statistically, it shows that most reviews are of translated fiction and non-fiction books, followed by fiction written in Slovak, children’s literature, and Slovak poetry. In the ten years of 2013–2023, there were years when there were no reviews of translated poetry volumes (e.g. 2023) and other years with a maximum of four reviews (2013), with usually two or three reviews in other years including in the present research.

From the translation point of view, it is decisive for Slovakia that on the core-periphery scale (Heilbron 1999), Slovak is one of the peripheral languages (Hostová 2023, 160) and the natural flow is from the major languages to Slovak. In absolute numbers, this means that translations currently account for almost a third (to be exact 2,655 publications and 32.2%) of all publications printed in Slovak (Ministerstvo kultúry SR 2024).

The quantitative indicators confirm that poetry is a marginal genre and that translated poetry represents the periphery of the periphery in the book market. Yet, despite the obvious unprofitability of creating, translating, and publishing verse, it has not died out. Poetry still possesses a significant amount of symbolic capital as “any property (any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social) when it is perceived by social agents endowed with categories of perception which cause them to know it and to recognize it, to give it value” (Bourdieu 1998, 47). This can be seen in the lists of winners of prestigious international or national literature prizes, the Nobel Prize for Literature or the Pulitzer Prize, which include fiction writers and poets. Poetry finds itself in a permanently ambivalent position, marginal but at the same time appreciated by a small but highly specialized community of culturally and academically active audiences.

METHODOLOGY PREVIEW

Research on the production and distribution of translated poetry addresses the book publishing industry’s sociological, economic, and cultural aspects. In this article, drawing mostly on interviews and quantitative methods, as well as

personal correspondence and archival materials, I wish to contribute to the knowledge of the contemporary landscape of publishing poetry in Slovakia, with a focus on the decade 2013–2023. This decade was chosen for three main reasons: it provides a sufficiently long interval for conducting a quantitative analysis reflecting current trends; secondly, it deals with contemporary movement, enabling us to outline predictions for the near future. However, the most important reason is the fact that two significant poetry-related events occurred in Slovak culture in 2013. That year, a special poetry series “Poézia” (Poetry) was established by the press Skalná ruža, which boosted the publishing of original and translated poetry. The series opened with a selection from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* (in Slovak *Spev o mne* – “Song of Myself”), and the press became one of Slovakia’s leading poetry publishers over the following decade. Also in 2013, the first Slovak journal devoted specifically to poetry, *Vertigo – časopis o poézii a básnikoch* (Vertigo – a journal of poetry and poets), was founded.

In the further analysis, I include books of poetry translations published from 2013 to 2023 that were listed in Slovak distribution (databases of distributors and booksellers), in the National Library catalogue as well as in the journal *Knižná revue*’s “Nové knihy” (New books) section.² From the assembled list, I excluded reprints of earlier publications, books for children and young adults, books aimed at other than the general public (e.g. theaters, festivals, and books published for research purposes), online editions, and amateur books.³ In cases where it was unclear whether the texts should be seen as poetry or poetry for adult readers, other aspects were considered (artistic intention being the most important). The number of published poetry translations in the following period was 158 books published by 24 presses. The article does not take into account the aesthetic quality or the level of translation, which would require a different approach and methodology. The following section will present a detailed quantitative survey of publishing houses and their contribution to the publication of translated poetry.

POETRY PUBLISHERS IN SLOVAKIA 2013–2023: QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

As mentioned above, poetry publishing is peripheral in almost all countries, Slovakia being no exception. With regard to publishers, the situation here is not very different from how Venuti describes it in the USA: “In the United States, most poetry translations are issued by small and university presses, limiting their print run and distribution and making many of them ephemeral publications” (2013, 174). The status of “ephemeral”, i.e. less visible and with limited impact on readers, is confirmed by reviewers and the media, who prioritize fiction and if they focus on poetry then on poetry originally written in the native language. Nevertheless, poetry – also in translation – still attracts translators, authors, and publishers who invest large amounts of energy into its creation and circulation.

The change of political regime in 1989 led to the collapse of the central planning of book production, which was based on the previous ideological preferences (ties to the Soviet Union and other socialist countries) with restrictions on both business

and freedom of speech. Immediately after the end of socialism, small presses began to emerge that first published original Slovak poetry and prose, followed by translated literature. Each of these small publishing houses was specific to a particular field of literature (contemporary Slovak fiction, poetry, children's books), with poetry presses singled out from the newly formed group of independent and commercial, i.e. not state-run publishers (Gavura 2019).

The 1990s, often referred to as “the transition period”, was a decade in which previous large publishing houses were privatized and transformed into joint stock or limited liability companies:

The decisive influence on the production of quality books in the field of contemporary Slovak poetry and prose has been acquired by small, often more specialized, publishing houses while larger publishing houses (e.g. Slovart, Ikar) or those with a long cultural tradition (Tatran, Slovenský spisovateľ) are less involved in the field of artistic production. (Passia and Taranenková 2014, 28)⁴

Companies with publishing activities rely either on state funding (non-commercial basis) or on economic profit generated by sales. All large publishers operate on the latter system and have only a limited space for less profitable projects that sometimes include translated poetry. The exceptions, mentioned later in the article, are selected with regards to potential commercial profitability, to widening their portfolio (satisfying divergent groups of customers) and, occasionally, as an aspiration to higher aesthetic achievements.

In the first half of the 1990s, five small poetry presses which also put out translations were established: *Skálná ruža* (August 1990), *Modrý Peter* (August 1991), *F.R.&G.* (August 1992), *Solitudo* (November 1992) and *Drewo a srd* (1994). Only three of these five publishers were active in publishing poetry during 2013–2023 with two publishing poetry in translation, *Skálná ruža* (published 21 volumes) and *Modrý Peter* (16 volumes). Alongside these two publishers, two other presses began publishing poetry in translation and, when compared numerically, outperformed them in the decade under review. As can be observed from Table 1 and Table 2, a significant contribution was made by the newly established press *FACE, Fórum alternatívnej kultúry a vzdelávania* (Forum of alternative culture and education, 29 volumes) and *Vydavateľstvo Spolku slovenských spisovateľov* (The publishing house of the Slovak writers' society, *VSSS*) with 22 volumes.

The publishers of translated poetry can be divided into three categories according to frequency (Table 2), which shows that four presses cover more than half of the total production (55.7%, 88 volumes altogether). Three of the four presses fall into the category of small publishing houses run by poets: *Skálná ruža*, run by Juraj Kuniak, *Modrý Peter*, run by Peter Milčák, and *FACE*, run by Ján Gavura. The fourth press, *VSSS*, is the publishing house of *Spolok slovenských spisovateľov* (Slovak writers' society), one of several associations of writers in Slovakia, with more than 400 members (www.spolok-slovenskych-spisovatelov.sk).

Publisher	Number of published volumes	Percentage from total volumes published in 2013–2023
FACE	29	18.35%
VSSS	22	13.92%
Skalná ruža	21	13.29%
Modrý Peter	16	10.13%
Perfekt	10	6.33%
Drewo a srd	8	5.06%
Literárna nadácia Studňa	7	4.43%
Ars Poetica	6	3.79%
MilaniuM	6	3.79%
Ikar	6	3.79%
Slovart	4	2.53%
Lindení	4	2.53%
Pectus	3	1.9%
Literárna bašta	2	1.26%
Fraktál	2	1.26%
Asociácia Corpus	2	1.26%
<i>publishers with only 1 volume</i>	10	6.33%
Total	158	100%

Table 1: The list of translated poetry publishers and their production share from all volumes of translated poetry

Publisher	Frequently (15+)	Occasionally (6–10)	Rarely (1–5)	Total number
Number of presses	4	6	14	24
Number of volumes combined	88	43	27	158
Percentage of total number of volumes	55,7%	27.2%	17.01%	100%

Table 2: Frequency of publishing by the presses, 2013–2023

MOST PROLIFIC POETRY PUBLISHERS IN SLOVAKIA 2013–2023: FOUR CASE STUDIES

As stated above, the four most active publishers of poetry in Slovak translation include three presses run by poets: FACE, Skalná ruža, and Modrý Peter, while the fourth press, VSSS, is the publishing house of the Slovak writers' society. The three small publishers operate as civic associations with the status of a legal entity but, like a non-profit organization, have concessions in how they operate. They are headed by a single manager who represents the publishing house in its business dealings and guarantees the content of the publishing activity. Significantly and crucially, these managers are themselves authors, poets, and poetry translators.

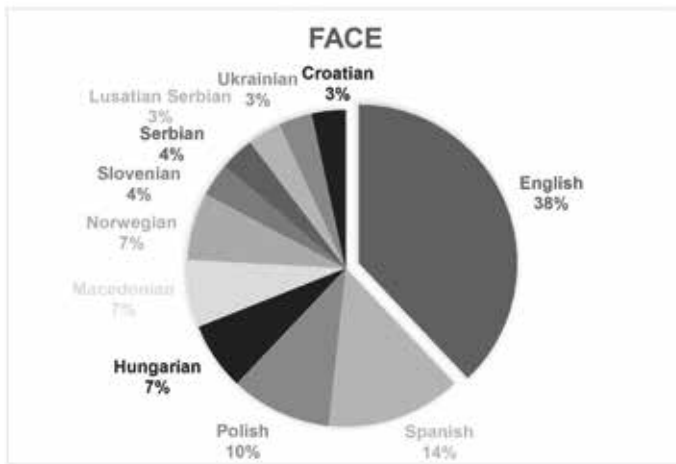
Publisher	Number of volumes	Number of translators	Number of languages	Most frequent language
FACE	29	20	11	English (38%)
VSSS	22	12	8	Serbian (63.6%)
Skalná ruža	21	18	10	English (42.9%)
Modrý Peter	16	10	9	Polish (31.3%)

Table 3: Most prolific publishers of poetry in Slovak translation 2013–2023, number of volumes, translators, and languages

FACE is headed by the present author – poet, translator, and literary critic Ján Gavura (1975) and was founded as an organization with a university background, with its portfolio of art and academic publications related to education. It is associated with experts from universities and research institutes and, with their input, produces publications in Slovak literature, translation, books for children, and scholarly monographs on literature. It has two book series, which publish equally original and translated literature, mainly poetry, and a special edition of pamphlets (“*Veršeonline*”), which are published and distributed together with the journal on poetry and poets *Vertigo*. The press published 29 volumes in the decade under discussion: 12 full-length books and 17 pamphlets.⁵ Table 4 and Graph 1 show that 11 languages with 20 different translators confirm scouting aims and diversity as the primary goal of the press. The diversity is also applied in Anglophone literature, though the statistics partly distort this fact; the authors come from England (1), Scotland (3), Canada (1), the USA (1), Palestine (1), and in one case a British resident in Slovakia (1). These 11 poets are translated from English by seven different individual translators or translation teams.⁶

Language	Number of volumes	Number of translators
English	11	7
Spanish	4	2
Polish	3	2
Hungarian	2	2
Macedonian	2	2
Norwegian	2	1
Slovenian	1	1
Serbian	1	1
Lusatian Serbian	1	1
Ukrainian	1	1
Croatian	1	1
Total	29	21

Table 4: FACE – number of languages and translators



Graph 1: FACE – proportion and percentage of languages

The second most prolific publisher on the list is the VSSS, which produced 22 translated poetry collections between 2013 and 2023. The Slovak Writers' Society has seen itself as a continuation of the writers' organization operating during state socialism, a position it adopted in the early 1990s:

[The Slovak Writers' Society] pressured other writers' associations to push for solutions that would be in its favor. At the same time, it was inclined towards initiatives that entered the political life of the early 1990s with various demands falling under the so-called national agenda. [...] The Slovak Writers' Society derived its claims of protectionism and favoritism from the new ruling party, the populist authoritarian Movement for a Democratic Slovakia, from its role in the establishment and resolution of the national agenda within the framework of the common Czech-Slovak state [...]. As the largest writers' organization, from the beginning of the 1990s, it significantly contributed to the fact that Slovak literary culture in the 1990s was characterized by several elements that were transferred into it from the practices of the political field. (Šrank 2015, 17)

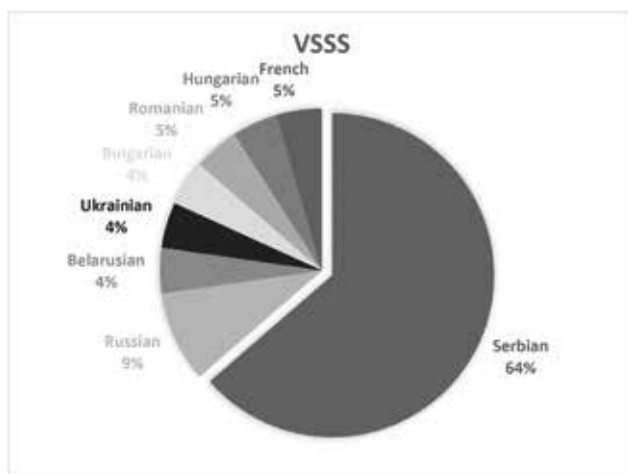
The Slovak Writers' Society has always been seeking connection and cooperation with political parties using nationalism and common ideological views for their benefit. As cultural bodies, journals, and literature publishers have traditionally depended on state subsidies, political parties used the grant system to eliminate their ideological opponents and favor allied writers and organizations. This was apparent mainly in the 1990s during the three governments of Vladimír Mečiar, whose "very name became associated with corruption and economic stagnation" (Kellman 2024), a man who was one of the earliest prototypes of post-communist populist and authoritarian prime ministers, whose main concern was to be re-elected and kept in power and even altered the Slovak electoral system in his favor (Birch et al. 2002, 75–79). The practice of undermining the fairness of grant systems returned in 2023 when the Ministry of Culture was taken over by the Slovak National Party, which is now systematically changing all media, cultural and artistic institutions in order to control the content and financial operations. In 2024, the most pressing problems have been the takeover of Slovak public television by pro-government factions and the distortion of the objectivity of the Slovak Arts Council's decision-making. Expert committees have become only advisory bodies: the decision-making process is now in the hands of the council's highly-politicized board creating room for non-transparent decision processes.

Regarding the period under discussion here and the corpus of translated poetry, it is significant that VSSS publishes only the writing and translations of the members of the association that runs it. In contrast, other presses are (virtually) open to all authors and translators who send manuscripts or suggest a project. Even though the Society is the largest organization of Slovak writers and translators, it does not represent the full spectrum of poetic approaches but rather national-oriented, conservative, and traditional literary works (Šrank 2015, 16–19). Its language stratification and selection of translated poets began before the fall of state socialism in 1989. With one exception (French), all source languages of its translations are of former socialist countries (Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Bulgarian, Romanian, and Hungarian), and the selected authors are often classics (e.g. Alexander Blok, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Jean Arthur Rimbaud, or the Belarusian Janka Kupala). The high number of translations from Serbian (14 volumes, 64% of all poetry translations published by the VSSS) is a consequence of the involvement of translators from the Slovak diaspora in the Serbian region of Vojvodina. The 14 volumes were translated by three Slovaks from this diaspora: Miroslav Demák (1948), Zdenka Valentová-Belić (1975),

and Martin Prebudila (1960). As Table 5 and Graph 2 show, the publishing schedule of VSSS is asymmetrical and reflects the intentions and abilities of the Society members rather than diversity. The positive effect of this is that Slovak audiences can get to know much of contemporary Serbian poetry; conversely, from the readers' perspective, the one-sided VSSS production does not sufficiently support other cultures.

Language	Number of volumes	Number of translators
Serbian	14	3
Russian	2	2
Belarusian	1	1
Ukrainian	1	1
Bulgarian	1	1
Romanian	1	1
Hungarian	1	1
French	1	1
Total	22	11

Table 5: Vydavateľstvo Spolku slovenských spisovateľov – number of languages and translators

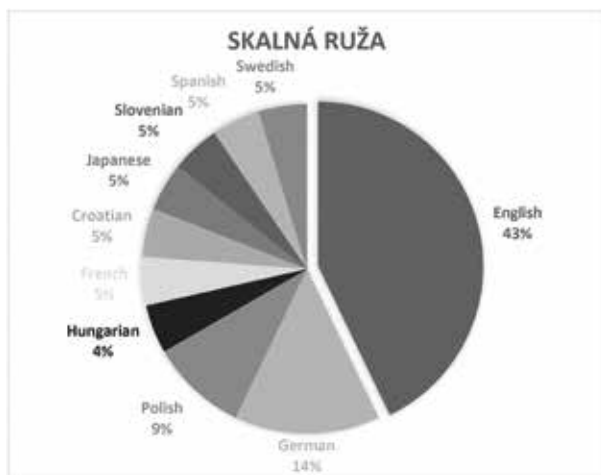


Graph 2: Vydavateľstvo Spolku slovenských spisovateľov – proportion and percentage of languages

The small press *Skalná ruža* is headed by Juraj Kuniak (1955), who in 2013 started the *Poézia* (Poetry) series, which over the following years became a highly regarded series of its kind in Slovakia. Since 2013, it has published 38 volumes, half of which are translations. The books have a distinctive, rather luxurious design – hardback and clothbound – and the selection of authors follows strict criteria set when the series was founded. The decision-making involves three associates of *Skalná ruža*; besides the poet and translator Kuniak, they are Erik Jakub Groch (1957) and Rudolf Jurolek (1956), both distinguished Slovak poets and former publishers. A book gets included in the edition only if all three give their consent. If the consensus is not reached, the press places the book in the less prominent series (*Solitudo*) or excludes it from its publishing plan. Table 6 and Graph 3 show that *Skalná ruža* has published translations from ten languages, and has collaborated with 18 translators. Though Anglophone literature is dominant (43%), nine other source languages are used. The variety of English language and realia is preserved by translating classics (Walt Whitman, James Wright, and Ted Hughes), recent prize winners (Louise Glück, Robert Hass) and famous contemporary poets (Alice Oswald, Donna Stonecipher, and Ilya Kaminsky).

Language	Number of volumes	Number of translators
English	9	6
German	3	3
Polish	2	2
Hungarian	1	1
French	1	1
Croatian	1	1
Japanese	1	1
Slovenian	1	1
Spanish	1	1
Swedish	1	1
Total	21	18

Table 6: *Skalná ruža* – number of languages and translators

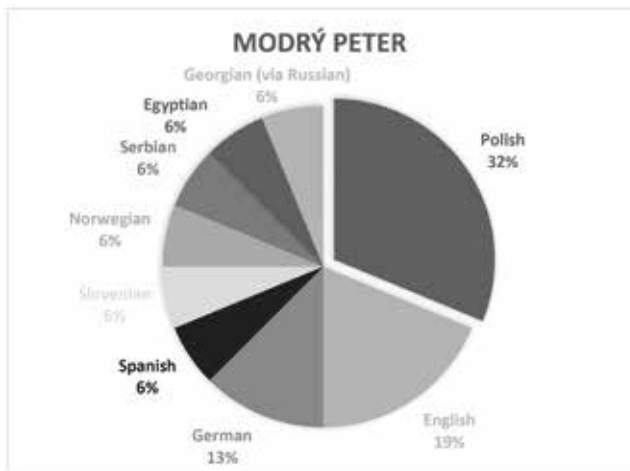


Graph 3: Skalná ruža – number of languages and translators

The publishing house Modrý Peter is headed by Peter Milčák (1966), a poet, translator, and literary scholar, who for most of his career has worked as a Slovak language instructor at universities abroad (Poland and Belarus) as well as a publisher in Canada (1999–2002). The central edition of the publishing house is “Mušľa” (Seashell), which publishes Slovak authors (almost 70 volumes to the present); it also pays great attention to the presentation of Slovak literature abroad, especially poetry. In the first half of the 1990s, it produced several anthologies introducing Slovak poetry in English, German, French, Polish, and Belarusian (*Not Waiting for Miracles*, 1993; *Blauer Berg mit Höhle* [Blue mountain with a cave], 1994; *Les jeux charmants de l'aristocratie* [The charming games of aristocracy], 1996; *Pisanie* [Writing], 2006; *Paljemika z aptymizmam* [A polemic with optimism], 2015). The press publishes poetry in translation in a series titled “Súčasná svetová poézia” (Contemporary world poetry), but also publishes translated poetry outside this series, including canonical works of John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (2020) and *Paradise Regained. Samson Agonistes* (2022), the poetry of Gary Snyder, *Stretnutie s horami* (Encounter with mountains, 2023), and ancient Egyptian poetry, *V severnom vetre čítaš správy ďaleké: staroegyptská ľúbostná poézia* (In the north wind you read messages from afar: ancient Egyptian love poetry, 2023). Unlike the managers of FACE and Skalná ruža, Peter Milčák is more involved as a translator in his press; all five Polish translations were done by him, and all English translations by his close friend and co-editor of the press, Marián Andričík.⁷ As shown in Table 7 and Graph 4, the publishing house also scouts for new and unknown poetic areas, old Egyptian and Georgian (via Russian) being the most exotic for Slovak audiences.

Language	Number of volumes	Number of translators
Polish	5	1
English	3	1
German	2	2
Spanish	1	1
Slovenian	1	1
Norwegian	1	1
Serbian	1	1
Egyptian	1	1
Georgian (via Russian)	1	1

Table 7: Modrý Peter – number of languages and translators



Graph 4: Modrý Peter – proportion and percentage of languages

As can be seen from the brief outline, all four of the most prolific publishers of translated poetry reflect the editorial board's aesthetic, ideological, and linguistic preferences. The publishers run by poets are rather tightly connected with the interests of their managers, which is partly reflected in their book portfolio. For example, Juraj Kuniak, a former active alpinist and rock climber, has produced numerous publications on mountaineering at Skalná Ruža, as well as publications involving the author himself and people in his immediate circle. The manager of Modrý Peter, Peter

Milčák, has been working most of his life as a lecturer of Slovak language and culture at foreign universities and has therefore put a lot of effort into publishing anthologies of Slovak literature in translation. He has spent the longest time in Poland, and it is from this literature that he has published the largest number of poetry translations. The manager of FACE also takes into account to a great extent the connection of the publishing house with the university environment; the translators are usually university teachers or students of translation programs, and the needs of universities in terms of awareness-raising are also taken into account. An important link is the quarterly *Vertigo*, which opens further possibilities for presenting literature, especially poetry, with information on important figures in literature and translation (interviews, insights into forthcoming manuscripts, thematic blocks, or reviews). The press manager is also a translator from English, and between 2013–2023, he translated five books (one in co-operation).

THE SELECTION STRATEGY OF THE PRESSES RUN BY POETS

The selection process for the annual publishing schedule by all three small presses that are run by poets pursues primarily the same goal: “a strategy of complementing and confirming the domestic literary tradition” (Kaplická Yakimova 2015, 101). In doing so, they deal with two groups of authors: on the one hand, world-renowned canonical authors with whom the recipients in the target culture are familiar; on the other, unknown or lesser-known authors who may or may not already have a central position in their home tradition, but who primarily “complement” or otherwise interact with the target culture.

These two categories (renowned vs. unknown) are also adapted to the method of publication (hardcover – paperback – pamphlet), the inclusion of an afterword, explanatory notes, and promotion (to avoid “ephemerality”), which has proven to be much more challenging with foreign authors or long dead classics. The most prestigious of these editions, *Poézia* (Skalná ruža) included canonical authors from various national literatures (Walt Whitman, Louise Glück, Ted Hughes, Czesław Miłosz, Octavio Paz or Basho), as well as contemporary authors who occupy a prominent place in their national literatures, but whose canonical place is still in the making, and are relatively new to Slovak readers (e.g. Dorta Jagić, Barbara Korun, Robert Hass).

A different approach towards selection and presentation is provided by the “*Veršeonline*” pamphlets which since 2006 include 55 volumes, 23 in Slovak, and 32 translations. The history of the pamphlet edition has two stages: between 2006 and 2012, when they were sold separately, and since 2013 when they became a book supplement to the journal *Vertigo*. The editions “*Poézia*” and “*Veršeonline*” have a joint founder – the poet and book designer Erik Jakub Groch. He created not only the concept of the former, the prestigious poetry series, but also the latter, an edition designed for scouting contemporary literature, a risk-free, “pocket” edition, a literary chapbook with a nominal price (1.00€), which was intended to help readers discover new authors and poetics. The *Veršeonline* series was launched at the end of 2006. Its publication was discontinued after 20 volumes following cancellation of the subsidy from the Ministry of Culture with pamphlet-size publications no longer being con-

sidered “books” because of their size. Despite the edition’s popularity, the ministry could not, in its bureaucratic rigidity, find a way to support the idea. Publication was resumed with the foundation of *Vertigo* magazine in 2013, and the pamphlets were published as supplements.

Both strategies – publishing canonical works and literary scouting of unknown authors – are also used by Modrý Peter, whose edition of world poetry mostly presents authors familiar in Slovakia only to specialists in the given national literature and to a lesser extent authors who have become well-known in the course of their publication and presentation (such as the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Jon Fosse). The books in this series are published as paperbacks and without paratexts such as forewords or translator’s notes, focusing primarily on the direct aesthetic experience. In addition, Modrý Peter also publishes books by canonical authors, which have a different format (hardcover, extensive notes on the work, the author, and the method of translation). Of these books, John Milton’s pair of books stand out in particular. The translation also received a proper response in society, which was reflected not only in the sales of the work but also in the winning of several awards for Modrý Peter and the translator and long-time co-editor Marián Andričík – the Krišťálové krídlo (The crystal wing) prize for prominent Slovak personalities in the field of science, culture, philanthropy and sport (2020) and the Ján Hollý Award for the most notable literary translation of the year (2020, 2022). The extraordinary resonance of Milton’s canonical works reflects both the rarity and scarcity of publications of this type and the fact that their preparation rests on the shoulders of individual translators and publishers. The following section provides more details on how awarding literary prizes affects the sale of poetry translations and how poetry presses try to navigate through the complex relationships of book production and preparation of publishing schedules.

READERSHIP AND SALES

In the period 2013–2023, among the authors whose poetry was published in Slovakia, two, Jon Fosse and Louise Glück, won the Nobel Prize, which influenced the sales of the books. Kuniak, the manager of Skalná ruža, shares his experience with how this fact affected the demand:

An exceptional example is Louise Glück, who was utterly unknown in Slovakia at the time of publication. From 2017 to October 2020, only about 60 copies of her book *Village Life* were sold. However, on 12 October 2020, the media released the news that she had won the Nobel Prize, and by 30 October, it had sold out. I took a chance and ordered a reprint from the printers as early as October 13, and by St. Nicholas’ Day in December 2020, Glück’s book was on sale again. This was a successful “action” because the sale was not interrupted. But trees don’t grow into the sky even in such a case. Slovak capacities limit sales. A reprint of 400 copies is still being sold today, it will probably be sold out in 2024. (Kuniak and Gavura 2024)⁸

The example of Glück’s award shows a significant difference between mere personal inclination towards the poet – the reason why she was chosen for translation – and the commercial impact or motivation which increased the number of readers

of translated poetry several times thanks to those who are not ordinarily interested in this type of literature (Kaplická Yakimova 2015; Palková 2024). However, other literary prizes (primarily national, like Magnesia Litera in the Czech Republic, Nike in Poland, or even the Pulitzer Prize in the USA) have little positive economic effect on the Slovak book market. As Kuniak states, from 2017 to 2020, only 60 copies of Glück's book were sold, although the author had won numerous awards, including the Pulitzer Prize for poetry (1993) and National Book Award for poetry (2014), and she was a United States Poet Laureate (2003–2004). Only the Nobel Prize, it seems, can make translated poetry appeal to the general public in Slovakia, making winners of it the safest publishing option for having both great literary value and the least risk of economic loss. A more detailed Table 8 suggests that besides the Nobel Prize, publishers can count on possible commercial attraction of modern classics though with less immediate selling power as the annual winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature.⁹

Author	Volume	Year of publishing	Number of copies	Status
Walt Whitman	<i>Spev o mne</i> (orig. <i>Song of Myself</i>)	2013, 2019	1000	sold out immediately
Basho	<i>Haiku</i>	2019	500	sold out within 2 years
Octavio Paz	<i>Každodenný oheň</i> (orig. <i>El Fuego de Cada Día</i> [Everyday fire])	2017	500	sold out within 5 years
Czesław Miłosz	<i>To</i> (orig. <i>To [This]</i>)	2014	400	sold out within 8 years
Robert Hass	<i>Čas a materiály</i> (orig. <i>Time and Materials</i>)	2019	500	last copies available

Table 8: Bestselling volumes of edition “Poézia” (Skalná ruža) (Kuniak and Gavura 2024)

Although the managers and directors of the small presses run by poets have the final say in the poet's choice to be translated, it is never just one person's decision. This decision is usually crucial when the question of execution is considered, i.e. whether the press can publish the work in question and whether the time and financial resources are available in the first place. As already mentioned, publishing houses in Slovakia apply for support from the state-funded Slovak Arts Council, where applications are assessed by a 5–7-member expert committee which determines not only the amount of funds allocated but also which works from the submitted editorial plan it recommends and which it does not.

DIVERSITY AND VOLATILITY OF TRANSLATION POETRY PRODUCTION

The exceptional challenges of translated poetry are precisely mirrored in the state of publishing and the conditions under which it operates. The genre thrives on the dedication and efforts of a small group of people, usually authors, who value poetry to such an extent that they devote their time to expanding the quantity and quality of poetry, both native and translated.

Venuti identifies one of the few benefits of such a peripheral situation of translated poetry: “Released from the constraint to turn a profit, poetry translation is more likely to encourage experimental strategies that can reveal what is unique about translation as a linguistic and cultural practice” (2013, 174). However, translation in translated poetry is not the only unique aspect or practice. The limited number of participants (translators, readers, publishers, etc.) makes the whole production chain more dynamic and volatile. Shifts such as introducing a new poetry series (Skalná ruža, FACE), systematic overproduction from one language (VSSS), a change in publishing focus (e.g. *Drewo a srd*), deliberate or involuntary production hiatus (e.g. Modrý Peter’s three-year pause 2015–2017 from publishing poetry translations) result in an acceleration or decrease of variety or quantity of volumes. Another effect is multiplicity of roles at all levels; frequently, the translators work as editors, proofreaders and experts who write epilogues (like in the “Poézia” series by Skalná ruža), or they are involved in the post-production phase as reviewers, book presenters, etc. The poetry readers, publishers and other actors constitute a community that functions efficiently but has limited reach beyond its borders. Exceptions could be either rare publications, e.g. John Milton’s biblical epics, Leonard Cohen’s poetry testament *The Flame* (translated in 2020 as *Plameň* by Ján Gavura, FACE) or Nobel Prize awards.

Data from Table 4 and Table 6 show that Skalná ruža and FACE build primarily on diversity of languages and translators. Both presses have published translations from ten and 11 languages, including rare ones like Lusatian Serbian and Japanese, though even French has become scarce since 1989 (Palková 2024). Tables 4 and 6 also reveal that the two publishers have the lowest ratio of translators per volume (1.16 for Skalná ruža, 1.38 for FACE), which suggests that both presses have less or no preferences for translators for a particular language. The ratio of Modrý Peter (1.6) and VSSS (2.0) is higher, proving that for some languages, the presses prefer particular translators. For Modrý Peter, all five Polish translations were carried out by Peter Milčák, and three English by Marián Andričík; for VSSS, the 14 Serbian translations were done by three translators: five by Miroslav Demák, three by Martin Prebudila and three by Zdenka Valentová-Beličová, and the remaining three as collaborations by the translators mentioned earlier (in one case with the help of Anna Vršková). It also means that in the latter case, the publishing schedule is determined by the translators’ offer and not solely by the manager’s decisions or, in Skalná ruža’s case, the editorial trio.

As the data from Table 9 show, selected books do not copy general trends in translated literature. Drawing on Johan Heilbron (1999), three stages of central-(semi)

periphery positioning of languages and cultures quite distinct from global tendencies can be observed.

Position	Central position (+10%)	Semiperipheral position (3–10%)	Peripheral position (1–3%)
Languages	English (26.13%)	Spanish (6.8%)	Macedonian (2.27%)
	Serbian (18.18%)	German (5.68%)	Ukrainian (2.27%)
	Polish (11.36%)	Hungarian (4.5%)	Croatian (2.27%)
		Norwegian (3.4%)	Russian (2.27%)
		Slovenian (3.4%)	French (2.27%)
			Lusatian Serbian (1.14%)
			Belarusian (1.14%)
			Bulgarian (1.14%)
			Romanian (1.14%)
			Japanese (1.14%)
			Swedish (1.14%)
			Egyptian (1.14%)
			Georgian (via Russian) (1.14%)
Totally out of 100%	55.67%	23.78%	20.47%

Table 9: The position and share of published translations languages of the four prolific presses (FACE, VSSS, Skalná ruža, Modrý Peter)

Comparison with data on all genres of published literary translations for 2013, as presented in Pliešovská and Popovcová Głowacký (2020, 104), shows that the source languages for translated poetry are radically different. While for all translated literary texts, the majority of which is commercial fiction, the primary source language is by far English, with almost 80% of translations being of US American or British literature, poetry translations from English form only just over a quarter of the volumes produced in 2013–2023 (26.13 %). English is the most translated language globally, and with 50–70% of translations on the European continent in the late 20th century being translations from English (Heilbron 1999, 434), the relatively small number of poetry translations by the four presses under discussion here points to a significant curatorial input springing from intense agency and personal and group involvement in the matter – a movement against the dominant flow of translations.

Table 9 also shows that the movement from the center to the periphery is gradual. The three most frequent languages, however, show their central positioning,

and combined, make up more than half of the production (55.67%). The primary position of Anglophone poetry is not surprising, though it is much less dominant than expected. The second position of Serbian poetry is due to the close relationship of the Slovak diaspora in Serbia as well as the support of VSSS for the trio of translators (Demák, Prebudila, and Valentová-Belić) in their creative intentions. The third position of Polish poetry reflects the long-term and lively tradition of reading and translating Polish literature and poetry into Slovak (Káša 2020, Obertová 2022); apart from VSSS, the publishing houses run by poets include Polish poetry in their output introducing Slovak audiences to new authors (Marcin Świetlicki, Dorota Koman, Wojciech Bonowicz, Bohdan Zadura, Justyna Bargielska, Franciszek Nastulczyk, and Marzanna B. Kielar) and new volumes by canonical authors (Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska).

OTHER PUBLISHERS OF POETRY IN TRANSLATION ACTIVE IN 2013–2023

The publishers who produced ten or fewer books of poetry translations in the researched period fall into two main categories. The first group consists of other small presses run by poets, e.g. *Literárna nadácia Studňa* ([Literary Foundation Studňa] seven volumes) or *MilaniuM* (six volumes), mainly focused on classics (Heinrich Heine, Paul Claudel, Paul Celan, or Juan Ramón Jiménez) with occasional space for contemporary poets (Maja Vidmar and Pia Tafdrup). Due to specific difficulties, some small poetry publishers have reduced their previous frequency of poetry translations. According to the director of *Drewo a srd*, Peter Šulej, the reasons for this are a lack of good offers and the low quality of proposed translations, as well as the condition to publish 500 copies per volume (Šulej and Gavura 2024) set by the principal benefactor, the Slovak Arts Council. Although the Slovak Arts Council intended to move publishers towards promoting books more via advertising and live readings and, in this way, sell more copies (Kuniak, Gavura and Palec 2024), this task was unrealistic and a large number of print runs would remain unsold. Fortunately, after persistent pressure from publishers, this condition was reconsidered, and since 2024, the number of minimum copies has been reduced to 300 (Kuniak, Gavura and Palec 2024). The press *Ars Poetica* plays a vital role in introducing new contemporary poets from all over the world, primarily through the literary festival of the same name. The festival is held in Bratislava, and the audience can see poets perform in their native languages and find their poems in the original and in translation in the festival anthology and short online pamphlets.

The second category of occasional publishers of translated poetry is major publishing houses with approximately 200–300 books per year (fiction, non-fiction, prose, children's literature, etc.) that either choose bestselling poets of the present like Rupi Kaur (Lindeni) or past like the Beat Generation (Slovart), Charles Baudelaire, and John Donne (Ikar), or Alexander Pushkin (Perfekt). Besides commercial motivation, the publishing houses take pride in building their symbolic capital, often successfully competing in national and international literary exhibitions and competitions such as *Book of the Year*, *The Most Beautiful Books of Slovakia*, etc.¹⁰ Two good examples

of how big commercial publishing houses contribute to the production of translated poetry is a book by the canonical 17th-century author John Donne, whose Slovak translation *Vzduch a anjeli* (Air and angels) won the Ján Hollý Award for the publisher Ikar and translator Jana Kantorová-Báliková in 2017. Another case is a publication that required immense financial backing for which a small press would not have the resources – the limited handmade edition of *Haiku v obrazoch: klasické japonské básne* (Haiku in pictures: classic Japanese poems) by Ikar in 2022 for book collectors and design enthusiasts.

CONCLUSION

Literary criticism has tried to explain the marginal character of contemporary poetry and the peripheral position of poetry translation. Some reasons are general and valid for all literature; the spread of the internet and new types of media have usurped some functions of literature and led to their marginalization (Piorecký 2016). Poetry has gone through a process that resulted in distancing poets from a once large audience. What we have witnessed since the late 19th century confirms the observations of theoreticians like Roland Barthes, who sees that modern poetry has taken on whole new dimensions and reinvented concepts of poetic structure. Modern poetry is “a monolith or a pillar which plunges into a totality of meanings, reflexes, and recollections: it is a sign which stands” (Barthes 1970, 48). The freedom of “modern” poetic speech is “terrible and inhuman” (48) and significantly reduces the number of critically engaged readers. Similar conclusions were made by Czesław Miłosz, who states that new poetry is born from a deep quarrel. Bohemian poets set up new values and rules beyond the reach and taste of the rest of the population. As Miłosz says: “the symbolists discovered the idea of a poem as an autonomous, self-sufficient unit, no longer describing the world but existing instead of the world”, which eventually led to the creation of a gap and mutual antagonism between poets and the “great human family” (1983, 19).

Consequently, modern poetry attracts a much smaller number of recipients than in the past, and the interaction between the poetic community and the rest of what Miłosz calls the “great human family” is limited. Size constraints lead to the individuals involved taking on multiple roles: poets and translators become publishers and vice versa; it is not rare that the whole production process (scouting, selection, copyright and license agreement, translation and layout) is done by a single person. Size limits give birth to a phenomenon of presses run by poets, currently the backbone of original and translation poetry in Slovakia; of the 25 publishing houses in my bibliography, ten are run by poets and are responsible for an impressive 63% of all published poetry translations. The unique correlation between the number of presses and the number of books published becomes even more pronounced when we consider that the three most active publishing houses run by a single manager and poet (FACE, Skalná ruža, and Modrý Peter) produced together almost half (45%) of all translated poetry volumes.

A look at the situation in publishing poetry before 2013 shows that small presses can quickly perish, e.g., Q111 (1991–2019) or Solitudo (1992–2003), later trans-

formed into an edition within Skalná ruža. Fortunately for Slovak readers, the number of new presses with poetry translations is growing, e.g. Literárna bašta (since 2018) and Fraktál (with two new collections from Slovenian in 2023), as is the number of translators whose role in poetry promotion proves significant, as they often take the role of “ambassador” for the translated author or source culture (Kaplicka Yakimova 2015). Besides experienced translators, publishers accept younger translators who, again, frequently are active poets and apply their poetic skills to the translation process (Silvia Kaščáková, Mirka Ábelová, Viliam Nádaskay, etc.) or in-depth knowledge of poetry and translation as theory and practice (Ivana Hostová, Peter Trizna, Patrícia Havrila and others), which seems to be a decisive factor in differentiating translators of poetry from translators of other genres.

The limits of poetry, whether it is Barthes and Miłosz’s words, the translatability of poetry, the economic or other aspects of the book production which we consider, do not give reasons for us to expect radical changes despite the volatile character of the poetry translation processes. The number of recipients will stay small and closed-off, like a private community, and its demands will differ from readers of other genres. The off-center position of translated poetry enables some publishing houses, their owners and managers, to assert their will and publish books they enjoy translating and producing (besides VSSS and Modrý Peter, the best example is the press MilaniuM with Milan Richter translating all six volumes of its poetry translations between 2013–2023).

Twenty-five out of all the publishers in Slovakia (around 1,250 in the 2020s; Združenie vydavateľov a kníhkupcov SR 2021–2022) represents a tiny fraction, and as expected, the pace of new volumes is slow and at most five volumes per publisher and year. This factor puts pressure on the decision-making process, and the most significant is the diversity that prevails over global translation tendencies from the Anglophone cultures. This is reflected by new volumes released in 2024: old Japanese poetry of the 10th century (Vydavateľstvo Matice slovenskej), the Italian 16th-century poet Torquato Tasso (Perfekt), the Russian post-avant-garde poet Konstantin Vaginov (Európa), the Palestinian canonical poet Mahmoud Darwish and the renowned Ukrainian poet Serhij Zhadan (both FACE). This diversity is an unexpected outcome of publishing translated poetry because even in poetry translation, translators from English are the largest group by a wide margin. It is almost as if the release “from the constraint to turn a profit” (Venuti 2013, 174) preserves, more precisely, world diversity.

NOTES

¹ *Knížná revue* (est. 1991) is a cultural magazine focused on new books and all those who are involved in the book industry; in addition to professional representatives from the ranks of writers, translators, editors, publicists, publishers, booksellers and librarians, it also addresses readership across the whole spectrum of interests and typologies of readers (Makara 2021, 41). Originally it was published by Združenie vydavateľov a kníhkupcov Slovenskej republiky [Association of publishers and book-

- sellers of the Slovak Republic], an organization focused on the development and support of entities operating in the book culture and industry.
- ² Each issue of *Knížná revue* contains a detailed list of new books registered in the national distribution. The list provides classification according to a library catalogue system and serves as an information database of new books for booksellers, librarians, literary agents, and possibly readers.
 - ³ Amateur books are publications produced by self-publishers or publications that are not intended for or available to the general public because of their limited importance; they are not included in the national distribution and if sold then only in selected places.
 - ⁴ If not stated otherwise, all translations from the Slovak and Czech are those of the present author.
 - ⁵ Two of the pamphlets (Zoltán Lesi, 2019 and Pavlo Petrovyč Korobčuk, 2013) were turned into books (Lesi 2022, Korobčuk 2014) but in the survey they are statistically counted as one publication.
 - ⁶ A translation team is a couple or a group of translators who author the translation. For statistical purposes, each single, couple or a group of translators is counted separately as a new subject.
 - ⁷ Marián Andričík stands out not only as a translator from English (he has translated John Keats, Billy Childish, Beat Generation etc.), but also as a researcher in the field of literary and poetic translation (Andričík 2013) and a comprehensive in-depth research of Slovak poetry translated into English (Andričík 2021).
 - ⁸ See Glück (2017, 2021).
 - ⁹ From the literature under research, FACE published two volumes by Wisława Szymborska, the Nobel Prize Winner for Literature in 1996. The press did not choose the form of selected poems, the most usual manner of presenting poets as in Szymborska's case, this had already been done three times before (1966, 1999, and 2009). FACE published complete volumes of original Polish books: the 1976 volume *Wielka liczba* as *Velké číslo* (A big number, 2016) and the 1962 volume *Sól* as *Sol'* (Salt, 2019). The sale of the books was steady and 300 copies of the volume *Sol'* were sold within three years, approximately 40 copies (out of 400) of *Velké číslo* are still available.
 - ¹⁰ The exhibition "The Most Beautiful Books of Slovakia" is organized by Bibiana – medzinárodný dom umenia pre deti (International house of art for children) and the main prize is inclusion in the list of the ten Most Beautiful Books of Slovakia.

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