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Henrik Ibsen in Czech translation

The earliest translations of Henrik Ibsen's works into the Czech language are to a great degree determined by the special situation in which the Czech-speaking people found themselves in the last decades of the 19th century. It is therefore necessary to mention at least some basic facts in this regard. By Czech-speaking people I mainly mean the inhabitants of two historical areas, Bohemia and Moravia, which form what is known today as the Czech Republic and which can be abbreviated, also as a historical term, as Czechia or the Czech Lands.¹ I will not distinguish between Bohemians and Moravians in this paper, and I will call all the Czech-speaking inhabitants of this area Czechs, which is usually done when one speaks of the nation which lives in the Czech Republic.²

For several centuries Czechia was governed by the Habsburgs, or the Austrians, in more general terms, and thus it was an area in which the German language was omnipresent. The Czech and German languages were officially granted equal rights in 1627, but in reality the German language had a stronger position in Czechia for a long time afterwards, not only in the administration, as one might expect, but also, for example, in high culture, which is significant for our purpose. In fact, the situation grew worse in the second part of the 18th century: there were, for example, attempts to make German the only official language in Czechia and the sole language of instruction at all universities and schools except elementary schools. However, such attempts only had a temporary effect, because the process of the so-called National Revival began at about the same time. This period of the Czech struggle for political and cultural self-determination lasted approximately from the 1780s until the 1850s. But the fight for a political emancipation from Austrian rule continued even in later decades, ending in 1918 when the Austro-Hungarian Empire ceased to exist and Czechoslovakia was founded.

These historical facts have to be mentioned so that one can understand why the majority of the translations of Ibsen's works in the first few decades of his reception in Czechia does not come from the Norwegian

original, but from German. Ibsen began to be translated and staged in the 1870s. A great part of the Czech population was bilingual at that time, they spoke both Czech and German, and in some elite circles the knowledge of German was actually deeper than the knowledge of Czech. In addition, the influence of the German-language culture was generally very strong. At the same time, there were very few people with the first-hand knowledge of the Norwegian language then. Given all this, the fact that Ibsen entered the Czech culture via German is not surprising.

Before I explore the implications thereof further, I would like to point out a general problem. Discussing the history of translations of plays is inherently difficult for relatively obvious reasons: not every drama that is staged is published in printed form, and not every play that is published ends up being staged. Thus although one sometimes has information as to who translated Ibsen's texts for some of the early Czech productions, only some of these translations have been preserved. Therefore one can only speculate about the quality of some of the earliest attempts to render the Norwegian playwright in the Czech language.

However, judging by what *has* been preserved, one can relatively easily come to the conclusion that the quality of the earliest Ibsen translations was relatively poor. Some of the Czech scholars who have dealt with this topic before have already mentioned the low quality of the older translations, and they have tried to give explanations for this phenomenon.³ The fact that Ibsen was often translated from German is perhaps the most obvious reason: such secondary translations are twice removed from the original, and thus the likelihood that they render the Norwegian text well is even lesser than in the case of the German version in between, either in terms of accuracy or style. Here I should mention the fact that some of the earliest Czech versions of Ibsen's texts state the name of the translator, but it is not always mentioned whether he or she translated from Norwegian or from German. One might sometimes even encounter cases of false advertisement in older Czech translations from Scandinavian languages: a particular book might say "translated from the Norwegian," but certain elements in the text reveal that the translation was done from the German version. One can find various types of evidence for this. Some can only be detected by means of a detailed analysis of semantic differences in vocabulary, others are more obvious. Of the more conspicuous, one could mention, for example, the name of the character of Krogstad from *A Doll's House*. Both in Wilhelm Lange's German translation and in two of the early Czech translations Krogstad is not Krogstad, but Günther.⁴ The German influence also explains the fact that *A Doll's House* is much better known as *Nora* in

Czechia. As is well known, this is the title the first German translator Lange gave the text in 1879, and this is what the play continued to be called in the German-speaking countries for a long time to come.⁵ Several Czech translations and many Czech productions retained the “German” title as well, thus creating the illusion that this is what the play is called in the original. In fact, some Czech theaters still use the title *Nora* when they stage the play nowadays even if they base their productions on more modern translations which do preserve one or the other version of the original title.

The first Czech translations of Ibsen from Norwegian only began to appear after the turn of the century⁶, but translating Ibsen from the original was still not the rule at that time. However, it was already evident to many intellectuals that the practice of translating the dramatist from German should be abandoned. For example, after the premiere of *The Lady from the Sea* in the National Theater in 1905 a reviewer for one Czech magazine complained: “Some of the expressions used in the translation do not fit the idea. Why does one translate Ibsen from German if there are Czechs with excellent knowledge of Norwegian, such as Karel Kučera or Hugo Kosterka [two accomplished translators from Norwegian; M. H.]?”⁷ Despite such criticisms, it still took some years before the situation changed. It seems tenable to claim that “the majority of [Ibsen] translations that were staged at Czech theaters until (at least) 1918 came from German.”⁸

Translating via German is, however, only one of the explanations as to why the earliest Czech translations of Ibsen are of relatively poor quality. The second general reason – and this also concerns some translations from Norwegian – is that translation as craft was not yet very developed. Something like a reservoir of shared translator’s techniques, i.e., a set of standard approaches to translating in general, or to translating from concrete languages in particular, did not yet exist around the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries.⁹ Translations from that era reveal, often quite blatantly, the underlying grammatical and stylistic structures of the source languages. In other words, the diction is not adjusted enough to the natural features of the target language. It seems that transferring the contents was the primary goal, whereas much less attention was given to the form.¹⁰ The problem I have just described still occurs even in some translations from the interwar period.

In addition, prose drama was likely to suffer more from bad translation than other literary genres. Many people involved in the theater business considered the text of a play to be only one of the many ingredients of the theatrical production. The text was usually not

regarded as an accomplished aesthetic whole the integrity of which one should attempt to preserve, but rather as a more or less flexible material for creating a performance. Therefore the translations were not always done by skilled translators, but often by amateurs, for example by actors from the theater companies which wanted to stage a concrete foreign play.¹¹ Moreover, some of the early translators would not only feel free to delete certain parts of the text, but they would sometimes even add entire sentences and passages that were not in the original. Thus some of the early Czech versions of Ibsen's works were more or less loose adaptations, rather than translations in the proper sense. Therefore what the theatergoer eventually saw on the stage may have been very far from the original text. This is probably the only way one can explain such a bizarre evaluation of the production of *A Doll's House* in the National Theater in 1889 as when a reviewer described it as an "interesting comedy."¹²

After 1918 the practice of translating Scandinavian literature from German came to be more and more seldom. Ever more translators appeared who knew Scandinavian languages and culture well. Thus during the interwar period the majority of translations of Scandinavian authors were already done directly from the original. Therefore also the Czech versions of Ibsen's dramas gained in both faithfulness and linguistic fluency.

However, more substantial changes in translating Ibsen only took place in the second half of the 20th century. The edition of *Henrik Ibsen's Writings* in four volumes, most of which were published at the end of the 1950s¹³, is an important milestone in this regard. The project was never completed; it was originally planned as a five-volume set. Nonetheless, the four existing volumes include all of Ibsen's dramas from *Brand* to *When We Dead Awaken*, as well as a selection of the author's prose pieces, articles, letters and public speeches. The well-known Czech Scandinavianist Radko Kejzlar supervised the project, and the team consisted of several translators with good knowledge of the Norwegian language and culture. The *Writings* already represented quite a modern translation and it remained to be the standard Czech edition of Ibsen's works for decades. Only very recently, in 2006, was it superseded by a new edition of the author's selected dramas in two volumes, called simply *Plays*.¹⁴ The two volumes contain *Peer Gynt* and Ibsen's last 11 plays. These 12 plays are, at the same time, those of Ibsen's works that are still alive in Czech theaters, and were so in the last approximately 50 years (with the exception of *Little Eyolf* which is only rarely staged). In the remaining part of my paper I would therefore like to point out some important differences between the 1950s edition

and the 2006 edition. Unfortunately, I will have to disregard *Peer Gynt*, because the story of the Czech translations of *Peer Gynt* involves so many complicated and interesting issues that I would not be able to mention them all within the limited scope I have here.¹⁵ Therefore I will only concentrate on Ibsen's last 11 plays, i.e., the works from *A Doll's House* onward. For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the earlier versions of these texts as translations from the 1950s (if one disregards the volume which came out in 1975, all the 11 plays in question were published in the three remaining volumes in the years 1958–1960).

As I have already indicated, the four-volume edition of Ibsen's *Writings* includes relatively modern and reliable translations. However, as far as Ibsen's so-called social dramas of contemporary life are concerned, these translations are lacking in at least two major respects. First, they are not colloquial enough, and thus do not correspond to Ibsen's original intention, or, to put it in another way, to the style of the original plays. As is well known, Ibsen's characters were meant to speak an everyday colloquial language on stage. The author expressed this intention on various occasions, among others in a letter to Rasmus B. Anderson who was supposed to supervise the project of translating Ibsen into American English. In this letter Ibsen says:

[T]he language of the translation [should] be kept as close as possible to ordinary everyday speech; all the turns of phrase and expressions which belong only to books should most carefully be avoided in dramatic works, especially mine, which aim to produce in the reader or spectator a feeling that he is, during the reading or performance, witnessing a slice of real life.¹⁶

This effect is nowadays difficult to achieve in Norway without adjusting the language of the original text, because Norwegian has obviously changed since Ibsen's times. In contrast, foreign translators do not have to interfere with the original. They "only" need to find the appropriate stylistic register(s) which would mirror everyday speech in the target language.

This is precisely one of the areas in which the Czech translations from the 1950s did not succeed. The language of these versions was somewhat outdated already at the time they were published. The contemporary reader must have perceived it precisely as a language that "belongs only to books." There may be several explanations for this fact. In my opinion, the main reason is that Ibsen was already a great classic of world literature at that time, and presumably it was unthinkable for the translators to let Ibsen's characters speak in a too colloquial way due to a certain bias related to the dramatic genre: the language of drama

must have a certain pathos, it must not be how the ordinary people really talk. The result is that the style of speech of Ibsen's characters in the translations from the 1950s is relatively pompous and turgid; the words and their forms were too often chosen from higher language registers. In this regard, the translations from 2006 represent a clear improvement. All the 11 plays in question in the latest edition are the work of František Fröhlich, one of the most accomplished Czech translators from Scandinavian languages. He began to translate the Norwegian playwright for Czech theaters in the 1980s, and the edition from 2006 can be regarded as a nice rounding off of his Ibsen efforts. One can perhaps argue that Fröhlich sometimes goes too far in his effort to make the text sound colloquial, but, in general, the characters in his versions really use a language people normally speak today.

The second major problematic aspect of the earlier translations concerns the repetition of thematically relevant words and significant motifs which one finds in the original texts. Ibsen's social dramas are well known for their meticulously designed networks of connections on various levels, and these connections are created by repeating the same words and expressions (some of them being clearly symbolic, others not).¹⁷ In order for each of these words to have the same effect it has in the original, the translator must try, as much as his or her native language allows him/her, to find a word which could be repeated throughout the play in the target language as well. This can, in itself, be quite difficult due to the semantic differences between similar words across various languages. But before the translator can even take up this task, he or she must realize first that such words exist in the original and what functions they have. Most of the translators of the 1950s edition did not pay enough attention to this phenomenon. Often enough, they did not realize that a particular word is repeated in the original in order to create a significant pattern of meaning, and they translated it inconsistently by non-identical expressions; or they simply do not seem to have taken the idea of consistency seriously enough. In other words, an important prerequisite for translating Ibsen's social plays is, among other things, a thorough literary analysis which enables one to understand the text's deep structures.

This is, once more, an area in which the 2006 edition of Ibsen's plays succeeds better than its predecessor. Fröhlich is the first Czech translator who has attempted rigorously and systematically to create the same consistent repetitions as those in the original. Fröhlich's translations also have other qualities than those I have mentioned, but these two aspects alone are important reasons that make his versions surpass the older edition of Ibsen's works and render it obsolete.

The recent translation of *Peer Gynt* that I have mentioned is also very good, and now a new translation – abbreviated and in prose – of *Brand* has appeared.¹⁸ Thus one can conclude that Czech theaters can currently work with competent and recent translations of Ibsen's most important plays. This, I believe, is a pleasure for Scandinavianists and theatergoers alike.

Notes

¹ The term “Czech Lands” also sometimes includes Silesia or the so-called Czech Silesia.

² Bohemians and Moravians are usually considered as two ethnic groups, not as two separate nations. The fact that the Czech word for both “Czechs” and “Bohemians” is one and the same (“Češi”) can be a source of confusion, also in texts written in English, because some authors may use the English word “Czechs” to refer to both “Czechs” and “Bohemians” within a single text.

³ Petra Mertinová's excellent study “České překlady Ibsenových dramát: *Et Dukkehjem, Gengangere, Fruen fra Havet a Hedda Gabler*” (master's thesis, Charles University in Prague, 2002) is so far the most extensive analysis of Ibsen's social dramas in Czech translation. For another important contribution, see František Fröhlich, “Jak se u nás překládal Ibsen,” in Jiří Pechar (ed.), *Sborník Krubu přátel českého jazyka 1986*, Prague: Sdružený klub ROH Melantrich, 1986, pp. 30–48.

⁴ See Mertinová 2002, p. 36.

⁵ See Fritz Paul, “World Maps of Translation: Ibsen from Norway to China,” in Vigdis Ystad (ed.), *Ibsen at the Centre for Advanced Study*, Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997, p. 71.

⁶ Mertinová 2002, p. 35. Cf. also Radko Kejzlar, *Henrik Ibsen*, Prague: Orbis, 1956, p. 79.

⁷ Lévin (pseudonym), *Divadelní list Máje* 1906, p. 61, qtd. in Mertinová 2002, p. 38; trans. M. H.

⁸ Mertinová 2002, p. 38; trans. M. H. But see also Fröhlich 1986, p. 42.

⁹ See, e.g., František Fröhlich, “České překlady Ibsenových her,” in *Souvislosti* 1998:2, p. 59. Cf. also Fröhlich 1986, p. 46.

¹⁰ Cf. Jiří Levý, *České teorie překladu: Vývoj překladatelských teorií a metod v české literatuře*, 2nd ed., 2 vols., Prague: Ivo Železný, 1996, vol. 1, p. 187.

¹¹ Mertinová 2002, p. 36.

¹² Anonymous, *Národní listy*, May 6 1889, qtd. in Petra Mertinová, “Ibsen na českých jevištích v letech 1878–1918,” in *Disk* 2003:4, p. 110.

¹³ *Spisy Henrika Ibsena*, Prague: SNKLHU, 1958, 1959, 1960 (vols. III–V) and Prague: Odeon, 1975 (vol. II).

¹⁴ Henrik Ibsen, *Hry*, 2 vols., Prague: Divadelní ústav, 2006.

¹⁵ For the history of translating and staging this drama in Czechia, see Helena Kadečková, “*Peer Gynt*: překlady a inscenace,” in Karolína Stehlíková (ed.), *Ipsa ipsa Ibsen: Sborník ibsenovských studií*, Soběslav: Elg, 2006, pp. 151–162. The translation of *Peer Gynt* included in the 2006 edition of Ibsen’s plays is by Josef Brukner and Josef Vohryzek. It was originally published in the program brochure for a production of *Peer Gynt* in the National Theater in Prague in 1994.

¹⁶ Letter from Sept. 14 1882, qtd. in Michael Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography*, Garden City: Doubleday, 1971, p. 501.

¹⁷ For a detailed analysis of the various equivalents of some of such expressions (e.g. “*dukke*,” “*det vidunderlige*,” “*det grufulde*,” and others) in the Czech translations of Ibsen’s plays, see Mertinová 2002.

¹⁸ The text of this new translation, by Karolína Stehlíková, has been published in the program brochure for the production of *Brand* by the Transteatral theater company (Prague: Transteatral, 2010).