

Tom Lozar, response to the review of *Ten Slovenian Poets of the Nineties* in *Slovene Studies* 24.1–2.

As one of the translators in *Ten Slovenian Poets of the Nineties* with whom your reviewer, Christopher Merrill, is not happy, I wonder if I might attempt a reply.

A note first to the editors: How fair is it to ask a reviewer that does not know Slovenian to comment on translations from the Slovenian? I mean to suggest, of course, that it is not fair to the reviewer. For such a reviewer can tell us little, except what he likes, or does not like. How useful is that? *De gustibus non disputandum est*. Surely, the crucial question, one open to discussion, is how well a translation has caught the original.

I would like, for instance, to ask Merrill whether a plea to God should or should not be somewhat hesitant, diffident, even, dare I say it, “wooden.” “Wooden” is Merrill’s word for a line he quotes from my “10 Pleas for a Good Night.” Now, my argument on behalf of the necessary woodenness of the line is probably slippery sophistry. However, it is difficult to discuss this issue of poetry and theology with a reviewer who does not know Slovenian, for how can he know whether the original was or was not hesitant, even appropriately “wooden.” By the way, speaking of *gustibus*, I like enormously even my title, “10 Pleas for a Good Night.” Isn’t it lovely? But this may just be an expression of my taste.

Given his not knowing Slovenian, Merrill’s praising Steger, despite my “wooden” translations, seems to this reader patronizing. I know that Steger is good. Merrill cannot personally know that, since my translations are so “wooden.” Equally patronizing seems his suggestion that the best formula for translation from language X is to have native English speakers get together with native speakers of language X, like so many priests with acolytes. In order to establish the bona fides of a native speaker, should we insist on passports? If I sound aggrieved, it is because this kind of patronizing attitude is, alas, common in a world where *small* languages are desperate for recognition from *big* languages. It is as common as bad translation.

Merrill is on one side of a struggle between two views of translation. I have put woodenly a view that Nabokov, who would fail Merrill’s ID check, has put elegantly. Here is what Nabokov, in his notes

to his intentionally wooden *Eugene Onegin*, says about reviewers and translators that do not know the language of the original.

I have been always amused by the stereotyped compliment ... a reviewer pays the author of a “new translation.” He says: “It reads smoothly.” In other words, the hack who has never read the original and does not know its language praises an imitation as readable because easy platitudes have replaced in it the intricacies of which he is unaware. “Readable,” indeed! A schoolboy’s boner mocks the ancient masterpiece less than does its commercial poetization, and it is when the translator sets out to render the “spirit,” and not the mere sense of the text, that he begins to traduce the author.¹

Since I am of the Nabokov school, though not of his mettle, I take Merrill’s calling my translations “wooden” as a compliment. I thus deplore the fact that I was not mentioned by name. Do not rules of scholarship, if not rules of etiquette, demand that the person being praised be named?

Anyone interested in a carefully argued analysis, not a mere opinion, of a Merrill imitation of a poem by Salamun, can look at my February 21, 2004, column in Maribor’s *Večer*: “Šalamun v angleščini.”

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¹ Pushkin, Aleksandr Sergeevich. *Eugene Onegin: Volume I*. Trans. Vladimir Nabokov. (New York: Bollingen, 1964) ix.