NORMAN MAILER AND HIS RECEPTION IN SLOVENIA

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AFTER THE SECOND WORLD WAR, SLOVENES (until 1991 Slovenia was a part of Yugoslavia) were relatively well in touch with contemporary American literature, at least with the works of the most popular and the best authors from the United States. Janez Stanonik, Slovene professor of English and American literature, in his 1988 article "The Reception of American and Canadian Literatures in Slovenia" chronologically analyzed new translations of important works of American literature into Slovenian language and wrote at the beginning of his article:

> In Slovenia, the reception of American literature by way of translations is above all a result of the work of Slovene translators after the Second World War. The extent and the importance of recent Slovene translations from American literature widely surpasses anything that had been done in this field before the Second World War. It is only after the Second World War that we can say that Slovene translators effectively followed the contemporary developments in American poetry, prose, and drama. (Stanonik 329)

At the beginning of the 1950s, the post-war period in the reception of American literature in Slovenia started: more works of American authors were translated into Slovene accompanied by a notable increase in quality of the translations. According to Stanonik, in this decade important foundations were laid "for all the subsequent work in the transfer of American literature to Slovenia" (332).

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Stanonik also claims that interest in the postwar American novel was awakened with the translations of works whose background is in the Second World War (333). With the war novels, the new names of postwar generation of American authors were, to a very large extent, first introduced to Slovenia, among them Norman Mailer, whose novel *The Naked and the Dead* was brilliantly translated into Slovene in 1958 by Boris Verbič. Mailer's first novel became available to Slovene readers ten years after originally being published in the United States, which seems quite late from today's perspective, but it should be noted that the economic situation in Slovenia, like the whole of Yugoslavia immediately after the war was difficult, and there was a scarcity of everything. In the 1960s and 1980s Slovene translators produced Slovene translations of the following Mailer works: *An American Dream*, *The Executioner's Song* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Today there are four Mailer novels available in Slovene translations: *The Naked and the Dead* (*Goli in mrtvi*, transl. Boris Verbič, Ljubljana: DZS, 1958); *An American Dream* (*Ameriški sen*, transl. Mira Mihelič, Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga, 1966); *The Executioner's Song* (*Krvnikova pesem*, transl. Ana Padovan, Koper: Lipa, 1982); and *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (*Nepremagljivi ne plešejo*, transl. Bojan Rambaher, Maribor: Založba Obzorja, 1986). These translations, considering the number, quality and popularity of Mailer's works, amount to very little.

However, it should be emphasized that the following translations into Slovene were quite up to date and, more significantly, the quality of the translations is excellent. *An American Dream* was translated by Mira Mihelič, who was the best translator of English at the time. Later, Ana Padovan, who translated *The Executioner's Song*, did an excellent job. Unfortunately, the Pulitzer-winning *The Armies of the Night* is not yet available in Slovene translation. There are, of course, reasons for there being only four translations of Mailer's works into Slovene. Perhaps Norman Mailer was not recognized as an interesting author for Slovene publishing houses, which is, considering Mailer's fame, unlikely. Possibly editors in Slovene publishing houses did not recognize the value and quality of Mailer's works, or perhaps editors at the time could not find appropriate translators for Mailer's works.

However, my impression is that the Slovene public would love to read more of Mailer's works in translation. And his works, from which publishing houses and translators can choose, are indeed many. Thus, my critical observation is that Mailer's literature as a whole should be and could be better available in translations to Slovene readers.

Slovene media reported on Mailer when his works were published in Slovene translations, when his new novels were released in the United States, and every time he received a prestigious literary prize. The affairs and excesses of Mailer's private life and his political activism also repeatedly attracted the attention of Slovene media. However, in depth assessments of Mailer's works or their translations into Slovene are rare. The exception is National Radio Slovenia, which has devoted some longer broadcasts to Mailer over the past twenty years. I will speak about the latter further on, but first, I quote a few statements from Slovene print media.

In 1995, the national newspaper *Delo* published a translation of an interview with Mailer, in which the author discussed *Harlot's Ghost*, in which the main focus is the CIA. When asked why he decided to write about CIA, he responded:

> As a novelist, I have always dealt with the question of identity, the writer needs to know what are his foundations, and where from he is sending his messages. This question has plagued me since my first novel, I have constantly researched myself, and this brings about the changes of habits, friends and the ways of life. On the other hand, I was always interested in spies, because they obviously have problems with dual identity, and for years I have been engaged in introspection, so to speak spy myself for me. The CIA is somehow a shadow of the government, its counterpart, its phantom and the hidden side, and yet, the side that knows best what is the purpose of a certain mission. It is also true that the world of espionage is an image, a reflection of some sort of prostitution (*harlot* also means a prostitute in English), which is widespread among famous people, actors, journalists: everyone is a prostitute in the sense of pretending that they are more satisfied with something than they really are. A journalist, for example, inevitably fascinates a person her or she interviews, because of giving him/her a feeling that he/she is special; when this person later reads the article, he/she is disappointed because he/she realizes that that journalist's opinion is different from what he/she expected. And journalism is a very subtle form of prostitution, much worse is with advertisements in which manufacturers exactly like prostitutes pretend to offer something out

> of love. An informant actually does not seek to pleasure the customer, he is trying to produce the most likely lie, cheat the enemies and try to find a traitor among them. Therefore, prostitutes are around him, and he plays more the role of a pimp.

Further on in this interview Mailer says:

> We are victims of plastic, commercials, television. No one has taken into account the horrors of capitalism. Communism brainwashed the Russians for seventy years, but it did not quite succeed because the Russians were too aware of it. It was too obvious—if you see huge banners with Lenin's thoughts along the road, you understand what's going on; but if you stare at television and are being bombarded with commercials, this is brainwashing that you are not aware of. The damage being produced is certainly bigger than that with the famous ozone hole, the damage are the holes in our souls. ("Vohuniti")

In 1998 *Delo* published a translated interview with Mailer's ex-wife Adele Mailer from *Der Spiegel*. Adele described in her book *The Last Party* her turbulent life with the American writer. In the interview she said, "He could be charming. Some psychopaths are charming. He quickly impressed those who knew him only superficially. But I also knew his dark sides" ("Malo je"). A few months later, *Delo*[1] published an article on *The Gospel According to the Son*.

When in 2002 Mailer was rewarded a very important Austrian award, the Honorary Cross of Science and Art of the first order, *Delo* published an article on Mailer and his views on situations in contemporary American politics.[2]

Slovene media wrote about Mailer in 2003 when the writer celebrated his 80th birthday. The newspapers *Slovenske novice* and *Delo* mostly emphasized the writer's personal life and his major works, among them *The Naked and the Dead*.[3]

In February 2003, when *The Spooky Art* was released, *Delo* published a short interview with the author (a translated interview from the *Newsweek*).[4] In the same month *Delo* also published Mailer's essay on democracy—again a translation, this time from the *International Herald Tribune*.[5]

In May 2003 another Slovene national newspaper, *Dnevnik*, published an article by Croatian Professor Maroje Mihovilović, who described how Mailer upset conservatives in the United States by analyzing the Iraq war with Freudian methods. Mailer wrote that the United States opted for the war in Iraq so that a white American man could demonstrate his masculinity. The famous writer also estimated that precisely for that reason the Americans could continue attacks on Syria, Saudi Arabia and Iran. In the article, Mihovilović also shortly introduced Mailer's life story and added that some of the worst criticism that Mailer suffered was at the expense of his analyses of the Iraq war.

In 2003 Mailer's *Why Are We at War?* came out, and *Delo* wrote about it under the title "Norman Mailer vs. George Bush." In May 2003, *Delo* devoted another article to *Why Are We at War?*—and the book was deemed important because of the topics that accompanied Mailer since his first book *The Naked and the Dead* (*Goli in mrtvi*) in 1948. The article by Branko Soban summarizes the contents of the book and concludes with the following thought: "It would therefore be time to stop George W. Bush. The Americans are offered an opportunity for this in this year's presidential elections."

In January 2004, another Slovene national newspaper *Večer* wrote on Mailer's warnings about the imperialistic tendencies of the United States of America. In 2004 *Nedelo* published an article on the influence of the *The Executioner's Song* on Jack Abbott. The murderer, who was serving life in prison, wrote a letter to Mailer and offered to be his internal source from prison, which could be very helpful to Mailer when writing on Gary Gilmore. In the following months a lively correspondence developed between them.

In January 2005 also Slovene media summarized the news of Mailer's calls for a ban on television advertising.[6] In March 2005 Slovene cultural magazine *Ampak* wrote about Mailer as a beginner of non-fictional novels that are a mixture of journalistic reporting on contemporary events, political commentary, critical provocations, autobiography, and novelistic fiction. This article appeared because, at the time, many translations of Mailer's *Portrait of Picasso as a Young Man* into European languages were published across Europe, although there was no translation into Slovene.

In 2005, Slovenian Press Agency published the news that Mailer won the Honorary Award for Lifetime Achievement, which is awarded annually by

the U.S. National Literary Foundation.[7] The same news was published also in *Delo*, which stated that the rationale of the jury was as follows: "Mailer has long been an important figure of post-war American literature; with his inventive literary and non-literary works. He has changed American literature" ("Nagrajen").

Mailer gained attention of the Slovene media again in 2007 when his novel *The Castle in the Forest* (in Slovene media translated as *Grad v gozdu*) was published in the United Sates. Critics were mostly asking themselves why Mailer decided to devote his novel to Hitler and to the bloody history of the twentieth century. At the time J. M. Coetzee's assessment of *The Castle in the Forest*, for example, was translated and broadcast on Channel three of National Radio Slovenia.

Following November 10, 2007, news of Mailer's death was published in all the major media in Slovenia, and there were many articles about his life and his works. Some cultural and political magazines, *Mladina* for example, published obituaries.[8] *Dnevnik* published the news that Norman Mailer was posthumously awarded the prize for the worst description of the sexual act, in his novel *The Castle in the Forest.*[9]

Occasionally Slovene media still remember Norman Mailer and his extraordinary works, usually when the Norman Mailer Award is granted or when the annual conference dedicated to Norman Mailer takes place in the United States. As a typical representative of literary journalism, Mailer is often used as a comparison to other authors: Truman Capote, for example, or Swedish writer Per Olov Enquist (1934).

Furthermore, the archives of National Radio Slovenia hold some long and in-depth broadcasts on Norman Mailer. The first broadcast on Mailer was published in 1993, when Mailer celebrated his seventieth birthday. It focuses primarily on *The Naked and the Dead* and *An American Dream*. This broadcast pointed out that Mailer wrote "in the style of the new naturalism, in the spirit of the tradition of writers Hemingway and Dos Passos, and that he described intellectual and moral crisis, the American man and society after the Second World War." It was also pointed out that Mailer is the most versatile writer of his generation. In 2003 when Mailer turned eighty, another broadcast was dedicated to his works and life.

The archives of National Radio Slovenia also keep a half-hour portrait of

Norman Mailer by Jasna Potočnik that was broadcast shortly after Mailer died (14th November 2007).

The year 2013 marked the 90th anniversary of Mailer's birth, and on the occasion some media in Slovenia remembered Mailer and his works. *Acta Neophilologica,* the review of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, also published an article on Mailer's works: *The Naked and the Dead*, *An American Dream*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, *The Armies of the Night*, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, *Of a Fire on the Moon*, *The Executioner's Song* and *Why Are We at War?*.

Mailer has often been often overlooked in the Slovenian literary environment, despite the importance of his topics and his extraordinary writing style. The Slovenian media wrote about him when his new novels were released, and his personality was of great interest to them, but reflexive reviews were rare—with the exception of national Radio Slovenia. Mailer is, however, a compelling subject for theses and dissertations at Slovenian universities.

In the Cobiss system (Co-operative Online Bibliographic Systems and Services) is a reference model of a system representing the platform for the national library information systems and/or bibliographic systems for the evaluation of research results in Slovenia. There are three BA theses on Mailer and/or his works: *The Structure and Mythological Function of Imagery in Mailer's Novel An American Dream,* 1997 (Smiljana Pejanovič); *Concept of Power in Norman Mailer's Novels The Naked and the Dead and An American Dream*, 2002 (Toni Jelenič); *American War Novels: Joseph Heller's Catch-22 and Norman Mailer's The Naked and the Dead*, 2007 (Maja Medja).

There is one MA thesis on Mailer: *Reality and Fiction in the works of Truman Capote and Norman Mailer*, 2007 (Jasna Potočnik), and several PhD dissertations: *The Contemporary American Documentary Novel* (*Sodobni ameriški dokumentarni roman*), 2009 (Leonora Flis); *New Journalism of Tom Wolfe in USA and Slovenia* (*Novi žurnalizem Toma Wolfa v ZDA in Sloveniji*), 2004 (Sonja Merljak), *Social Criticism in the Works of Norman Mailer* (*Družbenokriti na ost v delih Normana Mailerja*), 2012 (Jasna Potočnik Topler) and *The Slovene Americans: Writers and Identity* (*Les Slovénes Américains: Écritures et identité*), 1997 (Tatjana Dumas Rodica). The latter was written in France and the author is Slovene.

Norman Mailer is still being discovered in Slovenia. Of course, he was

known in the Slovene literary environment, especially for his translated novels and some other successful works, but Slovenia has yet to include an in-depth analysis of his opus. His contribution to the development of literary journalism in Slovenia has also not yet been evaluated. Why has there been such a delay? The main reason is probably found in the few translations of Mailer's books into Slovene, and consequently few reviews of his books in Slovenia. Moreover, poor access to his books in Slovene libraries certainly hinders better knowledge of Mailer among Slovene readers. Even in faculty libraries, only some of Mailer's works are available. Consequently, the general level of knowledge of Mailer in Slovenia is limited to familiarity with a few of his works like *The Naked and the Dead*, *An American Dream* and *The Executioner's Song*. Yet, Mailer certainly became better known in Slovenia with the expansion of the internet.

I dare say that also due to some prophetic observations on behalf of Norman Mailer, his writings will certainly not be forgotten in the forthcoming years. It should also be noted that the genre of literary journalism is expanding in Slovenia, so Mailer's name will undoubtedly appear in the future in close connection to literary journalists, but until now Mailer's influence on the development on literary journalism in Slovenia has not yet reached a critical stage.

It is interesting that from the perspective of the current Slovene reader Mailer is becoming increasingly relevant. That is probably because Slovene society, prior to the 1990s, was markedly different than it is today, and because Slovenes experienced different political system than Mailer. Slovene readers possibly found Mailer's topics directly connected to the contemporary political situation in the United States less interesting for Slovenes. Taking this context into consideration, it is quite surprising that *The Executioner's Song* was translated into Slovene as early as 1982. At the end of the 1990s, and especially after 2001, Mailer's criticism of the current American and global situation became more relevant and more observed, including in Slovenia.

I believe that much more will continue to be written about Norman Mailer in Slovenia, and I am certain that more Slovene readers, critics and translators will pay increasing attention to his works, and more in-depth studies of Mailer's works will appear in the Slovene literary and academic world. I also hope that soon more works by Mailer will be translated into Slovene in the near future.

NOTES

1. See "Normanova svetopisemska različica." *Delo* (1998): n.p. Web. 11 Aug. 2010.
2. See "Norman Mailer odlikovan na Dunaju." *Delo*, 28 September 2002.
3. See "Zadnji veliki zalet ameriške legende." *Delo* (2003): n.p. Web. 11 Aug. 2010.
4. "Norman Mailer, pisatelj: To je eden naših velikih kulturnih proizvodov: drek." *Delo* (2003): n.p. Web. 10 Aug. 2010.
5. See "Dobili imperij, izgubili demokracijo." *Delo* (2003): n.p. Web. 10 Aug. 2010.
6. See "Ameriški pisatelj Norman Mailer zahteval, da na televiziji ukinejo vsa propagandna sporočila." *Slovenian Press Agency* (2005): n.p. Web. 12 Aug. 2010.
7. See "Prestiž za Normana Mailerja." *Slovenska tiskovna agencija*, 20 September 2005.
8. See Štefančič, Marcel. "Beličrnec." *Mladina* (2007): n.p. Web. 2 Dec. 2007. 4
9. See "Pokojni Norman Mailer osvojil nagrado za najslabši opis seksa." *Dnevnik* 29 Nov. 2007. Print.

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