

READING POETRY BY VASYL STUS IN ENGLISH: TRANSLATIONAL JUSTICE AND ENTANGLED EDITORIAL PRACTICES

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The present article appears to be the first comprehensive examination of the reading and reception of Vasyl Stus' poetic works in English translation, exploring the details of when, where, and under what circumstances they were rendered and published. Through a diachronic study, the paper thus compiles the history of translating Vasyl Stus, spanning from the initial poetic renditions by Marco Carynnyk to Yaropolk Lassoovsky's compilation of Stus's free verse poetry in English, and encompassing contemporary interpretations by Bohdan Tokarsky, Nina Murray, Uilleam Blacker, Alan Zhukowski and others, published in leading international magazines. The translators who have enabled the entry of Stus's poetic works into English have different profiles and positionalities, which articulates their selection of texts for rendition and aesthetic affinities, yet all of them are keen promoters of modern Ukrainian poetry. The paper reveals the interconnectedness of Carynnyk's roles as both the compiler of the second Ukrainian poetry volume of Stus published in the diaspora (Munich) and the translator of Stus's poetry into English, highlighting the complex nature of his editorial and translation practices. It also addresses the multimodal aesthetic interpretation of Stus's poetry presented by Oleksandr Frazze-Frazenko in English translation, where art, music and poetic word are intricately interwoven. The article hence puts forth a perspective on translational justice and contributes to its broader discussion in the context of Ukrainian literature and its reception in the English-language world. Apart from that, the study underscores that translating into English becomes a means of exploring – through the lens of Stus's poetry – the shifting linguistic and cultural environments in treating Ukrainian literature worldwide.

**ЧИТАННЯ ПОЕЗІЇ ВАСИЛЯ СТУСА АНГЛІЙСЬКОЮ МОВОЮ:
ПЕРЕКЛАДАЦЬКА СПРАВЕДЛИВІСТЬ
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Ключові слова: *поетичний переклад, Василь Стус, історія перекладу, англomовний переклад, українська поезія, рецепція, українська література, редагування, едитологія перекладу.*

Запропонована стаття – це перше комплексне дослідження рецепції поетичних текстів Василя Стуса в англійському перекладі, яка детально аналізує часо-просторові умови та культурні обставини їхнього видання. У діахронному зрізі представлено історію цих перекладів, починаючи від перших перекладацьких спроб Марко Царинника до збірки віршів *vers libre* Стуса англійською мовою Ярополка Ласовського, а також сучасні інтерпретації Богдана Токарського, Ніни Мюррей, Уіяма Блекера, Алана Жуковського та інших, що опубліковані у провідних міжнародних часописах. Вказано, що перекладачі, які уможливили появу поетичних творів Стуса англійською мовою, мають різні профілі та позиціонування, що стає передумовою до їхнього вибору текстів для перекладу та подальшої контекстуалізації. У статті також окреслено взаємозв'язок у діяльності Марка Царинника як упорядника другої української збірки поезій Стуса, виданої в діаспорі, і як перекладача поезії Стуса англійською мовою, що підкреслює складне переплетіння його редакторської та перекладацької практики. Описано також мультимодальну естетичну інтерпретацію поезії Стуса, запропоновану Олександром Фразе-Фразенком в англійському перекладі, де інноваційно переплітаються мистецтво, музика і поетичне слово. Загалом, ця студія – це і спроба концептуально осмислити та винести на фахове обговорення аспект “перекладацької справедливості”, що дає змогу ширше поглянути на представлення і рецепцію української літератури в англomовному світі. Крім того, у статті показано, як англійський переклад стає засобом дослідження – через призму поезії Стуса – динаміки англійського мовно-культурного простору в трактуванні української літератури.

Problem statement. In the spring of 2022, when the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia began, the poetry of Vasyl Stus, one of the most sophisticated and avant-garde Ukrainian poet-dissidents who died in the Soviet forced labor camp in 1985, re-emerged as the voice of Ukrainian resilience and resistance. Perhaps, it can be explained with the observation, made by Marko Pavlyshyn, that over the past two

decades, “the intellectual lead in Stus studies shifted from literary scholarship to biography” [3], with his poems assuming a documentary role to illustrate the facts of Stus’s tragic life, his uncompromising stance and commitment to the Ukrainian cause against all odds. Pavlyshyn further reflected on this prevailing trend: “How Stus might be viewed relative to Rilke <...> was of less interest than what he could teach the

inhabitants of post-Soviet Ukraine through the example of his life” [3, p. 602]. Indeed, a series of in-depth research publications exemplifies this trend, among them – the 2021 book “Vasyl Stus: Life in Creativity” authored by his son Dmytro Stus, translated into English by Ludmila Bachurina, and published in the Ukrainian Voices series by Stuttgart’s Ibidem Verlag [5]. However, the recent years of the 2020’s, especially 2021–2023, also signify the “comeback” to close reading of Stus’s texts along with the translation of his poetry into English, foregrounding their intrinsic literary value and thematic complexities as pivotal focal points. Fresh insights were presented in the contributions by Bohdan Tokarsky, who drew parallels between the metaphors and metonymy in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Vasyl Stus [19] while also identifying kindred spirits like T.S. Eliot with his “Four Quartets” [20]. This contributes to a nuanced understanding of Stus’s literary legacy independent of, yet complementary to, biographical considerations, alluding to the 1980s when his poems similarly held a prominent place in translation endeavors [8; 13] due to the Nobel Prize nomination attempts.

Purpose of the article. While English-language renditions of Vasyl Stus’s poetry are now mostly published in periodicals and online poetry portals, bringing more light to his texts, the relevance of the present study lies in its systematic character – to collect and review all existing English renditions, and thus compile the history of translating Stus’s works for the Anglophone readership and reflect on their positioning and reception. This article represents one of the first comprehensive examinations of the reading and reception of Vasyl Stus’ poetic texts in English translation, exploring the specifics of the temporal, spatial, and circumstantial aspects surrounding their rendition and publication. This study is inherently linked to the concept of translational justice, encompassing the imperative to uphold equity in the representation of the lesser-known literatures in target cultural space. The paper sets out to shed light on the ethical and editorial dimensions of translating Stus’s poetry and contribute to a more just and expansive representation of his literary legacy in the English-speaking world. Thus, in view of the material basis – English renditions of Stus’s poetry, the object of this paper is the comprehensive and systematic outline of these translations, while the subject is a focused discussion of the history, reception, and editorial considerations of translational publications.

Presentation of the main material. Until the 1990s, all collections of original poetry by Vasyl Stus appeared outside Ukraine: in 1970, his initial book, “Zymovi dereva”, faced rejection from domestic publishers and was eventually published without his knowledge and consent in Brussels [18], whereas in 1977, Marco Carynnyk (Tsarynnyk) assembled Stus’s

second published Ukrainian-language collection, titling it “A Candle in a Mirror” («Свіча у свічаді») [14] based on the recurring imagery of the mirror and the candle in his poems. Furthermore, Marco Carynnyk is one of the first translators of Stus’ poetry into English. In 1986, the year following Stus’s death, he submitted “Four poems by Vasyl Stus” for the issue of “Ukrainian Weekly” [8], which included the rendition of Stus’s iconic poem «Як добре, що смерті не боюсь я <...>», presented in translation as “How good it is that I’ve no fear of dying <...>” [1]. In other words, the compiler and editor of Stus’s original poetry collection, Marco Carynnyk, also served as the initial translator of his poetry into English, which underscores how intricately entangled was the nature of Carynnyk’s editorial and translation practice. Noteworthy, Marco Carynnyk is the only member of the New York group of poets who has not published a single book of poetry and expressed his poetic identity exclusively in the literary periodicals and collections in the West. What comes across clearly is his force of personality that is fully devoted to translating Ukrainian literature into English, as in his translator’s oeuvre one can also find the English translation of Kotsiubynskyi’s masterpiece “The Shadows of the Forgotten Ancestors”. In this respect, Carynnyk played a triple role of “the poet-translator-anthologist” in the internationalization of Stus.

In 1986, Munich-based publishing house “Suchasnist” published the 480-page Ukrainian-language collection “Palimpsests” (“Palimpsesty: Virshi 1971–1979”), comprising poems written during the poet’s incarceration. Based on manuscript materials with unclear dating, the volume was edited by Nadia Svitlychna, a prominent figure in the Ukrainian dissident movement in the West. It was also accompanied by an introduction written by George Shevelov.

One year later, in 1987, the bilingual edition “Selected Poems” by Vasyl Stus was published in Munich by the Ukrainian Free University [13]. Originally conceived to fulfill the criteria set by the Royal Swedish Academy for a representative compilation of Stus’ poems, intended to support his nomination for the 1986 Nobel Prize in Literature, the Ukrainian-English volume featured forty-four poetic pieces. The Ukrainian originals were presented on the left-hand page, juxtaposed with English translations on the right. Generally, a bilingual lay-out is considered to be a challenge for the translator, as both versions – original and the target version – are presented *en face*. Due to the constraints of time in assembling a corpus of translations, Jaropolk Lassoovsky opted to include solely the poems composed in *vers libres* in the period of 1957 to 1976 and provide literal translations for the collection.

The translator was fully aware of the inherent complexity in translating Stus’s poetry and shared his

stance in the introduction: “I fervently hope that it is genius [of the poet] that will shine through my very imperfect efforts to you, gentle reader” [13]. Favoring free verse, Lassovsky did not totally exclude the rhyme and added to the final collection three rhymed pieces. As Vasyl Stus died in the Soviet Gulag in 1985, and the Swedish Academy exclusively considers nominations for living authors, the edition was open to such modifications.

George Sheveliov authored a refined scholarly introduction to this English-language collection, shedding more light on architecture of Stus’s poetic diary sketches. To date, this 1987 publication remains the sole book release featuring Vasyl Stus’ poetry in English.

The decade of the 1990s was characterized by the thorough analysis, revision, and publication of multi-volume editions of Vasyl Stus’s poetry in Ukraine – a four-volume collection published in Lviv from 1994 to 1999 [12] and the twelve-volume one in Kyiv in 2007 [17]. During that time, there was a notable absence of translations of Vasyl Stus’s works into English. Michael Naydan reflected in one of his interviews in early 2000’s: “A while ago when I was in graduate school, I was asked to translate a collection of Vasyl Stus’s poetry. I declined for one simple reason – at that stage of my career I wasn’t prepared to translate his dense and complex verse. I would feel much more confident to work on him now” [2]. Naydan’s acknowledgment underscores the importance of experience and maturity in handling Stus’s complex poetic expression.

In 2010, Marko Pavlyshyn authored an extensive and in-depth paper titled “Martyrology and Literary Scholarship: The Case of Vasyl Stus” for “The Slavic and East European Journal”, where he as well integrated his translations of several short verses by Stus, such as “As arrows fired into a chasm <...>” and “How unbearable is this native foreign land <...>” [3].

In 2014, “Journal of Ukrainian Literature” published the translation “I cross the edge. This conquering the circle, this forward motion of a foot <...>” [9] under the pen of Artem Pulemotov, who also, during the first months of the full-scale war (in March 2022), presented his translated rendition of Vasyl Stus’s poem “So many words; they are like crippled ghosts!” under the additional title “A Poem from Ukraine” in the esteemed international literary magazine “World Literature Today” [6].

In 2021, the journal “Apofenie” published two poetic pieces “I wandered through the city of my youth <...>” and “One-thousand-year-old Kyiv” in English co-translation by Bohdan Tokarskyi and Uilleam Blacker [10]. Concurrently, in 2021, the chamber opera project “Stus: Passer-by” was presented, featuring 12 poems by Vasyl Stus accompanied by

avant-garde drawings that served as the foundation for 10 musical compositions, made accessible in English through the translations of Oleksandr Frazze-Frazenko [11]. Both initiatives, emerging in 2021, revolved around the key theme in Stus’ poetry – introspection, self-exploration, and the infusion of the soul with personal reflections. They sought to redirect the focus onto the philosophical dimension of his poetry, rather than solely on the martyrdom of the poet’s existence.

In the spring of 2022, Alan Zhukowski translated Stus’s poem «В мені уже народжується Бог <...>» into English for the March issue of the leading international magazine “Poetry London” [15]. This rendition carried a profound symbolic philosophy for the Anglophone audience, resonating with the unfolding events in Ukraine. Previously, Alan Zhukowski has also prepared the translation “A stranger lives my life and wears my body” for “Poetry International” [7].

In June 2023, Bohdan Tokarskyi and Nina Murray contributed to Translation Tuesday in “Asymptote”, the premier site for world literature in translation, with a collaborative translation of the poem “Here’s the Sun for You” [21]. They also co-translated two poems “The Mummy” and “I feel as though it isn’t me who lives <...>” for publication in the “Two Lines Journal” issued by the Center for the Art of Translation, the latter champions new, global voices brought into English by translators [16].

Interestingly, all translations of Stus’s poetry selected for publication in the 2020’s revolve around the existential force of the human spirit and its inner strength. They collectively form a new re-contextualized dialogic whole, enter in conversation and echo each other (a fact that the translators might not even realize). Mediating an encounter with Stus’s introspective poetics, the selected poetic pieces by translators invoke and reinforce one another, framing an intricate pattern of deep intertextual links: “*I wandered around the city of my youth, / <...> I hoped at least to run into myself, / right where the fountain flowed, / hemmed by artificial marble. / All in vain. / <...> I realized for the first time: I failed at life*” (translated by Uilleam Blacker and Bohdan Tokarskyi), “*I knew: the world concealed itself from me, / behind each thing another thing is hiding*” (translated by Bohdan Tokarskyi), “*The Lord has started being born within me / and, half-recalled and half-forgotten, waits / till I depart from life*” (translated by Alan Zhukovski), “*In death I somehow find my fate*” (translated by Marco Carynnyk).

Conclusions and prospects for further development. Lawrence Venuti emphasized that translation is an interpretive act that involves what Jacques Derrida calls an “inscription”, so every translation requires the application of an interpretant as a necessary condition of its existence [22]. Ukrainian translators of Stus used different interpretants to inscribe his poetry in the

globalized space of English. In the 1980's, Carynnyk and Lassovsky attempted to bring translational justice by introducing "the other" Ukrainian poetry to the world – its avant-garde, innovative and sophisticated aesthetic code that had no ideological Soviet imprint – a case exemplified by Stus. In the 2020's, Stus's poetry emerged as emblematic, resonating with existential and resilient overtones that captured the zeitgeist of our time – from the pandemic to the full-scale war. This newfound prominence can be attributed to a renewed interest in themes of human endurance, inner strength, and existential reflection, so Stus's verses, marked by their profound insights into the human condition and their ability to evoke resilience in the face of adversity, garnered increased attention from contemporary English-language translators.

Brief introductory note by Tokarsky and Murray to their translation "Here's the Sun for You" revealed one more interpretant to incorporate Stus to the world poetry canon, as the translators emphasized that this poem exposes "with Kafkaesque subversion of logic the grotesque nature of the Soviet totalitarian state" [21]. In another instances mentioned above, Tokarsky alludes to T.S. Eliot and his "Four Quartets", as well as Walt Whitman. Drawing from Clive Scott's observation that "an autobiography of reading and associating" [4] can become a source of interpretants (for instance Edward Thomas's poem "Adlestrop" can be meaningful to the "reader of Proust"), Tokarsky and Murray apply this personalized contextual background to unveil the relevance and appeal of reading Stus in English.

To conclude, Stus-as-text remains largely undiscovered and underrepresented for English-language readership. Indeed, translations produced in the 1980s hold enduring value and merit reconsideration for republication, while the consolidation of scattered present-day poetic translations into a dedicated English volume of Stus's poetry is a pressing endeavor. Looking ahead, further studies could undertake the comparative analysis of different translations and explore in more detail the socio-political contexts influencing their reception. Examining the editorial design alongside the evolving perceptions of Stus's poetry among English-speaking audiences over time is another facet worth deeper study.

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