J. W. Goethe **“Faust”** (1898)

(Translated by Aspazija and Rainis)

Since early childhood, Goethe was one of the most favorite and closest poets to Rainis. He isn’t only drawn to the poet Goethe, but also the philosopher, scientist and erudite personality of his persona. The idea to translate “Faust” came to Rainis already in the years he was studying at the gymnasium, and he added it to the list of planed translations. While his studies, Rainis rendered a few fragments of this work into Latvian. In the middle of the 1990’s the publisher Pēteris Zālīte offered Aspazija, who was at the time already a well-known poetess, to translate Goethe’s tragedy, but she refused, not being sure about her capability to do such a philosophically difficult work. However Rainis convinced her to take on this job and resolved to translate “Faust” himself as well, even though at the time he was more known as a lawyer and newspaper editor.

Even appreciating how much Aspazija contributed to the creation of the translation of “Faust” (the translating of certain fragments, editing and preparing commentaries), it is nevertheless considered to be a work of Rainis, and in later years it was published only with his name on it. The work on the translation begun at the start of the year 1896 and was finished in 1897 at the prisons in Panevėžys, Liepāja and Rīga. The whole poetic translation of “Faust” was for the first time published in the monthly magazine “Mājas Viesa Mēnešraksts” in the editions 1 to 12 of the year 1897. Later the poem translation of “Faust” was printed in book form in 1898, adorned with elaborate illustrations and vignettes. The fact that Goethe’s work was translated and printed in the Latvian language was an invaluably significant thing for the forming process of the Latvian culture and the developing of the language. The reproduction of “Faust” proves Rainis’ talent as a poet and the maturity of his philosophical thinking. “Faust” is next to him, when he thinks about the future human and the model of the new future society. The poet was certain that the integration of this work in his culture is necessary for the process of development of every European national culture, because it captures the spiritual achievements and ideas of its time.

In 1926 Rainis was thinking about a new epic, about his own Faust of the 20th century. This work stays unwritten, however the influence of the theme of “Faust” can still be felt in the works both his (“Fire and Night” (*„Uguns un nakts”*), “Ave sol!”) and those of Aspazija (“The Witch” (*„Ragana”*), “The Daughter of Sun” (*„Saules meita”*)). In the person of Rainis was found a poet and philosopher, who could not only translate, but also create an adequate poetry image for the ever young ideas of Goethe. This work required to create a new language. Rainis was searching through dictionaries, reviving old and rarely used provincialism words, giving them new and shorter forms. After Rainis finished his translation the Latvian language wasn’t anymore the same it was before.

The attitude of linguists was critical. Soon a wide dispute emerged and against Rainis stood such people like Kārlis Mīlenbahs and Jēkabs Dravnieks. On the other hand, the language innovation was understood and supported by Teodors Zeiferts, Jānis Poruks, Rūdolfs Blaumanis and Andrejs Upīts. Translations have the tendency to become outdated with time. Not all of the new words have become a part of the language, for the satirically ironic verses can be probably found new, more precise translations, yet in the philosophical depth and the broad portrayal, in the comprehensive individualities of the expressions of Faust’s prideful “I” — in these Rainis is still unbeatable. His translation of “Faust” is still alive today. The extensive international conference of the year 1997, dedicated to the hundred year anniversary of the translation can testify to this.