THE POETRY OF ATTILA JÓZSEF IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

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Poetry is what gets left out in translation. (Robert Frost)

The translation of literature is a balancing act, an attempt to establish an equilibrium between the desire for faithfulness to an original and the necessity of creating something idiomatic and convincing in its own right in the target language. Such balance is hard to attain, and the result of any attempt to do so, regardless of whether the attempt succeeds, is necessarily a new original. Even the most slavishly literal scholarly translation of a text is a new text, one that did not exist before, and not simply a version of, or variation on, its antecedent. The translator's job is made more difficult when the original itself, whether by design or default, is vague or inaccessible, or both. Since obscurity is a fixture in much poetry, it is genre that consistently poses the greatest challenge to the translator. After all, poetry is unique in the emphasis it places on compression and sometimes, as a result, on ambiguity.

Though the pronouncement quoted above (a now legendary piece of Frostiana, full of his typical, impish, Yankee humor) could easily serve as an example of casual reductionism, it does reflect something basic to the nature of poetry and translation, and of the relationship between the two. Certainly, many poets, even some who translate (or translated) copiously, have come to a conclusion similar to Frost's. The early twentieth century Hungarian poet, essayist and fiction writer, Dezső Kosztolányi, for example, translated much and well from many languages, despite his conviction that translation is essentially impossible. There is a certain ambivalence, characteristic of many who try to translate poetry, that comes of seeing clearly the nature of the work at hand. It is a difficult endeavor, and one which regularly culminates in a flawed and imbalanced compromise only. It should be no surprise, then, that good translation of poetry are hard to find. It follows also from the same argument that mediocre and outright bad translations should abound. As a matter of fact, they do, and their publication is sometimes even received with critical acclaim.

Peter Hargitai's selection of translations from the poems of the Hungarian poet, Attila József (1905–1937), brings together 40 poems, along with the poet's "Curriculum Vitae," a document famous in his own country, and a short intro-

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duction by David Kirby. Illustrated by Elizabeth Woodsmall, the book has generally been praised by critics (including the American poets, Donald Justice and May Swenson) and received the 1988 Landon Translation Prize from the Academy of American Poets. Hargitai, an American of Hungarian origin, is himself a published poet, and brings to the task a knowledge of Hungarian sufficient at least to translate József more or less on his own, without the aid of a literal translation. While there is no fail-safe set of criteria that enables one person to translate poetry well and relegates another to the ranks of the second-rate, a grasp of the target language is an obvious *sine qua non* in the field, as is the ability to write a poem in that language. Many have done well without it, but a knowledge of the language of the original also clearly helps the translator. In his possession of all these skills, Hargitai on paper is a translator full of promise.

The volume begins with "Curriculum Vitae," a spare, poignant account of József's life, which includes the story of his expulsion from Szeged University, and which he wrote in 1937, the year he committed suicide by throwing himself under a train at Balatonszárszó in western Hungary.

Though he wrote it ostensibly only with the intention of using it to find a job, József put so much of himself and his view of the world into the plain, cold facts of the C. V., that since his death it has taken on the significance of autobiography. It reveals too much of certain controversial episodes in his life ever to have been much use to József in getting work. Still, it is a great piece of short prose, a type of consolation or apology, and if not remarkable stylistically, it is certainly striking in its urgency and candor. Hargitai's translation of "Curriculum Vitae" is readable and accurate on the whole, though somewhat shaky in one or two places. One passage, for example, which Hargitai translates as "I had stopped studying and going to lectures but I still knew my lessons," should in fact read: "I did not study, because I understood the lessons after hearing the teachers' explanations of them." This sort of misunderstanding of the original may not drastically impair Hargitai's prose text, but it does not bode well for his translations of József's poems. Sadly, this presentiment is borne out by a closer reading of these translations, which are quirky in places (as are József's poems, though unfortunately not in the same way or the same places) and patchy in others, and fail largely to imitate the metrical structure of their counterparts in József's work. More importantly, they fail with few exceptions as poems in English, an are thus caught in that no-man's-land between languages into which so much translation of poetry slips.

The first poem in the collection, "Strength Song," is an early piece, and though not one of József's most famous, it does represent well an element common to his work, a sort of tragic-heroic pose more fully developed in two later poems, one which Hargitai does not translate here and another which does appear in this collection under the title, "With All My Heart" (though "With a Pure Heart" would be a more literal rendering of the Hungarian). "Strength Song" is a

lyric of 15 lines, for some reason reduced to 12 in Hargitai's treatment, apparently due largely to a series of misreadings and omissions on the translator's part. For example, three lines which in the original (in the reviewer's literal translation) read:

> Under my feet the world of the pyramids crumbles away,
> and the dizzied spirit of the timeless sun
> crowns my head, which is tipped into the sky,

are reduced in Hargitai to the cryptic, "I crown my head, stagger the heavens." Lost, along with clarity, in the economy of this sweeping gesture is something essential to the poem, the image of the speaker as a colossus, towering into the stratosphere over the earth. Given this and other, more minor quiddities ("seventeen year-old muscles" becomes the awkward "seventeen-year muscles" in translation), in can come as no surprise that Hargitai's "Strenght Song" is hesitant and vague, and decidedly weaker than József's original. The problems with this first poem are not mere aberrations. They are diagnostic, and their symptoms can be found throughout the collection. "Mamma," a translation of one of József's best-know poems, concludes with the line "she blues the waters of the sky." The word "blues," apparently the third person singular of a verb of Hargitai's own invention, mars an otherwise decent effort. "Mamma" also suffers from another problem, likewise typical of these translations and even more troubling than the vagueness and inattention to detail already discussed – namely, the poor versification which is Hargitai's Achilles' heel as a translator. József wrote this poem ("Mama" in the Hungarian original) in wonderfully-cadenced lines of nine syllables each. In Hargitai's translation, line lengths range from four to ten syllables, not manipulated for effect but punctuated rather by irregular stresses in much the same way as everyday speech in English. The stresses of everyday speech are the basis of prose rhythm, and distinguish that genre from verse, where rhythm is subjected to certain patterns and thus controlled. Free verse, which attempts to remove the language of poetry from this constraint and return it to its origins in the colloquial, clearly has its place in the translator's bag of tricks. It is the obvious and apposite choice for the translation of poetry written in free verse. But its application to metrical poetry, whether in the service of contemporary taste or the translator's whim, is as problematic as the translation of a free verse poem into tetrameter quatrains. Even so, for those who insist on translating the formal into the free, the success of their endeavor rides largely on the quality of their free verse. In Hargitai's case, that quality is generally low. In fact, he renders nearly all of József's poems in a slack, free verse that borders in places on prose. This lax approach to metrics is something wholly foreign to József (even his prose poems and free verse "move" well), and is also great weakness of "With All My Heart," Hargitai's translation of a poem, another one of József's

most famous, which got its author expelled from university, and which in 1924 the Hungarian critic Pál Ignotus saw as the herald of a new poetry. Even here, where Hargitai is actually plainly concerned with meter, his inability to establish a consistent metrical pattern from which to deviate at times results in versification not quite free but not regular, more exception than rule, and thus more staccato than fluent. Still, "With All My Heart" succeeds in terms of metrics as well as any other translation in the collection, both in its own right and as a mimesis of the original. It is also one of the few translations in which Hargitai makes any attempt at preserving rhyme, a feature common to many of József's poems. (In fairness to Hargitai, he does substitute slant rhyme for full with varied success in a number of poems.) Despite its shortcomings, "With All My Heart" is one of the better efforts in the volume and as such (and considering its importance in József's work) is worth quoting in full:

> I have no father and no mother,
> I have no God, I have no land,
> neither cradle, nor a cover,
> nor kiss, nor lover's hand.
>
> Three days I haven't eaten
> neither scarcely nor well,
> all I have is twenty years,
> twenty years I'll gladly sell.
>
> If no one will take them,
> then maybe the devil will.
> I'll break in with all my heart,
> And if need be, kill.
>
> They'll catch and they'll hang me,
> cover me up with blessed earth,
> and death-eating grass will start
> growing on my lovely heart.

Though Hargitai's punctuation is erratic, here as elsewhere, and the reading of "death-eating grass" for "death-bringing grass" is curious, the translation does have some good moments, such as the enjambment, "start/growing," in the last two lines. A few other translations stand out from the rest. "Weary Man," which works as a poem in its own right, is one of the best translations of those collected here. "Eulogy" is another one of Hargitai's limited successes, as are "Bitter," a great prose poem in the original, "Everything Is Old" and "Dew." At the other end of the spectrum, "Medallions," in József a cryptic, unfinished poem in eleven and a half sections, each one a sort of riddle in rhyme, is predictably one of Hargitai's worst. In his hands it becomes a short primer on everything he does badly in the book.

While he lived, József wrote under conditions imposed by poverty, hunger and, towards the end of his life, mental illness. When he died, very few people had any sense of his greatness. So much has changed in Hungary in this regard in the nearly sixty years since 1937 that today it is taken for granted that he is one of the greatest Hungarian poets of any time. He has become a truly popular figure, popular in a way that few poets, if any, ever have been in this country. Nearly all Hungarians know something about him. The state university in Szeged, a school he was once kicked out of for writing and publishing the poem, "Tiszta szívvel" (Hargitai's "With All My Heart"), which one professor objected to on moral grounds, ironically now bears his name, as do streets and institutions throughout the country. National Poetry Day, an official state holiday, is even celebrated on József's birthday. His critical reputation also seems secure (though reputations, subject as they are fashion, are never stable for long). This all attests to the fact that he has come full circle, from isolation to veneration, though only posthumously, as is so often the case.

Despite his stature at home, and despite the fact that even a cursory examination indicates he is a poet worthy of serious attention, József is relatively unknow in the West, even in academia, outside a small group of scholars and poets. This discrepancy is easy to explain. József wrote in Hungarian, naturally, a fact that places him alongside most of his compatriots in liguistic isolation. As a Finno-Ugric language, Hungarian is fundamentally different in terms off grammar and vocabulary from the Indo-European languages that surround Hungary in Central Europe. It is also notoriously difficult to learn, and thus difficult to translate. In fact, Hungarian literature has suffered centuries of neglect in the scholarship of many countries due to this linguistic separateness, and in this sense József represents just one chapter in a history of isolation. What little attention József has received from scholars outside Hungary has been so heavily biased and uneven that it has perhaps done him more harm than good. These commentators sometimes refer him as a Socialist poet, a label so superficial and ill-fitting that a no more than passing familiarity with his work is enough to call it into question. József was associated with the then underground Communist movement in Hungary for a time, and he did write some programmatic pieces, but branding him a Socialist poet on this basis is ludicrous. In fact, József's poetry is so eclectic and yet so much his own that it consistently defies attempts at classification. This recalcitrance does not sit well with those who insist on labeling everything they study, but it should be accepted as a more accurate reflection of reality than any standard descriptive tag. In any case, the fact that his work will not submit meagerly to captivity in an easy generalization is as much a testimony to that work as it is an illustration of a shortcoming in scholarship.

In his introduction to the book, a generally perceptive short essay, David Kirby asserts that "Peter Hargitai's versions are as colloquial and emotionally charged as the original," a statement which says more about Kirby's own knowl-

edge of the originals than it does about Hargitai's translations. The truth is, the translations collected in *Perched on Nothing's Branch* reflect next to nothing of the strength and originality of József's language. The style most typical of his poetry is the result of a combination of informal yet intense, insistent diction, sometimes accessible, sometimes obscure, and certain elements of traditional prosody. József is primarily a metrist, a writer of verse, and many of his poems rely for their effect on rhyme and meter. Hargitai's generally limp, aimless free verse is naturally hard-pressed to reflect this formalism. Hargitai's selection of poems for translation is also regrettable at times, especially in its omission of "For My Birthday," a great poem, easily one of József's best and most innovative, which should be read as a companion to "With a Pure Heart." Still, Hargitai's collection represents a distinct improvement on Anton Nyerges' 1973 book, *Attila József,* a more representative but wholly unreadable selection of translations published by the Hungarian Cultural Foundation in Buffalo. *Perched on Nothing's Branch* adds very little, however, in terms of quality to the work of John Bátki, whose *Attila József: Selected Texts and Poems* was published in Great Britain by the Carcanet Press, also in 1973. It is clear that József's poetry has yet to find its definitive translator (or translators) in English. Though patently flawed, if Hargitai's translations gain József new readers, they will have done some service. After all, an ideal translator may be out there now, as yet unfamiliar with József's work.