

Adam Makkai (ed.)

**In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag': The Poetry of Hungary.
An Anthology of Hungarian Poetry from the 13th Century
to the Present in English Translation. Vol. I.**

Chicago–Budapest: Atlantis–Centaur, M. Szivárvány and Corvina,
1996. Lxvi + 964 pp.

I

One is hard pressed not to read this book with what Hamlet's uncle describes as "an auspicious and a dropping eye". The publication in English translation of nearly 900 pages of Hungarian poetry dating from the thirteenth century to the very recent past is undeniably a remarkable achievement and, for anyone with an interest in the international dissemination of Hungarian culture, a major event. The anthology is a labour of love, some thirty-three years in the making, and is only the first of two planned volumes. The focus of the second volume is not altogether clear, partly because hints as to its contents are scattered throughout the first. In his Introduction, the editor explains that "a large number of excellent poets I wanted to include in Volume I will instead appear in Volume II, due to severe space limitations" (xxv); in the introductory remarks to the extensive essay by László Cs. Szabó on "A Nation and Its Poetry" at the end of the anthology we are told that the second volume "will present in detail the work of living Hungarian poets, regardless of their domicile or citizenship" (867), and a footnote to the same essay further suggests that a "complete list of Hungarian poets who have lived abroad will appear in Volume II of *The Poetry of Hungary*" (947). In any case, one can but applaud the energy and dedication of an editor who promises us more, after already having given us, in the quantitative sense at least, so much.

"To edit an anthology of translated poetry invites the fury of the gods", writes Árpád Göncz in his Foreword to the anthology. While the nobility of this undertaking can only inspire admiration, the quality of the translations themselves sadly invites, if not exactly celestial fury, at least mortal disappointment. In his Introduction to the volume, Professor Makkai explains the method of translation adopted for the anthology. He calls it the "Gara Method of Translation", because it was inspired by the procedures followed in producing Ladislav Gara's *Anthologie de la poésie hongroise* published by Les Éditions du Seuil in 1962. According to this method, poets working in the Target Language are given a literal translation of the poem in question, a free prose translation, mock stanzas reproducing the "rhythmic and rhyming pattern" of the original ("without regard for the meaning"), and a tape-recorded reading of the poem in the original Source Language. Gara, we are told, would not only have his poets produce several versions of the same poems but also "often gave the same piece to several poets, sometimes ten or more... then judiciously compared all the possible versions harvested in this manner and only included what he and his team thought were of the highest quality" (xxii). A rigorous enough method, to be sure, and in the case of Gara's *Anthologie* it undoubtedly produced some excellent results. It is hard, however, to believe that the method was applied with much rigour in preparing *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'*. About a third of the translations were produced by authors who could read Hungarian without the above mentioned aids – Makkai alone is responsible for about a hundred translations – and the best of the native-speaker poets, inevitably

perhaps, only make a handful of contributions. One imagines that Makkai's chief problem lay in finding usable translations at all, rather than in "judiciously" selecting between competing versions; hence the resuscitation of so many translations by the stalwart Watson Kirkconnell (the extent of whose contribution is second only to that of the editor), a great and noble friend to Hungarian poetry, but hardly a major poet in English. The unfortunate result is that the bulk of the translations in the anthology are depressingly weak, and much of the poetry simply reads like doggerel. Too often the translators fail to make the crucial leap from fidelity to the sense and sound of the original to the creation of anything one might recognize as poem in its own right in the target language. Consequently, the translations read, for the most part, like translations, and not even very accomplished translations at that.

It may appear ungenerous to single out examples, but in the light of Professor Makkai's footnote to his own translation of Sándor Petőfi's famous "Nemzeti dal", there is perhaps some justification in reproducing a couple of stanzas here. "Translated many times in the past," Makkai writes, "former English renditions failed to bring out the natural flow and rhythm of the poem, whose aesthetic value lies less in its political message than in the fine arch the belligerent tone weaves towards the religious end" (319). Here is the translator's opening stanza, followed by stanza four:

Rise up, Magyar, the country calls!
 It's 'now or never' what fate befalls...
 Shall we live as slaves or free men?
 That's the question – choose your 'Amen'!
 God of Hungarians, we swear unto Thee,
 We swear unto Thee – that slaves we shall no longer be!
 [...]
 Sabers outshine chains and fetters,
 It's the sword that one's arm betters.
 Yet we wear grim chains and shackles.
 Swords, slash through the damned manacles!
 God of Hungarians, we swear [etc.]

It is precisely the sense these lines reveal of trying to make English words fit a pattern the translator has all too rigidly in his head that is so characteristic of the volume. Petőfi undoubtedly was, as we are told "a genius of language, who mastered any form he chose", but what is to be gained by contorting English syntax for the sake of forcing such stilted anapaests as the ones offered by these lines from "At the End of September" (Szeptember végén):

but notice my dark hairs – to white streaks I lose them –
 as the hoarfrosts of autumn my head's winter start.

This, again, is all too typical of the laboured, awkward, stilted and altogether unpoetic verse that characterizes the anthology as a whole.

There are better things in *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'*, but they are unfortunately few and far between. One gets, as one would expect, respectable poetry from the likes of John Fuller (translating Batsányi) and his late father (translating György Sárközi), and George Szirtes seven contributions come as a breath of fresh air (why was he only given snippets of Vas and Jékely?). Peter Zollman's translations are occasionally inspired; parts of Babits's "Questions at Night" and "The Danaids" are splendidly done in his translation, and there are lines and

cadences in his “The Approaching Winter” which really do strike the note of Berzsenyi. The late Ted Hughes’s Pilinszky translations have justly been celebrated and it is quite appropriate that they should be included here – but why only two translations, when the alternative versions offered are so clearly inferior? Compare, for example, the first nine lines of Hughes’s version of “Fish in the Net”:

We are tossing in a net of stars.
 Fish hauled up to the beach,
 gasping in nothingness,
 mouths snapping dry void.
 Whispering, the lost element
 calls us in vain.
 Choking among edged stones
 and pebbles, we must
 live and die in a heap.

with the version given in the anthology:

We write in a star-net
 fish, hauled onto land;
 we gasp into the emptiness
 we bite dry nothing’s end.
 The Element we’ve left and lost
 whispers in vain to return,
 ‘midst prickly stones and pebbles
 suffocating, we must
 live and die next to each other!

From the confusing punctuation of the first two lines and the twisting of syntax for the sake of half a rhyme (“we bite dry nothing’s end”), to the unforgivably stilted “midst” in line seven, the anthology version simply fails to convince as poetry. One also wonders why one of Pilinszky’s central masterpieces, “Apokrif”, was not included, and why for that matter Pilinszky is so under-represented in the volume. Gyula Illyés, for example, is given almost three times as much space; supposedly because the editor considers him “[p]erhaps the most important, politically committed Hungarian intellectual of the 20th century” (625) – another case of rather questionable punctuation.

The question of selection is, of course, always a thorny one in the compilation of an anthology of this kind. It would be pointless to grumble about the omission of personal favourites; one is at least consoled by the thought of the fate they may fortuitously have escaped in having been left to rest in peace. (Although the complete absence of Pál Ányos, Gábor Dayka and László Szentjóni Szabó from the “Enlightenment” section of such an extensive anthology strikes me as utterly inexplicable.) *In Quest of the ‘Miracle Stag’* raises, however, a still thornier question. With so little Hungarian poetry available in good translation, are more bad translations better than no translations at all? And what kind of service does an anthology like this do either to Hungarian poetry or to its potential readership in the English-speaking world? There is enough good material in this anthology to have formed a slim volume of convincing versions of Hungarian poetry in English. It would not, of course, have been as systematic, comprehensive or as historically “representative” as the anthology now stands. But the problem

with *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* is precisely that it too often simply "represents" poetry, rather than giving us poetry as such. Much as one commends the anthology's aspirations, one might at the end of the day rather have had the real thing than the representation, the slim volume of poetry rather than the heavy tome of history.

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II

I greet the appearance of this anthology with a mixture of anticipation and foreboding. A representative collection of Hungarian poetry in English translation is long overdue and Makkai's is by far the most comprehensive and ambitious to date. Still, I have been disappointed consistently enough by other volumes of translations from the Hungarian to know the danger of expecting too much. In acquainting myself with what is available, I have been shocked into numbness by the preponderance of the bad and mediocre in the field, and, I am sad to say, I have become inured to it.

The first volume of *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* sets out to trace Hungarian poetry from its beginnings in recorded oral tradition and folk songs to the present. In the planned second volume, Makkai intends to collect the work of living Hungarian poets to give the reader some sense of the contemporary scene in Hungarian poetry. In mapping its course through the distant and recent past to the threshold of the present, volume one fills well over one thousand pages and includes a short foreword, a not so short introduction and various notes and appendices of various lengths, in addition to its roughly 850 pages of translations. Compiling a work of this scope is a daunting task, and its completion, whatever the work's quality, is a significant accomplishment, one which clearly comes as the result of great care and effort. Makkai and his fellow editors are to be congratulated for having completed such a formidable project.

At first glance, *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* has all the habiliments of quality. It is an attractive book, fairly well printed and laid out, and illustrated with accomplished woodcuts by the Hungarian-born, English artist, George Buday. It even comes with the blessing of Árpád Göncz, the President of Hungary and a published writer himself, who contributes a complimentary foreword to the book. In short, a quick perusal gives us at least superficial reason for optimism. *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* seems substantial, and not by virtue of its weight alone. But once the book has been put to the test, once its nature has been called out in the reading, our guarded optimism falls away. There is no longer any mixture of emotions in our approach to it. Foreboding takes on the flesh of disbelief, anticipation draws its final breath, then fossilizes into disappointment. When Makkai's anthology has revealed its true face to us, we see there can be no satisfaction here, no hope of anything approaching Blake's "lineaments of Gratified Desire".

The editing in this collection is heavy-handed and clumsy throughout, in places fairly scandalous and in general far too intrusive. Where he has seen fit, it seems, Makkai has tinkered with or substantially rewritten the work of other translators. This editorial license might be excusable as merely over-zealous were he a great translator. If the products of this indulgence were outstanding, a reviewer could feel justified in taking Makkai to task only lightly for such indiscretions. The ends would have gone some way toward justifying the means. But the results are not overwhelmingly good. The original translations themselves may not have been great (I do not have them all at hand and so cannot speak to their general quality), but it is

telling that after Makkai's efforts none is so substantially improved as to be great, or even very good. This does not mean that Makkai has not improved any of them. He may have done indeed, but I can only judge the final products of these peculiar collaborations. In his general introduction, Makkai thanks Watson Kirkconnell and Anton N. Nyerges, two of the translators whose work is included here, for their permission "to carry out a few minor touch-ups." But Makkai also reworks translations by George Burrow, Joseph Leftwich, Thomas Kabdedo, J. G. Nichols, Kenneth White, Ena Roberts, H. H. Hart, Neville Masteman, Judith Kroll, William N. Loew, István Tótfalusi, Michael Kitka, István Fekete, Vernon Watkins, and Peter Jay. Was he granted permission to do so by any or all of these translators? Perhaps he was. If so, I stand corrected (though I doubt this was the case with William N. Loew, a Hungarian-American translator who died in 1922). But even if Makkai did receive the necessary permissions, my encounter with his unorthodox procedure leaves me wondering just what the point could be of such extensive revision of other people's work. Is this a species of what Oscar Williams did in his *Little Treasury of Modern Poetry*, including his own work (and that of his wife, Gene Derwood) in a more than generous selection, while skimming on or bypassing altogether several worthy poets? Whatever its sources and ethical implications, the practice looks bad in an anthology compiled from translations by various authors.

Makkai has selected eighty-one of his own translations for this volume, not including those pieces by other authors that he has revised, which number thirty-two, for a total of at least 113 translations attributable in part or whole to the volume's chief editor. (There may in fact be more than this, since at least one translation that bears Makkai's initials is not listed under his name in the index of translators.) This puts Makkai squarely in the lead in number of appearances in the volume. If it were a competition, a kind of contributor's Olympics, let's say, Makkai would win going away. He is followed by Watson Kirkconnell in distant second with seventy-two translations and Peter Zollman in third with fifty-eight, after which the numbers drop off sharply into the teens. All this gives one the impression that Makkai the Editor (or Judge, to extend the sporting metaphor) is a great fan of Makkai the Translator, or at least that the former takes the latter very seriously. This seems to invite all others to do the same, which in turn invites scrutiny, encourages the reader to examine Makkai's translations to see whether such overt self-promotion could be justified. I accept the invitation and take the opportunity now to look at Makkai's translations.

Though many of his offerings are flawed beyond the pale of criticism, Makkai does contribute some good efforts to the collection (Gyula Juhász's "What Was Her Blondness Like..." and Attila József's "On Mankind" are two of the more successful). But too often even his best translations are marred by solecisms and awkward constructions. In "Zrínyi's Second Song", a translation of "Zrínyi második éneke" by the early nineteenth-century poet and essayist, Ferenc Kölcsey, Makkai taints an otherwise competent performance with the ungainly, ungrammatical "Your country's constellation / Must sunset for her prodigal son's guilt". I am not against inventive usages per se. Language permits such flexibility, even welcomes it in the hands of a good poet. But this effort to press "sunset" into service as a verb only calls unwanted attention to itself and falls so short of success it can hope to elicit nothing more sympathetic than a bemused chuckle in the reader. Two lines down in the same translation, Makkai betrays his weakness for archaic diction and Elizabethan syntax in the phrase "grey-haired fathers [sic] tombs begilt". Makkai's translations are rife with examples of this kind ("For 'twas the same song crying o'er the meadows", p. 570; "O woe, how shallow the depths and bare", p. 493; "For paltry mercenaries may have killed / him, and his heart could stop – but lo, see a / real wonder", p. 790; etc.). He employs these purposeful atavisms indiscriminately: the three phrases in parentheses above are from translations of twentieth-century poems, each by

a different poet (István Sinka, "My Mother Dances a Ballad"; Dezső Kosztolányi, "The Song of 'Kornél Esti'"; János Pilinszky, "On the Third Day"). As one might expect, none of the originals reads like an indifferent exercise in belated Victorian poesy. I do not mean to suggest that a translation should serve as a mirror to its original in every respect. To have any hope of avoiding the foibles of the purely academic or the amateur, a translation of a poem must succeed as a poem in its own right. One that fails in this cannot be rescued by literal accuracy or harmed significantly by excessive freedom.

Makkai renders Kölcsey's poem in an irregular mixture of meters that skirts the iambic closely but never quite gets there. In too many places (and this is typical of Makkai's versification) the translation borders on prose without much novelty or success. Despite these failings, "Zrínyi's Second Song" manages to preserve the stanza form and rhyme of the original. Makkai deserves commendation for his fidelity in this (a laudably consistent element in his approach to translation). More often than not, the regular meter and rhyme of originals get pushed aside by translators in favor of free verse, which is easier to pull off in some senses and in any case more prevalent in our poetry today. But Makkai is not a remarkable metrist in English, and, though he sometimes manages to fill out the form, his substitutions are so frequent and so slack that they regularly call into question his handle on the norm he means to approach. On the whole, his grasp of metrics impresses one as nearly competent. His verse tends to split the difference between the accentual-syllabic and the purely syllabic without being very much at home in either. His translation of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz's "Még egyszer Lillához" ("Once More to Lilla") provides as good an example as any of his dilemma as a prosodist. Makkai executes the translation in an ornate metrical form that reproduces the letter of Csokonai's original reasonably well. Like so many of his efforts, it looks like the original on the page, but (again like so many) it does not read like the original. There is no trace here of the sound and spirit of Csokonai's versification. Makkai's version is cold and lifeless and its rhythmic effects remarkable only in their combination of unsettling jerkiness and listless meandering. Since Makkai's translations of metrical poems rarely establish a pattern from which to deviate, it may be misleading to speak of their substitutions. It would be more accurate in many cases to regard substitution as the rule in his metrics, which makes extended prosodic analysis of his work fruitless. In any case, Makkai's failures seldom stem from errant versification alone. When the translations fail (as they often do), they fail in their entirety as independent poems.

Taken as a whole, Makkai's translations leave me as they found me, only bewildered and with a nagging sense of injustice. I think this effect results in part from their artless eclecticism, a quirky blend of the overworked, affected highbrow and the informal. Makkai seems to admire contractions in any form and context and regularly forces them on the reader where common usage and common sense would advise against it. ("You, who're alive now", p. 590; "How different rang the thunder of Hungary", p. 176; "You can't teach your nation, your verse's just a caper", p. 124.) I suspect this compulsion may stem from a notion that the facile prosodist makes verse by whatever means possible. I agree entirely, Makkai has certainly shown that a bad line can be made to scan through inventive use of punctuation. Unfortunately, he has also demonstrated that such lines invariably remain bad and actually tend to be laughably bad after all his tinkering. Add to this Makkai's weakness for the pseudo-folksy and studied colloquial ("I must sob here, sob a-crying, / and what I can't, Nymph, help! I've been a-trying", p. 163) and you have a combination that makes for fitful reading, each translation a haphazard tug-of-war between the Erstwhiles and the Y'all's with neither gaining sufficient advantage in the end to hold the reader's attention. After trudging through this second-hand landscape with its language relics and derelict constructions and its open season on the apos-

trophe, anyone who came to this book looking for readable poems should be thoroughly frustrated and ready to move on.

Like Makkai's, Watson Kirkconnell's translations are mired in the past, shot through with outworn contractions and antiquated turns of phrase. In this, both translators belong to what one might call the Miniver Cheevy school of versifying. Both seem to have "grown lean" with Robinson's world-weary, day-dreaming, comic figure in their assault on the seasons. Kirkconnell consistently adopts the pseudo-heroic tone as a translator, inflating even the sparest modernist poems into versions that read like neo-Romantic mock epics. This practice seems harmless enough on the surface. In fact, it puts the general reader, already at a disadvantage without knowledge of the originals, in danger of accepting *ex cathedra* a very skewed view of the nature and course of Hungarian poetry in the last hundred years.

In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag' intends to be encyclopedic and thus to provide a panoramic landscape or representative survey of Hungarian poetry. To achieve the type of inclusiveness he is after, Makkai has had to present a range of translations, from the very good few through the undistinguished multitudes to the frankly unrepresentable many. I have already noted Makkai's own shortcomings as a translator, along with those of Watson Kirkconnell. If I were to limit my discussion of individual translators to just these two, I might still manage to give some sense of the book's basic flavor. After all, together Makkai and Kirkconnell account for more than a third of the translations in the collection (it takes 89 translators to produce the remaining two-thirds). But *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* does contain some good work, despite its emphasis on the mediocre. There are convincing translations by a handful of prominent British poets, all of whom worked from literal translations and without extensive knowledge of Hungarian. Roy Fuller and John Wain stand out from the rest of these, while Britain's former poet-laureate, Ted Hughes, next to W. H. Auden easily the most imposing name included, delivers two rather undistinguished efforts. (Auden's single contribution is fine but very spare and certainly not earth-shattering.) It is sadly diagnostic that the best translators in the collection are among the most scantily represented here. Edwin Morgan's work is consistently good and dominates the selections from Sándor Weöres's poetry, much to Makkai's credit and the benefit of the book. But George Szirtes, another of the better and more prolific contemporary translators from the Hungarian, has just six pieces in the anthology. Peter Zollman, heavily represented throughout, is a spotty translator, just readable at his best, and belongs with Makkai and Kirkconnell in their loyalty to the antique, though Zollman exhibits this in a greatly diminished measure, primarily in his syntax. J. G. Nichols also deserves mention as one of the more accomplished contributors to the book (his translations from Gyula Juhász are especially satisfying). There is one exceptional inclusion here as well. Christine Brooke-Rose, whose name I have not encountered much, appears just once (but very impressively) with a translation of a poem by Gyula Illyés ("The Apricot Tree"), one of the best in the collection. Her single contribution validates Makkai's whole endeavor. I only wish her work had been included in a quantity commensurate with its apparent quality and at the expense of the filler that gives this anthology its bulk.

The editor of any anthology is limited in making selections by what is available at the time or can be produced through assignment or commission. This may be self-evident, but it complicates the assessment of such compilations based on what they include. Can an editor be faulted for accurately representing the state of affairs in a given field? Does the reviewer, in turn, have a responsibility to question the criteria for selection in a book that includes a preponderance of the bad or indifferent, or one that excludes much that is clearly good, or one that, like Makkai's, commits both of these peccadilloes in some measure? I think the answer to both

questions must be yes. When someone sets out to compile a tome, knowing there is barely enough first-rate work to flesh out a slim volume, the endeavor cannot end well. If anthologists want their products to be good, they must extend their responsibility beyond selection to the very conception of the work, its scope and focus. There can be no defense in lamenting the paucity of quality poems, translations, etc. An anthology whose nature is governed as much by accident as by choice does a disservice to its subject and the cause it means to represent. *The Stuffed Owl* and its kin aside, good anthologies will reflect what is best in their field. Decisions on inclusion may come down to arbitrary issues: there is room here for matters of taste, for constraints put on editors by money, space or time, for the thousand small concerns that can plague a project. But these decisions should never result from bad research or a faulty initial concept of the work.

Makkai would have done well to limit the scope of his anthology, if not to a single period, at least to the most outstanding figures in the last five hundred years. I am confident that László Arany, Gyula Reviczky, Ödön Palasovszky and several others could have been passed over without seriously undermining the spirit of the work. In this way, Makkai and his fellow translators could have concentrated their efforts and might with some luck have come up with more flattering results. As it is, there are a number of related anthologies better than this, though none half so Herculean. (I am thinking, for instance, of Miklós Vajda's *Modern Hungarian Poetry* and Thomas Kabdebo's *Hundred Hungarian Poems*.) For all its generosity and good faith, *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* adds little of substance to the field. It may improve on Watson Kirkconnell's long and tedious collection, *Hungarian Helicon*, but only by a hair. The curious will find more welcoming homes in some of the smaller anthologies and collections than they will here, and I would send them to any one of these long before recommending Makkai's palatial accommodations.

In a sense, the publication of this book is an important event. It is even historic on the modest scale of such things. I fear that in ten years *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* may also be of historical interest only, referred to as a document, one of the first of its type, but not very much read. But this is not for me to decide and, despite this dark prediction, I would be happy to see the book attract enthusiastic readers. It is terribly flawed (the punctuation is inept from start to finish and the proofreading a travesty, unleashing such curve balls as "Alan Dixon" spelled "Aalan Dickson" in the index of translators). Even its critical apparatus is potentially misleading (the vision of Hungarian history it presents strikes me as largely revision). And yet I wish Makkai's anthology well, in the belief that it will be of use and interest to someone somewhere. Though subject to the vicissitudes of fashion, the reputations of peripheral literatures are resilient (partly because they are marginal), and in the end no single work can do irreparable harm to the entire body of Hungarian poetry.

Hungarian poetry in English translation is not a field that takes up much territory. Once the dross has been removed, once the egregiously inept and the mediocre have been expunged, what is left is not so much a field as a patch of yard, well-tended and brightened by daffodils and lilies, but a patch of yard all the same. It is a pleasant enough place and I have spent many idle hours reading in its confines. Each of its parts represents a service done to the whole of Hungarian poetry and each addition to its ranks offers reason for hope that the field will continue to grow. Several anthologists have found in it the makings of small, attractive bouquets. But Makkai had decided to take a more inclusive, monumental approach and seems determined to play florist to the literary equivalent of a coronation or, as turns out to be more apt, a state funeral. In his defense I can only suggest that he may have envisioned some source of decent flowers beyond this humble garden nook.

III

The recent appearance of *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* has prompted harsh, though entirely appropriate criticism. The anthology is riddled with flaws and any reader who opened it without being forewarned of its pitfalls would be shocked by the often bizarre twists of phrase contrived by some of the translators. Given the book's shortcomings, it is not surprising if its few merits have perhaps been overlooked. These merits, however, should be mentioned, as they might suggest the possible usefulness of this contribution to the literature in English concerning Hungarian poetry.

Though Makkai proves, as has been noted by Christof Scheele, a meddlesome editor and at best inconsistent translator, he nevertheless has made some inclusions in the anthology that greatly add to its worth. The succinct biographical sketches, which often contain mention of notable works (often prose) that have not been included in the book, offer background information helpful to a reader unfamiliar with Hungarian authors. In addition Makkai includes footnotes, which give fairly generous explanations of allusions to historical figures and events. Many of these footnotes contain fascinating tidbits concerning the significance of certain poems or passages. It is crucial, for example, to note, as Makkai does, that Vörösmarty's *Szózat* ("Appeal"), set to music by Béni Egressy, has become a sort of second national anthem for Hungary. Makkai often points out lines (for example, from Arany's *Toldi*) which have become proverbial in Hungarian. Perhaps the most interesting of Makkai's comments concerns the scene between Adam and the scientist in Madách's *Az ember tragédiája* ("The Tragedy of Man"). He notes that it was largely because of this scene that the play could not be performed under Stalinism in Hungary before 1953 by order of the Communist Party leader Mátyás Rákosi. Such details enable a reader to better understand the significance that many of the poems and passages have acquired.

Makkai has been criticized for including works of less significant Hungarian poets. Such a contention is problematic. It was clearly the editor's goal to provide a representative survey of Hungarian poetry, and one is tempted to say that he succeeded. It is wrong, for example, to cite the inclusion of works by Gyula Reviczky as a shortcoming. His poem in response to Arany's *Kozmopolita költészet* ("Cosmopolitan Poetry") articulates a significant attitude toward the debates concerning the role of the poet in nineteenth-century Hungary. Although the translation included in the anthology is poor, the crucial differences between the attitude expressed by Arany and that of Reviczky are clear. Mihály Tompa is perhaps a poet of no greater stature than Reviczky, yet the translation of his poem *A gólyához* ("To the Stork"), an expression of despair after the defeat of the 1848 revolution, is an excellent contribution to the volume. Moreover, when dealing with the most famous Hungarian poets such as Vörösmarty, Petőfi, or Arany, Makkai has taken care to include works of varying styles. Thus alongside the somber *Szózat* and *Az emberek* ("On Makind") we also find *Petike* ("Young Pete"), a sample of Vörösmarty's impish verve. These remarks, however, should be tempered with the observation that there are no works of Lőrinc Orczy in the anthology, an inexcusable oversight if it was indeed the editor's intention to provide a representative survey.

In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag' is littered with mediocre and even galling translations and Scheele is certainly correct to ask why so few works were included by, for example, Edwin Morgan and George Szirtes and so many by Watson Kirkconnell and Makkai himself. However, the worth of the book should not be too hastily dismissed. Too much has been written about the challenges of translating, and I hesitate to add another comment. Nevertheless, without intending to contest accepted wisdom, I wish to suggest that there are readers of poetry in English translation who are not necessarily looking for fine verse. Certainly there is enough

poetry written in English to last any reader a lifetime. Some readers of translated poetry undertake simply to discern a few of the distinctive features of a different literary tradition. This includes attempting to grasp historical influences which shaped attitudes towards literature and language. For such a reader, *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* will prove, in spite of its shortcomings, a useful book. It is perhaps faint praise, but nevertheless this anthology constitutes an important contribution to the literature available in English on Hungarian poetry.

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Thomas E. Cooper

IV

Translations are often judged in terms of "faithfulness to the original." Christof Scheele makes an important point by insisting that "the translation of a poem must succeed as a poem in its own right." Such a target-oriented approach implies a radical devaluation of most of the English versions of Hungarian poems published so far.

Unlike Richard Aczel, a distinguished scholar and translator, Thomas E. Cooper, an American who has studied Hungarian history, language, and literature, and Christof Scheele, a young poet who writes verse in both English and Hungarian, I am not a native speaker of the English and Hungarian, so my reading of the anthology edited by Adam Makkai is strictly limited. I cannot judge the quality of the translations; all I can do is to assess the selection.

The high standard Scheele sets makes understandable the claim that in the English translation of Hungarian verse "there is barely enough first-rate work to flesh out a slim volume." Paradoxically, it is thanks to *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'*, the only large-scale anthology of Hungarian verse in English to date, that we can understand why Hungarian poetry is so little known and appreciated in the English-speaking world. In any case, it is possible to make general statements about the relative success and failure of the English translations of Hungarian verse on the basis of this unprecedented collection.

Since the success of a translation depends entirely on its reception in the target culture, the ideal translators would be poet, whose work in the target language is significant. Few, very few of them can read Hungarian, so they have to rely on prose translations. Occasionally this two-stage process has led to readable versions, but a poet unfamiliar with the source culture is no closer to being an ideal translator than a Hungarian who translates from his/her native language into English.

Translation can be regarded as an interlingual activity only if language is taken in a very broad sense, as the embodiment of cultural memory. Most of the existing translations of Hungarian verse have been made with the false assumption that translation was an interlingual activity in a limited sense. Some Hungarians, who claim to have a perfect command of the English language in a practical sense but write poetry neither in English nor in Hungarian, have done more harm than good to the international reputation of Hungarian literature by publishing translations made with good intentions but with no understanding of what poetry is.

While it is undeniably true that no single book can resolve such a crisis, it would be unjust to ignore the merits of an ambitious undertaking such as *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'*. The works of seventy-eight authors are included, and a generous selection represents folk poetry and verse by anonymous writers. I fully agree with Thomas E. Cooper that the suggestion that less could have been more has to be rejected. In an interview published in a daily (*Magyar Hírlap*, 9 August, 1997), Miklós Vajda, the editor of *Modern Hungarian Poetry* (New York:

Columbia University Press, 1977), a highly readable collection of contemporary Hungarian verse based on a rather questionable selection, criticized *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* for including many second- or third-rate poets who "can be important to Hungarian but not to English or American readers". If we take a target-oriented approach to translation, this criticism will seem inappropriate. A reader who is not familiar with the Hungarian language will not care whether Ferenc Faludi (1704–1779) is regarded as a major or minor poet in Hungary; (s)he may find the translation of *Spring* a fine poem. Ideally, the translator of an eighteenth-century Hungarian poem should be familiar with the history of two cultures. Davie could not read Hungarian, but he was not only an English poet but also an outstanding analyst of eighteenth-century English poetry. Accordingly, he could find a style appropriate for a poem composed in the eighteenth century.

To publish translations of contemporary verse is one thing, to present English versions of poems written in the past is quite another. Miklós Vajda, George Gömöri, or George Szirtes, the editors and translators of such collections as *Modern Hungarian Poetry* or the more recent *The Collonade of Teeth* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1996) had a much easier task than Adam Makkai, since they could ignore the historical implications of poetic language. One of the strengths of *In Quest of the 'Miracle Stag'* is that some pieces written in a more distant past and neglected by the Hungarian public prove to be quite successful. Another advantage is that in quite a few cases several translations of the same "original" are presented. This is a practice the compilers of future anthologies of translations should follow.

Literary evaluation is of great complexity. In this respect, too, Makkai's anthology is worthy of attention, insofar as the "official" canon institutionalized in Hungary is neglected. To take one example: *The Sons Changed into Stags* by József Erdélyi (1896–1978) is included, and so the reader can see that *The Boy Changed into a Stag Clamours at the Gate of Secrets*, a longer narrative by Ferenc Juhász (b. 1928) that was praised by W. H. Auden and others, may have been inspired by a much earlier text.

Adam Makkai has lived in the United States since 1956. His selection is based at least partly on the knowledge he acquired at school and at home in the early 1950s, and his value judgments are made from the perspective of a professor of linguistics who is also a Hungarian poet living in Chicago. It is a matter of course that his selection is as biased as the long essay by László Cs. Szabó (1905–1984), who went into exile in 1949. This outline of Hungarian poetry contains much useful information, although it is not free of questionable statements. Imre Madách (1823–1864) was not "imprisoned for his participation in the 1848–1849 Hungarian War of Independence" and cannot be called a "contemporary" of Gyula Juhász (1883–1937). Some of the errors may be ascribed to the printer rather than to the author, but this is hardly true of the parallels drawn with other literatures, which sometimes are more fanciful than convincing. To mention but one example, it is difficult to see why Cs. Szabó compares the lyric poet János Vajda (1827–1897) to Meredith and Turgenev. The essayist tries hard to find the closest affinities of the style of Hungarian poets but his comparisons are rarely helpful and reveal that he was out of touch with the results of literary historiography.

Cs. Szabó fails to recognize the significance of the late poetry of Kosztolányi and Makkai does not include the most significant poetic achievement of the Hungarian avant-garde, Kassák's *The Horse Dies and the Birds Fly Away*, Kosztolányi's greatest lyric, *A Song upon Nothing*, and two of the most widely discussed pieces of Hungarian literature: *Consciousness* by Attila József and *Apocrypha* by János Pilinszky. János Arany is represented by fewer poems than István Vas, and other examples could also be cited to suggest that the value judgments underlying this anthology may be somewhat conservative. This may be a characteristic feature of all anthologies edited by authors who spent most of their lives outside Hungary. Even Gömöri and

Szirtes have done less than full justice to the more innovative aspects of Hungarian poetry by excluding both the avant-garde and postmodernism, not to mention strikingly original poems by Lőrinc Szabó, Attila József, and Sándor Weöres. Of course, all value judgments are of historical nature, and I am aware that my taste will also be called outdated by future generations. A collection that provokes readers and translators may inspire others to follow suit and publish more Hungarian verse in English translation. This is an achievement no reader of poetry can ignore.

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