

REVIEW ARTICLE

Hungarian Poetry in English Translation: Two Recent Anthologies

Timothy Kachinske

Hundred Hungarian Poems. Edited by Thomas Kabdebo. Manchester: Albion Editions, 1976. Pp. 125.

Miklós Radnóti, Subway Stops: Fifty Poems. Translated, with an Introduction and Notes, by Emery George. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977. Pp. 95.

Hungarian literature has long been *terra incognita* to Western readers. Hungary's linguistic isolation on an Indo-European continent and her history of subjugation to outside imperial powers are often given as reasons. But perhaps the primary reason for Western nescience of Hungarian poetry is the lack of good translation.

This decade has done more than any previous decade to remedy the neglect Hungarian poetry has suffered in the West. Since 1970 individual collections of Petőfi, Illyés, József, Radnóti, Weöres, Pilinszky, László Nagy and Ferenc Juhász have been published in North America and Britain. Also, during the period 1975 to 1980 no less than five anthologies of Hungarian poetry will have been published in English translation. By and large these translations are good. A variety of translation methods have been used. Some are done by native speakers, others by English-speaking poets and scholars who have come to know Hungarian letters, and still others are the result of collaboration between native-speaking Hungarians and English-speaking poets. Thus a variety of voices in translation is afforded the reader, as well as a wide selection of Hungarian poets.

Thomas Kabdebo's *Hundred Hungarian Poems* is an anthology that shows such a variety of approaches to the problem of translation. The list of translators is impressive. Many of the poems in this anthology are the result of partnership between Hungarian-speakers and English-

speaking poets, including such important poets as W. H. Auden, Robert Graves, Michael Hamburger, Ted Hughes, Edwin Morgan and John Wain. Internationally recognized scholars of Hungarian letters, such as George Gömöri, George Cushing, and Watson Kirkconnell, have also contributed translations. And some selections come from Hungarians such as Paul Tabori who have themselves become writers in England and America. Because of the range of translators, a distinct voice in English is assured for each Hungarian poet.

The historical scope of Kabdebo's anthology is ambitious. He includes poets from the Renaissance and Reformation to the present, arranging the one-hundred poems chronologically according to the birth of the author. However, the emphasis of *Hundred Hungarian Poems* is on more recent poets; more than half the anthology is devoted to the twentieth century. Firmly established modern writers such as Ady, G. Juhász, Babits, Kassák, Illyés, Attila József, and Radnóti are of course included. Also, a surprisingly comprehensive selection of contemporary poetry is given. A number of the important poets living in Hungary today are represented - F. Juhász, L. Nagy, Weöres, and Pilinszky all have a poem or two. Kabdebo also includes not-so-often read Hungarian poets living outside the national boundaries of Hungary, thereby expanding the anthology's range. Among these poets are F. Fehér (Yugoslavia), G. Páskándi (Romania), G. Gömöri and Cs. Szabó (England), L. Kemenes Géfin, G. Faludy and F. Fáy (Canada), and A. Makkai (USA).

The anthology is not without problems. Using the Hungarian tri-colors red, white and green across the entire cover is an eye-catching idea. Unfortunately, the horizontal colors are inverted, appearing green, white and red — the color arrangement of the flag of Iran. A few typographical errors occur. It is not so bad that József Erdély's Christian name appears with a "d" rather than an "f" in the biographical section "Notes on the Poets" (p. 112). When it is obvious to the reader that a name is misspelled, the error is not so important. But when a typographical error occurs in a line of poetry, as in György Rónay's "The Death of Virginia Woolf," it is not so easy to make allowance. In the line "The weaves are splashing round my hips," "waves" should replace "weaves" (p. 84). This is disconcerting because "weaves" is a noun that fits into the grammatical logic of the line. Without a close reading, a reader could take this line for a clumsy image, which it is not.

Hundred Hungarian Poems could have a more convenient format as well. Since it is designed for the English-speaking reader, it would have been appropriate to follow organizational conventions usually found in

books written in English. A table of contents, for example, would be helpful. As it is, the two title indices located at the back of the book, which list titles alphabetically in English and then in Hungarian, are of limited use. The "Index to Hungarian Titles" is of course essential, but of interest primarily to readers who know Hungarian. The "Index to English Titles" presupposes a knowledge of the title given a poem in translation, and such titles can vary considerably from translator to translator. The reader familiar with Magyar poetry in translation can for this reason find himself nearly as ill at ease using the index as would the novice, since alphabetical arrangement requires knowledge of what one is looking for. A table of contents listing authors' life dates would have been more useful, as well as being appropriate to the chronological arrangement of the book.

Emery George's *Subway Stops* is an important contribution to the growing interest in Radnóti. Hungarians consider Radnóti to be a major poet. Since his death in 1944, many collections of Radnóti's works have been published in Hungary, with some of these collections enjoying several printings. More than a dozen monographs on his life and work have been published by various Hungarian presses, and countless articles about him have appeared in Hungarian journals. Indeed, Miklós Vajda, literary editor of *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, has said that Radnóti is among a handful of Hungarian poets who, had they "written in a language less isolated than Hungarian would now be revered wherever poetry is read." Interest in Radnóti in the United States has grown in recent years. Various poems in translation have appeared in American literary magazines, and in 1972 Harper and Row brought out *Clouded Sky*, a collection of poems from the posthumously published *Tajtékos ég*, translated into English by Steven Polgar, Stephen Berg, and S. J. Marks. This book is out of print.

Subway Stops is the first book in English to offer poems from all seven of Radnóti's books of poetry. The fifty poems are arranged chronologically, and include posthumous works. *Subway Stops* has an appealing format and good organization. The cover is an arresting, full page portrait of the poet's face. A table of contents, a selected bibliography and an introduction — all meticulously prepared — precede the poems.

The introductory remarks begin with an assessment of Radnóti's position in the tradition of Hungarian letters. George compares Radnóti to Petőfi, a comparison he warrants justifiable on both literary and historical grounds. Certainly Radnóti's universality, his active political engagement, and his tragic death appeal to the public imagination. The

fact that he was able to produce such a large body of work, both original poetry and translations, in a short lifetime of appalling hardship and difficulty makes him already a legendary figure in an age rather short on literary heroes. George summarizes his appeal quite succinctly when he says, "He is seen, like no one else of his generation, to have the power of synthesizing such polar extremes as tradition and innovation, the local and the cosmopolitan, the Christian and the classical, most importantly the perennial antagonism, in poetry, between engagement and art."

George notes that critics generally agree that important influences on Radnóti the poet "are found in the enthusiasms of Radnóti the translator." Radnóti studied the Greek and Latin poets, and translated Horace and Vergil. He knew French literature well, and translated Ronsard, LaFontaine and Apollinaire. His French was not limited to academic knowledge, for he and his wife made a number of trips to France, and several poems are prompted by places there, such as Chartres, Versailles and Paris. Radnóti also knew German, and translated Goethe and the German romantics. But Radnóti's native heritage was an equally important influence on him. His university education (culminating in a doctorate) provided a thorough knowledge of the Hungarian literary tradition, and the great nineteenth century Hungarian romantics — Petőfi, Vörösmarty and Arany — stand out particularly as having contributed to his work. The folk song is also a strong influence, and it is not surprising that Bartók was Radnóti's favorite composer.

The introduction concludes with comments on translation problems. George began this project because of "an almost personal feeling that Radnóti deserves an English-speaking audience." Previous translations were found to be "unsatisfactory at best," and he is quite correct in calling the only other volume of Radnóti in English (Harper and Row, 1972) "an extremely slipshod piece of work." In his own translations, George has aimed at "fidelity in form, pattern, diction, tone, mood, prosody down to sound repetition," a gargantuan task when dealing with languages as unlike as Hungarian and English. All of these things are of course important considerations, but fidelity to meaning (which George does not single out) is also important. For the most part, George is closer to Radnóti's meaning than any previous translator. But problems in meaning do occur, and the principal weaknesses of the translations result from a tendency to sacrifice precise meaning to formal considerations.

George tends to shift Hungarian active verb constructions into the

passive, or into noun phrases in English, thereby weakening the English versions. In "Elegy, or Icon, Nailless," the Hungarian verb phrase *dolgozni nem tud* (he cannot work) is changed into the noun phrase "work is out of the question," which is in fact a cliché (line 13). In "Friday," the verb *elfutottak* (they ran away, or fled) becomes "have taken flight" (line 11). Also in "Friday," the verb *kiöntött* (they overflowed) is changed to the passive "are flooded" (line 22). For the verb *alszik* (it sleeps), which occurs three times in the first two lines of the poem "Night," George gives "are asleep" twice and "is asleep" once. In "Picture Postcards," the verb *torlódik* (to become congested) is changed to the noun phrase "a traffic jam" (line 3). One would guess that George makes verb shifts such as these in an attempt to get more syllables. Although his concern for rhythms is laudable, whatever he may gain in metrical balance is taken from the power of Radnóti's language when active verbs are lost.

Sometimes George sacrifices meaning in his zeal to give a rhyme scheme to his translations. For example, in "Cartes Postales," the Hungarian *ikra* (roe) is given as "roes of eggs" in order to create a rhyme for the word "legs" (lines 4 and 6). The phrase "roes of eggs" is both redundant and not idiomatic. In "Friday," George gives "shiver" to rhyme with "river," thereby inventing the impossible construction "it (April) whips you with . . . shiver" (line 6). To cite another example from "Friday," one might examine the line *vad zápor hullt időnként* (sometimes a wild sudden shower fell). In an effort to give this line consonant rhyme with the word "place," which concludes the stanza, George creates the phrase "erratic dose," something that does not make clear sense in English and bears only a suggestive resemblance to the Hungarian original (lines 18 and 20). In "Letter to My Wife," we find the phrase "the silence in my ears is strident" created to fit with "silent," the last word of the previous line (lines 1 and 2). In Hungarian, the action verb phrase is *üvölt a csönd fülemben*, which translates literally as simply "silence howls in my ears." Faced with a choice between rhyme and meaning, the translator should favor meaning. Contemporary readers instinctively mistrust translations which are too-neatly rhymed, and rightly so, for it is unusual that this can be accomplished without sacrifice.

Though the English of the translations reads smoothly for the most part, a few poems do show, on occasion, insensitivity to connotation and usage in English. The aforementioned "roes of eggs" and "whips you with . . . shiver" illustrate this, and other instances of the problem occur sporadically. In "Cartes Postales," the verb phrase *tükre pattan* is

given as “its mirror snaps” (line 5). The verb *pattan* can mean “snap,” but in this particular situation the alternative “crack” would be better English; a broken mirror exhibits cracks, not snaps. Several mistranslations occur in “Night.” The Hungarian *a fatörzsben* (in the tree trunk) *a harkály* (the woodpecker) is given as “the snipe in its house” (line 4). The phrase *rózsában* (in a rose) *a rózsabogár* (the rose beetle) is given as “the fly in the rose” (line 5). Were “fly” intended, *légy* would be found in the original. However, flies do not live in roses. The pattern of imagery in the poem, which finds each creature quiet in its resting place, is disrupted. In “Root,” George renders the Hungarian verb phrase *nem érdeklí* (does not care) as “cares not a hang,” a euphemistic colloquialism which jars the native English speaker a bit in the context of the poem (line 11).

George’s translations are, however, better than any done previously. The early poems are especially well done. In “Portrait, Angry as Hell,” George shows Radnóti’s anger with a terseness in English that matches the original. In “Elegy, or Icon, Nailless,” George conveys very well the sympathetic energy with which Radnóti writes of a wanderer struck down and crippled by a count’s car. In “Love Poem in a Forest,” in which Radnóti compares his lover and a forest, George has rendered images with clarity and precision. *Razglednicák*, a series of four short poems written on a forced march only weeks before the poet’s death, are among Radnóti’s most frequently translated poems, and George’s versions are a decided improvement on previous efforts. The ominous, brutal, yet patiently sensitive quality of the poems makes translation especially problematic. A typically difficult phrase occurs in line 18: *az emberek mind véreset vizelnek*. Ruth Sutter, in a translation appearing in *Chicago Review* and *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, translates this as “the water the men make is black with blood.” Sutter avoids Radnóti’s verb *vizel* (to urinate) and introduces “black,” thereby changing the color imagery connoted by *véres* (bloody). The Polgar-Berg-Marks translation is “the men all piss red.” This is even further from the original because of colloquial verb usage changing the tone of the line, and the replacement of “red” for “bloody.” George’s rendering, “Blood shows in every man’s urine,” comes closest to both the tone and meaning of the original.

Although one may have reservations about the accuracy of occasional phrases in some of the poems, *Subway Stops* is on the whole a respectable piece of work, one which will be welcomed by admirers of Radnóti.