

BOOK REVIEW

Miklós Radnóti: *Forced March*

Translated by George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer

London: Enitharmon Press (in association with The European Jewish Publication Society), 2000, 96 pp.

The gap between English and Hungarian verse forms is so wide that it is hardly surprising that there are very few successful English translations of Hungarian poetry. Miklós Radnóti (1909–1944) has had more English and American translators than any other Hungarian poet. The explanation for this is not that he was the greatest artist in his medium; it would be foolish to call anyone the greatest Hungarian poet. Radnóti's relative popularity in the English-speaking countries is inseparable from the formation of a canon of Holocaust literature. Together with the non-Jewish János Pilinszky (1921–1981), he is mentioned as one of the authors who represented the 'poetics of expiration,' in Alvin H. Rosenfeld's *A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, 84).

Unlike his younger colleague, Radnóti was a victim of the Holocaust, despite the fact that he refused to identify himself as a Jewish author. The translators are right to point out in their introduction that "he seems to have felt no special attachment to his race and religion" (13). Herein lies the primary reason why he is absent from Jerome Rothenberg's anthology of Jewish poetry (*A Big Jewish Book: Poems and Other Visions of the Jews from Tribal Times to Present*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press–Doubleday, 1978). Following the example of Sándor Sík (1889–1963), his professor at Szege University, he joined the Roman Catholic Church and became a firm believer in the cultural assimilation of Jews to Hungarians. Although he translated some poems by Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Ivan Goll, and Paul Éluard, his mature verse is closer to Neoclassicism than to the legacy of the avant-garde.

George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer decided to focus on the poet's posthumous collection and ignored the first four of his seven volumes. This selection is justifiable, but involves special difficulties, since many of the late poems are composed in forms derived from the poetry of Classical Antiquity. In his "Note on the Translation" Clive Wilmer summarized the difficulties in the following manner: "In English, unlike Hungarian, the quantitative metres of Latin are impossible, and a line over five feet long runs the risk of monotony. In the end, I opted for an English line of six accents, which owes something to the longer line as used by Thomas Hardy" (21). The diction is often artificial and archaic, but it is undeniable that in his mature phase Radnóti, like Hardy, was a conservative poet rather than an innovator. Cries of "So old-fashioned!" or "So mannered!" will rarely stand up to questioning: even if a particular line can be pinpointed, the feature of the rendering that elicited such a cry may have come about as a result of study. At issue really is the translator's intelligence. To the English poet Clive Wilmer it is a first principle that the translation should be a re-creation.

The first edition of *Forced March* was published in 1979 (Manchester: Carcanet). Since then, the translators have revised several of their versions and added eight poems to their col-

lection. Their selection is judicious by any standards and is based not on the ideal of a cross section but on a specific and personal interpretation of Radnóti's work as a whole. The benefit of such an approach greatly outweighs the disadvantages. The eclogues are presented as the highlights of the Hungarian poet's career. In view of the fact that Radnóti's *First Eclogue* has an epigraph from *The Georgics*, it is perfectly understandable that Dryden's English version of the relevant passage of Virgil's poem opens the selection. The more innovative short lyrics, inspired by German Romanticism and Expressionism, are represented by *Gyökér* (Root), but *A mécsvirág kinyílik* (The Ragged Robin Opens), *Majális* (May Picnic), and even *Álomi táj* (Dream Landscape), a poem that Emery George calls "one of Radnóti's finest late lyrics, if indeed not his finest" (*The Poetry of Miklós Radnóti: A Comparative Study*. New York: Karz-Cohl, 1986, 407), are excluded. Two features are stressed: the moral value of the preservation of the legacy of Classical Antiquity and the obsession with the idea of death that may have originated in the poet's awareness that his birth caused his mother's death.

Translations tend to focus either on the signified or on the signifier. George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer are very sensitive to the verse forms of the Hungarian poet. Their desire is to produce successful poems in English. At the same time, they insist on semantic equivalence. To reach such different goals, they have to pay a price. Sometimes connotations, intertextuality, and internal repetitions seem to be neglected. *Együgyű dal a feleségről* is rendered as *Simple Song of My Wife*, although the adjective is somewhat more specific in the original; it suggests naiveté, artlessness, even lack of sophistication. Another title, *Letter to My Wife*, is more prosaic than the elevated *Levél a hitveshez*, which reminds the reader that 'hit' ('faith' or 'belief') is the foundation of marriage. The English reader of *Csak csont és bőr és fájdalom* (Skin and Bone and Pain), written on the death of the poet Mihály Babits, may not realize that the first word repeats the opening of *Halotti beszéd* (Funeral Oration), a free translation from the Latin, made around 1200, that has become canonized as the first longer Hungarian text to survive. The impression the grammatically unusual title of *Nyugtalan őszül* makes on the Hungarian reader is lost in the English version: the pun based on the homonym 'ősz' (meaning both 'grey' in the sense of 'grey hair' and 'autumn') is lost in *Autumn Begins Restlessly*.

In their revised versions the translators make fewer concessions to the English readers in the sense that they are less inclined to reduce the unfamiliar aspects of the original context. "It is perhaps a sign of the times," they argue in their Preface to the new edition, "and an encouraging one, that in 1979 we thought 'cultural' translation was sometimes necessary – that the English reader could not cope with (for instance) common Hungarian names. We have abandoned that preconception and made up for it by amplifying the notes" (12). Understandably, this principle could not be observed beyond certain limits. The archaic verbal and adjectival forms in the opening and closing lines of the first half of the title poem, 'fölkél' (rises) and 'honni' (native), have no equivalents in the English version:

A fool he is who, collapsed rises and walks again,
Ankles and knees moving alone, like wandering pain,
Yet he, as if wings uplifted him, sets out on his way,
And in vain the ditch calls him back, who dare not stay.
And if asked why not, he might answer – without leaving his path –
That his wife was awaiting him, and a saner, more beautiful death.
Poor fool! He's out of his mind: now, for a long time,
Only scorched winds have whirled over the houses at home,
The wall has been laid now, the plum-tree is broken there,
The night of our native hearth flutters, thick with fear.

The intricate structure of this late poem may illustrate the different degrees of translatability. Radnóti's verse is full of cultural memories. When the rewriting involves texts written in Hungarian, the translator has to ignore some of the allusions, while in other cases he can rely on commentary.

The Introduction and the Notes at the end of the volume are useful and can help the English public understand the historical and cultural context of the poems. There are a few misprints and in some cases the readers unfamiliar with Hungarian history might need more information. The poet, essayist, and fiction writer Mihály Babits was born in 1883 and not in 1886. The statement that he wrote an unfavourable review of one of Radnóti's early verse collection is correct but somewhat cryptic; it may be important to add that what Babits disapproved of was the populist diction of some pieces in Radnóti's third collection *Lábadózó szél* (Convalescent Wind, 1933). No serious critic would disagree with the older poet's value judgment. The title of the first poem in the selection, *Istenhegyi kert*, is translated as *Garden on Istenhegy*. This version is an improvement on *A Mountain Garden*, which was the title of the same poem in the first edition. "Istenhegy is a hill on the Buda side of Budapest", the reader is told, "where Fanni Radnóti's family owned a weekend cottage" (89). The interpretation is correct from the biographical point of view, but from a poetic perspective, it may be important to remember that the word 'Isten' stands for 'God'. The observation that in 1941 the Hungarian government "granted the Germans permission to cross its territory and invade Yugoslavia, part of which was then annexed by Hungary" (16) is correct but it could be added that the Hungarian prime minister committed suicide because of the German pressure on Hungary, and half a million Hungarians lived in the territory occupied by the Hungarian army. In a similar way, the statement that after the German occupation of Hungary, 19 March 1944, "Admiral Horthy remained as figurehead 'Regent', but the new administration gave unconditional support to the German war aims" (91) may lead to simplifications. At the end of June 1944, Horthy ordered halt to the deportation of Jews and on 29 August, he appointed Géza Lakatos as prime minister, who dismissed numerous right-wing members of the administration and released most of those who had been arrested in April and May. On 11 October, the Regent's envoys signed provisional cease-fire terms in Moscow. On 15 October, the day of the broadcasting of the Regent's proclamation of the armistice, his only remaining child was kidnapped, and German troops took over strategic points in Budapest. The next day Horthy, whose son was taken to Dachau concentration camp, was forced to resign. It was not the Regent's Hungary but the dictatorship of the extreme right-wing Arrow-Cross movement that replaced it that could be made responsible for the killing of the poet on 9 November.

In 1994 George Gömöri and Wilmer organized a Radnóti memorial conference at Darwin College, Cambridge. There I spoke of a "discrepancy between works about Radnóti published in the West and in Hungary" (George Gömöri and Clive Wilmer, eds, *The Life and Poetry of Miklós Radnóti: Essays*. Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 1999, 24). The situation has not changed in the last decade. Although *In the Footsteps of Orpheus: The Life and Times of Miklós Radnóti* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), the third full-length work on the Hungarian poet, is a biography rather than an analysis of the works, it is undeniable that literary scholars living in Hungary have not written any substantial study on Radnóti's poetry in the last decade. The revised edition of *Forced March* may remind us that in some cases works published outside Hungary can make a significant contribution to the understanding of Hungarian literature.

Mihály Szegedy-Maszák

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Martin Buber, *Das problem des Menschen* (Heidelberg: Lambert Scheider Verlag, 1984), 35.

Martini, Fritz: *Deutsche Literaturgeschichte von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart*. 18. Aufl. Stuttgart: Krönet 1984 (= Kröners Taschenausgabe 196). S. 125.

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