

More and Less Heroic

Two Hungarian Poets in English Translation

Attila József, *Poems and Fragments*. Trans. Thomas Kabdebo.

Argumentum-Cardinal Press

Attila József, *The Iron-Blue Vault: Selected Poems*. Trans. Zsuzsanna

Ozsváth and Frederic Turner. Bloodaxe, £8.95 (pbk)

György Petri, *Eternal Monday: New and Selected Poems*. Trans. George

Gömöri and Clive Wilmer. Bloodaxe, £7.95 (pbk)

Hungarian is among the more obscure languages of Europe. This linguistic fact alone results in the relative isolation of Hungarian literature, which otherwise is no less rich than the literatures of other European nations, or in any sense alien from European literary traditions. Edwin Morgan's case could finely demonstrate this situation: he recognises Attila József as one of the outstanding European poets of the century, but he had to discover József for himself in Italian translation.

Nevertheless, of late those interested in Hungarian poetry seem to have been relatively well served. In addition to Bloodaxe's anthology of modern Hungarian poetry, *The Colonnade of Teeth*, there are also now three new volumes from two central poets, Attila József (1905-1937) and György Petri (1943-2000), who stand in important antithetical relation to one another. While József is the inheritor of romantic models, Petri became perhaps the most vigorous innovator in Hungarian poetry through a conscious undoing of the poetic attitudes and voices of the József tradition. Publishing the two of them together thus offers not only a taste of poetry that is major by any standard, but also a glimpse into some of the developments of the recent history of Hungarian verse. At the same time, the two volumes of Attila József themselves are different enough to give English language readers an excellent opportunity to piece together a sense of József's poetry that perhaps no single volume could provide on its own.

All the more so, because the difference between the two József volumes does not lie in their selections—there are numerous overlaps, both of them containing most of József’s central poems. In addition to this, Thomas Kabdebo’s edition also has thirty-eight fragments and a few extracts from József’s letters and essays, while *The Iron-Blue Vault* has an excellent biographical essay by Zsuzsanna Ozsváth, and another essay by her co-translator, Frederic Turner, giving an interpretation of some aspects of József’s philosophical outlook. Compared to how substantial these essays are, Kabdebo’s introduction and the four-page “Conclusion” by Miklós Szabolcsi to *Poems and Fragments* are hardly more than elegant gestures at guiding the reader.

Poems and Fragments features twenty-nine translators, collecting some of the best available translations of József’s poems (for copyright reasons sadly excluding Edwin Morgan’s fine renderings), and adding some new ones by a host of (many Irish) poets and the editor. The collaboration of Ozsváth and Turner has produced translations of no lesser excellence, but their volume differs from Kabdebo’s in achieving a coherent tone based on the translators’ interpretation of József’s thinking. The Ozsváth-Turner translations are also characterised by their formal faithfulness: on almost all occasions they recapitulate the rhyme-schemes of the originals and do their best to render, or to find equivalent effects to, the rhythmic patterns. There is a heroic quality to this attempt, given József’s sheer formal skill; but it is also an approach which may carry different problems.

The power of József’s voice has much to do with the astonishing discipline he could exercise in expressing the most torturing emotional states. There is precision in even his most expansive metaphors, and the use of folk song and chant rhythms at times lend mythic dimensions to his verse (a trait that often made critics compare his poetry to the music of Bartók). His feeling for form gives his meditative or elegiac moods a ponderous musicality. Even in its most elaborate eloquence or at its most painfully self-revealing, József’s voice seems to issue forth with a bang not a whimper.

The metaphysics and high rhetoric of the poems, their musical power and “shamanistic” aura are also those features which have most obviously captured the imaginations of Ozsváth and Turner, and where such qualities are to the fore, their translations can be triumphant. Take for instance a stanza from the famous poem “A

hetedik”, translated as “The Last of Seven” by Ozsváth and Turner and as “(The) Seventh” by Kabdebo:

Mortal dweller, may your mother
bear you seven times together!
Once within a house that’s burning,
once in floods, the icefloes churning,
once in bedlam, yelling, yearning,
once in a wheatfield’s soft turning,
once in cloisters bell-intoning,
once stied with pigs in grunts and groaning.
What though these six cry out to heaven?
You shall be the last of seven!

(Ozsváth-Turner)

To take root in this world
You must be born seven times!
Once born in a burning house,
Once born in an icy flood,
Once born in a loony-bin,
Once in a field of ripe wheat
Once born in an empty cloister,
Once in a pigsty, among pigs.
The six cry out, what’s it all for?
The seventh must be you, yourself!

(Kabdebo)

Kabdebo’s translation is much closer to the original in terms of vocabulary and phrasing. “Yelling and yearning” in the fifth and “grunts and groaning” in the eighth lines of the Ozsváth-Turner version are words not to be found in József’s poem. Contrast also line seven, where we have two different interpretations of the Hungarian word “kongó”: the word is the adjectival form of the onomatopoeic verb “kong” meaning the sound a church bell gives, but it does have a common phrasal use as well where it means metaphorically the sound of emptiness. Ozsváth and Turner use the former meaning, Kabdebo the latter. It is not, of course, a case of judging which is the “right” reading, but where Kabdebo’s understands the original as a precise, economical phrase, the Ozsváth-Turner rendering emphasises its aural quality, since the church bell’s massive tone is consonant with the mythic aura of the poem, created partly by its powerful, chanting

music. Kabdebo's fidelity to sense loses something of this music, recaptured in Ozsváth and Turner's version through the repetitive rhyming of identical suffixes and by the strong trochaic pulse. Kabdebo's fidelity to meaning rather than form, in other words, suggests a timidity, a shying away from the translator's proper task.

But this instance aside, the broader issue of fidelity remains a problematical one. "Night in the Outskirts", a poem which predates by a few months "The Last of Seven", differs considerably both formally and tonally: its irregular stanzas and line-lengths, and its rhyme schemes which re-appear in József's later masterpieces "Ode" and "Elegy", have nothing to do with the "shamanic" quality of the voice that both Ozsváth and Turner reveal a preference for in their essays. In Kabdebo's volume the poem is translated by Michael Hamburger. The two versions of the first stanza run as follows:

From loading yards like deep sea caves
the light now lifts its sagging net,
our kitchen's drowned beneath the waves,
sunk in a dusk still darker yet.

(Ozsváth-Turner)

Slowly the light's net is lifted
Out of the yard, and our kitchen
Fills with darkness
Like the hollows deep in a pool.

(Hamburger)

Hamburger sacrifices the rhymes; Ozsváth and Turner retain them. But in order to do so, the stanza has been complicated almost beyond recognition: the loading yards are like "deep sea caves" (nowhere to be found in the original); the kitchen has to sink and drown (no such verbs in the original) "beneath the waves" (no waves either). The original, literally, says that "like a hollow under the water/ our kitchen is now filled with darkness". The simile is expressive and precise, the wording relatively simple, and the lucidity of Hamburger's version does far more justice to this. The lexical imprecision of the Ozsváth-Turner version also seriously alters the whole tone of the poem. The appeal of an image-cluster of mysterious deep sea caves, waves, sinking and drowning to the translators is understandable, given their pen-

chant for romantic aggrandisement, but the appeal of the rhetorically powerful József is such that the more precise, lucid József—favoured in Kabdebo's volume—sometimes disappears from view.

No poet's work can ever really be cut loose from the language it lives in. I repeat this old piece of wisdom not because these volumes do not achieve excellence in carrying out an impossible task, but because they achieve it in different, and complementary ways. The interpretative strategies behind *The Iron-Blue Vault* give the volume a bold and creative vigour; these are translations which dare to take risks, and the successes outweigh the failures. Kabdebo's volume doesn't take such risks, and thereby avoids some criticisms; but rich though it is, it is also the less heroic of the two. Since József's voice encompasses restraint as well as exuberance, both versions bring a welcome sense of the work of a major European poet.

If Ozsváth and Turner at times tend to aggrandise József's idiom, they could hardly be accused of aggrandising him as a poet-figure, since Attila József stands in Hungarian literary history as a modern embodiment of the poet-hero. No modern figure did more to undermine and reject such a concept than György Petri. While his poetics is based on the rejection of the myth of the poet-hero, on his denial that the poet can represent anyone but him- or herself (if even that much), he has become an almost cultic figure, the representative of his generation, a hero of a kind. He is an anti-vates who is nevertheless regarded as the voice of history. This paradox is due in large part to the historical circumstances of Petri's work and life. That the irony of the situation should be reproduced in discussions of his translated works is thus no surprise. An Eastern European poet of dissent, whose works were banned by the communist regime, Petri is easily accommodated, from the point of view of the West, as a version of the poet-hero whose political and moral courage is of more interest than the intricacies of his poetic procedures. That issue of moral courage is one of interest, in a different way perhaps, to Eastern European eyes as well. But the way Petri writes makes him a troubling figure in this respect. The bleakness, the disgust, the cynicism and the irony which characterise his writing also deliberately work to undermine a position in which he could be seen as the spokesman of anyone or anything.

Clive Wilmer, in his introduction to *Eternal Monday*, describes

Petri as “a major political poet”, but one who was “forced into political utterance by the circumstances of his daily life”. (In this respect, Wilmer draws a slightly uneasy comparison between Petri and various contemporary Northern Irish poets.) Petri himself acknowledges only one duty—to give poetic shape to reinterpreting notions of beauty, and, in effect, to render invisible any strictly political responsibility. Critical discussions of his work tend to turn and turn about on this axis, as evidenced in the discussion going on between Clive Wilmer and George Szirtes, in the latter poet’s reviews of Wilmer, and in Gömöri’s two volumes of translations from Petri to date. Wilmer sees in Petri a “major verse satirist” and “a major political poet”, while for Szirtes he is primarily “a lyrical poet who has deliberately gone sour”. Both of them also focus on the question how Petri’s poetry can proceed after the fall of Communism. Wilmer, in the introduction to *Eternal Monday* accepts Szirtes’s criticism that in his previous edition and translation of Petri’s *Night Song of the Personal Shadow* (1991), he may have overemphasised the political at the expense of the personal, and claims to do justice to the balance in *Eternal Monday*. Nevertheless, the volume begins with the poem “Collapse”, an early piece offering an unmistakable description of the nature and effects of the communist rule in the Hungary of the 1960s and ’70s, and ends with “A Recognition”, the closure of which reads: “The epoch expired like a monstrous predator./ My favourite toy’s been snatched”. This edition still foregrounds the political Petri, and the question of what he is left with after the fall of the object of his political satire. Szirtes, too, in his review of the second volume finds politics as the source of Petri’s voice. He concedes that Wilmer’s edition now makes “the identification of the body politic with the body erotic work from the latter to the former”, but he continues: “But chickens only grudgingly go before the eggs. After all, we know how things got into this state. The State struck the first blow, and now that the State is gone, so, to a great extent, is the vocation”.

Petri is an astonishing satirist with a bleak and cruel humour, his poetry is indeed deeply political, and he did also write a unique type of love poetry, sour, ruthless, embittered, with a strange and deeply cutting lyricism. But his *poetic* vocation takes as a point of departure not so much the blow the State struck, as the conviction that the József tradition, in which poets profess to be driven by inner needs, compulsion, genius, obsession, is no

longer valid. Poets in the József tradition do not *decide* to become poets—they are *compelled*. In contrast, Petri consciously chose poetry as a profession. When he eventually published his first volume in 1971, he appeared on the scene as a fully developed figure and mature voice.

Petri came of age in the era of the Hungarian Communist leader János Kádár. Writers were made to understand what was expected of them, and in return for complying with the unspoken rules, were allowed to imply things between the lines. As Clive Wilmer suggests, it was “a system based on half-truths, nods and winks”. Or, as Petri phrases the nature of this system in an epigram, “I glance down at my shoes and—there is the lace! / This can’t be gaol then, can it, in that case”. Hungary’s communist repression was of a kind where the walls of the prison were made less visible, with inmate civilians encouraged to forget that they were actually locked up. Thus, the price of relative freedom was an insidious form of moral corruption—the controls were relaxed in return for the relaxation of the awareness that there were controls, channelling opposition into inaction, and creating a morally and intellectually torpid, lukewarm atmosphere of resignation.

Under these circumstances it is at least problematic to assert one’s honesty as the focus of truth and one’s personality as a representative of the people. Petri did not wish to represent anybody apart from himself, nor did he think he could be egotistical enough to regard his own attitudes as exemplary, which are all in some ways part of the poet-ideal of the József tradition. In Petri’s view “József was the last to have been capable, while preserving the straightforwardness of lyricism, to create great poetry out of a maximum intensity of personal utterance”. In Petri’s poetry it is not the poet’s personality that organises the facts—the personality is part of the facts that make up the life, but the facts and circumstances come first. The self is thus never a given—it is, rather, the poems that are somehow to regain and reconstruct from the debris of the registered facts the person who is speaking in them. The creation of such a voice involves, among other things, a constant relativisation of the very texture of language. The position of a satirist would demand some moral plain above and beyond the object of satire, but not even at his most sarcastic, ironic or vulgar can Petri stand outside his statements. As he writes in a gloomy and beautiful meditation addressed to a fellow-poet, he is “the prisoner of a condition”. Petri’s poetry is, in one sense, “irre-

deemably personal”, but the personality is never a way to vast truths created by the poems.

His first volume, whose title translates as *Explanations for M*, attempted an intellectual poetry while reflecting on the collapse of all ideological frameworks, painfully aware of its own impossibility. This awareness finds expression in an anti-rhetorical stance, a mode of sarcastic understatement, and a provocative attitude towards traditional expectations and traditional lyricism. It is a volume which lives up to its title: Petri is indeed writing “explanations”, and words and phrases like “indisputably”, “in a sense”, “though sometimes”, “virtually”, “we permit for the time being” all signal a mock-official tentativeness and circumscription. The volume closes with the famous “I am Stuck, Lord, on Your Hook”, which reaffirms Petri’s final renunciation of his role: “Lord, if you still have hopes,/ chose some other worm. Being/ among the elect/ has been beautiful. All the same,/ what I’d just like to do, right now,/ is dry off and loll about in the sun”. Petri’s first volume was already a last solution.

The critical preoccupation with Petri’s poetic fate after liberation tends, therefore, to miss some of the continuities of Petri’s æsthetic from the 1970s through to the 1990s. In his review of *Eternal Monday* George Szirtes interprets the attitude Petri expresses in a poem like “Only Mari’s Remained” as love being the poet’s final haven after his “favourite toy”, i.e. anti-Soviet political poetry, has “been snatched”. In a sense, Szirtes is right: Petri does write more about love and death than politics in the 90s. But the same anti-lyrical, anti-“poetic” thrust characterises his love poetry throughout his career. His love poetry in the early and middle as well as later period—often brutal and cynical, ironising confession and vulgarising everything else—is never an escape from the dreariness of everyday existence, but a negotiation with it. Petri’s consistent poetics can explain this side of his development more meaningfully than any focus on his fate as a politically dissident poet after liberation.

On one level, translating Petri is an almost impossible task: he is a master of pun and word-play, and his verbal wizardry can only be approximated in another language. On the one hand, there are astonishing accomplishments in this respect in *Eternal Monday*; on the other, when Wilmer and Gömöri need to footnote the puns (as in the case of the title poem) much of their force is inevitably lost. The (representative) selection of the poems in

the volume obviously had to take into account the fact that some of Petri's poems are probably simply untranslatable. Nevertheless, Petri's colloquial, anti-rhetorical style is particularly well rendered here. The facts and observations from which Petri weaves his verbal structures are so closely related to the texture of life in the Kádár era that I suspect some of the atmospheres of his poems will be lost on English-language readers. But thanks to Wilmer and Gömöri, Petri's style and voice come across superbly: his circumscriptions, his deliberate botching of verbal textures, the irony not just in attitude but also in language, in syntactic twists and turns, are all there to give an important sense of his disturbing intellectual and emotional depths.

In a review of Petri's last volume, a Hungarian critic has written that Petri was both a great poet and a Hungarian poet at the very outset of his career. The reviewer also tells us what she means by "Hungarian poet": "the Hungarian poet is... the type of the romantic hero..." Petri reshaped this type, and perhaps there is no better measure of the poetic success with which he did so than the fact that he turned into a poet-hero by writing the least heroic poetry one is ever likely to read. The less he wrote like József, the more he became the latest variation of the tradition he renewed by his rejection of it. The irony of it all was summed up in an incident in the Hungarian parliament. Shortly before his death, Petri was awarded the most prestigious prize Hungary gives her artists. One MP, however, was outraged by the decision of the prize going to a poet who dares satirise God and country, and in his speech quoted lines by Petri to make his point. In answer, another MP quoted lines by a poet who is beyond question a "great Hungarian poet" in the above sense: "Without father without mother/ without God or homeland either..." Needless to say, the lines used to show that Hungary has heroes of equal daring, are by Attila József. I do not know if the incident amused Petri or not—he accepted the prize and went on writing his heroically anti-heroic poetry all the way to the bitter end.