

Kirkconnell, Watson

The Hungarian Helicon

(Alberta, Acadia University Press, 1985, 763+xxxix pp.)

The Hungarian Helicon is the most extensive anthology of Hungarian poetry ever to have appeared in English translation. Containing over five hundred examples of the work of 172 poets (including two complete epics) the volume is even more comprehensive than William Loew's similarly ambitious, but little known, *Magyar Poetry*, the second, expanded edition of which (New York, 1908) ran to 510 Pages. Like Loew, Watson Kirkconnell devoted the best part of fifty years to the translation of Hungarian poetry. Sadly, neither translator saw the complete publication of his efforts in his own lifetime. According to Árpád Pásztor's preface to the posthumously published *Modern Hungarian Poetry* (Budapest, 1926), Loew was "working on a new collective edition" when he died in 1922. While Kirkconnell's "Prologue" to *The Hungarian Helicon*, although undated, was presumably written in the early 1970s (the author describes himself as "pushing 78"), the volume was only published in 1985, as "A Tribute to the Millennial Anniversary of the Birth of Saint Stephen A. D. 977". The sad irony is, of course, that 1977 was also the year of Kirkconnell's death.

Kirkconnell's "Prologue" is preceded by a brief biographical foreword by J. R. C. Perkin, the President and Vice Chancellor of Acadia University (a position also held by Kirkconnell between 1948 and 1964), and followed by the translator's own short introduction to the history of Hungarian literature. This introduction is both less detailed and less perceptive than that of Kirkconnell's first anthology of Hungarian verse, *The Magyar Muse*, published in Winnipeg in 1933. It is also – and especially in its consideration of Hungarian literature after 1945 – more overtly political. Kirkconnell does not attempt to conceal this ("The bias of our politics, in all parties, is still so absolute as to distort our judgements", xxviii), and closes his introduction with a quotation from an unattractively irredentist "credo" (xxix).

The translations are divided into three sections – Epic Poetry, Lyric Poetry and Poets of the Emigration. The first section (pp. 1–189) opens with extracts from Janus Pannonius's *Panegyricus ad Marcellum* and closes with extracts from Petőfi's "Sir John" (*János Vitéz*). There are also short passages from works by Anonymus, Stephanus Parmenius Budaëus, Zrínyi, Gyöngyösi, Csokonai and Vörösmarty, most of which are less than a page in length and form the opening lines of the work in question. Two epic poems by János Arany – *Toldi* and *Buda halála* – are, however, translated in full. Kirkconnell's *Toldi*, which first appeared in two consecutive numbers of *The Canadian-American Review of Hungarian Studies* (Vol. IV, No. 2 and Vol. V, No. 1), although superior to Loew's version – the only other complete translation in English – is somewhat uneven. Rare moments of truly inspired translation are separated by long stanzas of awkward inversions, mixed registers and lexical anachronisms. Kirkconnell's pioneering translation of *Buda halála*, which was published separately with a very useful introduction and footnotes in Cleveland in 1936, is on the whole a more homogenous and accomplished work. While both of these translations – along with Kirkconnell's versions of Zrínyi, Gyöngyösi and Csokonai – systematically, and perhaps understandably, reduce the original metres to iambic pentameters, Kirkconnell's translation of the opening lines of Vörösmarty's *Zalán futása* is metrically far more ambitious. Here, drawing upon his sound and practical knowledge of classical prosody, Kirkconnell uses dactylic hexameters to considerable effect:

Where is our glory of old? Is it lost in the night and its shadows?
Centuries pass; and beneath you, the ominous depths of the darkness
Loom as you wander. Above you dense clouds and Forgetfulness' figure
Float in ungarlanded sorrow, the image of glory forgotten.

The second and longest part of the book consists of translations of Hungarian lyric poetry from the thirteenth century to the present day (pp. 190–683). Here the selection of poets and texts often seems somewhat idiosyncratic. While it is interesting for example, to see the relatively little known Krisztina Újfalvi represented among Kirkconnell's admirably comprehensive selection of late eighteenth century poets (which includes Orczy, Gvadányi, Baróti Szabó, Rájni, Bessenyei, Révai, Péczeli, Virág, Ányos, Kazinczy, Batsányi, Szentjóni Szabó and Csokonai) it is hard to understand the complete absence of Gábor Dayka, one of the two or three most accomplished "sentimentalist" poets of the period. Similarly questionable is the omission of Jenő Komjáthy from the even more generous representation of Hungarian poetry between 1867 and 1900. Both the detailed coverage of this period and the omission of Komjáthy are all the more surprising when one considers that, in his introduction to *The Magyar Muse*, Kirkconnell had claimed that "the last four decades of the nineteenth century were not notable" in poetry (p. 23) with the exception of, among others, Komjáthy, who is listed among a group of poets "whose work . . . often attained a notable standard of excellence".

Twentieth century Hungarian poetry is, on the whole, more evenly (or at least conventionally) represented in *The Hungarian Helicon*, even though the selection inevitably grows more debatable as the volume approaches the present day. The real problem with Kirkconnell's twentieth century translations, however, is that they very often read too much like (late) nineteenth century verse. Thus Gyula and Ferenc Juhász are made to sound equally Victorian, while Babits, whose first volume of poetry was no less radical and experimental than Ady's *Új versek*, sounds even more archaic than the ailing poetic rhetoric he set out to renew: "Perchance (I dream) she means in jewell'd state/ Her treasure'd virgin beauty to unfurl/ When I, hereafter, come to be her mate." (The Tomb of Hegesó, p. 535). Even the stark simplicity of Attila József's *Tiszta szívvel* (Whose title is modified and mollified to *With Virtuous Heart*) is "poeticized" into a style of forced and awkward elevation as the straightforward lines "Harmadnapja nem eszek/ se sokat, se keveset" are rendered: "For three long days I haven't eaten,/ no crumb I've had from slices wheaten" (p. 632). Kirkconnell's anachronistic tendency to refashion a wide range of poetic styles into a somewhat stilted, pseudo-Victorian "poetese", is not, however, only characteristic of his translations of modern verse. The same poetic preconceptions and rhetorical strategies also seem to inform the earlier parts of the anthology, and there is little sense of development or variation from one poet – or even period – to the next.

Kirkconnell is understandably at his best when translating those poets whose conception of their craft comes closest to his own. Some of Hungary's more minor *fin de siècle* poets are handled with considerable insight and sympathy. His version of Mihály Szabolcska's "In the Grand Café, Paris" (pp. 469–470), for example, quite effectively, if somewhat freely, reproduces the tone and sentiments of the original poem. When dealing with the more sentimental and nostalgic products of late nineteenth century Hungarian verse, Kirkconnell's tendency to ornament, embellish and elevate seems less overtly anomalous and anachronistic. The sense of anomaly and anachronism quickly returns, however, when the anthology fails to register the rhetorical and stylistic challenge presented to the poetry of the *fin de siècle* by the following generation, and Ady himself sounds more like a Pósa or Váradi than a singer of "new songs for new times": "And I have sold thee, O my prince of God, For life I'd loved, Life more than thee ador'd" (p. 499).

Similar criticisms could also be levelled at the third section of *The Hungarian Helicon*, Poets of the Emigration, but here the key problem (recognised by Kirkconnell himself) seems to be one of selection and proportion. The "Prologue" tells us that the inclusion of "nearly two-score" emigré poets had been "subject to rather strenuous debate" (ix), and although much of the poetry translated certainly deserves a place in an anthology of this kind, the devotion of nearly twice as much space to emigré poetry as that afforded to verse written inside Hungary since 1945 does seem somewhat disproportionate. After all, at least *some* of the following post-war poets should surely have been represented in *The Hungarian Helicon*: László Kálnoky, Mihály Váci, László Nagy, István Simon, Sándor Csóóri, Ottó Orbán and Dezső Tandori.

The anthology closes with biographical notes on all the poets translated (with the inexplicable exception of Árpád Farkas, Simon Kemény, Bertalan Szemere and János Vajda) followed by an index

of poets, which incidentally employs a different alphabetical sequence. Like the rest of the book, the notes are plagued by colossal printing errors. The biographies of Károly and Sándor Kisfaludy, for example, suddenly merge as we are told that the younger brother "inaugurated the popular use of the ballad, but was in 1772 at Sümeg, died there in 1844" (p. 749). The anthology does contain a loose-leaf list of *errata*, but the seventeen corrections it offers represent only the tip of the iceberg. Although the attribution of the Hungarian national anthem (Kölcsey's "Hymnus") to Károly Kisfaludy is fortunately amended, countless other errors and "oddities" have passed unnoticed. The result can be both perplexing and misleading, as it is in the case of the extra sixteen lines added to Babits's "Nocturnal Question" (Esti kérdés, p. 539).

Librarians and bibliographers are advised to check the *errata* – if it has not slipped from the book by the time it reaches them – as the final correction is to the "Hard over and Title page (i)": for „Hungarian Helicon" read "The Hungarian Helicon".

In his "Prologue" Kirkconnell states his aims as a translator as follows: "to come as close as possible to the meaning and metre of the original" and "to produce English verse that is acceptable (as English) in prosody and idiom" (x). It is significant that Kirkconnell does not add terms like style, diction, tone or register to "meaning and metre", and this should perhaps be born in mind in any evaluation of his translations. To produce more than seven hundred pages of prosodically competent (and, for the most part, rhyming) verse, while also doing full justice to the "sense" of the poems translated, is undoubtedly a major achievement. If Kirkconnell's translations fail to represent the aesthetic (as opposed to the strictly semantic) interest of his chosen texts, they will none the less provide an invaluable service as parallel texts for the anglophone student of Hungarian literature who is not yet able to read the original poems without assistance. Translations, furthermore, unlike the works of art they represent, are never finished entities: they can always be developed and improved. There are clearly many lessons (both positive and negative) to be learnt from *The Hungarian Helicon*, and Watson Kirkconnell's protracted labour of love will certainly do much to assist and inspire translators of Hungarian poetry in the future.

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Erdély története

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Liest man die dreibändige ungarischsprachige *Geschichte Siebenbürgens (Erdély története)*, so steht außer Zweifel, daß die Kapitel über das neunzehnte Jahrhundert zu den besten des Werkes gehören. Die zwei Verfasser, Univ. Dozent *Ambrus Miskolczy*, Leiter des Lehrstuhls für rumänische Philologie an der Budapester Universität, und *Zoltán Szász*, Vizedirektor des Instituts für Geschichte der Ungarischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, sind hauptberuflich Forscher der Geschichte Siebenbürgens, ihre früheren Publikationen befassen sich fast ausschließlich mit dieser Problematik. Glücklicherweise haben diese beiden Wissenschaftler der mittleren Generation ihre Tätigkeit der Vergangenheit Siebenbürgens gewidmet. Darum sind diese Kapitel besonders gut gelungen. Ich meine, die ungarische Geschichtswissenschaft von heute sollte dafür Sorge tragen, daß ein ganzer Stab von Historikern eingesetzt wird, der sich mit der Erforschung der Geschichte Siebenbürgens von der Urzeit bis zur Gegenwart beschäftigt. Die zahlenmäßig reichen Publikationen aus Ungarn und aus allen anderen Ländern reichen als solche nicht aus, um eine recht gute zusammenfassende Darstellung zu ermöglichen (einige Kapitel dieser Synthese zeugen davon).

Wenden wir uns dieser wirklich imponierenden Darstellung des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts zu. Zuerst – und an dieser Stelle beginnt *Miskolczy* seine Ausführungen – lesen wir über die Gesellschaft,