

Sándor Petőfi; His Entire Poetic Works. A translation by Frank Szomy. 2nd ed. (Boca Raton, Fla., Published by the Author, 1972. Illus. Pp. 773).

Frank Szomy's intention, to make available an English translation of the poetic works of Sandor Petofi is a laudable one. Unfortunately, neither his command of the nuances of Hungarian nor his talent for English versification is equal to the task. In all fairness it should be noted that Mr. Szomy assumes no false airs and acknowledges in the "Foreword" that "the effort has been devoted to giving an accurate version of the thoughts and ideas of the poet." This much is generally accomplished, even when some of the thoughts suffer so much in the translation that their freshness and vitality disappear.

In general, poems that are chiefly narrative or descriptive are more successfully translated than those lyrics in which both the imagery and the music of the lines are essential to the total meaning. So a poem like *The Apostle* communicates the meaning of Petofi's original. However, since the excellent verse translation of Victor Clement has been in print for more than ten years, Mr. Szomy would have been well advised to give merely a brief prose summary and direct the reader to that work. It is this lack of awareness of the scholarly work in progress, this isolation from current scholarship in Hungarian literature that is one of the major drawbacks of the work. It is certainly at the root of most of the errors found in the volume.

The two other long narrative poems, *The Village Hammer* and *John the Hero* have not yet appeared in a better English version, so Szomy's rendering of the story is adequate. Unfortunately, Petofi's playful and ironic style does not come across in the translation of the former, and the mock heroic tone is lost. A study of the techniques of Pope's *Rape of the Lock* or Byron's *Don Juan* would profit any translator of the satiric Petofi. The second epic is an even more difficult poem to translate. Petofi uses a genre and a vocabulary that is not familiar to the Western reader. The imaginative world of the poem is closed to the translator, as it had been to John Bowring and William Loew, though Szomy at least gives an accurate version. Still, some disturbing elements remain: "Kanaan" of Canto XI is translated as "Caen," and in Canto XIII the imagery is transformed into pedestrian verbosity:

Johnnie Corn and the princess
Reached the battlefield at sunset.
The setting sun's last rays
Looked with reddened eyes at the terrible scene.

Even the name, "Johnnie Corn"—a literal translation—comes across in English quite differently from the melodic and romantic "Kukoricza Jancsi."

In most of the poems the failure to render the connotation of the words prevents the translator from capturing the tone of the poem even when the "dictionary" equivalent is accurate. The real meaning is lost when "Asszonyom" in "Maria Szechy" appears as "My woman; the literal translation of "kikeltik" by "hatch out" in "I Hear the Sound of the Lark Again" brings in connotations that are inappropriate to the poem. The list can go on, and regrettably these are not always merely errors in tone but also in sense: "könynyü termetedet" translated by "your light nature" is inaccurate as well as destructive to the mood of the poem; "a varmegye embere" is not "the men from Var County," nor is "lovagkor" the same as "days of horses." Finally, the poem on his parents' death speaks of a reunion (vizontlatas; , not a farewell. Other times the translation is disturbing even when not quite so far from the mark: "saloon" is not the equivalent of "kocsma" and there is no such word as "saloon-keepstress."

This would be nitpicking, were it not that such errors detract from the meaning and effect of the poem. If the purpose of translation is to make an author's work known beyond his country, and Mr. Szomy avows this is his intention, these errors are real problems. The poet's passionate appeal against German tyranny is lost in "Governor Bank" as the first stanza degenerates into meaningless phrases:

That second Endre . . .
Labored, under a slipper, to breath;
His wife held the reins
Of the country,
And the wagon did sway because of this,
First this way and then that way.

The English idiom of "henpecked" and the original of "from one side to the other" would render the sense much better. The use of slang ("own bunch," "gotten lost") and grammatical errors of case and tense further dilute the effect of the original. "Okatootaia" (shortened for some reason to Ikatoota"), a satire on Hungarian backwardness and an attack on Austria, loses its point when the parentheses in "Austr(al)ia" are eliminated.

In the foreword, the translator disclaims any effort at a poetic translation, yet some poetic effects can not be ignored. One expects an accurate reproduction of the sense of the poem, and often this means a duplication of tone and mood as well as words. "From Afar" loses its meaning when the limpid iambics disappear in halting prose arranged in short lines; "At the End of September" likewise fails. Marital poems such as "I Dream of Bloody Days" and "National Song" or a marching

song like "Rise to the Holy War!" are not the same when the beat is lost.

As mentioned earlier, many poems in the book give an accurate idea of Petofi's thoughts. Thus "Patriotic Song," one of the early poems, captures both the meaning and the spirit of the original, as does "Finally I Can Have Julia" and the poem "To Laci Arany." Others could be added to the list, but there is no point in such a catalogue. The reader should consult the work and, keeping in mind the shortcomings, use the literal translations as a guide. Unfortunately, it can not be used to savor the poetry of Petofi.

Many problems could have been solved if Mr. Szomy had had an editor, or at least had consulted with someone who was acquainted with Hungarian literature and the rules of formal English. Such glaring errors as the translation of "Vörösmartyhoz" as "To Marti Voros" or Ottokar as "Otto Karol" would have been avoided. Similarly, the use of capitals for common nouns (Komondorok, Kikiris), possessives for plurals (Szekely's), and the nominative case where the accusative is required for the indicative mood where the subjunctive is needed would have been corrected. Typographical errors (a execrated; *slim* for *slime*; Visakna), though relatively few, are nevertheless disturbing, especially since one is never certain that these were not intentionally written so. Finally, an editor would have caught the problem of using only one source: "Egri hangok" is translated as "The Bells of Eger" since the text used by Mr. Szomy has this error; to anyone who is acquainted with Petofi's poetry the mistake is obvious, though even without this prescience, the title has no relevance to the poem.

The final problem is Mr. Szomy's desire to give an "Americanized" version. To attain this this, he takes liberties with idiom and names. The latter is extremely disturbing when historical or literary figures are re-named, when proper names appear without accents (Gomor; Kecskemet; Alföld; Honderu; Matyas) or when a needless reversal of order results in the poem "To Miss B.O."

The book, published by the author, is handsomely bound and the pen and ink drawings that illustrate it further enhance its appearance. The typed manuscript, photographically reproduced, is neat and very readable, though a drawback of this method of printing is that the book is too bulky. The arrangement of the poems follows the chronological one generally used in editions of Petofi's complete poems. The table of contents helpfully gives the Hungarian as well as the English titles, though the lack of an alphabetical index is regrettable.

The magnitude of the undertaking, and the evidence of dedicated work, deserve praise. Furthermore, as a working tool for other trans-

lators—in the nature of an interlinear version—this volume can be of service. It is the only *complete* translation of *all* of Petofi's poems into English, and it certainly surpasses the recent issue of some rudimentary notes by Anton Nyerges (*Petofi*. Ed. by Joseph Ertavy-Barath. Buffalo, Hungarian Cultural Foundation, 1973) precisely in this. Later translators can certainly be indebted to Frank Szomy and his family for this systematic work.

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NEWS ITEM

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Review of Reviews*

Hungary. By Paul Ignotus. Nations of the Modern World. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1972, Pp. 333.

The very first impression is disconcerting. Here is another brief history to be added to the dozen other brief histories headed by C.A. Macartney's *Hungary: A Short History* (Edinburgh University Press, 1962) when what we need is a long history of Hungary in English . . . The first chapter seems to confirm the disillusionment: history until the end of the eighteenth century is dismissed in forty-odd pages not free of clichés and factual mistakes . . . But then, Mr. Ignotus, a well-known and talented writer but not a professional historian, himself protests his bias in the introduction as to what he finds interesting in Hungarian history and what he doesn't. He comes into his own with the description of the first Reform Generation of intellectuals in Hungary, and his writings thereafter becomes breathtakingly interesting. Foreign policy remains neglected to the end, but domestic affairs are treated judiciously and in great detail, and we learn more and more of the role intellectuals, especially writers and poets, played in politics. The approach is urban and liberal, which causes some peasant politicians and populist writers to come out badly: a judgement which I cannot but agree with. There are beautiful passages on Hungarian society, the explosive role of the Jews, the accomplishments of the second Reform Generation of intellectuals in the early twentieth century, the troubles of the interwar period—that Ignotus knows personally—and the triumphs and disasters of the post-1945 era in which the author played a distinguished role, except when he languished in prison as a victim of Mátyás Rákosi. The concluding description of Hungary today is scholarly and fascinating; the style is always elegant and witty, but factual errors continue almost to the end . . . This is a travelogue that takes the reader through history and through the lives of Hungary's political and cultural leaders: the guide

* The inclusion of a book in this section does not preclude a review of it in the Book Review section of a future issue of *CARHS*.