

American Poets at the Turn of the Second Millennium
Amerikai költők a második ezredfordulón Budapest:2016
pp.215. Válogatta és fordította Dr. Bagi István

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I

István Bagi's ambitious effort focusing on the lyrical production of the past two decades in the United States enriches the discipline of American Studies in Hungary, and contributes to translation studies as well. Said volume while providing a special gift to the fans of literature contains a selection of the poems of 25 contemporary poets along with their Hungarian translation positioned in a mirror fashion. In my review I would first provide some background information on the given authors, take a look at some of the translations and evaluate the significance of the given volume along with the respective compilation and translation efforts.

II

The volume contains the works of 13 male and 12 female poets. The poets included in this volume can be organically connected to the great traditions of American poetry, especially the post-1945 schools including the Beat Generation (Ginsberg, Kerouac), the confessionals (Plath, Sexton) the deep image poets (Robert Bly), or the imagists, especially Ezra Pound whose influence was still felt in the post-war period.

Bagi's main source is the world wide web, as the respective poems can be freely accessed on the Internet. Most of the anthologized poets are affiliated with higher education institutions, but there are business executives and representatives of other professions in their ranks as well. Bagi, as a retired MD is considered another link in a chain of medical professionals ranging from Chekhov to William Carlos Williams whose efforts enriched literature. The selection treats a critical mass of poems representing the cultural diversity of the United States. Consequently, in addition to the so-called mainstream poets (Wendell Berry, Gary Ferris, Billy Collins) ethnic and sexual orientation-based minorities, such as Maggie Estep, the performance artist, who died at a young age, are included as well. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that a few exceptions notwithstanding the creators of the poems

are still alive, and most of them have received high professional acclaim including the Pulitzer Prize. A large segment of the anthologized poets can be considered confessional. The most often treated themes include the pain and joy of lost and found love, internal impressions and memories of travel and the poet's self-identity ranging from Jewish, feminist, African-American to Puerto Rican. Some poets attempt to extend the limits of traditional poetry, among them, Wanda Phipps who made a commitment to write a poem each morning through several years is notable.

Gary Ferris following the tracks of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams writes poems while he functions in the business world as the director of a cable TV company. Louise Gluck and Jorie Graham subscribe to the confessional school, while David Lehman, similarly to Wanda Phipps undertook a five-year poem creation project including erotic topics as well.

Naturally in case of original and translated poems located in a mirror-fashion questions concerning the quality and accuracy of the Hungarian versions emerge. Generally, it can be concluded that the translator created an accurate and high quality work. The rendering of a literary work from one language to another raises the issue of translatability as well. Translations in general can be located on a spectrum ranging from a close version attempting to provide a word by word rendering to a freer translation expanding the limits of the original while staying true to the authorial intent. As it is indicated on the back cover the translator situates himself on the translation scale between the fully faithful and free translation versions. The question whether a given poem is translatable, or the translator can smuggle himself into the poem is one for the ages, demonstrated by György Faludy's rendering of Villon's poems. Another issue is the translator's familiarity with the given culture serving as the background for the text, Bagi's work testifies to his familiarity with the North American cultural context and his proficiency in American English. The Hungarian version of Estep's poem "Stalk Me" proves the translator's familiarity with slang as well.

Below I would like to select a few examples from the myriad of lyrical images generated by the translator.

Charles Simic's "Watermelons" reminds the reader of William Carlos Williams' famous imagist poem "The Red Wheel Barrow:" "much depends on a red wheelbarrow glazed with rainwater beside the white chickens." „Zöld Buddhák kacagó karéját faljuk, Kiköpjük fogaik: a fekete magjuk.” “Green Buddhas on the fruit stand. We eat the smile And spit out the teeth.” The image is clear, although the red meaty part of the watermelon is only implied, we are already treated to the contrast of green and black as Bagi translates the teeth as the black seeds. In both cases the contrast of colors is striking as with Simic the

green and black, while with Williams red and white form a spectacular dyad. It is obvious however, when a text is translated from English, a language known for its preference for economical expressions the translator has to cope with the relative verbosity and more illustrative terms of the Hungarian language. In case of Michael Burch's poem "She Was Very Strange, and Beautiful" the following quote and its Hungarian translation illustrates the above point. "She was very strange, and beautiful, as the violet mist upon the hills before night falls when the hoot owl calls and the cricket trills and the evaporated moon hangs low and full." „Különös lány és gyönyörű volt, mint dombokon a lilás ködök, mikor éjbe olvad a határ, szerelmes dalába kezd egy madár, nótát húz hozzá a hegedűs tücsök, és fátyolban fürdik a szerelmes Hold.” Bagi expresses the full lyrical beauty of the theme. He realizes that it is the love, the romantic feelings that have to be emphasized. On the one hand he compares the beauty of the woman to an inviting landscape, on the other the translation of the expression "evaporated moon hangs low and full" as a "love-struck heavenly body in a veil bath" lends a romantic feeling to the poem.

The following line is from, "Ordinary Love" written by the same poet. Bagi translates the title as "worn-out, weary love" (Megfáradt szerelem) and the hair color contrast is shifted onto an opposition between glittering bush and faded thicket. Thus Bagi writing: „Hajad, a csillogó cserje, most elfakult bozót” provides a better illustration for the exhaustion of emotions occurring in long-term relationships: "Your hair's blonde thicket now is tangle-gray; you turn your back; you murmur to the night."

I would also like to mention the elegance and ease with which the onomatopaeic aspects of "Redolence" translated as „Édes illat" (sweet fragrance) are handled. The translator engages in a brilliant game with language rich with alliterations: "cicadas sing; the tall elms gently sway;" „kabócák cicegnek, lombja lebben a szilnek;"

Bagi's translations enrich the original poems and expand their limits while shifting toward a freer rendition. The following line is from Billy Collins' "Introduction to Poetry:" "walk inside the poem's room and feel the walls for a light switch" „a versbe merülni nyakig is lehet, csak legyen hideg csap, ha a víz túl meleg.” Instead of a verbally identical translation Bagi substitutes the light switch with a bathtub faucet indicating that the reader can fully immerse himself in the poem, just like a person taking a bath. A poem cannot be tied to a chair, and interrogated, a poem does not break down and give a confession after beaten with a truncheon or baton. a poem can only be experienced and lived.

Or let's take a look at Gary Ferris' poem, titled "Your Fears" (Félelmeid) "Fears are like tests, through life we go, Moving on to the next, as we increase what we know." „Amíg élünk, aggályok is kísérik az utunk, Túléljük majd mindet, mert egyre többet tudunk;" The Hungarian translation reinforces the positive message of

the poem. The original English version merely refers to gaining more knowledge as a reward, but Bagi emphasizes survival and eventual victory over the crises of life, thus the reader is given an encouraging message.

In Erica Jong's "Middle Aged Lovers, II", a finger cut on paper rendered as „papírélen kaszált ujj” makes this everyday mishap almost visible and we feel the pain merely by reading the given line. One of the best examples of free yet fully appropriate translation is Bagi's rendering of David Lehman's verse title, "The Left Bank" as „Testékszer.” In this case the poem becomes an ankle bracelet intended for Lehman's lover.

I would like to cite a short line from Bagi's rendering of Thomas Lux's "Refrigerator:" "Three- quarters full, fiery globes, like strippers at a church social." „Izgatón duzzadók, nem csesznye kis bogyók - farizeusok közt sztripperek.” The translator fully understands the intent of the poet aimed at describing Maraschino cherries in a sensual way, while highlighting his status as an outsider. Strippers at a church social, or the Hungarian version: strippers among Pharisees, implies the social and cultural differences between the two groups, that is those with supposedly looser morals and with a religious commitment respectively. The latter originally referring to a religious group dedicated to the oral tradition can metonymically stand for all with religious fervor and extreme moral rectitude.

The following line is from Belinda Subraman's "Yin Yang:" "With the warm blanket of knowledge is the freezing cold of truth. We are greeted with tears as we come into this world and tears as we go out." The Hungarian translation including such terms as ice cold reality, tears greeting us when we are born and bidding farewell when we pass is similar to the pure, simple, yet hard, whiplash-like lines of Sylvia Plath. „A tudás melengető leple lebeg a jéghideg valóság felett. Könnyek fogadnak, mikor világra érkezünk és búcsúztatnak, amikor nem leszünk.”

III

All in all, the work of István Bagi is ambitious and deserves praise. As a researcher of American culture I realize that the discipline needs a figurative blood transfusion since the so-called great authors and topics, i.e. Hemingway, Faulkner, Civil War have lost their original lustre. Bagi by identifying new authors and incorporating new themes not only enhances, but strengthens the discipline of American Studies and provides crucial information for literature enthusiasts in Hungary. I recommend this book for everyone interested in American culture or literature in general. However, a question must inadvertently be dealt with, namely, could this book be useful in our material wealth-oriented world, or in other words should we still read poetry today?

As Robert Frost asserts, poetry offers “a momentary stay in confusion.” The fact that the world surrounding us is chaotic and turbulent can hardly be debated and this bilingual treasure trove presented to us by István Bagi is a valuable tool to recharge our batteries and replenish our mental energies enabling us to beat on forward on our chosen path.