

BERNARD ADAMS

Response and responsibility

Exactly at a quarter to one, after repeated futile experiments, the tense anticipation was rewarded. Into the colourless flame of a Bunsen burner upon the classroom desk there suddenly burst a flash of bright emerald; the professor's efforts to demonstrate the fact that certain chemical substances are capable of changing the colour of fire had proved successful. But, at the same triumphant moment, exactly at a quarter to one, there intruded the sound of a hurdy-gurdy in a neighbouring courtyard. Whereupon all earnestness and attention instantly fled. The windows were wide open, welcoming the warmth of a March day, while the wings of fresh spring breezes wafted music into the room. It was a rollicking magyar melody which issued in march tempo from the hurdy-gurdy. It was so utterly hilarious an air, so Viennese in spirit, that the entire class felt tempted to smile; indeed, many among those present did not restrain this urge.

At a quarter to one, just at the moment when, after long and fruitless attempts and as a reward for the waiting so heavily and anxiously endured, an emerald green streak flared up in the colourless Bunsen flame on the master's desk in the biology laboratory as evidence that the compound that the master had said would colour the flame green had in fact coloured the flame green – at precisely a quarter to one, I say, just at that triumphal moment, in the yard of the house next door a hurdy-gurdy struck up. The windows were all wide open that warm March day, and the music floated into the classroom on the wings of the cool springtime breeze. It was some lively Hungarian melody which, coming from the hurdy-gurdy, sounded like a march, and its military, Viennese ring made the whole class feel like smiling, which some actually did.

I feel that many are likely to recognise the Hungarian text of which these two pieces of English prose are translations – the opening passage of Molnár Ferenc's *A Pál utcai fiúk*. I offer them as evidence that there is by no means always one way and one way only to translate a given set of words in a given context. The difference between different versions of the same source text will derive from different translators' feelings about what the author has to say and/or how best to express his thoughts in the target language – in other words, their subjective response to the original, over and above the purely objective transmission of content.

Relatively few items of Hungarian literature have been translated into English more than once. These are mostly poems and short stories, but the most frequently translated longer work is Madách Imre's *Az ember tragédiája*, with seven translations, while the list includes Jókai's *Az új földesúr*, Kosztolányi's *Pacsirta* and Szabó Magda's *Az ajtó*. There are two reasons for re-translating a literary work: one is dissatisfaction with an existing translation, coupled with the belief that re-translation is worthwhile and that one can do better; the second is ignorance of the existence of an earlier translation. The first of these two versions of Molnár which I have quoted is Szirtes György's 1994 revision of Rittenberg Lajos's translation made in 1927. The second is my own unpublished version, made about fifteen years ago in ignorance of the work of Rittenberg and Szirtes. You will notice that the two differ to some extent in vocabulary, and very noticeably in the length of the first sentence. I preserve Molnár's longish first sentence, while Rittenberg/Szirtes break it down into a number of shorter ones.

The first time that I ever spoke to an audience about my work I was asked whether I believed that in translating I produced new works of literature. The idea had never occurred to me, so whatever answer I gave probably made no sense at all, but the problem remained at the back of my mind. Some time later I read an inaugural lecture by a President of the British Classical Association, who said that translation was a "creative art, if only a minor one"; quite what was meant by *minor* was not explained, but it seemed a strange thing to say. Soon after that came a series of articles in the journal of the British Translators' Association urging creativity in translation: translators should "work the source text to get the most out of it", should

“write unnatural English” if they felt like doing so, should see it almost as their *raison d’être* to induce change in the English language. Enough, I said to myself, I must think about this. What exactly am I doing?

I understand the term ‘creative art’ to mean an activity in which a raw material is made into, or used to make, an artefact, something that did not previously exist as such. This is the process in which a sculptor makes stone into a statue, a painter uses paint and brushes to make a picture, a writer uses writing materials to produce a poem etc. etc. The translator does not do this. He does not use a raw material but starts with an artefact – a text that has already been written, usually by someone else – and modifies it so as to increase its accessibility, to widen the author’s audience.

The translator has much in common with the musical performer. Most people will derive little or no benefit from looking at – I hesitate to call it ‘reading’ – the printed page of, say, a piano sonata by Mozart: they need a pianist to play the notes for them. Similarly, anyone with no knowledge of a given foreign language will be little if any the wiser for looking at a text in that language: if they are to understand it they need a translator. In playing Mozart the pianist must play only what Mozart wrote, without omission, addition or error; the translator must treat his source text similarly. The pianist is allowed a degree of liberty in deciding how quickly and how loudly to play, and exactly how to phrase the musical line – in other words, without altering the substance of what he plays he can introduce an element of personal style. The same applies to the translator – there is by no means always one way and one way only to translate a given set of words in a given context. I’ve already offered two versions of a little Molnár: here are four different accounts of Radnóti Miklós’s famous *Hetedik eclóga* – just the third and fourth stanzas, for the sake of brevity.

- A As thus in darkness I feel my way over the poem,
 shorn of its crown of accents, even so do I live,
 blind, like an inchworm spanning my hand on the paper;
 flashlight, book, the lager guards took away everything,
 and the mail doesn't come, and fog descends on the barracks.
 Amid rumours and pests live the Frenchman, the Pole, loud Italian,
 the Serbian outcast, the musing Jew in the mountains:
 one life in all of these tattered and feverish bodies,
 waiting for news, for a lovely womanly word,
 for freedom – for an end how dark soever – for a miracle.
- B Dropping accents, groping my way from line to line,
 I write this poem here in the half-light as I live:
 purblind, looping inchworm-like along the paper;
 torch, book and all the Stalag guards have taken,
 mail never comes, and only fog descends on our hut.
 Here we live in the hills, between the rumours and bugs,
 Frenchman and Pole, loud Italian, dissident Serb and wistful Jew,
 one dismembered, feverish body with a single life –
 waiting for good news, a pretty woman's word, a free man's fate,
 waiting for the end, the fall into the thick dark, for miracles.
- C Line under unaccented line I scrawl
 My poem in the dark, just as I live,
 Across the paper feel my sightless way.
 My lamp, my book, my everything the guards
 Have taken; all around the drizzle swirls
 Down on the barracks, and we get no mail.
 Here among lice and rumours live the Poles,
 The French, loud-voiced Italians, quarrelsome Serbs,
 Despondent Jews, a body feverish,
 Dismembered, and yet living in these hills
 A life united – waiting for good news,
 A woman's loving word, a destiny
 Humane and free, and waiting for the end
 Veiled yet in darkness, and for miracles.

D Undotted, uncrossed symbols grope and join to the last one,
feeling my way I write as I live, condemned to a dark world,
sightless, probing along my page, imitating an inchworm.
Torches, books and the rest were taken away by the warders,
post never comes, just the mountain fog drifts into the building.
Rumours and rodents mix with a few Serbs of the Resistance,
Frenchmen, Poles, with the pensive Jews and noisy Italians,
feverish and fragmented, yet one in the desire –
for happy news, soft words from a loved one, dignity, freedom,
and for an end, difficult to predict, a miraculous easement.

A is by Frederick Turner from the prose of Ozsváth Zsuzsanna; B by Francis Jones; C by the author; D by Zollman Péter. It is obvious that the four translators have taken four different approaches to the poem. The problem of metre is resolved differently, there are differences in vocabulary, one may speculate on whether the chosen metre influences choice of vocabulary or vice versa, and on whether or not the translators were aware of each other's work, while the question of the use of an intermediary prose translation is aired once more.

The musical composer can in fact offer suggestions as to how fast and how loudly a performer should play and how the musical line should be phrased, because music is written for the purpose of repeated performance and by so doing the composer retains a modicum of control. The musical performer's audience is quite often familiar with what is played to them, and will therefore be sensitive to tempo, dynamics and phrasing, all of which they will see as indicators of good or bad taste, and they will recognise wrong notes as technical errors. Literature, however, is not written for the purpose of translation and the author may be quite unable to exercise any influence on the process. The translator's audience is very unlikely to be familiar with the source text and cannot be expected to recognise mistakes, while if they find fault with the translation as literature they may well blame the original rather than the translator.

In their response to their material, therefore, both musician and translator have a responsibility to audience and composer/author alike not to mislead or distort. Of the two, the translator's responsibility is arguably the greater. He, like the musician, is a guest in someone else's work, more often than not

uninvited, but the relative permanence of the written word compared with the transience of a musical performance makes the consequences of how that guest behaves much more serious for both his host-author and his audience.

No author acquires an international reputation except through his translators, but the effect of faulty translation is hard to predict, and I'm aware of one curious case of this. In 1858 the English orientalist Edward Fitzgerald published a verse translation of the *rubaiyyat* of the medieval Persian poet Omar Khayyam. This became very popular indeed, ran into many editions, and is reprinted even today. In 1967 the Classical scholar Robert Graves, in collaboration with the Persian expert Omar Ali-Sharif, published a re-translation in verse of sorts, adding an essay (*The Fitz-Omar Cult*) highly critical of Fitzgerald's work, pointing out both inaccuracies in translation and failure to understand the mystic *Sufi* philosophy that underlies the original. Quotations from both versions point the difference very clearly:

I:

Fitzgerald

Awake! For Morning in the Bowl of Night
Has flung the Stone that puts the Stars to flight:
And lo! the Hunter of the East has caught
The Sultan's turret in a Noose of Light.

Graves/Ali-Shah

While Dawn, Day's herald straddling the whole sky,
Offers the drowsy world a toast 'to Wine',
The Sun spills early gold on city roofs –
Day's regal Host, replenishing his jug.

XI:

Fitzgerald

Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse, and Thou
Beside me singing in the Wilderness –
And Wilderness is Paradise enow!

Graves/Ali-Shah

Should our day's portion be one mancel loaf,
A haunch of mutton and a gourd of wine
Set for us two on the wide plain,
No Sultan's bounty could evoke such joy.

Fitzgerald himself openly said that he had “treated his material quite freely”, and called his version a “transmogrification” rather than a translation. While it cannot be denied that Graves’ is technically the better translation, Fitzgerald’s is far superior as poetry – all of it is sound, much of it clever and some of it memorable. One hears Fitzgerald quoted in daily life – indeed, some of it has passed into the language – but I have never heard anyone quote Graves. Such, then is the extreme possibility of what can happen when response and responsibility are not held in balance: in literary terms, responsive artistic misrepresentation can win over responsible pedantry. Khayyam has a very good reputation with the English reader – but it stands on a false foundation.

Let me conclude, then, with the suggestion that translation is not a creative art but a performance art, and that because of its potential impact on the reputations of writers and their work it is anything but ‘minor’.