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The Limits of Literary Translation: Notes on a Hungarian Translation of a Chinese Poem Translated by Gyula Illyés

Abstract

Hungarian literary translation has always been known for its supreme quality, and we might also add that it is peerless in terms of quantity, too, there are translations from probably all major languages of the world. This fact is not only due to the uniqueness of the Hungarian language in Europe, but also to political reasons: after WW2, many Hungarian artists were not allowed to publish their own pieces, however, they were allowed to translate. This paper investigates some translations of Gyula Illyés (1902-1983), one of the famous Hungarian literary translators, who ventured to translate an anthology of Chinese literature on the basis of a collection of French translations. Although his translations are generally good, there are many problems which stem from the cultural and linguistic differences between the two countries. There are other misunderstandings, too; the question to answer is whether it is possible to transfer poems between such distant cultures without significant loss.

Keywords: literary translation, Chinese poetry, cultural transfer, Gyula Illyés, mistranslation

1. Introduction

Hungarian literary translation was a "winner" of the period following the Second World War. Artists judged by the establishment as "unreliable", "bourgeois", or "individualistic" were not allowed to publish their own pieces, however, they were allowed to publish literary translations, be they plays, poems, novels, or short stories, both from western and from "fraternal socialist" countries. The translations done before WW2 out of sheer individual interest or personal education were replaced by translations mass produced in a system where literary translations were done upon order, along strict principles, using so-called "control editors"[1] - felt by many to be literary drudgery. We can quote the words of Zoltán Kenyeres who said that from the 1950s the main focus was on content and formal equivalence: instead of experimenting, literary translation was now seen as an instrument of spreading information (Kenyeres 1974: 330). Knowing this requirement, many Hungarian literary translators - including Gyula Illyés - felt an urge to explore "lands less known or unexplored" (Illyés 1975: 352). I am using Illyés as an example now because this paper focuses on one of his literary translations. It was as I was doing an analysis of Illyés' translation that I found there is no direct

transfer whatsoever between Chinese and Hungarian - a pivot language must be used, which can have radical consequences, and all this becomes absolutely clear in Illyés' translation.

2. The Chinese Poem

The experimentation mentioned above - predominantly getting its motivation from trying to dodge the literary system - bore fruit such as the 170-page book translated by Illyés, titled *Kínai szelence* [Chinese Box], which presents a fragment of Chinese poetry to Hungarian readers. Having read the 1957 collection - titled *La poésie chinoise* - of the French poetess, Patricia Guillerma, who was of Chinese origin, Illyés felt an urge to translate some Chinese poems into Hungarian.

Because of this *détour*, Illyés thoroughly misunderstood Chinese poetry. In one of his writings he claimed that "the compulsory language of Chinese poetry is so subtle that we might well call it genteel" (Illyés 1975: 269). He, however, might only have thought this because of the intermediary texts, as he was unable to read the original ones. Sinologist Gergely Salát was kind enough to let me know that several translators (including Sándor Weöres and László Nagy) worked in the 1950s and 60s with the help of sinologists - Ferenc Tókei and Barnabás Csongor - who created a rough translation of the poems, together with footnotes; then this information was inserted in the poems by the translators; and then the sinologists compared these poems with the originals. This method resulted in translations of high poetic quality and philological accuracy. However, Illyés' translations never met the original and were not checked later either. Illyés was aware of the fact that Chinese poetry can be barely compared to its European counterpart: each Chinese poem contains the entirety of Chinese culture, and all poems abound in symbols and ellipses that condense the text (Illyés 1975: 270). In his foreword, Illyés speaks about the "peerless density of the short-worded Chinese language" (Illyés 1975: 268). What this is all about we can easily understand if we have a look at the figure below, showing the original version of the famous poem *Silent Night* by Li Bai (W1 [this reference replaces internet addresses for the sake of convenience, see details in Works Cited]). This poem is one of the most famous quatrains in Chinese, everybody in China knows it by heart as the best phrasing of homesickness:

静夜思	Jìng Yè Sī
床前明月光	Chuáng qián míng yuè guāng
疑是地上霜	Yí shì dì shàng shuāng
举头望明月	Jǔ tóu wàng míng yuè
低头思故乡	Dī tóu sī gù xiāng

If you follow this link, you can watch a video and listen to the poem: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9T>. If you want to make a search, type: Li Bai jing ye si.

3. Hungarian Translations

It is quite clear that an exact translation is impossible here: as György Rónay explained, we, Europeans have no key to unlock this type of poetry, this is "impossible to render" (Rónay 1958: 498). Gergely Salát adds that Chinese does not have suffixes, the categories of part-of-speechness are blurred, the role of words depends on their position in the sentence and also on their context. In the original of the poem - as in most Chinese poems - the pronoun "I" is not used, the poems are completely impersonal. It is a western tradition to translate poems without explicit subjects in first person singular, even though this leads to misinterpretation. The poem is formally an example of "broken sentence" (*jueju*), which has strict rules: there are 4 lines, each line contains 5 or 7 syllables, and the rhyme scheme is either aaxa or xaxa. The poem presented has five-syllable lines (i.e. five words) and the rhyme scheme is aaxa. The Chinese signs correspond to the following words (on the right you can see the rough Hungarian translation, made by Gergely Salát from the original poem):

Silent / night / think	Csönd(es) / éjszaka / gondol(at)
Bed / before / bright / moon / shine	Ágy / előtt / fény(es) / hold / fény
Think / be / ground / on / frost	Mintha / van / föld / rajta / dér
Raise / head / view / bright / moon	Felemel / fej / néz / fény(es) / hold
Lower / head / think / old / home	Lehajt / fej / gondol / régi / otthon/falu

Creating a poem from this information inarguably requires courage and a creative genius. In Illyés' version we see a poem which is rather tranquil, precisely following the rhyme scheme, but quite bizarre in its imagery. Illyés had the content of the poem re-written:

Holdfény a földön: ezüst pocsolya,	Moonshine on the ground: silver puddle
a talaja meg fehér kocsonya.	and the floor is white jelly.
A holdra nézek, majd fejem leejtve	I look at the moon, then drop my head
rád gondolok, kiskorom otthona.	and think about my childhood home.
<i>(Illyés Gyula)</i>	

The term "white jelly" seems somewhat strange but if we read the French version of the poem, we know where the misunderstanding came from (W2). The translation in prose cited here is not equivalent to Guillermaz' translation, but it is very similar in content.

Devant mon lit, la lune jette une clarté très vive;
Je doute un moment si ce n'est point la gelée blanche qui brille sur le sol.
Je lève la tête, je contemple la lune brillante;
Je baisse la tête et je pense à mon pays.

The phrase to blame is "*gelée blanche*", which means "rime" or "frost", which Illyés interpreted word-by-word as "gel" or "jelly", that is how "jelly" and "puddle" entered the translation. In the second line - the floor is white jelly - it is even impossible to state what "floor" we are speaking about. The original Chinese poem is about a traveller, a travelling poet, or an exile who wakes up suddenly in the middle of the night and takes moonshine for frost, i.e. he/she thinks of the moment of leaving (or the nights spent under the sky), and, turning his/her regard from the moon to earth, he/she thinks of the place he/she left.

When we compare it to Illyés' translation, we will find that Lőrinc Szabó's version is much more exact, even though he introduces the additional idea of a "foreign bed", and describes the white snow as something real:

Káprázva ébredek. Idegen ágy.	I wake up in a dazzle. A foreign bed.
Fehér hó lepi szobám padlatát.	The floor of my room is covered in white snow.
Felnézek - a hold vakítva ragyog.	I look up - the moon is shining bright.
Fejem lecsügged - hazagondolok.	I look down - I think of my home.
<i>(Szabó Lőrinc)</i>	

Lőrinc Szabó used the rhyme scheme aabb, which is more familiar to Hungarian ears, and gave an exact rendering of the last two lines. In contrast, Sándor Weöres' translation is more like an impression, resembling a romantic European poem rather than any kind of Chinese poem. It misses the very essence of the poem, and translates calmness into nervousity, a static poem into an eventful one:

Ágyam lábánál fehér ragyogás:	At the feet of my bed white glare:
lehet, hogy nyáron itt a hófuvás?	could it be a blizzard in summer?
Fölemelkedek, nézem-figyelem:	I rise, then watch-observe:
ágyamhoz ér a holdfény-villogás.	the moonshine-glimmering reaches my bed.
<i>(Weöres Sándor)</i>	

Dezső Kosztolányi's translation abandons the original rhyme scheme for the sake of an abab scheme, and it is sentimental-romantic in tone; it is, in fact, a loose interpretation of the original. Here we also find the adequate and effective image of "a foreign bed". The poem itself has a modern feel, sounding as if it were the self-addressing confession of an adventurer:

Éjjel ocsudok föl idegen ágyon,	At night I waken in a foreign bed,
a zuzmara künn a tájat befűtta.	outside the world is covered in frost.
Föl a fejet - tekints a holdra vágyn.	Up the head - look at the moon longingly.
Le a fejet - gondolj a vándorútra.	Down the head - think of the way ahead.
<i>(Kosztolányi Dezső)</i>	

Géza Képes' translation makes an effort to render the form of the Chinese poem, as well. Short lines, impersonal opening, aaxa rhyme scheme: Képes obviously wanted to transfer the original as a Chinese poem into Hungarian literature, avoiding cultural adaptation as much as possible. In his translation, the word "gond" [worry] replaces "szülőfalu" [home village], probably to fit the rhyme scheme (this is what Italian calls *tirannia della rima*).

Ágynál fénylő hold	At bed shining moon
lent fehér dér-folt.	down white frost- spot.
Nézek fel: csak fény.	I look up: only light.
Nézek le: csak gond.	I look down: only worry.
<i>(Képes Géza)</i>	

Dénes Szedő had a similar approach to the poem. His translation has a modern, nervous feel because of the enjambments and the punctuation. Instead of home village, Szedő explicitly uses the concept of "homesickness", which makes the poem unambiguous, and much less objective - in the technical sense of the word - than the original:

Ágy előtt dérnék	At bed as if frost
tetsző fényszőnyeg.	there is light- carpet.
Fölnézek: hold süt;	I look up: moon is shining;
le: honvágy éget.	down: I feel homesick.
<i>(Szedő Dénes)</i>	

We can see that all of these translations are - despite all the benevolence of the translators - more of literary bluffs than proper translations, impressions for people who do not speak the original language and culture, similes that try to give glimpse of the original, but in fact change the original fundamentally and irreversibly because of the constraints of the target language, and the experience of the readers and their beliefs about poetry. All of these translations lose the battle in a noble fight, so perhaps it is not an accident that the anthology published in the *Lyra Mundi* series presents seven different translations of the original (the six translations presented here come from this anthology).

4. Notes on Illyés' Translation

Gyula Illyés' Chinese translations were received with very little understanding in Hungary - reviews complained about the inaccuracies of the introduction and the translations, and found very little value in the little poems. "Gyula Illyés, unfortunately, also followed Kosztolányi's footsteps[2] when he filled the Chinese Box", said Endre Sós, one of the critics, also adding that "uncovering the millennial essence of Chinese poetry in quite impossible" for anyone (Sós 1958: 8). Sós states that the poems are not so much translations but "Gyula Illyés' poems about the Chinese originals" - Illyés sometimes translates as if he was writing an original poem or a Hungarian "folk song". He also adds that Illyés translated from a French anthology whose decoding of the Chinese symbols was rather questionable - Barnabás Csongor, however, stated that the French prose was "good and accurate" (Csongor 1958: 256).

Sándor Lukácsy was of the opinion that Chinese poetry suited Illyés very well because it was also "demotic in its ancientness" (Lukácsy 1964: 455). Illyés observed that Chinese poems have a unique system of symbols and a unique language, and this sometimes clearly resembles the traditional symbols of Hungarian folk songs, e.g. in their natural imagery. Bai Juyi's poem *Drunk Amid the Falling Leaves* is a poem about life and getting old. It starts and ends with natural images, similarly to Hungarian folk songs. In Illyés' translation the poem is somewhat incomprehensible, presenting a crazy old man who is talking to his wine:

A szél az őszi fák csúcsán barangol.	The wind is roaming at the top of the trees.
Az öreg meg a borának beszél.	The old [man] is talking to [his] wine.
Arca akár a dércsípte levél.	[His] face is like a frosted autumn leaf.
Nem ez volt a színe tavaszkor!	It had a different colour in spring!
<i>(Illyés Gyula)</i>	

The biggest mistake is not in line two, but in changing the meaning of the last line, which should be something like "it is red but not because it is young again". The Hungarian word-to-word translation, created by sinologist Gergely Salát, exposes a significantly different poem.

széllel dacolva ágvégek az ősz fákon	defying wind boughs autumn trees
borral szemben hosszú évű ember	opposite wine long year man/men
részeg arca, mint a deres levél	drunken face like frosted leaf
vörös ugyan, de nem a tavasztól	red but not because spring

The English rendering (W3) of the poem is the following. As there is no singular or plural in classical Chinese, it is acceptable to say that there are several old men drinking together.

Facing the wind beneath bare trees.

Drinking with a bunch of old men.

Our faces look like frosted autumn leaves.

Any red in our cheeks is no sign of youth.

György Rónay says that these poems can only be understood as a whole because of their "heightened focus

on reality" and their "exactitude and simple realism" (Rónay 1958: 499); linguistic simplicity and richness of symbols both contribute to the meaning of the poems. "Illyés tries to render these strange little poems just as they are", Rónay said, with a lot of permissiveness in his voice (Rónay 1958: 497). He claimed that Illyés' translations are "bleaker, more foreign, and greyer - more realistic" than Kosztolányi's, and thus they are closer to the original (Rónay 1958: 498). Indeed, they are closer, but not in a way Rónay thinks they are. Barnabás Csongor devoted a complete essay to Illyés' Chinese translations - in his essay he prefers to criticise the foreword of the book instead of the poems themselves. He writes extensively about Illyés' inaccuracies and generalisations, at the same time he notes that Illyés' main mistake is that he fell for popular fallacies about China. "It is hard to believe that Illyés wrote a foreword like this" - he wrote (Csongor 1958: 259). Csongor pointed out that Chinese poetry can only be understood if we know a number of complicated rules very well, and he adds encouragingly that "the monotonousness of the Chinese originals is broken by the colourful variety of different translations and formal experimentation" -, which, he said, is a "valuable approach" (Csongor 1958: 256). At the same time, he misses modern Chinese poetry from the book especially because - as he put it - "Chinese poems have been explained by philologists for translators' convenience since 1945" (Csongor 1958: 255). Illyés preferred to use the French language, which he dearly loved, as a mediator.

5. Conclusion

"The Latin spirit of Gyula Illyés" stood very close to what modern literary translation required - wrote Zoltán Kenyeres (Kenyeres 1974: 338), and we can also add that his literary translations were ripe and remarkable. Still, the fact that sometimes he also misunderstood (or peculiarly interpreted) both French and English poems cannot go unnoticed. In the case of Chinese poems it is clear that he did not translate from the original, and he seems to have accepted the French poems to such an extent that he never questioned what was stated in them. It is impossible to decide now if Illyés made his mistakes accidentally, or his interpretations of the poems were deliberate. The question remains to be answered whether it is possible (and if it is worth trying) to create valid translations from a culture so far away as China without preliminary studies and lengthy explanations. Without them, it seems, the boundaries of literary translation reveal themselves all too soon.

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W2 = <http://wengu.tartarie.com/wg/wengu.php?no=233&l=Tangshi#p13n1> [accessed 06.01.2018]

W3 = <http://tangshi.tuxfamily.org/baijuyi/0077.html> [accessed 06.01.2018]

[1] Despite the name, this term does not denote a kind of censor, but someone whose task is to help the work of the translator.

[2] Dezső Kosztolányi, Hungarian poet and translator, was famous for his unfaithful - albeit beautiful - translations: he often created new poems to his own liking rather than faithfully following the source text.

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