

Thoughts on a Lecture about Translating Poetry by John Minahane



I was glad to be able to speak to a large roomful of bright-eyed students at the Faculty of Applied Languages on February 27, 2019. The university of Economics in Bratislava made a very good first impression. Here, I thought, the atmosphere is fresh and stimulating. When I met my student audience, I sensed immediately that they were curious, friendly, and ready to give me a hearing.



I was to say something about my life, my work as a translator, and specifically my translation of the *Bloody Sonnets* of Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav. My focus would be on literary translation, especially translation of the most demanding kind of language, poetry. Rather than talking about this in the abstract, I wanted to give some examples. It would therefore be helpful for the students if the texts of the short poems selected could be projected in both languages, as well as being read. The Faculty gave me this option, and Jozef kindly and patiently managed the projections, enabling me to stand at the lectern (as I hate to recite poems sitting down).

How does someone like me, born in the south-west of Ireland in the 1950s, happen to be in Slovakia in the third millennium, translating poets such as Rúfus, Novomeský,

Hviezdoslav ? This question was too big to handle systematically. I was more anxious to convince my listeners that I really did have access to these poets : I could make my way into the atmosphere, thought and feeling of their poems. I wanted to give some impressions, or broad hints, of how a translator can forge access routes for him/herself to a seemingly distant literature.

The natural place to begin was my native island. Ranging along the projected map of Ireland, I mentioned my periods of residence in Cork and Dublin and my contacts with Belfast, north of what was previously our “hard border”. Then, going back down the map to the rural south-west, where I was born and raised, I touched on the subject of the Irish language. As an English-speaking child, Irish (also called Gaelic) gave me my first powerful awareness of the differences of languages. I tried the students with a verse, in the original Irish and an English translation, from a comic poem by the famously drunken poet Cathal Buí mac Giolla Gunna. One day Cathal Buí saw a bittern (*bučiak*) lying dead on the ice of a frozen lake. The thought occurred to him that since the water was frozen, the bird couldn't drink, and therefore he had died of thirst. And this was a warning to himself, not to listen to his wife and others who were urging him to give up drinking: no, he would drink while he could, for fear of ending up like the bittern!... – It was gratifying to be asked afterwards, by a student in the audience, whether I would not consider translating Irish poetry into Slovak! Alas, my grasp of the Slovak literary language will never be good enough for that...

Continuing, I said that my rural childhood gave me a sense of the country life which Milan Rúfus writes about. Agriculture in south-west Ireland in the 1950s, however, was already more mechanised than in Slovakia as described by Rúfus. During the 1960s we experienced another great wave of mechanisation. Showing pictures of the threshing machine (*mláťací stroj*) and combine harvester (*kombajn*), I explained that the threshing machine required a great deal of physical labour, and it was associated with very enjoyable social occasions. The machine which replaced it, the combine harvester, required only a driver, and it was totally unsocial. Economic and technical progress, represented by the harvester, came at the price of rural community life.

More broadly, I said, modern intensive farming is a paradox. On the one hand, it has a powerful economic logic. On the other hand, it has a devastating effect on the environment (to which Rúfus was highly sensitive). This negative environmental impact was evidenced recently in media reports about the worldwide destruction of insect species: about 2½% of the world's insects are dying off every year, principally as a result of intensive farming.

Rúfus has many poems about ploughing. We might have a mental image of a tractor, which we associate with this activity. But we need to remove that image, because Rúfus's ploughs are drawn by animals. – As I explained all this, followed by a reading of the short but demanding poem *A každý deň / And Every Day*, I sensed that my audience was listening attentively. But how clear was my presentation ? I wasn't sure. On the other hand, when we moved to the two short poems by Ladislav Novomeský, I could feel a firm connection. *Pašerák / The Smuggler* is about the worrying prospect of crossing a “hard border” in the summer of 1939. So as not to end up a prisoner of the Gestapo, Novomeský was planning to move from Prague to Bratislava. That is to say, he would go from the Nazi German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia across the border to the Slovak Republic. His miniature poem carries a powerful charge, and the students' own experience and/or reading enabled them to feel it.

And so to Hviezdoslav's *Bloody Sonnets*. It's easy to say concisely why they interest me. I'm interested in poetry and I'm interested in World War I, and this is one of the finest works of World War I poetry. Ireland's World War I poetry, for example, is rich and varied and sometimes magnificent, but it has nothing like the *Bloody Sonnets*. To approach this work of Hviezdoslav's, to connect with it, there are different paths we might take. We could go

through the sonnets from beginning to end: the sequence of 32 poems is carefully and logically planned.

But today, for example (I told the students) we can perfectly well start at the end. Like any well-organised piece of writing, the *Bloody Sonnets* end with a recapitulation or summary. The final sonnet is less famous than the penultimate, the 31st (which is a hymn to peace, formerly compulsory reading for generations of Slovak boys and girls). Nonetheless, Sonnet 32 makes a splendid conclusion. Hviezdoslav describes what his sonnets are about, the sufferings he is responding to, the pain of combatants and non-combatants; how he too has inwardly fought battles and is sorely wounded; what his hopes are for his people... And finally, there is his powerful invocation to the war to be gone, to leave the world.

A question-and-answer session included the following: “When do you stop changing or polishing a translation, when is it “perfect” or “as good as it gets”?” “Can poets like Hviezdoslav and Novomeský be interesting to people in Britain and Ireland?” “How were you able to understand Hviezdoslav’s difficult language?” “Why did you come to Slovakia?” – among others. Possibly some who would have liked to ask questions did not, because they worried, unnecessarily, that their English would not pass muster (those who spoke expressed themselves very ably). But if ever the session seemed likely to flag, Dominika and Jozef, from the teachers’ camp, ensured that it did not.

I am grateful for the stimulating challenge, large friendly audience and pleasant atmosphere. Particular thanks to Nora, Ildiko, Dominika, Jozef, Andrej (who gave good recitations of the Slovak originals), and others directly involved.

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Poems referred to here may be found in:

Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav, *The Bloody Sonnets* tr. John Minahane (Centre for Information on Literature, Bratislava, 2018)

Ladislav Novomeský, *Slovak Spring* tr. John Minahane (Belfast Historical and Educational Society, Belfast, 2004)

Milan Rúfus, *Niest’ bremeno a spievať / To Bear the Burden and Sing* tr. John Minahane (Matica slovenská, Martin, 2008)