

“I’m a Tradesman...”

An interview with Ádám Nádasy, the translator

You are a teacher, a linguist, a poet and a literary translator. In this interview I would like to enquire especially into the latter two, with a special emphasis on translation. Firstly, I would be interested in how these roles complement each other.

They do overlap to a great extent. Being a teacher is not a separate activity, it links both to linguistics and translation. I take up translating jobs that challenge me as a linguist, for instance, jobs that require careful philological work. I think poetry is the most independent out of these involvements.

In the translator’s note that you wrote to your translation of Hamlet, you made a hint that in your general intention to clarify there is something from the attitude of the teacher.

My expectation of my translation is that spectators understand everything from beginning to end. One of the critics of my translation of *Hamlet* is Géza Fodor, the well-known drama editor and professor of criticism, who read the translation on a friendly basis. For a period of four and a half hours he just went on and on listing his problems with it. He concluded, “every single corner is floodlit.” In his opinion, this actually becomes a disadvantage, because in this play, he says, a portion of gloom is beneficial. So, he praised and criticised my work at the same time.

How did you take it?

I agree that every single corner is floodlit. On the other hand, the original itself is also comprehensible, at least on the lexical level. I don’t deny that there is a kind of gloom in the whole of the text, but as a translator you don’t have to deal with it.

Do you think your translation is obscure?

It is much less obscure than what people are used to. We do understand the words of the characters, what we don’t cope with is their motivations, aims, fears and so on. Nevertheless, we might attribute more mystery to this play than it deserves.

Do you write yourself into your translations?

I think I can say yes. I have had remarks from friends regarding lines that “sound like me.” I don’t suppose this is a problem. After all, I am an interpreter, like a pianist. It is just natural if one can tell by hearing that it’s him who plays the piece, and not somebody else. Provided the piece remains recognisable... Doing a translation gives me more pleasure if I find a self-portrait in it... When I am happy about a freshly translated line, it might be because it expresses me. The measure is fidelity to the original.

Fidelity must be difficult to measure in practice.

It is like when a pianist reads Chopin’s instruction saying *andante*, but he decides to play it a little bit faster, because he knows the music will sound better this way in his interpretation. The tempo is relative; the point is to achieve an effect with your performance. However, it is not easy to see when the piece becomes a different one, not the one you are supposed to play. What can I say? You need good ears, and good taste. In this sense, translation can be regarded as art.

This leads on to one of my crucial questions. To what extent do you consider translation to be artistic, a kind of co-production with the author? Do you think translations belong to the literary oeuvre of the translator? I’m not only asking this about your own work, but literary history in general.

I think translations can be part of one’s oeuvre, even though there are a lot of poor translations owing to routinised, less dedicated work. Apart from these there are translations where the challenging nature of the task, the high standard of the work as well as its success secure them a place of esteem in the translator’s oeuvre. For instance, János Arany’s translations of Shakespeare form an integral part of his work. I cannot decide about my own achievement. It will be your generation that can judge after a while whether my translations survive or not. I wish this were true at least about *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Hamlet*.

How does your reading of the text inform your translation?

Not too much, I hope. I wanted to avoid this. It would be a bit aggressive. I don’t think I succeeded completely; a good parodist doesn’t exclude himself, either. A good parodist is not identical with a mirror. I made an effort to recognise the differences in the language of the characters and communicate these, but I may not have always kept the proportions. I can bring one example of this phenomenon,

that of Polonius. I wanted to do justice to this gentleman, to show that he was not as stupid or as childish as many think. Actually, he's a benevolent person. Maybe he tells his daughter a bit too bluntly what he is inevitably supposed to tell her in some way: the prince cannot marry her. Ophelia is just one of Polonius's numerous duties. He does not embrace his daughter with tender loving care, but tells his opinion in telegraphese. Albeit in the wrong way, he does something which is right.

How can you grasp the difference between translating and writing? There is a commonplace in literary theory saying that the act of translation, since it is rewriting, shouldn't be so much separated from writing. What do you think about this?

This is really complicated. When I translate, I know what I would like to write – what the author of the original wrote. I'm a tradesman... For me, it is as simple as that. When I write my own work, it is the language, the form itself that shows me the way. I hear the rhyme, and I find words to go with it. Even in free verse, the beat of the rhythm leads me. When I translate, I am aware of what I have to say. I struggle with it until it says the very same.

Can you say the outcome is the equivalent of what you read in the foreign language? When you work, you probably read a passage and interpret it. So, you try to find words in Hungarian for your interpretation of the original...

It is evident that the activity is not a simple act of re-coding. The solution comes by intuition, too. My principle is to write the same word by word, which is not always possible.

I appreciate this ars poetica, but isn't this word-by-word attitude an illusion? Almost every word can be translated in different ways. How do you find the most proper meaning in a context?

Let me refer to music again, to my own experiences as a less talented piano student. My teachers always told me to play exactly as it is written in the sheet music. I was never encouraged to interpret. That would have been a great danger of amateurism. Of course, in reality, you can't push your personality aside, but you shouldn't place yourself in the foreground on purpose. More precisely, a word can be associated with different situations. In this sense, the work of the literary translator does not differ from that of an interpreter or a technical translator. Translation as a profession expects you to realise which meaning belongs to a certain situation.

How do you think translation as a profession can be taught?

I myself learnt a lot in courses. Analysing translations by others, comparing rival translations, preparing sample translations are all very useful.

Who is a good translator? One to whom we pay attention? Or does a translation fulfil its goal when it reads so well that it does not even occur to us to check who translated it?

The wider reading public will never be interested in the name of the translator. (In the case of popular books, the author's name is often similarly irrelevant.) Nevertheless, in a smaller circle of connoisseurs you can and indeed must gain a name with your individual style, a method which might even get spread, like that of Arany or the representatives of the great Modernist generation circled around the journal *Nyugat*.

The translator himself might often be blind to the interpreting-rewriting nature of translation. In many cases it is only the more accomplished receiver who notices this.

It works like parody. Let's pretend that we are experienced actors, good at parody. I have to parody you, and you have to parody me. People can tell that my performance is Márta Minier's parody, even if it is similar to her style in every respect. I don't have to intend not to be a perfect Ms Minier. Human nature and frailty will see to that. And the way I parody you will be different from the way anybody else would do it.

I am really glad that you mentioned parody. Don't you think your Hamlet is a bit parodistic in the context of its previous Hungarian translations?

You can have a similar impression in connection with a modern Crucifixion. Or if you see two pieces of rusty iron with the title 'Madonna with the Baby Jesus.' And for a moment you don't know whether to laugh at it or not. If you watch it for a while, you may find the Madonna and the child somehow in a large and a smaller piece of iron. Let alone a contemporary Mass with guitar music. This tendency can apply to any classical theme.

What do you think of congeniality? Does it exist at all?

Yes, I think it does. I have had translating jobs that were no more than burdens. I didn't understand the author's intention. It's like when one pianist is good at

playing Chopin, and another one at playing Bartók. You can't be congenial with everyone.

How did you become a drama translator and a Shakespeare translator, in particular?

My first task was the translation of Goldoni's comedy *Il Campiello*, commissioned by Tamás Ascher. The play was written in the Venetian dialect, like a number of plays by Goldoni. I know that variety of Italian through my grandmother, who was from there. I agreed to translate the play because it challenged me as a linguist and as a teacher of Italian. A few years later Péter Gothár commissioned the translation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He was aware that I had done some work in English linguistics, including the history of the English language. He also knew my Oberon poems, which evoke the atmosphere of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Is there a less practical explanation as well? How does the genre match your personality?

I do have a preference for plays. I could have translated novels, too, but I didn't take the opportunity. In drama, I have also translated from contemporary English. Translating *Live Like Pigs* by John Arden was a much different task from Shakespeare. The characters were gypsies and working class people, but I think I did a good job there.

What kind of task was Live Like Pigs? Especially from a sociolinguistic perspective...

Forty years had passed since the work was written, and sometimes it annoyed me to what extent the original was devoid of dirty language. Obviously it was not possible to stage something really obscene in the fifties in England (or anywhere). I didn't put anything like this in the text, either, but actors occasionally grumbled with swearwords because the situation needed it. Like the original, I used very short co-ordinate sentences with a meagre vocabulary. To keep the same length of sentences as in the original was almost as important to me as when one translates the lines of a poem. I did not intend at all to compensate for the Northern English dialect. The theatre, much to my agreement, consulted a Romany expert, Zsolt Csalog about the playtext. At a few points he changed my expressions to more vulgar ones. It is interesting that the play had also been translated by Tibor Bartos many years ago, who used a more folkloristic, thus richer vocabulary, while I used a more urban, proletarian one, rather spare of build.

Do you translate poems, too?

I translate poems quite rarely, only when I am requested to. I have a wish, but I'm not sure it will ever come true. When I'm sad and tired, I think of translating W. H. Auden's poetry into Hungarian. I don't think the existing Hungarian translations are witty or entertaining enough. He could be more popularised in Hungary.

Why do you find it important for Hungarians to read Auden?

What I find important is that those who cannot read Auden in the original, should have access to good translations. I appreciate his poems because he can be bitter and joyous, or playful and decadent at the same time. He is a typical 20th-century character, an excellent poet. In Hungarian literature it is Sándor Weöres who can be compared to him with his frequent use of lyrical masks. He can also be both nonsensical and very serious.

What do you expect from a translator of poetry?

Again, fidelity. If you read a translation, you need to know that you are not receiving the same experience as a reader of the original. You are lucky if you get the literal meaning. Some of the poetic value might also be evoked. If you are interested in how beautiful a poem is, you have to read the original. Atmosphere cannot be translated. That would be cheating. Translation is like a symphony adapted to the piano. One can compare the two movement by movement, and for a few moments the piano adaptation might echo Beethoven's full orchestra.

Can you grasp how the different Shakespeare plays challenged you as a translator?

I'll start with the latest, *The Taming of the Shrew*. The first major scene between Petruchio and Katherine is nothing but verbal fencing. A great deal of linguistic humour is unfolded in the characters' finding faults with one another's sentences, misunderstanding one another on purpose. It is a piece of farce. I never diverted so much from the original than in this scene, because I knew that a sudden effect is needed at this point on the stage, and it wouldn't be satisfactory to compensate for it in another scene. The audience feel that it is time for something very funny, and it is frustrating if this does not happen. There's a very expressive word in the English language – *unfunny* – for something that is supposed to be funny but it isn't. So, I didn't want this scene to be unfunny. I knew I had to be uninhibited

here. The play is built in the way that you know the great scene is coming now. I think I was faithful regarding the importance of this scene in the drama. The previous translators were not as cheeky as I was, they didn't divert that much. There's a strong bourgeois and business-like element; it is tasteless and revealing how men bargain for women, it is like business negotiations, a bit like some people sitting around us now in the cafeteria, with their mobile phones and bank cards. So, there is social satire in it besides the excellent psychological satire – the latter stresses how foolish both men and women are. Out of my translations this one has proved to be the most popular in the theatre market, it has been staged four times, in Budapest, Miskolc, Kecskemét and Gyula. *The Comedy of Errors* did not cause any problems. In the case of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the large number of the rhymes and the strong changes in the style made my task difficult. The fairies, the tradesmen, the young and elderly Athenians... all speak in a distinctly different register. Puck speaks in a different metre every time. There was no problem like this with *Hamlet*. In that case, the text was loaded with gross intellectual filling, like a well-stuffed strudel, and it falls apart when you try to slice it.

What did you do with the intellectual stuff?

I threw half of it out, simply because it couldn't be retained on stage. I hope the method of selection was right. The quality of my work depends on whether I selected properly or not. A translator of novels, for instance, has fewer problems like this. When I omitted something, I had the spectator in mind. I included wordplays that can be understood within three seconds. In 1864 Arany translated much more precisely than me, since he retained much more of the original. On the other hand, you can find a lot of enjambments in his text, while in Shakespeare's there are end-stopped lines. So: who translates more precisely? Arany, who inserts almost every wordplay in his translation, like a mathematician, or me, who leaves half of this out, but the text breathes like the original? Are we translating the author who wished to express the pulse and rhythm of the human heart and the process of interpersonal communication, or the one who put three puns in a line? When I was working on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the actors said that they did some minute thing at the end of each line; for instance, they shifted their weight. This works as a principle that coordinates stage action. Being an experienced teacher must have helped me unconsciously with the selection. A good teacher, e.g. a good teacher of history, does select from the material to give a relevant picture of Napoleon. This can be

enriched or altered later. A literary translator can hope that the reader, 'the student' will also read either the original alongside his translation, or the alternative translations by István Eörsi and Dezső Mészöly, and will be able to put together from the different points of view what the original is like. As for me, I would happily read bilingual editions. A good parallel has come to mind about the task of the translator. It is like when the photographer can take only one picture of a statue, and he wants to show the heart of it. After walking round the statue a few times, he will find a position. Translation is similar. Translators of the same text use different perspectives. It is advantageous to have more than one translation of the same play because they together show what the original is like. Classics are still read in this way at universities. Students prepare translations for the seminar, and they compare their results. I read Milton in this way with a couple of competent friends.

What do you find most important to put across from a Shakespeare play?

To write exactly the same as in the original, and to do this in the same style. In *Hamlet* Claudius has the most distinguished diction. His style is smooth and the easiest to translate. Hamlet was very difficult to render. His style is fragmented, actually, he has hardly any style at all, unless one sees his style as consisting of an imitation of others. I thought for a while that it was my mistake that I didn't find the right linguistic material for him, but then I realised that the play itself is about something like this. He is exposed to a number of influences, he echoes the style of the person he had just been talking to, until he achieves an ironic sense of humour (e.g. when he gives an account of changing the letters, or when he talks to Osrick).

How many co-texts do you use when you translate? What do you use apart from the primary source text?

I have used more than one text in each case. In the case of *Hamlet*, I used the New Arden version edited by Harold Jenkins as a main source. I also consulted the OUP one, edited by Hibbard. Schlegel's German translation from the beginning of the 19th century was of great help, just like Yves Bonnefoy's contemporary French version. The latter was accompanied by a rough translation in German, prepared for guest performances in Germany. Jenkins's edition is based on the second quarto. Some of the other translators used editions based on the folio. Using more texts enables you to be alert to minute differences.

Talking about different versions of 'the original,' I'd like to ask a question about a particular solution from your Hamlet. In Act III, Scene 1, Ophelia is sent to a nunnery by Hamlet. Both Arany and you use the dictionary meaning of the word 'nunnery.' Both of you use two different Hungarian synonyms, though. None of the translators of Hamlet try to refer to another meaning suggested by linguists: 'brothel.'

I am entirely convinced by Harold Jenkins, according to whom the very few occurrences which the defenders of this assumption refer to, are occasional uses. The word did not have such a permanent meaning. The two notions can occasionally meet in Hungarian, too, with a pinch of irony.

Do you imagine an ideal audience for the plays you translate? Are they readers or spectators in the first place?

I think of spectators in the first place. Even more specifically, I keep in mind secondary school students, for whom it is often the first Shakespeare performance they see. What's more, it might be their first encounter with the theatre. The four Shakespeare plays I have translated are among the popular ones. If I were a teacher of lit, I would take kids to these performances. They want to understand what's going on, their reactions are direct. One of my friends took her adolescent daughter to a *Hamlet* performance that used Arany's translation. Although the girl knew the plot very well, she could only follow the 19th century text up to halfway through the performance. Then we might as well perform it in a foreign language, or even in the original... When an actor says 'Oh Hamlet,' that cannot be missed.

Your decision is to translate for the spectators in the first place. Can you draw such a sharp dividing line between Shakespeare in reading and Shakespeare in performance?

I see a huge difference between the two. When you read a translation, you can jump from one page to another, return to problematic points, use the footnotes to understand the mythological references, the contemporary allusions, or the outdated words. In a performance, all this cultural stuff would damage the plot, and thus, the overall effect and atmosphere of the play. Today stage action is much faster than in Arany's day. Church sermons can also serve as a good example here. When I was a child, priests were talking without a microphone. They needed to talk loudly and slowly at the pulpit, and wait for the echo after

each sentence. Today this would be ridiculous, and yet, I find it a bit daunting when the priest almost whispers into the microphone as if it were the listener's ear. The case is similar with Arany's translations of Shakespeare. I would happily attend a stylised performance of Arany's *Dream* or *Hamlet*, where beautifully dressed actors would work with a lot of pathos, with very few gestures. It could be repeated every year, like a passion play, just for connoisseurs, who know the text by heart and want to hear it as it is – because what you get in contemporary theatres under the name of Arany hasn't got too much to do with him any more.

Nevertheless, you don't mind if people turn to Arany's translations again, having met yours.

Oh no, not at all. A few acquaintances started to reread Arany's translation having seen the performance of my text. The result was that they enjoyed it much more than they did before, because they knew from my translation what it was going to say. They had no problems with comprehension. There is a similar phenomenon in connection with the Bible. As far as I know, all churches use up-to-date translations now. I have heard young people saying that they find pleasure in reading the 16th century translation by Károli, with the knowledge gained from contemporary translations.

Regarding your translation, even if we bypass the intention of the translator, the text itself intends to appear very different from that of Arany.

I cannot outperform Arany's voice. I cannot sound more Arany-like than he himself. I am so different, there's no need me blinking towards him. That would be unnerving for me, which would result in a worse translation than it is now. I cannot just simply quote a line or two from Arany out of the blue in the middle of the play. When they started rehearsing my *Hamlet* in Debrecen, some of the actors were upset by not being able to say certain phrases widely known from Arany's classical translation. The director asked me what I would think about a mixed version. I let him shoulder the responsibility, and after a few rehearsals the actors themselves realised that they didn't feel like inserting quotations by Arany on the stage.

You find it very important to attach explanatory essays or at least a short programme note.

It was the theatre that commissioned a few paragraphs for the programme booklet of *Hamlet*.

The translation of A Midsummer Night's Dream was more advertised beforehand, if I remember well.

Yes, it was, without a doubt. It was the first Shakespeare I came up with. My friends encouraged me to 'defend myself.' I think people are interested in such apologies, whether they welcome the new translation or refuse to accept it.

The rhetoric of these essays contains very strong statements. It is very confident, even provocative.

The style might not be as modest as that of others, but I think I take criticism quite well, it feeds into my work. I cannot imagine working without being constantly criticised.

Some critics have found faults with your claim that your translation of A Midsummer Night's Dream was intended to be a neutral text.

I meant it wasn't archaic, folkloristic, or too modern. I could have said colloquial. I meant neutral in the sense when someone goes to a first night dressed in a neutral way. And a gentleman knows he is expected to wear a dinner jacket on a first night at the opera. So, I didn't want to add any extra peculiarity to the text.

It is also stressed in these essays that a new translation is offered.

I can only say that I aimed at a new translation. My intention was to roll the ball back where it belongs. To put everything to its own place, according to the meaning in Shakespeare's time. I emphasised that it was new because many people felt that I retranslated Arany's translation into contemporary Hungarian. I was accused of altering the text. Some people said, the original goes like this... and they started to recite Arany's translation. I had to draw attention to the fact that the original is not by Arany, but by Shakespeare.

Did you notice Arany's legendary prudishness?

Well, Arany is occasionally charged with prudishness. Some people discover this in his translations as well. I was a very meticulous reader of his translations, but I didn't notice such a phenomenon. Arany didn't mollify any of the prankish expressions. This is a layer of language that changes very fast; the words he chose are not as startling now as they must have been in his time.

I have the impression that the essay that accompanies Hamlet is more humble and respectful. Does this voice address Arany?

It might be addressing Arany, whose *Hamlet* is a much better work than his *Dream*. It is a question whether I managed to keep up with that quality at all. Another factor might be that my previous Shakespeare translations have been received quite favourably; their necessity didn't need that much explanation any longer.

Do you follow how your text is interpreted in the theatre?

I watch it with keen interest, and I'm really content with it. I don't think I have ever noticed any abuses. It has only happened in one of the stagings of *The Comedy of Errors* that they 'reinforced' the style of the quarrels in a way which is far from both the original and my text, but in a comedy...

Was it the verbal or non-verbal part of the staging?

Oh yes, I'm talking about the verbal side now. I cannot form a competent opinion of the other part of the staging. I always imagine the scenery somehow, but I don't expect to see that on stage.

After completing a translation for a performance do you make any more changes? How, on the basis of what factors is the 'final,' publishable version formulated?

I listen to a number of opinions from colleagues, theatre people, spectators, and readers. Observations made at performances help a lot. Lately, when my Shakespeare translations were published in a separate volume, the texts reached a 'final' status. But who knows till when...

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