

**Kányádi, Sándor. 2013. *In Contemporary Tense* (trans. Paul Sohar). Arad, Romania: Irodalmi Jelen Könyvek. Published in the United States by Iniquity Press. 342 pages.**

**Reviewed by Peter Hargitai, Poet Laureate, Gulfport, Florida**

The noted English poet and critic George Szirtes and I agree that, in the main, it is the musicality of Sándor Kányádi's verse that accounts for his popularity as the most beloved living Hungarian poet. I would venture to add that his stature as a national poet is further enshrined since he is a true blue Székely from Transylvania, a region revered by Hungarians as something akin to sacred land. Over the centuries the Székelys have considered themselves the proud descendents of Attila the Hun, with a vanguard role in defending, shaping and preserving what is quintessentially Hungarian. It is this geographical outpost in the Carpathians that Hungary lost to Romania after the Trianon Treaty of 1920 that stripped Hungary of three quarters of its territory and left 1,600,000 fiercely independent Székely inhabitants torn from their mother country. A once-proud people now became an oppressed minority in Romania, their human rights violated, their churches, language and culture under constant attack, severe enough to spark a revolt during the brutal regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu.

Sándor Kányádi the poet (b. 1929) not only survived, but his language soared, and his single-handed revival of lyric poetry in both Hungarian and Romanian would eventually lead the official Romanian Writers Union to award him their highest prize, to be followed by one prestigious literary award after another, including the Kossuth Prize from Hungary, the German Herder Prize, and the Central European Time Millennium Prize. The sound effects invested in Kányádi's verse are never artificial but seem to evolve organically and effortlessly in an ingenuous chorus of traditional end-rhymes, internal rhymes, delayed rhymes, approximate rhymes, subtle assonances and sibilants that together create richly nuanced embroideries of harmony, neither sentimental nor anachronistic, but simply melodic. In short, Kányádi is a born poet, a *wunderkind*, in the same vein as were Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822). He could have easily penned lines like, "Ah distinctly I remember, it was in the bleak December; / And each separate dying ember ..." from Poe's "The Raven" or a verse from Shelley's "The Cloud": "I am the daughter of Earth and Water, / And the nursling of the Sky; / I pass through the pores of the ocean and shores; / I change, but I cannot die."

There is no poet known to the English speaking world that is as admired in his own country as Sándor Kányádi. His poems have been delighting generations of Hungarian readers of all ages and he is especially popular with children. But he is not for everybody, certainly not for elitists, those two percents of the population, usually scholar-poets with their tortured cerebral puzzles, or for minimalists, insufferable oblique imagists, or for prose-poets with their long-suffering strings of words presented in numbered chapbooks. The problem with Aristo art is that sooner or later the public becomes savagely bored with it because they want to break out into



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song, they want to dance, and this is not at all about the urban-versus-folk literature debate or about ideology or any nationalistic agenda.

To select and translate poems from Kányádi's vast oeuvre in a hefty volume of 342 pages which contain 339 poems, and to do so in a way that they resonate with the same startling lyrical immediacy as in their original Hungarian is well nigh impossible. The task is monumental and the process all the more arduous due, in large measure, to the nature of the Hungarian language. Linguists would agree that because of its agglutinative syntax, rhyming comes easier in Hungarian than in English, and that Hungarian naturally lends itself to intense musicality partly because its suffixes create natural assonances and thus make sounds come to life as if by magic. If anyone can come up to try the impossible and save what is usually lost in translation, it is Paul Sohar, an American poet who writes in both English and Hungarian with convincing power and who recently won the Árpád Tóth Translation Award in Budapest. Sohar is not only perfectly bilingual but also an award-winning translator with an eminent publishing history in a poetic terrain that is uniquely Székely. His task in preparing this recent volume was to convey the unique harmonies of the original poems and at the same time make them sound contemporary, even if the Romantic lyricism of Kányádi's poems is anything but that. Therefore, the very title, *In Contemporary Tense*, may strike us as a sleight of hand, but on further review it is not, and least of all in the sense of contemporary populist poetry.

*In Contemporary Tense* presents its 339 poems chronologically and in sections corresponding to Kányádi's published volumes. Among its nineteen sections, the most popular ones are "Black and Red Verses," "All Souls Day in Vienna," "Mane and Skull" and "The Curious Moon" (for children); but "There Are Regions" must be a particular favorite as it has so far been translated into Romanian, Finish, Swedish, Estonian, German, French, and Portuguese. The "Prologue" from "There Are Regions" (1982) is a good place to begin a comparative look at the original and its English translation by Sohar:

### ELŐHANG

vannak vidékek gyönyörű  
tájak ahol a keserű  
számban édessé ízesül  
vannak vidékek legbelül  
szavak sarjadnak rétjein  
gyopárként sziklás bércein  
szavak kapaszkodnak szavak  
véremmel rokon a patak  
szívemmel rokon a patak  
szívemben csörgedez csobog  
télen hogy védjem befagyok  
páncéлом alatt cincogat  
jeget-pengető hangokat  
tavaszok nyarak őszeim  
maradékaim s őseim  
vannak vidékek viselem  
akár a bőrt a testemen  
meggyötörten is gyönyörű  
tájak ahol a keserű  
számban édessé ízesül  
vannak vidékek legbelül

### PROLOGUE

there are regions beauty-laced  
landscapes where the bitter taste  
and sweetness on my tongue collide  
there are regions deep inside  
on their meadows phrases sprout  
flower words gush blooming out  
words hang on to words on peaks  
my blood is cousin to all creaks  
in my heart it comes and flees  
to save it in winter I have to freeze  
under ice armor it squeaks and sings  
plucking crystal melody flings  
my springs and summers turn to fall  
my heirs and forebears are they all  
there are regions that I live in  
wearing them just like my skin  
tortured through they're beauty-laced  
landscapes where the bitter taste  
and sweetness on my tongue collide  
there are regions deep inside (222-223)

Sohar's English version comes very close to conveying the symbiosis of sound and sense in this bitter-sweet stanza. A less successful English translation of the same poem by the late Peter Zollmann, entitled "There is a Land," strays wide of the mark with Zollmann's offering of the collective noun "land" for 'vidékek.' Zollmann's wording comes close to a mistranslation as the two terms are neither syntactically nor semantically equivalent, because "land" means a country and not part of a country as the poet intended; moreover, Sohar's "regions," unlike Zollmann's "land," is plural like Kányádi's original 'vidékek.' It may be useful to look further at Zollmann's translation to demonstrate the great pains Sohar has taken to preserve the poet's trademark musicality. The Zollmann version of the first three lines sounds almost prosaic: "there is a land with beauty graced / landscapes where the bitter taste / that fouls my mouth is purified." Save for some approximate assonance between "landscapes" and "taste" and the rather clumsy "foul" and "mouth," the quintessential Kányádi verse is lost in this translation.

<http://www.leafepress.com/litter1/noon02.html>

In the first four lines of *ELŐHANG* the original Hungarian has true three-syllabic end-rhymes (AABB), coupling 'gyönyörű' with 'keserű' and 'ízesül' with 'legbelül.' Moreover, there are delightful plays of assonance as one vowel-sound after another is repeated and echoed in the end-rhymes themselves. The 'é' phoneme in 'vidékek' is assonant in the first and last letters in 'édessé' and the coupling end-rhymes are also assonant with each other in the stressed and unstressed homophones 'ű'/'ü' in 'gyönyörű'/'keserű' and 'ízesül'/'legbelül.' What this Székely poet is trying to say in these lines is that discovering, generating and regenerating a language with such a musical range make the "bitter taste" of loss taste sweet in his mouth, and in this way

language itself becomes life and identity affirming. As the lines that emerge transform his pain, the poet hangs on to every word as if he were hanging on for his life on some treacherous mountain crag, just as his people tried to hang on to their regional identity and culture. When the Székelys were listening to the poet reading this poem and others like it on old 1980s cassettes, they must have felt a resurgence of their old grandeur as the magical language they had thought was lost was not only found but displayed for them in bewitching chords.

Sándor Kányádi, the poet of the people or something as close as can be to a national poet, was born in an obscure little Transylvanian village and he often reminisces about swineherds, geese and goats, oxen, foals and the joys of the harvest. The revered New England poet Robert Frost (1874-1963), perhaps the best-known of America's regional poets, also wrote about foals and mending fences, and did so in traditional rhyme; at the same time, his verses are, more often than not, profound meditations on existence. Kányádi, too, wrote poems that demand rigorous intellectual engagement. His iconic "All Souls Day in Vienna" (1976) has been compared to T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" and not frivolously so as its kindred tone is unmistakably Eliotesque. Since, as poet and translator Paul Sohar reminds us in his review of several Radnóti translations in this very volume, poetry translation is all -- or much -- about the translation, I will henceforth present parts of his translations of Kányádi's poetry rather than the Hungarian original:

It is said and even recorded in the *histoire de la musique encyclopédie de la pléiade* but also in *kolozsvár* at number ten *vasile alecsandri* street my friend *dr rudi schuller* will happily translate into *hungarian german or romanian* for those who don't speak *french* the part about the grand travelers *les grands voyageurs* who claimed that the inhabitants of the most *godforsaken les plus lointaines civilizations* who were totally indifferent to the *tom-toms* of neighboring tribes would perk up their ears only on hearing *mozart's music* (151)

To those pundit critics who dismiss Kányádi as a lightweight who lacks suggestion and irony, I offer his poem "Knives" (1968), which is short enough to quote here in its entirety:

Knives' gleam flickers in me,  
I've an urge to grab them, throw them,  
stab them all and all at once.  
Carefully I pick one out,  
the sharpest, and guided  
by tenderness I slice  
off a piece of bread  
for my son (74).

To those who criticize the poet for saying more about Armenian woodcarving than Transylvanian gates, I say he is cosmopolitan, and that they should read his "Brief Encounter With Cartagena" (1985, p. 176). To those who criticize him for being too cosmopolitan, I say, read about his childhood's "smoke-smelling / covered wagon" in "The Gypsy Caravan" (1976, p. 125). To those who say he is an anti-Semite because he doesn't like big cities or abstract art, I say, read "Unexpected Yellow" (1993):

*A note to go under a painting entitled  
Unerwartetes Gelb by András Markos*

the unexpected yellow  
showed up unexpectedly  
and yellowed into the mint-  
mellow and curdled blood  
of unexpectedness  
all black lines wiggled into  
worms and then a mess of cocoons  
a capital T fell flat on its back  
turning blacker than black when  
someone called me a dirty jew  
and if I'd walked bent under the weight  
of just one millennium before then  
unexpectedly I aged by  
four thousand years more (234)

This poem is provocative on several levels, including the personal. The subject is a non-representational painting by Transylvanian sociologist and archivist András Markos (1920-1974). As bizarre as it may seem, one's views on non-representational art is still used by some misguided academics as a sort of litmus-test for anti-Semitism. When as a first-year lecturer at the University of Miami I was "interrogated" by a colleague about my views on non-representational art, I told him that I preferred Tivadar Csontváry over Jackson Pollock. I was immediately labeled a Fascist, until a personal letter from the renowned Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai (1924-2000) came to my rescue. Sadly, I have lost touch with Amichai over the years, but Sándor Kányádi has not and he pays moving tribute to the memory of the celebrated Jerusalemite poet in his poem "The City."

To those who say that Kányádi's work is all about show and has no substance, I say, read "From the Diary of a Pilgrim" (1978) for its elegant simplicity and surprising irony:

I've been stunned by the truly  
stunning beauty  
of the great cathedrals abroad  
but to pray I could be moved  
only in my childhood's old  
village church  
if so I could be moved (145)

To those who say that he is out of touch with the human condition, I say, read "Evening Scene" (1965):

The boy tears out of the house,  
inside  
it's dad smacking mom around.  
The kid puts his hand on his ears  
against the horror.  
He'd like to run out of the world,  
but the darkness  
sends him back sobbing  
under the meager light of a window where  
the sight of a moth  
bumping against the pane  
slowly smother his sobs (55).

And to all those who dismiss poet Sándor Kányádi for not being contemporary enough, I say:  
read *In Contemporary Tense*.