

György Faludy. *Silver Pirouettes*. Trans. Paul Sohar. New York: The WriteDeal, 2012. 182 pp.

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Paul Sohar, the excellent translator of Sándor Kányádi's verse and an American poet in his own right, has translated an impressive selection of poems from György Faludy, a veritable icon of modern Hungarian literature. Culling from major tent poles in Faludy's life, the volume presents a sampling of the poet's early work, his first exile, his return to post-war Hungary, his second exile, and his late poems. For a prolific poet like Faludy, whose work spans from the 1930's right through the new millennium, this oeuvre is a daunting challenge to any translator both in the selection process and in the rendition into contemporary American English.

First and foremost, we must acknowledge the poet's tumultuous life and the often inhuman conditions in which he plied his craft. Because he was a Jew and an American citizen, Faludy was persecuted by both the right and the left, suffering imprisonment and torture in his native Hungary. In World War II he fought as an American GI, and after the war he returned to Budapest only to be taunted and eventually imprisoned on the preposterous charge of being an American spy. As a political prisoner who resisted the violent spasms provoked by the extremes inherent in the "isms" of ideology, be it in the guise of nationalism, socialism or capitalism, the individualist in Faludy became not only a cause célèbre who defied all forms of tyranny, but also the quintessential poet, the quirky persona whose cultivated eccentricity and flamboyance in both deportment and libertine lifestyle would always be at odds with his conventional poetry. There is plenty of suffering and tragedy in the poet's life but is that a proven alchemy for great poetry?

In one of his signature poems, "Erasmus of Rotterdam No. 3" [*Rotterdámi Erazmushoz, 3*], one of four Erasmus poems in the volume, Faludy's epigrammatic comparison between his own personal persecution as a Hungarian Jew and that of Erasmus, instead of being penetrating or illuminating, settles into the silt of hackneyed expressions like "skinning you" [*'bört húztak le rólad*']. What follows is a strange non sequitur where the poet squeezes the great humanist's "hand," [*'kezedet*'] in the library, commiserating glibly about seeing, "Suleiman, Stalin, Hitler and / the inquisitors playing in the same band" [*Vesd össze Sztálint Szolimánnal, Hitlert s a máglyát: egyremegy*']. The traditional *abab* rhyme scheme of the original Hungarian is further accentuated by the even simpler and jinglier end rhymes in "hand" and "band" of the English version, adding to the sense that something very serious is getting a very light treatment.

It is never easy to respond to a poem where the suffering is all too real but the poem comes off as disingenuous, as if it were just another occasional piece and not a poem about the near annihilation of a people and a race. The demands of Faludy's poetic terrain seldom find their depth, and his characteristically breezy style, insofar as he adheres rather mulishly to regular meter and rhyme, continues to baffle this reader. Save for a few exceptions, Faludy the passionate individual *does not translate into his poetry in the original Hungarian*; and thus, we can hardly expect anything different in the English translations. Yet in Paul Sohar's lyrical



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evocations some poems do manage to come to life charged with original energy in English, as in "Sunset in San Francisco," the "Love Letter to a Dying Loved One" series, "Yin and Yang," and "Going Blind."

It is important to keep in mind that first and foremost, Faludy was a classicist, an academic who barricaded himself within the idealistic ramparts of an ivory tower whose tenants would always be Plato, Socrates, Plotinus, and, of course, Erasmus - in short, the ubiquitous list from antiquity that has become an old boys club we may refer to as the "Faludy Canon." For a self-avowed bohemian poet, he was ironically out of touch with the poetic revolutions whirling about him including the symbolists, the surrealists, and the realists like his Hungarian contemporary Attila József. Neither did he fall under the spell of the American imagists or the Whitmanesque "barbaric yawp" of the beatniks and peaceniks or the more recent lip-tongue-and-ear performance poets of the gritty inner city. This is all the more surprising since Faludy emulated both Walt Whitman and Attila József, embattled modernists who found beauty in cracked dooryards and factory yards because these, too, bore the touch of human hands. Without a doubt, it is Faludy the elitist who demands of true art to bear the signature and great seal of "Erasmus of Rotterdam" and other luminaries whose names he drops so often and so unabashedly as if he were already part of some exclusive poetry rat pack.

While Sohar's selection and translations pay tribute to a poet who is committed to beauty in the old classical sense of symmetry, radiance and grace as the volume's title *Silver Pirouettes* suggests - alas - perhaps by unhappy accident, many poems come off as just that: "pirouettes." On the dark side, and this is true of Faludy's late period, too, many poems come off as bitter proselytizing rants. The problem is that in modern, post-modern and contemporary poetry, aesthetics such as these loosely translate into intellectual exhibitionism, solipsism, snobbism, and, rarely, misanthropic assaults on humanity. In the poem "An Evening at Recsk" [*Recski est*], the notorious communist prison, the poet taunts his cellmates:

Would you like me to lecture on Plato or Erasmus?
Or Nyeste on Einstein? Or do you expect from me
a lecture on the god of Plotinus. Who can recite
poetry, classical or modern, from memory?

[*Mit kívántok? Plátóról, Erazmusról beszéljek?
Einsteinről szóljon Nyeste? Plótinosz istenét
mutassam be, az Egyet? Melyik tudja betéve
Jónas könyvét? a Toldit? Mindegy, hogy ki beszél*]

In the last line of the stanza, perhaps Sohar ought to have been more loyal to the original and included in the list "The Book of Jonah" [*Jónas könyvét*] and "Toldi," a mock epic by the Hungarian Romanic poet János Arany, to detail the notion that the poet's vast erudition extends from the universal to the obscure.

In another poem, "In Praise of Libraries" [*A jó könyv rózsakert,* or literally: "A Good Book is a Rose Garden," a rather sentimental cliché which Sohar wisely pruned], the poet invites us to partake in the pleasures of imaginative literature; at the same time he dehumanizes the non-reading public outside the sanctuary of the reading rooms as "two-legged toilet bowls / hungry for TV" [*tévére s pusztulásra éhes / két lábon járó árnyékszékek*]. And so it goes: young lovers

in his "Philadelphia" poem morph into "the young rabble of moist groins ... ready for / quick mating" [*'megjöttek a páras / ágyékú ifjak, kiknek párzás / kell...*]. Parenthetically, ahem, I need to add here, and not without a sense of comic irony, that "Gyuri," as his friends affectionately called him, thrived on scandal of the sexual variety, be it in Tangiers, in San Francisco or in his hometown of Budapest, where he was celebrated in a special edition of *Playboy* showing his withering 92 year-old frame with his nubile 27 year-old bride. For a humanist who reveled in the public display of his bacchanals in Tangiers and San Francisco, and who fathered a child in his nineties, the dehumanizing tenor of his late verse, both in his original Hungarian and in translation, must strike us as not only disappointingly paradoxical but disturbing: his marriage to a woman sixty years his junior was at the expense of abandoning Eric Johnson, his beloved partner of thirty some years.

As in "The Days to Come" [*'Jövendő napok*], his late poems take a dark turn: Faludy's obsessively bleak vision about Hungary's bareness could well pass for Spenglerian hubris: "The Hungarian Plains will turn to / a desert dust bowl, gray and forlorn" [*'A Nagyalföld sivatag lesz, / porfelhő, szikkadt, pizkosszürke*]. Mercifully, not all of the late poems sour on life and there is also tenderness. Perhaps the most touching of these is "Going Blind" [*'Megvakulok*], which he composed in 2006, but even here as the aging poet takes a walk with his young spouse, the note he strikes in the last stanza is more about mourning his escape into books than about opening a new page in life, with his wife as an appendage or just another crutch:

I've been expelled from the Eden of reading,
I can't tell who wrote the letter in my hand,
nor the one I myself might have written.
All the books in my library are banned.

So that's it. Is there any poetry left in me?
Will I ever write another poem in this life?
What next? I shuffle on the sidewalk,
on my left, a crutch. On my right, a wife.

[*Kizártak az olvasás gyönyöréből.
Nem tudom ki írta, ha kézbe kapom
a levelet, sem azt amit magamnak írok.
A könyvtáromat is kidobhatom.*

*Hát így vagyok. S maradt-e vakon bennem
a versíráshoz még erő elég?
Mi lesz velem? Megyek a gyalogúton,
balrol mankóm. Jobbrol a feleség.]*

There are mistranslations here and there, as in this ironic gem of a poem (e.g. Faludy's books and/or library are clearly not "banned," but because he is going blind he might as well throw them out). Notwithstanding, Paul Sohar is at his best in personal poems like this, where as a translator he can feel the human anguish, and it is such identification that gives him free rein to manipulate the form, content and diction of the original to achieve an aesthetic whole. He does

this at times by doing the unthinkable and editing the iconic poet, in some cases dramatically, and in a manner that purists would surely call "shock jock" to redeem what is patently too abstract and/or banal in the original Hungarian. The poem "Yin and Yang" (which the poet inexplicably misspells as '*Jing és jáng*') provides an illuminating comparison. Here Faludy's *férfi* ["man"] and *nőnem* ["female"] become Sohar's "jockstrap" and "camisole" in a fantastic metonymic leap that may ostensibly violate the original but at the same time invest what is surely "dead diction" with new life.

If only more poems worked like this in *Silver Pirouettes*, the volume would be imbued with a palpable life of its own. Poetry, then, is not always what is lost in translation: sometimes it is found, and as is the case in Paul Sohar's Faludy, it is not by happy accident but by hand-to-hand combat with words and verses making the most courageous of word choices to make the poem stronger, more visceral, the rhymes less doggedly doggerel, and the whole affecting a more satisfying reading experience - even if it fails to bear the great *nihil obstat* seal of "Erasmus of Rotterdam."