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Conversation with John Minahane

By Lucia Duero

LD: Is there a value that translation and poetry brought to you that you wouldn't find in other professions?

JM: I reckon it's good for the mind. I listen in on people who are putting a language-shape on their special thoughts and feelings. They aren't using my own native language, and their setting isn't the setting that I know best. And I have to be their medium, the one who makes them speak my language. That ought to bring me rewards in terms of mental range, and I feel it does. And just once, very exceptionally, I encountered a poet with whom I felt so much in common that translating him was like a kind of reincarnation – though it was actually going back in time, as the poet was dead. That was Ladislav Novomeský, who lived the lives of a journalist, politician, minister, condemned “traitor”, political prisoner etc. – but always and independently, also a poet – from the 1920s to the 1970s.

LD: Do you see anything we could call specifically Slovak among the Slovak poets you have translated and read? What aspects of Slovak poetry do you find unique?

JM: “Specifically Slovak” could mean different things. There's the small Slavic population group and language community that has survived in Central Europe, rather against the odds, and maintains a nation-state, landlocked and bordering on five bigger states (but with the leverage of belonging to the EU and NATO). But behind that, or together with it, there's the “Slovakia” that was a kind of cultural crossroads, with powerful Hungarian and Austro-German influences especially. Some of the poetry, especially of the older poets, is marked by those influences. Say, the poetry of Mila Haugová or Ivan Štrpka.

One thing I will say about Slovakia: you can find strange concentrations of insight here. Unexpected things. For example, there had to be a poet somewhere in Europe who so powerfully felt the impact of the new technology that he/she despaired of human beings and wrote our obituary. He turned up in Slovakia (Michal Habaj, *The Roots of Heaven*, a collection published in 2000). Maybe there are others elsewhere, but I've never come across anything like *The Roots of Heaven*.

LD: Are foreign publishers interested in publishing Slovak poetry? If yes, why? If not, why?

The answer to this question would be: in principle, yes; in practice, sometimes, but not that often. And the reason: publishers need to feel that the poet has strengths which will benefit the publishing house. If that doesn't happen, it might mean there are no such poets in Slovakia. Or it might mean that there's faulty intermediacy, that the strengths which Slovak poets have are not being communicated.

To illustrate, let's take a collection I translated by Eleni Cay, *A Butterfly's Trembling in the Digital Age*. It was published three years ago by a Welsh publisher. The poet wrote quite accessibly about love in the time of Facebook etc. There were melancholy thoughts about cultural loss, influenced by Milan Rúfus (but none of Habaj's desperate nihilism). All in all, this could be considered an interesting, engaging, fresh voice. Not by any means irrelevant were some other things which the publisher could be trusted to notice: that this poet was young, very photogenic, with a lovely voice, and living and working in Great Britain, so she could be available for events, potentially tours, etc....

Slovakia is a quiet kind of country. The Slovaks don't shout that much, they tend to leave that to the bigger neighbours. This means that Slovakia as such is never really in fashion. So a Slovak poet needs real strengths in order to convince a publisher. But then, he or she might have them...

LD: At the time we started this conversation, the US poet Louise Glück had just won a Nobel Prize in literature. In your opinion, is/was there a Slovak poet that could be/have been considered for such recognition?

JM: The Nobel Prize is thoroughly politicised, and again there's the problem of Slovakia being too quiet. It might be that the Slovak poet who really had the best chance was Novomeský. After five years spent in prison and seven more on a blacklist, he put his whole heart and soul into the Prague Spring movement for a reformed socialism in Czechoslovakia. If the Prague Spring, which got going in the 1960s, had succeeded, or looked like succeeding (instead of being crushed by Russian tanks in 1968), then Novomeský could have been a strong candidate. On a literary level, I think he was better than several who actually got it.

If any present-day Slovak poet is to go for it, he or she will need me or some better translator, or a better advocate who will be more persuasive to publishers. Because one of the requirements will certainly be a strong presence in English, at least three or four collections issued by a ranking poetry publisher. It would help if Slovakia could have some kind of war, revolution, coup, or spectacular demagogue leading it, with the poet being a voice of sweet reason: the Nobel Committee might well make an encouraging gesture. But we can hardly wish for that.

John Minahane (1950, Baltimore, Republic of Ireland) has lived in Slovakia since 1996. In recent years he has translated works of poetry and fiction. These include selections from two major Slovak poets (Ladislav Novomeský, *Slovak Spring*, Belfast 2004; Milan Rúfus, *To Bear The Burden And Sing*, Martin 2008) and the classic novel by Margita Figuli, *Three Chestnut Horses* (Budapest 2014). His translations of living Slovak writers include *Six Slovak Poets* (ed. Igor Hochel, Todmorden 2010) and Eleni Caj (*A Butterfly's Trembling in the Digital Age*, Cardigan 2017). In 2018 he translated *The Bloody Sonnets*, the outstanding series of anti-war poems written by Pavol Országh Hviezdoslav in August/September 1914 on the outbreak of World War 1.

