

Dezső Kosztolányi's Translations of Japanese Poems

Summary

My dissertation consists of three main sections. The first part is an essay of Kosztolányi's translations of Japanese poems. The second part is the Hungarian text with English, French and German and the original Japanese texts, and the third one is an annotation. The whole life of Kosztolányi was marked by battles over his translations, and in his works on the procedure of translation, he is always defending his position against his critics. He was, and still, is accused of publishing his own poems as translations. Gyula Illyés launched his critique of Kosztolányi and his work after the latter passed away in the foreword of the posthumous volume of the poet-translator, resulting Kosztolányi's eastern translations becoming suspect. Illyés's harsh words made it difficult for posterity to overcome their initial skepticism of Kosztolányi, as Illyés said: "In this volume, the reader will find Chinese and Japanese poets whose names are strange. We do not know, and because of the lack of knowledge of the language, we will very likely never know if we look closely at these honored and revered poets' faces, from someone or another's eyes whether the translator's bright look would sparkle from them, or not." However, if we look into the Japanese poets' face from up close, we find all of them real, and their poems translated in many European languages before Kosztolányi's work. We know it from the essay by Ervin Zágonyi that Kosztolányi did not tell patent untruths when he wrote that his translations were made from English, French, and German languages.

Among the Far East genres, *haiku* had the largest influence on western literature even though it is a debatable question whether it means the precise use of the genre, or just the borrowing of the exotic motive. The first users of this brief metrical form in Hungarian were the poets of the journal *Nyugat*, but even nowadays a lot of poets use *haiku* as a metre. There is also a large number of translations. Although if we take a look at Kosztolányi's translations, we get to know that a great part of his volume contains *tanka*, *sedōka* and *dodoitsu*.

Of the 203 poems 75 is taken from a haiku anthology by a Japanese university professor, Asataro Miyamori. The volume, published in 1932, contains the Latin transcription beside the original *haiku*, which are arranged by Miyamori chronologically by poets. He also published the other English and French versions among his own translations. A year later there were new Japanese poem translations in the *Nyugat* attached to a detailed essay by Kosztolányi. It deserves attention that in his preface he only mentions the *haiku* in connection with the Japanese poetry, however a significant part of the translation volume is *tanka*. Presumably, the Miyamori anthology, published in 1932 captured his attention so intensively, that he quotes only from its preface, and as the anthology contains only *haiku*, it is understandable why only he mentions the *haiku*. As regards to what other translations were used by Kosztolányi beside the anthology, we can lean on two precise and detailed studies by Ervin Zágonyi.

It may not be an exaggeration to say that the most difficult task set by literature is translation. It is even more difficult to translate ancient texts into modern languages. Not only in foreign languages, but in our own mother tongue, there are a lot of archaic expression which need to be explained, but on the other hand, too much explanation could come at the expense of the work in question. In the case of classical text's translation, even philologists are often stymied by these problems, which hundreds of years ago could be easily answered by any educated individual. This statement is especially true in Japanese language, in which according to the radical changes in the past and also in the present, have rendered classic texts almost completely unintelligible to the modern reader. Not only the understanding of medieval texts is problematical, but also most present-day Japanese experience difficulties reading the literary works of the 19th century. Not only the *haiku*, but also all of the Japanese texts have numerous difficulties. The first conspicuous difference between the Japanese and the European languages is that in Japanese there is no plural. Beyond that, there is no article, nor definite nor indefinite, so it only depends on the translator to decide which one to use. Although it is not only the syntactic differences in other languages that make it difficult to translate the Japanese language, but also the large number of puns, or the so-called *kakekotoba* are problematic. The Japanese language by nature is filled with words sharing the same phonetic sound having different meaning.

Dezső Kosztolányi invented new terms and unique translations of foreign poems. He himself considered his work as a saintly mission. As it turns out in the epilogue in 1933, Kosztolányi paid attention not to, - quote his words – “make long-winded the Japanese brevity”, but his style can be called high-flown, rather than sketchy. We can be a witness to the almost

perfectly faithfully rendered first lines, which are followed by ones with unsuitable words, ornaments, and adornment. On the other hand, I expect that Kosztolányi cannot be accused of faithlessness but rather of exaggeration at most. And what does faithful mean? And who will determine when a translator goes beyond the bounds of a faithful translation? Kosztolányi did not distort the meaning deliberately. The identification of translation and twisting is the main pillar of his programme of translation though, but it is not because he considered his poetic freedom above all; he was just fully aware of his limits. He knew that the Japanese poem could not mean the same for a European reader. He is often verbose, explains and expounds even if it is not necessary. However, the effort to be concise is a determinant of his *ars poetica*. In case of translating Japanese poems, especially *haiku*, the briefest metrical form of world literature, we insist on the structure and then we accept the fact that a message cannot be unraveled, thoughts will go unexpressed, half expressed, or if we accommodate European tastes as Kosztolányi did, it is specified and put down concretely.

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Kosztolányi wrote many times in various places that Europe and Asia are poles apart, which never could be ironed out on account of the cultural differences over during thousands years. In his 1933 preface quoted above, he has the highest regard for the Asian culture, calling it „child” and „virgin”; however, more than two decades before, he put the Japanese in a completely different light. Kosztolányi explains the differences of the genre with how far the European approach from the Japanese is, and how different the languages are. Quote his words, his job was not only to translate the *haiku* to Hungarian, but above all to translate them – making the distance of the two continents and philosophy fade away – from Asian to European taking good care not to make the Japanese briefness spouting, and not completing and paraphrasing the Japanese “sketchy”. Only in this way can the “child” and “virgin” Asia approach the adult and indifferent. Asia means in old Assyrian: „Country of lightness,” and for Europe: „Country of darkness”

Kosztolányi was already criticized in 1913 for his translation of Poe’s *Raven*. Talking of Kosztolányi, *faithlessness* is a regular attribute. His contemporaries considered him as having a light touch, almost like an improviser, and somewhat arbitrary. His methodological competency and the authenticity of his translations were questioned many times many people. We do not have the standard by which to judge these translation’s essence and attitude to the language. The same is true of the occasionally published poems in the *Sunday of Daily Pest*

and the Japanese and Chinese poets in the posthumous *Foreign Poets*. In the book of György Rába we can find a painstaking and detailed analysis of the translations of Kosztolányi. However, he did not comment on the Japanese translations either, saying “We do not have the standard by which to judge these translation’s essence and attitude to the language.” It is incomprehensible why the *Chinese and Japanese Poems* are omitted from almost all of the Kosztolányi’s work lists. His biographies do not even mention this volume among his publications, and the only exception is the work of József Szegzárdy-Csengery, but he also does not write about the volume itself.

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First of all, we have to decide, which text would be the basic text. We could not consider the posthumous volumes as the base of the edition, and since there is no available manuscript, the texts published in dailies and periodicals in Kosztolányi’s life have been chosen to be the basic text. There was only one exception when we considered presenting the text from the *Foreign Poets*, published in 1942, whether the poem got published there for the first time. The 1957 the 1995, and the 1999 version of *Chinese and Japanese poems* is not part of the annotation.

The Hungarian translations with the foreign and Japanese texts follow the essay. In the annotation we took all 203 poems alone, and divided the annotation into *Issue, text critic, genre, metrical form, transmitter text, original Japanese text* parts. The dissertation also contains a list of poets. It is significant that the material deals with 1200 years, therefore the identification of all the original Japanese text is a highly problematic matter.