

LITUANUS

LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Volume 34, No. 2 - Summer 1988

Editor of this issue: Antanas Klimas

ISSN 0024-5089

Copyright © 1988 LITUANUS Foundation, Inc.



Henrikas Radauskas. **Chimeras in the Tower. Selected Poems by Henrikas Radauskas.**

Translated from Lithuanian by Jonas Zdanys. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1986. xiv + 55 pp. Hard cover. \$17.00.

On the whole, Jonas Zdanys has shown himself to be a rather good translator. Many of the pieces have true poetic feeling, and upon occasion, even a turn of brilliance. Consider the following two stanzas from Radauskas's "Apollo":

His profile is as painful and thin
As the blade of a sword. Not long ago
Apollo walked by here,
And the glass echo of his lyre

Will remain forever
In these frightened rooms,
And his cold marble face
In this cruel night, and I have
To sing the tired, old
Songs of people who have died. (p. 43)

Aside from the skillful handling of the idiom and timing, there is also a musical echo of sound recurrences reverberating among the lines — just what Radauskas could have hoped his translators would understand. The translation of the prose poem "Light" has a good measure of the elegance and sly humor of the original. In general, Zdanys is more successful with prose poems, perhaps because one does not have to sacrifice as much; meter and rhyme so essential to the integrity of a poem are very difficult to transfer to another language without, as Zdanys says in his Preface, producing "rhymed doggerel." It is thus with a measure of satisfaction that we can greet this first book-length effort to present Radauskas to the English-speaking world.

There are, however, some problems with the book. Henrikas Radauskas was a precise and lucid artist. He was also a severe judge of his own work, permitting only the best poems to claim the attention of the reader. This being so, Zdanys's translations must now be measured by the demanding standards of Radauskas's perfectionism for they are, in a real sense, a monument to his work. It is not a perfect monument.

First of all, the Preface states that Radauskas has published only four volumes of poetry. In a strict sense, this is true, but one should really at least mention the fifth, fair-sized posthumous book of verse prepared by Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas and Jurgis Šlekaitis; in fact, a few of the poems Zdanys has translated were taken from that very collection.

There are also errors of a different kind. In the Preface (p. xiii) he says that Lithuanian "is the oldest living Indo-European language, older linguistically than the Greek spoken in the time of Homer and closer to the Old Indie literary language, Sanscrit, than to any other living tongue." Fact is, there are no "old" or "young" languages, only those with more or fewer conservative features. Lithuanian may share some of these linguistic traits with Sanscrit to a larger extent than other Indo-European languages do. This does not mean, as Zdanys's statement appears to imply, that an untutored Lithuanian could read the Upanishads over his breakfast coffee with more ease than anyone else.

Following that, Zdanys declares Lithuanian to be "an inflectional language with seven declensions, which have similar, and usually regular, endings in each case" (pp. xiii-xiv). Actually, Lithuanian has five nominal declensions and seven cases, and to say "similar endings" is far too imprecise to mean anything when describing a language. Yet, Zdanys builds his interpretation of Lithuanian prosody on this wobbly foundation, saying that, with all these endings being similar, it is easy to make (presumably, grammatical) rhymes in Lithuanian. That might be so, but grammatical rhyming is certainly not

considered to be the most sophisticated option in the poetry of any inflected language, including Lithuanian. It is true, Radauskas does not particularly shy away from grammatical rhymes, but his is the hand and the ear of a master. Zdanys's further claim that "the pool of words that share similar endings in English is much smaller" is best left for specialists to ponder over.

In the translations themselves, some errors seem born of ignorance. For instance, in the poem "Star, Sun, Moon," Zdanys mistranslates the word "akcijos" (shares of stock) as "actions," thus producing the nonsensical "actions in a kerosene halo" (p. 6). Translating Radauskas's "Madonna and the Fly," he writes that "she gives the yellow babe a round red breast," rendering "rausvas" (reddish, roseate, rosy) as plain red and turning the Lady into a painted clown. Zdanys could argue here that the poem has a deliberate aura of garishness, and that the babe's face *is* simply "yellow," and that therefore Madonna's red breast intensifies the feeling sought by Radauskas. Yet, Radauskas himself did not choose that color, and I, for one, am not fond of the translation-by-improvement school.

This is one of the times when Zdanys seems to know he is mistranslating but chooses to do so either for obscure reasons or for reasons having to do with his own aesthetic sense, which he then seems to prefer to that of the author. An example of the first might be the opening sentence in "Hope's Downfall" (p. 3), where it says "On the outer edges of the last black desert of the cosmos . . .," while in the original we have "On the outer edges of the black desert of the last cosmos," a very different thing. Similarly, on p. 47, Zdanys puts "bubbling hides" in Radauskas's image of fog depicted as white animals afraid that their foaming fur will melt. On p. 49 he has "death moans" where Radauskas had the laments of the dead. And so on. For no particular reason, unless he thought it more conventional, or poetic, on p. 44 Zdanys has an unhappy shop girl wringing her hands on the counter instead of on the threshold, as in the original.

There are more examples of the second type of conscious mistranslations, where the author is being improved upon. Thus in the same "Madonna With the Fly," where Radauskas says "Beyond her shoulders — a gold-blue river fallen from the sky," Zdanys has "a moon river falling golden from heaven," much prettier and more like in that song from "Breakfast at Tiffany's." On p. 18, where Radauskas begins his poem "Fire in the Museum" with "Having put on his glasses, the old guard in the museum's cellar," Zdanys changes that to "Wearing his glasses." Possibly, he is closer to the smoother English idiom which treats "wearing" and "having put on" as equivalents. But they are not equivalent here, because we lose a particular movement on the part of the old man, a settling-in to read, all cosy, before he falls asleep and the embers from his pipe cause fire in the museum. That he is "wearing his glasses" does not matter, indeed might be omitted altogether, as it would be in the equivalent Lithuanian idiom. That he "puts them on," however, is important for the ironic lift of the poem.

The tone of the translations is often rather flat, as if, having selected poems filled with hidden music, Zdanys could not hear that music in English. Sometimes his language seems to flirt awkwardly with absurdity, as in "... A phonograph/ Scratches *through* (my emphasis — R.Š.) a finished record/ Rustling like the wind" (p. 46), where a better translation might be "A phonograph/ Repeats the empty groove of a finished record ..." On p. 30, instead of Radauskas's "The cuckoo fell silent, the guest was stabbed in the tavern" (Gegutė nutilo, svečią nudūrė smuklėj), Zdanys has "The cuckoo quieted, stabbed a guest at the inn," a line that is not only awkward but also ambiguous, making it seem that it was the cuckoo who stabbed the guest. In general, either because of an uncalled-for literal fidelity to the different idiom of the original, or because of a linguistically insensitive infidelity, the translations sometimes have an uninspired feel about them that might make a foreign reader wonder what's so great about this poet Radauskas.

It also does not help the outsider that Zdanys has given no indication from which collection he took the particular poems, or at least at what time they were written. Without this sense of outline, it is difficult to perceive Radauskas's poetry as a developing entity.

Rimvydas Šilbajoris
The Ohio State University