

**The pitfalls of translating terminology\***

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Hungarian is a relatively isolated language. If a Hungarian scholar aspires to publish in a language accessible to an international public, (s)he either has to write in a language other than his/her own or find a translator. Although both alternatives have their risks, such recent examples as, for instance, László Somfai's *Béla Bartók: Composition, Concepts, and Autograph Sources* (1996), indicate that the first may prove to be entirely successful if the author has a good command of the target language. In the case of *The Fake* the original text was written for a Hungarian audience, so the translator had the task of finding terminology more or less accepted in English. Even an outstanding translator may regard it as too difficult to take on the role of a scholar.

Translation is like a leap in the dark, especially if the translator is not a native speaker of the target language. Although I am familiar with the Hungarian version of the book that is the subject of this review article, I cannot rely on that knowledge, since most readers of the English translation will judge it in its own right. All I can say is that I find the English text far more vulnerable than the book published in Hungarian. The short biography of the author that appears at the end of the volume suggests that the publisher has to share responsibility for the uneven quality of the English text. One sentence may suffice to illustrate the weaknesses of the editing: 'His previous books and essays include the relation of mysticism and poetry, the cultural philosophy of Walter Benjamin, the aesthetic reconstruction of the views of certain significant art-historians (Warburg, Riegl, Dvorak, Panovsky, Kubler), and treatises that studied the theoretical position of practical criticism and the concept of style' (p. 245).

Some of the blemishes may be due to simple oversight. The name of the Celtic queen Temora, a figure in Ossian and in a play by the

\*Sándor Radnóti, *The Fake: Forgery and Its Presence in Art*, trans. by Ervin Dunai. New York: Oxford, 1999.

twentieth-century Hungarian poet Sándor Weöres, is consistently misspelled as ‘Tempora’ (pp. 169, 172, 184). More disturbing is the rather incorrect rendering of German quotations (p. 7), the obscurity resulting from a too close imitation of the original syntax or from the use of literal equivalents of terms that appear in the Hungarian version. It is somewhat misleading to render Gadamer’s concept ‘wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein’ as ‘historically operative consciousness’ (p. 133). Because of the numerous endings defining the roles of words in a sentence, Hungarian can more easily accommodate long sentences with a complex structure than the English language, which has relatively few such endings. Since the connotations of ‘antique’ and ‘classical’ may not be exactly the same as those of their Hungarian equivalents, a sentence such as the following may be unclear: ‘*Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* has gone through classicizing, *Fontaine* has not’ (p. 141). Sometimes ambiguity is the result of the translator’s inability to find a satisfactory English word. When, for example, the rule of ‘aboutness’ is meant to suggest that a work of art ‘has a subject’ (p. 127), the reader may find the thesis too abstract. No less difficult to understand is the difference between ‘ahistorical’ (p. 130) and ‘unhistorical’ (p. 133).

One example of the rather loose terminology is the use of the word ‘romantic’. At one point it is stated: ‘One of the most romantic, but also the most superficial, commonplaces is the apparent contrast between the art business and the artists who are trying to make a living’ (p. 24). In a later chapter the same word seems to have an entirely different meaning: ‘Benjamin’s text has something of the flavor of a funeral oratory given by a resigned person of Romantic or conservative persuasion’ (p. 67). In view of the huge critical literature on Romanticism, the reader may ask for a more accurate historical approach. When ‘the imitation of nature’ is contrasted with ‘the imitation of respected artists and artworks’ (p. 86), the terms of distinction seem gross. The theological concept of ‘creating a new world *ex nihilo*’ had been applied to the activity of poets long before the Romantics — in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for instance. The character of scholarly agreement is in danger of trivialization if concepts are left without definitions. Keats’s poem *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* owes a direct debt to the old ballad *Thomas the Rhymer*, and numerous other works by painters, writers, and composers may remind us of the Romantics’ willingness to make a conscious effort to imitate artworks. The difference between the Romantics and their predecessors may lie in their choice of models rather than in their reluctance or inclination to transcribe. No less problematic is the way the concept of nature is mentioned. When Shakespeare is called ‘a happie imitator of Nature’, in the First Folio, the word denotes something different both from the

potentially ideal nature that some rationalistic Enlightenment authors were striving to describe and from the empirical nature of the later eighteenth century. For the Neoclassicists the word often stood for human nature, whereas for the Romantics it usually meant a world uncorrupted by man. Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition* may be less innovative, and turning points in the history of culture more difficult to locate than is suggested in this book. The association of Neoclassicism with the 'age of reason' and the dawning of Romanticism as the expression of a supposed 'age of genius or passion' has been criticized by Robert Rosenblum in his *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art* (1967) and, more recently, by Matthew Craske in *Art in Europe 1700–1830* (1997).

The thesis that it is a mistake to regard 'novelty as a value in itself' (p. 42) is supported by a detailed and sophisticated treatment of 'originality', but the declaration that 'absolutized historicism is pure relativism, which kills off criticism with its tit-for-tat type of banalities' (p. 55) is not qualified by an argument that would reveal to what extent innovation is a matter of interpretation. The shrewd analysis of shortcomings in other critics' argumentation cannot make up for the lack of evidence supporting the author's own statements. Such a lack of balance can be perceived in the remarks on Walter Benjamin's often overestimated essay *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*: '“The individuality of a work of art is equivalent to its embedment in the interconnections of tradition”, he claims. I think precisely the opposite is true — that the growing awareness of individuality can be linked to the abandonment of the interconnections of tradition' (p. 70). The suggestion that Benjamin's traditionalism was 'tainted with Jewish mysticism and messianic expectations' (p. 74) is convincing. However, it cannot justify a simplistic opposition of tradition vs. the individuality of a work of art. Such distinctions as high and low/mass/applied art, the 'beauty' of works of art and 'the assumed significance of their history' (p. 42), 'cultic' and 'expositional' value (p. 67), 'autonomous' and 'nonautonomous' periods and artists (p. 85), traditional and 'nontraditional cultures' (p. 96), 'documentary' and 'fiction' (p. 162) seem arbitrary. Instead of recuperating or reinforcing such concepts, it would be more interesting to lay them under a revisionary critique. The reader is expected to know what 'decidedly experimental, detached, and scientific form of modern art' is, an art 'that no longer concerns itself with questions of beauty' (p. 123). The author shows no intention to admit the mutability of 'beauty', 'experiment', and 'science', and seems reluctant to devote much attention to aesthetic qualities other than 'beauty'.

The fake is a concept that could easily ask for a semiotic investigation. Sándor Radnóti's field is aesthetics. His intellectual background is Germanic rather than English or American. As a young man, he belonged to the circle of György Lukács. The traces of his education are easy to discover. While an unpublished manuscript by another philosopher of the same group (György Márkus) is listed in the bibliography, substantial works relevant to the topic are not considered. Nelson Goodman's views are discussed, but *Fact, Fiction and Forecast* (1989 [1954]) and *Ways of Worldmaking* (1978), two books in which this author's ideas on quotation and fictionality are outlined, are not even mentioned. Wolfgang Iser's approach to the relations between 'fiction' and 'reality' is compared to the conception underlying the aesthetics of the late Lukács, but the German scholar's major book on the subject. *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre* is not given detailed analysis.

In the Preface the author calls himself a 'modernity-traditionalist' (p. VI). This position may remind one of Lukács's reluctance to cope with the characteristics of contemporary art. The legacy of this Marxist thinker can be felt in the use of such excessively abstract concepts as 'the reality that belongs to all of us' (p. 93). I am more than willing to concur with Radnóti in regarding much of postmodern theorizing as superficial, but I find it somewhat strange that his insistence on 'the current crisis of art' (pp. 25, 48) is coupled with a neglect of theoretical works that focus on the imitation of works of art, such as Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Parody* (1985). Irrespective of one's like or dislike of postmodernism, it needs to be admitted that some of the questions posed by postmodernism also apply to earlier periods. It has long been recognized by art critics, literary historians, and musicologists that the questioning of the identity of the work of art associated with postmodernism is in fact a general feature of art.

Radnóti's basic hypothesis is formulated in the following manner: 'Forgery is an applied art that relies for effect on the surface attractions of another work, or another style, flattering the eye by pretending to be exactly that' (p. 14). This definition is based on a production-oriented approach that insists on the immanence of the work. Such expressions as 'deliberate forgery' (p. 9) or 'the *gesture* of forging' (p. 44) indicate that a fake is defined in terms of intention. Questions of reception are hardly raised. It is not seriously considered that intentions notwithstanding, a painting can be taken as an 'original' by some and as a 'fake' by others. Interpretive traditions are neglected. Music, the art form in which these play the most conspicuous role, is almost entirely excluded. In the few cases when it is mentioned, the argument seems rather questionable. After the 'equipotentiality of "old" and "contemporary" works of art' has been

questioned, the following thesis is offered: 'This has long been evident in the case of music, where the segregation of old and modern music in the concert programs has institutionalized it' (p. 141). First of all, it is not clear what 'old' and 'modern' stand for. Performance practices have a long history. If we limit ourselves to contemporary practice, different periods ask for different instruments, so medieval music is rarely performed together with Romantic compositions. Few contemporary composers write for a nineteenth-century orchestra; most of them prescribe a particular number of instruments and seating arrangement. Still, in Paris or Chicago the same orchestra often performs nineteenth-century and contemporary pieces at the same concert, and leading instrumentalists from Maurizio Pollini to Zoltán Kocsis have a similar policy when planning their programs.

In contrast to music, literature is given a separate chapter in this book. What the reader may miss is a substantial treatment of intertextuality. The concept of the fake would invite a research into the interrelations of various works of art. While the main points of numerous scholarly works are summarized, Genette's *Palimpsestes* (1982) is relegated to a note and the same author's two-volume aesthetics, *L'Oeuvre de l'art* (1994, 1997), is not even listed in the bibliography, although this work contains a detailed assessment of the ideas of Goodman and Danto, and focuses on the relations between immanence and transcendence in the work of art.

It is unfortunate that Van Gogh's remark that when making oil paintings after Millet's drawing he was translating from one language to another (p. 82) has not inspired the author to develop the concept of translation. No more understandable is why such terms as 'quotation' (p. 108) and 'convention' (pp. 110, 126) are used without reference to the considerable literature on them. The fake could also inspire a scholar to deal with the history of culture as commodity. In this book there are very few references to the art market. In a world that can no longer confidently express its values as distinct from value in marketing terms, the reader may take this relative absence as a sign of rather old-fashioned conservatism.

*The Fake* ends with a short section devoted to museums. In view of this it is surprising that, although artistic canons are often mentioned, the books and essays written on canon formation by art historians, literary critics, and musicologists in the last decades are not given much attention. Radnóti views contemporary art with something of a well-meaning condescension. This attitude is quite respectable; what may be problematic is the tendency to make declarations rather than arguments. Speaking of the visual arts, it is asserted that 'the kind of complete

aesthetic experience, which we all know, cannot be expected from contemporary works' (p. 141).

A conservative taste can be a mark of refinement, but it cannot be taken as an excuse for the lack of rigor in the argument. 'There would be *many arts*, but there would be *no art*' (p. 212). This negative prophecy links *The Fake* to other works predicting the end of art. What I miss is not a recording of facts but a fusion of the objective and the subjective. The subjectivity of the tone is especially conspicuous in the final sentence, a somewhat cryptic value judgment that clearly shows that this book was written by a disciple of both Lukács and Danto: 'it is not Duchamp's (and Warhol's) Leonardo what (sic!) gives *example*, but Francis Bacon's Velázquez and Van Gogh what (sic!) gives *measure*' (p. 215).

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