

One Sentence: Illyés and Eluard

In the autumn 1995 number of *The Hungarian Quarterly* Mátyás Domokos maintained—with circumstantial evidence—that Gyula Illyés's most famous poem, "A Sentence on Tyranny" was written in the early 1950s and not (as the Kádár regime claimed) during, or immediately before, the 1956 Revolution.¹ Domokos enlists the poet's utterances regarding the matter, and refers to the life of the poem *extra Hungariam* between its first publication in the heady days of that red autumn, and the demise of censorship in Hungary in the late eighties.

There is nothing to take away from the arguments of the Hungarian critic—a trusted associate of Illyés himself—but there is, in fact, more evidence and a witness to support his case.

The poem is entitled, "Egy mondat a zsarnokságról", "A Sentence on Tyranny" or "A Single Sentence on Tyranny", which shows that the title itself allows for semantic varia-

tions. More of this, and of artistic merits later.

Total tyranny was the decisive and the most palpable cause of the 1956 Revolution, but it had been pervading life for something like eight years in Hungary and in its sham-socialist neighbourhood. For this reason the poem of six printed octavo pages acquired universal validity on publication, and was interpreted as the outcry of the oppressed when it made its rounds in the West. Apart from the English translation mentioned by Domokos, there were other English, French, Italian and Spanish translations in printed and manuscript circulation. The best of these was produced by Vernon Watkins, soon after 1956, with the help of Paul Tábori. He revised this translation with my help in 1967 before the Illyéses visited London.²

The volume entitled *A Tribute to Gyula Illyés*, commissioned by the Occidental Press in Washington, was already in the making, and soon afterwards some of the translations migrated—in slightly changed versions—to Illyés's *Selected Poems*, which was eventually published by Chatto and Windus. In October 1967 Illyés and his wife Flóra visited London, and stayed for a fortnight at 25 Ovington Square where I called on them S.W.3, twice.

Before these calls, I saw the Illyéses on another two occasions, once in a Knightsbridge patisserie shop and then in South

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Kensington in the Polish Hearth Club, where the poet had read his poems to a large audience of Hungarians.³

I was already in the shop when Illyés came in on the arm of Zoltán Szabó and followed by his wife, Flóra. Zoltán, and László Cs. Szabó were the leading lights among the Hungarian intellectuals in Britain and my chief advisors regarding the Illyés volume. Spotting me at a table and rising, Zoltán said to Illyés, pointing at me with his long and bony index finger, "Hé is the one doing your translations". I requested a longish talk with the poet, focussing on the contents of his book in English. "What to select?" Illyés gave me a steady gaze and said, "Whatever you put in the book you must not leave out "Tyranny". I assured him that the poem was to be the star of the show.

On the first of my two Ovington Square visits he recounted what Domokos has faithfully recalled: he wrote the poem in the early fifties, did it in the rough in Tihany, by the Balaton, kept it in his drawer until 1956, published it in *Irodalmi Újság*, and was unable to have it republished in Hungary up to (and as it turned out much after) that date. Then Flóra remarked that the authorities, for reasons of their own, wanted to postdate "Tyranny" to 1956. "It was ready years before that", she said, and smiled. Later that evening Gyula bácsi (he suggested the familiar mode of address) recommended two other poems for inclusion. Just before I left Flóra came out modestly and quietly with the choice of one title of her own. It was a love poem called "My Sensors". (Cs. Szabó said it was written for her.)

On my second visit I was able to show two translations of "Tyranny", one by Clara Lashley, the other by Watkins, to the Illyéses, which Flóra, with better English at her command, appreciated more than Gyula. During that visit—even when we

changed the subject, and Flóra was serving tea and cakes, and while Gyula bácsi was talking of two types of emigration, ours, out of the country, and theirs, out of free expression—I remembered something which I was too shy to ask. In 1964 Tábori and I, the first two editors of *The Poetry of Hungary* (a mammoth undertaking that never appeared in full) met László Gara, the editor of an eminently successful *Anthologie de la poésie hongroise* and that of an Illyés volume in French, and a good friend of the poet. Talking of "Tyranny", he said, simply, "the artistic model of this poem is a love poem, by Eluard. He was, of course, a friend of Illyés, who was well aware of the affinities". Let us jump now to 1995 when Kathleen Shields began to read Illyés in English and in French, as well as reading Eluard, whose poetry she teaches at Maynooth College.

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The poem upon which Illyés modelled his "Tyranny" is in all probability one of Eluard's most famous pieces, the poem entitled "*Liberté*". There is both circumstantial and textual evidence to support this claim. In addition, both "Tyranny" and "*Liberté*" are poems which took on a significant afterlife, being translated into many languages and being read as poems of resistance. The fact that Eluard's "*Liberté*" is the model for the Illyés poem also supports Domokos's dating of the composition of "Tyranny" at 1950, as we shall see further on.

Eluard's poem "*Liberté*" was originally composed as an address to his beloved Nusch, but was to develop into something much more than a love poem. According to his own account of the genesis of "*Liberté*", it was begun during the summer of 1941, during the height of the Nazi occupation of France. The ode to a woman became a hymn to liberty. In Eluard's own words:

Ainsi, la femme que j'aimais incarnait un désir plus grand qu'elle. Je la confondais avec mon aspiration, la plus sublime. Et ce mot, liberté, n'était lui-même, dans tout mon poème, que pour éterniser une très simple volonté [...] celle de se libérer de l'occupant. (Thus the woman that I loved was the incarnation of a desire that was greater than herself. I merged her with my highest aspiration. And this word, liberty, was itself there throughout my poem simply to immortalize an extremely simple urge [...] namely to be rid of the occupier.)⁴

This account of the genesis of "Liberté" makes it likely to be the poem which László Gara had in mind when he mentioned the artistic model for "Tyranny".

We can add to this circumstantial evidence significant textual evidence to support the idea that Illyés had "Liberté" in mind when composing "Tyranny". The original title of "Liberté" was "Une seule pensée" ("A Single Thought") and this is the title under which it was first published in *Fontaine* in Algiers in 1942, after being smuggled out of occupied France. It was again published under this title in *France libre* in the same year and in the *Revue du monde libre* in 1943, both of these journals being based in London. (The title was changed to "Liberté" in 1944). The similarity between the title "Une seule pensée" and Illyés's title, "Egy mondat a zsarnokságról", is striking.

From the textual point of view, there are other formal features that link the two poems. Although Eluard's poem is half the length of the Illyés one, the stanza length is very similar. It might appear at first sight that the latter text is a negative version of "Liberté" since one poem is a condemnation of the ubiquity of tyranny, whereas the other is a dogged paean of praise to liberty and its refusal to die. But both texts work by the obsessive repetition of the key words, whether it be "tyranny" or the phrase "j'écris ton nom" ("I write your name").

Sur mes cahiers d'écolier
Sur mon pupitre et les arbres
Sur le sable sur la neige
J'écris ton nom

Sur toutes les pages lues
Sur toutes les pages blanches
Pierre sang papier ou cendre
J'écris ton nom

Sur les images dorées
Sur les armes des guerriers
Sur la couronne des rois
J'écris ton nom

(...)
Sur mes refuges détruits
Sur mes phares écroulés
Sur les murs de mon ennui
J'écris ton nom

Sur l'absence sans désir
Sur la solitude nue
Sur les marches de la mort
J'écris ton nom

Sur la santé revenue
Sur le risque disparu
Sur l'espoir sans souvenir
J'écris ton nom

Et par le pouvoir d'un mot
Je recommence ma vie
Je suis né pour te connaître
Pour te nommer

Liberté.

In addition to textual similarities between the two poems, there are strange parallels in the importance of their after-life. Mátyás Domokos has written of how the whole issue of whether "Tyranny" was written in 1950 or 1956 was used by the Hungarian authorities to initiate a "show trial" against a poem.⁵ It could not be published in its country of origin for many years, thereby acquiring fame abroad in translations. In the different context of the Occupation, thousands of copies of "Une

seule pensée" ("Liberté") were dropped all over France by the RAF. Parrot, one of the people responsible for sending it to Switzerland and Algeria, wrote after the war about how it came to symbolize the Resistance:

"... partout ce poème souleva l'enthousiasme et réveilla les énergies. C'était un message d'espoir qui nous venait de l'autre zone, un message semblable à celui que les prisonniers parvenaient parfois à nous transmettre de leurs cellules." (... this poem inspired enthusiasm and rekindled energies everywhere. It was a message of hope which came to us from the other zone, a message like those that prisoners sometimes manage to send to us from their cells.)⁵

In 1949 Eluard travelled to Hungary and attended in Budapest the celebrations for the hundredth anniversary of the death of Petőfi, along with László Gereblyés and Pablo Neruda.⁷ Eluard and Illyés had been friends many years before when Illyés was a student in Paris in the early twenties, during the heady days of the transition from Dada to surrealism.⁸ Did Eluard's presence in Hungary in 1949 inspire Illyés to compose, shortly afterwards, a poem along the lines of "Liberté"? It is interesting that Illyés bases his own title on that of the original clandestine versions of "Liberté" ("Une seule pensée"). Perhaps he knew that like Eluard's poem, his own would create waves.

K. S.

NOTES

1 ■ Mátyás Domokos, "A Few Words About a Single Sentence", *The Hungarian Quarterly*, 139, Autumn 1995, pp. 10-14.

2 ■ Thomas Kabdebo and Paul Tábori, editors, *Gyula Illyés: Selected Poems*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1971, p. 17. Vernon Watkins approached his task of translating "A Sentence on Tyranny" in the mode recommended by Pope and Donne. Choosing the most suitable metre and never deviating from the general sense, he adapted expressions with more freedom than the other translators. I received the revised text of "A Sentence" on 20 June 1967. Using my notes and literal translation, Vernon Watkins had previously produced eight Attila József translations in 1965 which were first published in my *Attila József: Poems* (London, 1966) and afterwards, piece by piece, in *The New Hungarian Quarterly*. At that time he was considered the premier Anglo-Welsh poet. He was very appreciative of both József and Illyés: "a most powerful pair", he wrote to me, "but perhaps Illyés lacks József's perfect rhythm and melody". The *Selected Poems* had C. Day Lewis as its publisher's editor but he did not change a word in Watkins' rendering of the "Tyranny" poem. For internal reasons publication was delayed until 1971, too late to influence the decision of the Nobel Committee which put Illyés at second place in 1968.

3 ■ 55 Princess Gate, South Kensington. The Illyéses stayed at 25 Ovington Square, S.W.3. Life is both richer and poorer than poetry. Their localised worry at the time was that Flora had lost the top of the tea kettle. "I scoured the shops of Knightsbridge, carrying the kettle, and things were either too big or too small", she said. "At home, in my workshop, I could have made a bigger top fit the spout", said Gyula. I took their topless kettle, thought of the "sick goldfish solution" and provided them with a brand new replica.

4 ■ Paul Eluard, "La Poésie de circonstance", in *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1968, II, p. 941.

5 ■ Mátyás Domokos, p. 14.

6 ■ Quoted in Paul Eluard, *Oeuvres complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1968, I, p. 1608.

7 ■ See photographs of Eluard in Hungary in Roger-Jean Ségalat, ed., *Album Eluard*, Paris: Gallimard, 1968, pp. 273 and 292.

8 ■ László Cs. Szabó, on p. 28 of his introduction to his *Anthologie de la poésie hongroise*, states that Illyés, when he was starting out on his career, hesitated as to whether to write in French or in Hungarian. See also the poem "Voiliers", written in French by Illyés, with a dedication to Eluard, and dated 1924, p. 323.