

Changes of Eras in the History of 20th Century Hungarian Literary Translation¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the changes of eras in the history of 20th century Hungarian literary translation, and, as a case study, focuses what was called the “Horace dispute” in more detail. The dispute analysed was connected with the bilingual (Latin-Hungarian) Horace volume published in 1961, but its focus was not only on Horace and the translation of ancient poetry, but also on general questions of translation theory: the questions of fidelity to form, the perception of the nature of the other language, and the demarcation of the boundary between translation and transposition. The paper explores the background of the Horace dispute and the network of relations between editors and translators, based on editorial correspondence and manuscript documents. The aim of the paper is to examine the background patterns of cultural mediation and to explore the underlying factors of the change of eras through the chosen sample.

Keywords: change of eras, literary translation, Horace dispute, 20th century Hungarian literature, history of literary translation

1. Introduction

The eras of the history of literary translation parallel the changes in literary history, as changes in the institutional background also lead to changes of eras in the history of literary translation, and the altered circumstances also affect the specific translation solutions. The field of literary translation is the most regulated of all literary expressions: in addition to publishing plans, calls for proposals, scholarship systems,

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ideological expectations or manipulations, market demands can also strongly influence the birth of a literary translation. Since literary translation is socially and culturally embedded, it is worth examining the translator's personality, network of contacts, institutional background, audience and client expectations, and the intellectual context in which the translation was produced. As the client is an important factor in the translation of works of art, in addition to the recipient, the production of translations is significantly influenced not only by changes in literary taste but also by the institutional system and power relations. "Authority draws the ideological parameters of the acceptable. It influences (sometimes outright dictates) the selection of texts for translating as well as the ways in which those texts are to be translated" – states Levere (1992, 116). In analysing literary translations, we cannot ignore the expectations behind the creation of a translation, why certain texts are translated and others are not (Gentzler 2001, 194). In a summary of the history of translation, in addition to the how, it becomes important to consider the "when, by whom, what, and for whom" translations were done (Józan 2020, 29).

This paper discusses the key translation dispute in 20th century Hungarian literary translation history and the translation history processes that preceded it. The first section analyses the changes of eras in 20th century Hungarian literary translation history by placing them within a broader translation history horizon. The second section examines the influential Horace dispute that represented the consequences of the change of eras of the 1950s in the light of the documents related to the preparatory work for the translation volume of all of Horace's poems published in 1961, revealing the impact of the basic factors of the change of eras on cultural mediation, the status of the literary translator, and the specific translation solutions. In the dispute, in which philologists appear as representatives of power, the change of eras that took place in the history of Hungarian literary translation in the 1950s can be traced: the representatives of the new approach to translation, which sought to reconstruct the circumstances of the source text and convey its linguistic strangeness, distanced themselves from the translation style of the journal *Nyugat* (1908–1941), which they called translation impressionism.

2. Changes of eras in the history of 20th century Hungarian literary translation

In the history of translation, as in the history of literature or the arts, we can observe the alternation of certain trends. The process is somewhat similar to the shifts in the history of science (Kuhn 1970): the new trend always constructs its own institutional system, and can only be comprehensively implemented if it is supported by publishers, patrons, translation clients, schools, universities or the dominant ideology.

When a new trend in translation history seeks exclusivity, it often proclaims its own superiority in the name of developmentalist thinking. This is particularly evident in the case of what has been referred to the reconstructive trend in the history of 20th century Hungarian literary translation (Polgár 2003), whose main representative was Gábor Devecseri (1917–1971).

According to Devecseri, the translation literature of all nations can be roughly divided into two periods: in the first period, the source work only ennobles the works born under its influence, and only some of the beauty of the source text is transferred, while in the second period the translator is able to create the work in its entirety in their own language (Devecseri 1961, 606). Devecseri, therefore, without being aware of the paradoxical nature of complete equivalence between source and target texts (Barna 2015), believed that translators in the new era could reproduce the original text in its entirety. Devecseri believed in the historical development of translation, and he illustrated this with a metaphor of transposition that was consistently thought through: in his view, we go from the grafting of the branches to the complete transposition, which requires the training of the translation literature or language based on initial trials. Devecseri's chronology was linear, assuming a progression from the beginnings to the more mature and more developed, while considering his own era as the peak of translation history. In his view, in the new era, it was not the translators who had to take into account the needs of the recipients of translations, but it was the readers who had to immerse themselves in the foreign spirit, to become mature enough to receive new kinds of translations: the translator, according to Devecseri, exempts their reader from "learning a foreign language, but cannot save them from immersion in the foreign spirit"² (Devecseri 1938, 404).

In the early periods of the history of literary translation, the boundaries of the translated and the original work were strongly obliterated, and literary translation was related to the concepts of imitation and paraphrase. The idea of close translation in the history of Hungarian translation emerged in the Age of Enlightenment, and its system of rules was developed in János Batsányi's work (1787), which can be regarded as the first study of translation theory written in Hungarian (the antecedents of which are the translator's prefaces, epilogues and reflections which appeared as texts accompanying specific translations). We can consider Batsányi as one of the founders of the reconstructive theory of translation; the same principle was followed by Ferenc Kölcsey, who translated Homer, and who stated in a letter in 1815 that he translated word for word, because if he did not do so, it would not be a poetic translation but a paraphrase (Ritoók 2006, 38). Close translation did not become the sole dominant form of translation in the Age of Enlightenment, but only represented one

2 "az idegen nyelv megtanulása alól, de nem mentheti föl az idegen szellembe való elmélyedéstől."

of the options alongside free translation or paraphrase. The literary historian Ferenc Toldy challenged the Batsányi–Kölcsey principle in two influential lectures given at the Kisfaludy Society in 1843, in which he called for a “freer artistic and nationalist aspect”³ rather than a “grammatical tyrannical one”⁴ (Ritoók 2006, 53). Toldy’s views led to the emergence of a Hungarianizing tendency that dominated both verse forms and realia, a typical representative of which was János Csengery (1856–1945), for example, and which was taken up in the 20th century by translators associated with the journal *Nyugat* (1908–1941), but it still had its supporters later on, as evidenced by the Hungarian verse form adaptation of the *Odyssey* (by Gedeon Mészöly) completed as late as 1959. Mészöly’s experiment can be traced back to 19th-century principles (Mészöly 1982, 550–574), so it is not surprising that it was not successful in professional circles in the mid-20th century (Horváth 1961).

Csengery, a translator of ancient literature, repeatedly referred to the poet-translator practice of János Arany, and argued that the choice between a “true to form”⁵ translation and one “in the modern form”⁶ should be made according to the purpose of the translation (Csengery 1938, 230). For Csengery, the choice of verse form (following the views of the German philologist Wilamowitz-Moellendorf) is determined by the host culture: if a poem which has a fixed verse form and style in its original language is to be translated into another language, it must be adapted to the form and style of the target language (Wilamowitz-Moellendorf 1891, 11).

The Catullus dispute, which erupted in connection with the translation of Catullus by János Csengery and Gábor Devecseri, is representative of the clash between two approaches to translation. Csengery first published a selection of Catullus’s poems (Catullus 1880)⁷ and then, at the beginning of the twentieth century, he published the first complete Hungarian translation of Catullus (Catullus 1901). The first version of Devecseri’s translation of Catullus, published in 1938, can be read as a superscription of Csengery’s translation of Catullus. One of the cornerstones of the Catullus dispute is the exact, true to form translation of the poem’s meter, another is the use of words and expressions that represent a new style, which Csengery considers too modern. The decisive objection to the hyper-modern words and bold word combinations criticised by Csengery in Devecseri’s translation is, of course, the change in the outlook of the age. Underneath the questions of form or differences in word usage lay fundamental changes in the way we think about literary translation and the role of the literary translator.

3 “szabadabb művészít és nemzetit”.

4 “grammaticusi zsarnokló szempont”.

5 “eredeti mértéket utánzó”.

6 “modern alakban való”.

7 The translator used the name *Csengeri* when he published his translations of Catull, and *Csengery* at the time of the dispute with Devecseri.

The method of domestication used by Csengery was to eliminate the foreignness of the text while maintaining the translation's character by adapting it to the specific national forms. The procedure sought to give the target text the same canonical position in its own cultural milieu as the source text occupied in its own. This was most evident in the use of verse Hungarianization, e.g. the replacement of the verse forms used in Catullus's verse with Hungarian song forms, while the Latin names are retained in order to maintain the character of the translation.

The method of integration, which was typical of the poets of the journal *Nyugat*, launched in 1908, reinterpreted the text on the basis of spiritual and poetic affinities. It was about capturing the momentary mood of reading poetry, the essence of which was to incorporate the translated work into the translator/poet's own oeuvre. The literary translators of the *Nyugat* were themselves poets, and literary translation was linked to great personalities "who answer[ed] to each other, across ages and countries", "and reach[ed] out to each other over the heads of peoples" (Babits [1936], 11).⁸ The poets of the first generation of the *Nyugat*, Mihály Babits, Dezső Kosztolányi and Árpád Tóth, considered poetry translations to be an integral part of their own poetic oeuvre, and this was reflected in the translation methods and paratexts of the translations, the methods of publication, which often interwove the original.

Mihály Babits, the Hungarian translator of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, considered himself a relative of the great spirit: "Dante can only be translated by a poet. Whether this poet is worthy of Dante, whether he is related to Dante, I do not know, but if I did not think so, I would not have written a single *tercina*" (Babits 1978, 285). One of the most characteristic features of the *Nyugat*'s approach to translation was its emphasis on this equality, in contrast to the humility of later translators. The individuality of the translator was also considered important by Dezső Kosztolányi, who argued that translation is influenced by four factors: the source and target languages, and the individuality of the author of the source text and that of the translator. In his essay on the Hungarian translation of Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven*, his main argument against criticism of his own translation was that the translation bore not only Poe's name but also his own: "My work is the natural result of the English and Hungarian languages, of Poe's individuality and of my own individuality. For the poem published in the *Nyugat* bears not only Poe's name, but also my own"⁹ (Kosztolányi 1990, 566).

8 Although Babits does not use the quoted terms in connection with literary translation but with the current of European literature, they are clearly applicable to the relationship between the original poet and their literary translator.

9 "Az angol és a magyar nyelv, Poe egyéniségének és az én egyéniségemnek természetes eredője a munkám. Hiszen azon a versen, ami a *Nyugat*-ban megjelent, nemcsak Poe neve szerepel, hanem az enyém is."

Babits expected a translator with a personality worthy of the author of the work to be translated to seek a perfect solution, and in his opinion “only one perfect solution is possible for a *tercina* of Dante’s: woe to the one who fails to find it”¹⁰ (Babits 1978, 274). The emphasis on the experimental character of literary translation in the epilogue to the translation anthology of Miklós Radnóti, a member of the third generation of the *Nyugat*, was intended to resolve the paradox of the impossibility of translation: “The poet who translates poetry knows that it is impossible to ‘translate’, one has to rewrite a foreign poem, and that every literary translation is an experiment. And he also knows that, with few exceptions, there is no foreign poem that cannot be translated *into Hungarian*”¹¹ (Radnóti 1943, 170). The great poet’s or translator’s self-consciousness, which made *Nyugat* poets measure themselves against the greatest, and without which they would not even begin the work of translation, was accompanied, in the case of Kosztolányi and Radnóti, by a great degree of caution: the term experiment suggests an unresolved, unfinished state, and calls for further attempts, in the knowledge that perfect solutions are unattainable. István Vas came to a similar conclusion, although his starting point was not so subjective: in his opinion, a work cannot have a definitive translation because it cannot have a definitive explanation either (Vas 1982, 14). Therefore, a new translation of the same work is not superfluous, since every era provides a new interpretation of the masterpieces of world literature.

The new paradigm that replaced the translation tradition of the *Nyugat* started in the 1950s and paralleled social changes. The function of literary institutions and, within them, of literary translation changed and became subordinated to ideological goals. Literary translation was also embedded in a process controlled from above, as translators worked with pre-selected texts, and the assignment of tasks took little or no account of the individuality of the translator (Szilágyi 2004, 1328). Some representatives of the new paradigm of literary translation (e.g. Gábor Devecseri) came from the third generation of the *Nyugat*, but after the change of eras they distanced themselves from their earlier ideals. When Devecseri’s translation of Catullus was first published, he defended the ideals of the *Nyugat* in the dispute with Csengery, but later became the founder of a new trend that was opposed to the translation ideals of the *Nyugat*. What has been referred to as the Horace dispute (Rónay 1979, 176–199; Polgár 2003, 132–137; 2006, 7–19; Kőröz 2008, 14–28; Imre 2020; Hajdu 2024, 158–161), which erupted in connection with the bilingual Horace volume published in 1961 (Horatius 1961), shows the opposition between the two translation approaches.

10 “csak egy tökéletes megoldása lehetséges: jaj annak, aki ezt az egyet el nem találja!”

11 “A műfordító költő tudja, hogy nem lehet »fordítani«, csak újra megírni egy idegen verset s hogy minden műfordítás – kísérlet. És tudja azt is, hogy kevés kivétellel – nincs olyan idegen vers, amit ne lehetne éppen *magyarra* fordítani.”

The Horace volume and the associated discussion papers, reviews and speeches illustrate the changing perception of the *Nyugat*'s approach to translation. In the volume, the translations of the great literary translators of the *Nyugat* (Babits, Kosztolányi, Radnóti) were included in the appendix as "transpositions" or "experiments". The term "experiment", as used by the classical philologist Róbert Falus in his review of the Horace volume (Falus 1962, 217), can no longer be explained by the cautiousness of Kosztolányi or Radnóti as translators but is clearly connected with the disparagement of the translations of the *Nyugat* authors and their exclusion from the field of literary translation. In these translations, the advocates of the new trend see laxity and impressionistic superficiality instead of a faithfulness to the mood.

3. The Horace dispute and the eclipse of the literary translation tradition of the previous era

István Vas, the author of the most combative essay in the Horace dispute (Vas 1974), argued that the field of classical translations was a "reservation" which, in the *Nyugat*, "had not yet been so completely enclosed by classical philologists"¹² (Vas 1974, 605) as in the 1950s/60s. According to him, the great translators of the *Nyugat* started from the realization that "Sophocles or Horace need not be translated any differently than Shakespeare or Baudelaire; [...] in other words, they did not recognise the autonomy and reservation character of the field of Greek and Latin translations"¹³ (Vas 1974, 612). According to Vas, Devecseri was a unique phenomenon in the history of ancient literary translation because he was the only poet who did not venture into the territory of the reservation from outside but had grown up there, and thus gave the dictatorship of the classical philologists "a moral, even an artistic basis"¹⁴. The use of the terms "reservation" and "dictatorship" was also justified by the publishing methods of the 1950s, with the systematic and strictly controlled publication of Greek and Latin works. But this was not the only issue in the case of the translation of the classics. Here, the "philologists' reign of terror"¹⁵ marked the advance and development of a new trend of literary translation, which had its roots in the 1930s. A characteristic feature of this trend was the increased cultural alienation of Latin literary translations, accompanied by a linguistic reform and the development of a specific language of

12 "rezervátum", "még nem sikerült a klasszika-filológusoknak olyan tökéletesen elkeríteni"

13 "Sophoklest vagy Horatiust sem kell másképpen fordítani, mint Shakespeare-t vagy Baudelaire-t; [...], más szóval: nem ismerték el a görög és latin fordítások területének autonómiáját, rezervátum jellegét."

14 "erkölcsi, sőt művészeti alapot adott"

15 "filológusok rémuralma".

literary translations: “Latin poems become philological parables instead of live poetry in Hungarian”¹⁶ (Vas 1974, 614).

The most problematic parts of István Vas’s discussion paper were those concerning the question of poetic form, since in this respect there was no consensus among the proponents of the *Nyugat* school of literary translation. István Vas considered Lőrinc Szabó’s method and his metric licentiousness to be an example to be followed, arguing that the naturalness of Lőrinc Szabó’s translations came precisely from the liberation of metrical rules. Vas denied Gábor Devecseri’s thesis (which Babits also held) that the Hungarian language was perfectly suited to the reproduction of ancient versification, saying that this suitability of the Hungarian language was only apparent: “we cannot achieve the same naturalness with the same prosodic purity”¹⁷ (Vas 1974, 608). It was no coincidence that Gábor Devecseri reacted most sensitively to this question in his letter of response (Devecseri 1973, 336-360), in which he openly distanced himself from Babits’s heritage: in his opinion, Babits’s translation of Theocritus, which was interspersed with metrical looseness and anachronisms (and which István Vas quoted as justification for his own views), was a gem of Hungarian poetry, but not of Hungarian literary translation literature. According to Devecseri, metrical clarity did not come at the expense of poetry but made the poem more poetic and beautiful.

György Rónay (Rónay 1973), who defended the position of the *Nyugat* authors in connection with the views of István Vas, also disagreed with Devecseri in this respect. In his opinion, there were also ways of permissible metric licentiousness, and the main fault of the Horace volume was precisely that it insisted more on the “sanctity of metrics” than on the naturalness of the Hungarian language. Rónay stressed that, in Latin, metrics also had an intellectual function, “the rhythmic distribution of weight is usually also intellectual: the metre facilitates understanding”¹⁸ (Rónay 1973, 149); however, Hungarian translations that rigidly adhere to metrical rules were often intellectually vague, with the flawless “bouncing” of the metre working against “natural Hungarianness”¹⁹ (Rónay 1973, 147). Devecseri’s reply revealed that he assumed a priori forms that were more suitable for expressing certain ideas than others, and that, consequently, the translator who was mapping the ideas of the work to be translated was unconsciously forced to find the same form as the author of the source text.

The dispute was also held orally in the Literary Translators’ Section of the Writers’ Union, and the transcript of Devecseri’s speech survived in his estate, in which he had argued that, while the translator could

16 “a latin versek magyarul eleven költészet helyett filológiai példatárrá válnak”.

17 “ugyanazzal a prozódiai tisztasággal nem tudjuk ugyanazt a természetességet elérni”.

18 “a ritmikai súlyelosztás többnyire egyben értelmi is: a metrum megkönnyíti a megértést”.

19 “természetes magyarosság”.

choose from many different forms, it was best to try to choose exactly the same form as the original author, since form, in his view, had a communicative role.²⁰ The loosening of the antique metre, according to Devecseri, resulted in an “approximate poem”²¹ (Devecseri 1973, 333), and it was because of this application that he considered the *Nyugat* era to be metrically Iron Age: “How did the Iron Age come about, in which people of high culture also slipped back into the theory of approximation?”²² – Devecseri asked in his essay “Ancient verse form – Hungarian text”, in which he outlined the history of the Hungarian establishment of ancient verse (Devecseri 1973, 331). If the correspondence was inconsistent at the metrical level, Devecseri argued that the contradiction was inevitably also apparent at the stylistic level: the loosening of the metrics of the translated work was, in his view, a means of stylistic falsification.

Behind the poetic questions and metrical problems lay ideological differences. The representatives of the new trend did not see the treatment of metre as a purely technical problem: the representatives of the reconstructive trend, which opposed the *Nyugat*, saw in the loose treatment of metre only arbitrariness and superficiality, which, as Róbert Falus wrote, testified to “the translator’s whole moral and aesthetic position”: “whether he consider[ed] it more important to interpret the chosen original with humble fidelity, consciousness and experience, or to his own arbitrariness”²³ (Falus 1962, 208).

The dispute revealed not only a clash of translation principles but also dissatisfaction with the editorial methods of the time, which some translators felt were at the mercy of politics. In the new era, the translator was forced to collaborate with the editor as well as the proofreader, and editorial interference, to varying degrees, had to be expected for all texts. During the preparatory work on the 1961 Horace volume, Gábor Devecseri was responsible for selecting translations, liaising with translators, and editing the translations, including metrical corrections and new solutions. Devecseri’s poetic afterword (Devecseri 1961) also provided background information on the editing of the volume and reflected on the work of the translator–editor. Devecseri distanced himself from the 1935 selection titled *Horatius noster* [Our Horace], which also drew on earlier periods of Hungarian translation history. He stressed that they were not making a selection but wanted to show “the *whole*”, “which is beautiful only when it is fresh”²⁴ (Devecseri

20 Devecseri Gábor, *A költői műfordítás elvi és gyakorlati kérdései* [Theoretical and practical issues of poetic translation], Petőfi Literary Museum Manuscript Repository, Devecseri papers.

21 “körülbelül vers”

22 “Hogyan is került sor arra a vaskorra, melyben magaskultúrájú emberek is a körülbeliségi elméletébe csúsztak vissza?”

23 “a fordító egész morális és esztétikai alapállásáról” “arról, hogy mit tart fontosabbnak, a kiszemelt eredeti alázatosan hűséges, tudatos és átélt tolmácsolását-e vagy pedig saját önkényét.”

24 “az egész”, “mi úgy szép csak, ha egész friss”

1961, 606): the goal was to present a new literary translation ideal by presenting a range of new literary translators, and therefore they left out the old Hungarian translators and the poets of the “semi-past” (by which Devecseri meant the poets of the first half of the 20th century). Devecseri was enthusiastic about poetic team-work: in his epistle he compared editors to sheep dogs, who “with loyal principles, run and bark”²⁵ to herd the flock of translators together (Devecseri 1961, 606). Undertaking translations was a matter of both livelihood and prestige in those days, and many people tried to get into the volume but were forced to submit to the will of the “herding sheep dog”²⁶, the editor.

The editor’s interventions and the extent of textual modification are shown by the publisher’s documents, author’s proofs and correspondence relating to the editing of the Horace volume. Devecseri not only alerted the translators to the parts to be corrected, but (as if it were only a matter of changing his own text) directly participated in the shaping of the texts by making suggestions that could be metrically incorporated into the text. During the editing of the volume, he corresponded extensively and also consulted the translators by phone. In addition to the published discussion papers, the documentation preserved in the Devecseri estate shows that the dispute about the clash of translation principles had already begun before the book was published. Since the discussions (often even the discussion of specific translation solutions) were conducted partly by phone, the correspondence is largely the material accompanying the translations of the poems that were completed and sent to Devecseri. Most of the translators were initially enthusiastic about working together and contributing as co-authors to the new Horace image. “I would be very happy if I could help in the birth of a complete new Hungarian Horace, or if a ray or two of its glory could fall on me”, wrote, for example, the classical philologist and literary translator István Károly Horváth in his letter.²⁷

The poet Géza Hegedüs, who later (obviously as a consequence of the editorial reactions) became the author of the first discussion paper questioning the principles of translation (Hegedüs 1959) even before the publication of the volume, started work enthusiastically. Géza Hegedüs’s discussion paper and the three Horace translations following the paper, all published in the journal *Nagyvilág*, were preceded by an exchange of letters and phone calls. None of the three Horace translations published in the journal (Carmina [The Odes], Book 1, Poem 30; Book 1, Poem 38 and Book 3, Poem 26) were included in the Horace volume published two years later, which is a sign that they did not meet the requirements that the editor had in mind, i.e. the new literary translation style.

25 “hű elvekkel futva-csaholva”

26 “terelő puli”

27 István Károly Horváth to Gábor Devecseri, 9 December 1957. Petőfi Literary Museum Manuscript Repository, Devecseri papers. In Hungarian: “nagyon örülnék, ha egy teljes új magyar Horatius megszületésénél én is segithetnék, illetve, annak dicsőségéből egy-két halvány sugaracska rám is esne.”

Hegedüs sent to Devecseri a translation of the Horace poem *Persicos odi* [I hate Persian pomp] (Carmina [The Odes], Book 1, Poem 38) on an undated postcard, with a familiar-sounding accompanying text, which shows that the editor had not ordered the translation from Hegedüs, and this was reason enough for its omission from the volume. Metrically and stylistically, the translation did not meet the expectations of the new trend. In terms of metrical licentiousness, Hegedüs was aligned with the poets of the *Nyugat*, and in terms of style he created a hybrid text: he mixed sublime and archaic elements with modern, urban expressions, believing that since Horace combined mythological imagery with everyday expressions, the best way to approximate his style in Hungarian was to “put words used at the card table next to the names of the gods”²⁸ (Hegedüs 1959, 1881).

István Vas’s translation was included in the volume, but not in the version in which the translator would have liked it. In his discussion paper, Vas criticized the fact that Devecseri, the editor, had only communicated his suggestions for corrections to him by telephone, and that he (not being able to judge the correctness of the suggestions offhand) accepted them out of courtesy but later regretted his hasty decision (Vas 1974, 618–620). He cited as an example the change of the last stanza of a Horace ode (Carmina [The Odes], Book 4, Poem 12.). The poem had already appeared earlier in István Vas’s translation in the bilingual volume *Horatius noster* [Our Horace] (1943, 175), reflecting the translation style of the previous period, and later in István Vas’s anthology of his own selected translations (Vas 1955, 20).

Devecseri included his translation of the poem in the 1961 Horace volume in a “corrected” version (Horatius 1961, 299). “My old Horace experiment was included by Devecseri in his anthology”, wrote Vas. “And then before closing the volume he called me, saying that he had some suggestions which would make my translation more precise; and of course it’s up to me whether I accept them, but he would be happy if I did”²⁹ (Vas 1974, 618). The subsequent changes not only made the text fragmented, stalling the momentum of the first version, but also caused logical inconsistencies. One of the aims of István Vas’s discussion paper (in addition to expressing differing views on translation theory and poetics and metrics) was to make a firm distinction between the translator’s and the editor’s versions, and to restore the original version. He clearly distanced himself from the elements that were subsequently introduced into the text: “I shall therefore stick to my old, somewhat explanatory solution”³⁰, he wrote (Vas 1974, 619). In the new edition of his collected translations (Vas 1982, 23–24), he did not include any of the lines that Devecseri had changed.

28 “istennevek mellé kártyaasztalnál használatos szavakat állítunk.”

29 “Régi Horatius-kísérletemet Devecseri átvette antológiájába.” “A kötet lezárása előtt aztán felhívott, hogy van néhány javaslata, amely pontosabbá tenné fordításomat; persze, rajtam áll, hogy elfogadom-e, de örülne, ha beleegyeznék.”

30 “Maradok hát a magam régi, kissé magyarázó megoldásánál.”

The poet Gyula Takács also adhered to the individualist principles of the *Nyugat*, and after he could not reach the editor by phone, he wrote to inquire which of his translations were to be published, and how, with what changes. “I would like to know what you publish in the Horace volume? Also how, i.e. what are the intended changes? I prefer my own text to another’s, even if it is two words under my name,” he wrote to Devecseri in a letter dated October 16, 1961.³¹ The letter indicates that the individualistic translator did not want to blend into the shared text but wanted to preserve the individual flavor of his translation. The concern was justified, as evidenced by the proof, that have survived in the estate (the traslation of Horace’s epistle, Book 1, Poem 10). In the accompanying letter, the translator asked the editor to submit his text to the printer in this form, but when compared with the printed version, it is clear that not all of the corrections were incorporated into the final text. The editor had the final say, forcing even the most individualistic author to compromise.

An examination of the background materials on the editor’s work reveals that the editor’s idea was to achieve as close an approximation of literalism as possible, but this was not always possible because of Horace’s tight metrics and often resulted in incomprehensible texts with Latin grammar and fragmented syntax. Devecseri’s aim as an editor was to make the translation not only an “inspired variation”³² but also a mirror image of the original (Devecseri 1973, 337) – and the mirror image for him was not the contours of the figures but the point-to-point correspondences. In addition to the approximate perception of the poem’s meter, he considered another error to be the “approximate, allusive and transposed”³³ indication of the poem’s subject, and the two were, in his view, interrelated (Devecseri 1973, 341). He considered the altering of the original poem’s meter the greatest “embezzlement”³⁴, and the omission of ornamentation the smallest “embezzlement”, which, according to Devecseri, is not merely ornamentation but “part of the living fabric of the poem”³⁵ (Devecseri 1981, 111). In the case of the Horace volume, the juxtaposition of the mosaics, as his interlocutors pointed out, did not result in the transfer of “Horace’s mood”³⁶ (Rónay 1973).

31 Gyula Takács to Gábor Devecseri, Petőfi Literary Museum Manuscript Repository, Devecseri papers. In Hungarian: “Szeretném tudni mit közöltök a Horatiusból? Azt is, hogyan, ti. mi a szándékolt változtatás. Én ti. jobban szeretem a saját szövegemet, mint a másét, ha két szó is, a nevem alatt.”

32 “ihletett variációja”

33 “a vers tárgyának körülbelüli, utaló és áttett”

34 “sikkasztás”

35 “részei a vers eleven szövetének”

36 “a horatiusi hangulat”

4. Conclusion

The history of Hungarian literary translation went through two changes of eras during the 20th century: the first turn was associated with the first generation of the *Nyugat*, which opposed the national school, and the second turn with the third generation. However, while the first generation, despite individual differences, can be said to have been united in its rejection of the literary translation of the previous era, the third generation was not unanimous in its support for the new conception of literary translation, although many of its members were forced to make concessions. The change of eras is best illustrated by the translation oeuvre of Gábor Devecseri, while the dispute that erupted over the Horace translations is a good example of the fluctuations in translation principles, the political pressure of translators, and the desire to preserve earlier views on translation. Several of the third generation of translators (Gyula Takáts, György Rónay, and István Vas) later stood up for the principles they had learned in their youth, while Gábor Devecseri, a believer in radical innovation, worked to consciously overwrite the earlier approach to translation.

An analysis of the translations and of the background material has shown that the specific translation solutions and editorial corrections were based on a conscious eclipsing of the literary translation concept of the previous era. The 1961 bilingual Horace volume was intended to function as a mirror, and translation, according to this metaphor, is not a work in itself, but only a reflection, a mirror of something true and original. “Translation is not only an inspired variation, but also, as far as possible, a mirror image of the original”,³⁷ Gábor Devecseri believed, and for him, one of the indispensable conditions of this mirroring was faithfulness to form (Devecseri 1973, 337–338). Since the mirror can also distort or modify the proportions of the original image, the mirror metaphor also warns that the truth or falsity of an image cannot be determined as a matter of course. The Horace dispute, which started from the questioning of specific translation solutions and editorial interventions, reached a theoretical level, gaining a translation theoretical nature rather than a translation methodological one, and it also documents the change of era in translation that took place in the meantime. While the individual taste of each translator remained in line with the principles of the *Nyugat*, the change was mainly detectable in terms of editorial principles. In many respects, the Corvina Publishing House’s attempt to publish Horace is considered, by the profession today, as a failure, but the change of eras was clearly achieved, despite individual protests. And in that change a major role was played not only by Devecseri’s work, which is still influential today, but also the institutional publishing apparatus that supported the new views.

37 “A fordítás nemcsak ihletett variációja, hanem – amennyire csak lehetséges – tükröképe is az eredetinek.”

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