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Why does anyone translate?

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Tim Wilkinson, the English translator of Imre Kertsz, talks about the lack of literary translations in the UK and US, and assesses past, present, and forthcoming efforts to bring Hungarian literary fiction to the English-speaking market.

Why does anyone translate? The question is not mine, but comes from a typically bracing comment by Thomas Bernhard: “Translators are ghastly: poor devils who get nothing for a translation, only the lowliest fee – shamefully low, as they are wont to say – and they accomplish a ghastly job. In other words: the balance is restored. If a person does something that is worth nothing, then they should get nothing for it. Why does anyone translate? Why don’t they write their own stuff instead?”

As someone who has been trying to make a livelihood from translating contemporary Hungarian fiction, the comment rings so true that I increasingly ask myself why I thought, eight years ago, that this might be viable. Having learned the language through working in Hungary during the early 1970s, I had done occasional translations of more or less academic (mainly historical) works as a “hobby” without thinking of it as a possible full-time pursuit. That changed after my encounter with the work of Imre Kertsz, and specifically, in 1995, with *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* (though I had previously read his earlier two novels). By then I was very attuned to Bernhard’s writings, and I was struck by how in this short novel Kertsz was doing something recognizably similar yet with even more complex overtones. Curious to see how the text might look in English, I did a rough translation for myself. While finishing that in late 1996, though, I discovered that a translation of the work had just been published in the US. On



obtaining a copy of this, I was horrified to find it was teeming with errors and elementary failures of comprehension (see my [article](#) in the *Hungarian Quarterly* No. 168, Winter 2002). My regular trips to Budapest had begun to net a growing pile of fascinating works by other authors, so with Hungary scheduled to be the featured country at the Frankfurt Book Fair in 1999, it seemed to be the right time to make the leap and commit to becoming a full-time freelance translator.

It is probably naive to think that one can buck long-running trends, however. On my informal count, translations of just 36 serious novel titles by 20 authors have been put out by UK and/or US publishers over the 16 years since 1989 (to use that as a convenient marker), and that total includes two books (by Frigyes Karinthy and Lajos Zilahy) that were reissues of old (pre-war) translations and three (two by Imre Kertész, one by Magda Szabó) that were translated twice over because the first translation proved inadequate. In a nutshell: two titles per year. Of the 20 authors, just eight are living (yielding 20 titles), of whom three (Péter Esterházy, Péter Nadas, and Imre Kertész) account for 12 titles (admittedly one of the other five living authors is György Konrád, who already had four fiction titles translated by the mid-1980s). Eight of the clutch of 16 titles by 12 dead authors, incidentally, were originally published in Hungary during the seven-year spell 1935-42. The good news is that living authors have only had to wait, on average, nine years to see a title make it into English translation; for the dead writers, the average is over 60 years.

According to the *Guardian Review* (14 January 2006), "There has never been such a boom in book buying and reading. Overall, books cost less than ever, and there has never been such a wonderful variety of new titles from smaller publishers." True, but it happens not to cover fiction in translation, which is in decline. In the UK (population 60 million) an astonishing 120 000 book titles of every possible category are published annually, including 5000 that one might class as adult fiction titles, but no more than 100 to 200 of those (2-4 per cent) are translations (the figures for the US are not very different). The usual contrast is with Germany (population 80 million). There, some 75 000 book titles are published annually, including approximately 3500 new fiction titles, of which as many as 1400 (approximately 40 per cent) are translations. If one looks specifically at works translated from Hungarian: not only did more of these appear in German during 1999 alone than in English during the entire 16 years since 1989, but on average, ten times more titles are published annually in Germany than in the UK.



As a result, a huge range of works by Hungarian authors, and a body of informed criticism of contemporary Hungarian literature, is now available in German. Corresponding guidance simply does not exist in English, and with the run-down of the public library system, one would have trouble locating even what little published work has been translated. The Hungarian Book Foundation (www.hunlit.hu) tries to help, in part by also supporting the website [Hungarian Literature Online](#). For 40 years, the *Hungarian Quarterly* has admirably sought to bring choice delicacies to English readers, and is now available [online](#). This magazine has a regular literary column that reviews ten to twelve new books a year, though it often presumes an intimacy with Hungarian authors and works that a non-Hungarian readership cannot possibly have. A “The Best of the *Hungarian Quarterly*” was published by the Harvill Press in 2004 (*An Island of Sound: Hungarian Poetry and Fiction before and beyond the Iron Curtain*, eds. George Szirtes and Mikls Vajda); a laudable project, though the book tries to cover too much and is rather uneven, while failing to be very informative on the literary justification for the selection. Better on that score, though obviously narrower in focus, is *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Hungary: an Anthology*, eds. Susan Rubin Suleiman and Eva Forgcs (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 2003). But that is more or less the extent of it.

So what needs to be tackled? At the request of *Context*, an occasional American literary magazine associated with the Dalkey Archive Press that devotes particular attention to literature in translation, I wrote a short [article](#) on Hungarian fiction since 1975 which mentioned 77 works by a “Top 20” list of authors. As only 19 of the titles mentioned there have been published in English translation, that leaves a lot to go for (30 years’ worth at current rates of translation), and nearly half the authors have brought out newer work since then. Quite apart from hopes for the remaining four to five volumes by Imre Kertsz that have yet to make it to English, if pressed on personal favourites, they would be Lszl Mrton’s *The True History of Jacob Wunschwitz* or anything after it (especially *A Shady High Street*); Endre Kukorelly’s *Fairy-Vale, or Riddles of the Heart of a Man*; Zsolt Lng’s *Transylvanian Bestiary* (2 volumes); with Gbor Nmeth’s *Jewish, Are You?* (2004) as a wild card. Lszl Krasznahorkai also merits wider recognition, and his soon-to-be-published *War and War* (New Directions, 2006) may or may not achieve that. While the fiž½ting of Sandor Mrai is all very well, it would be gratifying to see acknowledgement for more original writers of the recent past, such as Gza Ottlik or Mikls Mszĩž½ly.



Still, the question remains: Why does anyone translate? The above authors share the feature that, besides writing marvellously distinctive Hungarian prose, they offer fresh and highly individual approaches to how one thinks about the world – above all, about history and personal identity. That, surely, is the whole point of serious literature. By contrast, most UK writers are, in my view, terminally derivative and boring, and an infusion of new thinking would not come amiss there or in the US. The bottom line was well expressed by Ezra Pound in *The ABC of Reading*: “The sum of human wisdom is not contained in any one language, and no single language is CAPABLE of expressing all forms and degrees of human comprehension.” Moreover, noted Pound, “If a nation’s literature declines, the nation atrophies and decays.”