

The Kiss: 20th Century Hungarian Short Stories

Selected by István Bart

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20th Century Hungarian Short Stories is a splendid book for readers who, like myself, must depend for any knowledge of Hungarian literature they have, or would like to have, on English translations. As a member of that target audience for whom the anthology is, presumably, primarily intended, I obviously cannot comment on it as an Hungarian specialist might. My own naive responses to the stories, as I read them, are those of an American who is a Professor of English and American Literature. My brief review is therefore less a critical evaluation of the literary merits of the stories, or even the merits of the translations, than an account of what happens in the reading process when a reader like myself reads what is in front of him or her on the page.

But let it be said at the outset that this collection, comprised of thirty-one stories by thirty-one leading Hungarian writers, from Endre Ady to Péter Esterházy, does yeoman work in making available a wide range of stories from throughout the century. Written in a broad spectrum of styles and narrative techniques, they generally read very well, making me feel that I am in good hands as I move from translation to translation. At times, however, I find myself wondering what sort of Hungarian expression, unknown to me, lies behind the English text. Given my very limited knowledge of Hungarian social and cultural history, I tend naively to draw upon a social or cultural linguistic context with which I am familiar. But in doing so I can find myself wondering what in the Hungarian original might have driven the translator to adopt the kind of language he or she has.

The initial story, and title story of the volume, Endre Ady's "The Kiss," a highly stylized story by an author completely new to me, is a good case in point of what can go on during the reading process. The dates of composition and publication of "The Kiss" are not supplied but from the biographical sketch at the end of the book – useful brief accounts of the life and works of each of the thirty-one writers are provided – one finds that Ady's dates are 1877 to 1919. Reading "The Kiss," I convert it into an Edwardian period piece, although at times it seems to me I am reading second-rate Poe, perhaps filtered through *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. This parochial response of mine may be quite unfair to Ady, and to his translator. But when, for example, in the second paragraph I read that Rozália Mihályi "was an insignificant lass of the theatre while she lived," I assume that the Hungarian original presented the translator with something equivalently peculiar to catch an "Edwardian" note. A page later one encounters some "period piece" expression in Marcella Kun's outcry,

Would it satisfy you, Sir, to ravish me, body and soul, and hear me call you a rogue? Would you have such a plundered success, such a loveless love? Well, would you? (8)

This sounds rather like *kitsch*, if not a parody of *kitsch*, which I fear it isn't. It would be difficult enough for me to accept such diction in a twentieth-century English or American short story, but when I find myself reading it in the form of a translation from the Hungarian, a language which bears not the slightest resemblance to English, I become even more painfully conscious of the dated melodramatic quality of the English. As English "dubbing" of Hungarian dialogue, it thus sounds, in my ears, even more embarrassing than it otherwise might. That "foreigners" should be made to mouth such English does make me wonder what Ady sounds like in Hungarian. I suspect that, working within Hungarian stylistic traditions with which I am necessarily unfamiliar, he simply cannot be "Englished" without his threatening sometimes to sound as if he were writing *kitsch*.

At other times one stumbles over the odd phrase which causes one to ponder what sort of technical term the English is doing duty for, as when the narrator remarks, "the gentlemen of the theatrical board liked their chorus girls to be gay" (p. 7). I am not all sure what a theatrical board is, much less its Hungarian equivalent, but the theatrical collocation "to troop the boards" from somewhere in the wings totally inappropriately calls out. And as soon as the talk is of "chorus girls" I, in my provincial fashion, think of Broadway of the 1930s and vintage *New Yorker* cartoons and old Hollywood musicals. It may very well be that "chorus girls" is a precise, entirely accurate translation. That there might be such a thing as an Hungarian chorus girl is a proposition I am not unwilling to accept, even if it does not match up with any of my limited range of stereotypical images of "Hungarians". Hungarian chorus girls must therefore in my reading process first shed all sorts of inappropriate non-Hungarian contexts which, without my willing them to do so, and certainly no fault of Ady or his translator much less Hungarian chorus girls, invade my reading consciousness.

Reading the anthology I sometimes find myself in something of a no man's land, between "my" Anglo-American "English" world, summoned up whether I like it or not by immediate stock responses to the language formulations of the translated text, and the Hungarian world which the English text is standing in for. This peculiar in-between world in which I find myself, a world in which theatrical boards exist, and in which Hungarian chorus girls traipse about, is not my familiar socio-linguistic world. Native English speakers with some Hungarian at their command, and who *know* their Hungary and Hungarians, will be able to compare the original text and the English rendering, and thereby gain a particularly acute linguistic and literary sense of the text being translated. Working back from a translation to the original – as Fritz Zenn, the world's most eminent Joycean, has often pointed out with regard to translations of Joyce – can be a marvelous way of acquiring a more penetrating knowledge of the literary work in the original. But readers like myself of *20th Century Hungarian Short Stories* are left a bit hanging in the air at times. The remedy is obvious: learn some Hungarian, learn more about Hungary. If that is one of the things this admirable anthology impels a reader to do, it will serve an additional worthy purpose.

Another kind of problem emerges for me in reading the opening paragraph of Sándor Bródy's delightfully whimsical story "The Chicken and the Woman":

Once upon a time, there was a parrot who owned a woman. The bird was well-satisfied with her; she provided food and drink regularly and did not torment him by trying to make him learn useless words. He'd known three, anyhow, ever since his fledgling days. One was an uncomplimentary definition of a female, beginning with a *wh* and ending with *e*; the other two were magic: "Give me money!"

This, the second story the reader encounters in the anthology, is no doubt in Hungarian as different stylistically and tonally from "The Kiss" as it is in English, and one cannot help but feel that its translators, Zsuzsanna Horn and Paul Tabori, were more fortunate than Judith Szöllősy in being able to render their text playfully and wittily (as in the locution "fledgling days"). The adoption of the English fairy tale formula "Once upon a time" is good for starters, and the first sentence is a sure winner. The rest of the paragraph sustains tone and manner wonderfully well, and one is eager to read on. But if this is a story about a parrot and a woman, why the title "The Chicken and a Woman"? Read on and find out.

But wait a moment. The parrot knew three words. The first we have figured out, the uncomplimentary term for a woman beginning with a *wh* and ending *e*. And the next two we have already been told, "Give me money!" What's going on here? Is Bródy pulling a fast one on his readers, is this some sort of postmodern puddle we are stepping into? Will this numerical confusion become part of a discombobulated fictive world he is slyly summoning into existence? Or is the translator, faced with a linguistic dilemma of how to render two Hungarian words, which can be rendered in English only with three words, being literally faithful to the text on the one hand while making it literally preposterous on the other? One reads on in part to find out.

The closer one approaches the postmodern, and the end of the century, the more idiomatic the stories tend to sound to me. Take, for example, the opening paragraph of Mihály Kornis's "Father Wins":

imagine I'm dead rejoice anarchy may set in and the whole thing started by me going to the Corvin to buy a cuisinart since I have said for the longest time that we ought to have a cuisinart and I am always shushed saying don't talk you don't have the vaguest idea about it it would be wonderful to be able to dice potatoes and make coffee in it at the same time and besides I saw one over at Mrs. Zengő it had a red base and it's East German and you will kiss my hand in gratitude and Mrs. Sas said I should go in and not worry I will have one because she adores me I always tell her that she is an enchanting slender elegant lady and this makes her swoon and do anything for me albeit her eyes are hyperthyroid and almost fall out and I occasionally feel like pushing them back in anyway

Whereas Bródy's used the "Once upon a time" at the outset of his story playfully to establish a formal narrative story-telling mode, Kornis's garrulous first-person narrator bursts forth in oral monologue, in which the formula "the whole thing started by" pops up momentarily to signal that a story is starting. What "the whole thing" was or is we don't know, nor do we know what started it, but that's what we are about to hear. In the meantime, "I have said for the longest time," an adept use of the American English locution "for the longest time," helps clearly to establish an authentic "narrative speaker" voice. Who else would say "I am always shushed". It is almost something of a surprise to discover that the narrator is a Hungarian.

The monologue's being "dubbed" into idiomatic, non-stop colloquial English, unpunctuated on the page, is, however, in its fashion no less a stylization than the sort of prose we encounter in Ady's "The Kiss," from earlier in the century. No one really talks like Kornis's monologist does; but ever since Molly Bloom's nonstop internal monologue in Joyce's *Ulysses* we have become accustomed to such bravura performances and the pleasures they can afford. The

“natural” quality of English, and presumably the Hungarian, pushed paratactically forever on by “ands” and syntactically roughshod, is itself a literary convention, a game we as readers enter along with the author and, in this instance, the translator. My favorite single word-ploy in the passage is the turning-on-a-dime stylistic flourish “albeit,” which the dubbed monologist, thanks to the translator Thomas J. DeKornfeld, deploys with such self-conscious panache. What, I wonder, is “albeit” in Hungarian? And does it have the same stylistic ring to it that “my” albeit does? My linguistic chauvinism almost forces me to argue that Hungarian simply can’t have something that “right” for albeit as albeit, albeit I may be wrong.

But “my English” sometimes oddly enters into the text, oddly rubbing shoulders with what for me is puzzlingly “foreign.” I do not know what “the Corvin” is but I do know what “a cuisinart” is, and having to go to the Corvin to get one is a venture which sounds whimsically comic. That before too long in the passage the cuisinart turns out to be an East German cuisinart, if Mrs. Zengő is anyone to go by, heightens the comic, and satiric, tone of the proceedings. That I am reading an English transmogrification of Kornis’s Hungarian going on about an East German cuisinart (an artificial “English” word derived from the French cuisine) down at the Corvin makes the whole linguistic-cultural mix, for me as reader, yet more satisfyingly comic and satiric. One may always, inevitably, “lose” something in translation. But, in a curious fashion, one may also gain something as well.

My favorite “too good to be true as translation” locution enters the text in the form of a knuckle sandwich midway through the third paragraph: “... I just said goldie watch your language or I will give you a knuckle sandwich perhaps you have an East German cuisinart NO and there won’t be one...” I would gladly read a short story just for an albeit and a knuckle sandwich, with or without an East German cuisinart at the Corvin to help me make it. Can there be anything as good as a knuckle sandwich in Hungarian?

The “Once upon a time” formula Kornis employs is also made use of by Paula Balo and Martha Cowan in their translation of Péter Esterházy’s “The Miraculous Life of Prince Bluebeard.” Esterházy, born in 1950, and Kornis, born a year earlier, carry on into postmodern terrain the avant-garde tradition of their “Once upon a time” predecessor Sándor Bródy (1863–1924). Esterházy’s prose, rendered in English, fuses the fairytale mode wittily employed by Bródy and Kornis’s rampaging oral monologue mode:

Once upon a time, east of sodomy but west of oral copulation, out where the short-tailed piggy and kinky-tailed bluebeard rooted, there once lived an East-, or rather East-Central-European Bluebeard, a *tzentral-yurop-blaubart*. And he lived happily ever after until he died. I could say a few things about this.

DeKornfeld’s translation speeds up the fairytale mode by going from “Once upon a time” to “he lived happily after until he died” in two sentences. Its “east of sodomy” also echoes the biblical “east of Eden” (not Sodom or Gormorrah), while “out where the short-tailed piggy and the kinky-tailed bluebeard rooted” amusingly echoes American western tale lingo. The “I could say a few things about that” tag signals the formal commencement of a narrative. As the story progresses, one finds that each of its twenty-six subsections ends with some variation on the initial “I could say a few things about that” formula, “There isn’t much to add to this” ending the second, “Well, I could certainly add to this” the third, “There is nothing left to say, really, about this” the fourth, and so on. Esterházy’s easy command of registers, voices, and styles throughout “The Miraculous Life of Prince Bluebeard” is, one may forget while reading, as much an achievement of the author as the translator.

In touching upon but four stories in this brief review I have had to neglect the remaining twenty-seven: to provide a bare listing of all authors and titles would have been no fairer to authors and translators whose work I have not discussed. What I have tried to convey is something of what it is like for a reader like myself, without Hungarian, to plunge into reading the stories on offer. Virtually all thirty-one I read with great pleasure – “The Kiss” despite some cavils of mine is a very intriguing piece and I felt it could not be neglected as it is the title story of the volume and the first story in it. Corvina Books, which also has produced a very attractively designed and printed volume, is to be congratulated, as are all the translators involved, in having done so much to make the 20th century Hungarian short story in all its diversity, and with all the pleasures it has to offer, available to Anglophone readers.

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