

*Enikő Nagy*

## Moving Crystal Mountains

Edwin Morgan and George Szirtes  
talk about translating Hungarian poetry

### AN INTERVIEW WITH EDWIN MORGAN

*Edwin Morgan, you are a celebrated poet and also one of the most popular British translators. You have translated several pieces of poetry from almost all parts of the world including Hungary. Among the Hungarian authors you translated are Attila József, Sándor Weöres, Sándor Petőfi, Miklós Radnóti and so many others. How did you first come across Hungarian poetry?*

I think it all began almost accidentally. Although I have been interested in languages and translations a long time back, I hadn't really come across Hungarian poetry until the 1950's when I discovered a volume of Italian translations of Attila József. – I found them extremely good, and very interesting, not like any poetry I had seen before. I got very interested in József, especially in his poems about the city and about the industrial outskirts of a large city. I tried translating these poems from Italian into English. I sent them to magazines and got printed. I got so interested that I began to look at other Hungarian poets and made some more translations. This was about the 1960's and I sent them to various magazines. I somehow got into the *New Hungarian Quarterly* in Budapest and my name gradually got known there. I was invited in 1966 to Budapest to an international poetry conference called Poetry Days. Here I talked to various people and promised to do some more translations with help from people in Hungary. The man who especially got interested was Miklós Vajda. He encouraged me to do more

translations. These were published usually in magazines especially in the N.H.Q. A lot of them were published in a book of Miklós Vajda, *Modern Hungarian Poetry*.

I got to like Hungarian poetry and the language as well. I didn't just go by the rough translation sent to me. I always had the original text and I had grammars and dictionaries. I went through the text myself and I got to know the poems quite well and through that I got to know a bit of the language. Although I could not speak the language I got to recognise many words and knew what the grammar was like. I began to feel more comfortable and some bilingual people said I had an ear for it ...

*In one of your interviews you mention that there are parallels between the history of Scotland and the history of Hungary. Do you think this similarity is reflected in the mentality and poetry of the two nations?*

Maybe. I don't know. I'm not quite sure about national characteristics. But there must be something about a small country. We were both small countries. We have about 5 million people. You've had to struggle to keep your own identity. It's been taken by other nations... You had a hard history in that sense and still you have managed to preserve your identity as a nation, as a country. Scotland has come off worse because we gave up our independence to the English in 1707 and since then we don't quite know where we are. You are lucky in a sense that you have a very distinct language which you all speak. In Scotland we don't have that. We have Gaelic which is spoken by about 70 000 people, and we have English with various accents and also what we call Scots which would have become the national language probably if we hadn't had the union with England.

*Should a poem be international or national in your opinion?*

I'd like to think it could be both. The interesting thing about the Scottish writers and poets in recent times is that although they are very Scottish, they would like to see changes in the Scottish constitution, they are also very internationally minded. I think this is true for myself. I'm interested in other countries, in other languages, it makes me international in that sense.

*Do you feel this bipolarity in Hungarian poets as well?*

Your language is so difficult for other people to learn. It's isolated by itself, it doesn't link up with the other Indo-European languages. In a sense you have a big problem in

getting your writers, your works known elsewhere in the world. And obviously you have to rely on a translation, you have to keep international contacts to get your works translated into French, German, English, whatever. In that sense you have to be international. At the same time your language has survived in a most extraordinary way, and therefore you must feel very close to it, you must feel very fond of your language.

*Many of your translations were published in Modern Hungarian Poetry edited by Miklós Vajda. Did you choose those poems or was it Miklós Vajda who asked you to translate them?*

It was he who chose them. I think they were all poems which had been published in magazines before. He just collected them from magazines, mostly from the N.H.Q., and he put them into the anthology. So it was his choice of poems. Some have been published in Britain, the Sándor Weöres poems for example, but most of them were just in the N.H.Q.

*This was the case with the actual translations. But was it also Vajda who chose the original poems to translate?*

Originally yes, because apart from that very first choice of József when I first discovered József myself, I was often asked to translate this and that. Miklós Vajda or somebody else in the magazine would write to me and send me some poems: would you try to do this. Of course it's always better to do what you really like and admire yourself. When I discovered József and Weöres it was like that. But on the other hand I discovered people that I had not known before and I got to like them. Otto Orbán for example. I was asked to try some translations of his poems and I enjoyed doing that.

*When you write or translate a poem do you have any audience or reader in mind?*

I don't think I have any reader actually in mind. I just translate the poem as well as I can, keeping usually pretty close to the text and making it something that would read well in English, as if it was an English poem, and I'm not really thinking of an audience.

*In one of your interviews you mention that a poem consists of two components, the pattern of meaning and the web of impressions. As you don't speak Hungarian don't you think that this later gets somehow lost in the rough translations?*

It would if I didn't have the text in front of me. I always have the poem in front of me, so if I want I can read through the poem and get the sound of it. It's not perfect as a

method obviously, but I can get close to it I think with a lot of practice and gradually learning more and more words I can get quite near to all the sound effects and the tone of the poem. I can easily get to distinguish between one which is very direct, colloquial, and one which is using much more unusual language and is quite difficult to understand. These things I can certainly get into and gradually understand.

*Before starting to translate a poem do you study its background?*

I would look up everything that I didn't understand or ask some names, some places. I would always try to find out something if I could about the poet – his or her background and that was often quite a help. I have some books about Hungarian literature and the history of Hungarian literature.

*Hungarian is said to be a unique language, totally isolated from the Indo-European languages. Do you think it causes big problems for a translator?*

Well I'd like to think not. Hungarian is an agglutinating language, and it's obviously different from English. Sometimes some construction in a different language like Hungarian is so different in anything in English, that you realise you are lost, and you have to say: well I can't do that in English exactly, I have to get something which is roughly like that. It's very difficult in Arany for example, who uses strange compound words, and he's working in certain ways that you cannot get the same in English really. I was trying to get some indication of what the original was like in that sense. I would have compound words too which look strange in English. I just take the risk that people would understand that I'm doing something strange because he was doing something strange.

*Have you ever had a failure?*

It must have been the case. I'm sure with somebody like Weöres especially. Because he does extraordinary things with language. He uses special sound effects. Obviously the sound effects can't be taken across directly into English. You have to find something in English that sounds like that. You can be mistaken, you can feel some words in the other language have evocative quality which you may not have. I remember when I first came across *tenger*. I thought *tenger* was a wonderful word. I'm sure it's not to you. That kind of thing keeps happening. Your ear is caught by something in the other language. You may be overreading its sound quality.

*But you have never given up translating a poem, have you?*

I always try. I don't think I've very often had a complete failure, just a relative failure of not getting exactly what you would like to get.

*Have you ever tried to write a better poem than the original was, to correct it in some ways?*

No, no. There is temptation sometimes because you may be doing some poems that are not entirely good, or you are not sure it is as good as it's said to be. It's just tempting to correct, to change or to make better. But I don't think it's the translator's job. You should be as faithful as you can to the other poet. It may happen sometimes unconsciously, but it's not really what I'd like to do.

*Do you feel the influence of the foreign poems on your own poetry?*

I'm sure there must be something coming across, especially if you actually strongly like or admire the other poet. There must be something that gets into your mind and probably stays there and does effect your writing. One thing that I use which other poets using English don't do very much is to have a number of single words, one word sentences. Weöres has some lines where one, two, three words are completely separate. No grammar, no syntax joining them together. And that can be very striking. And maybe I would have tried to do something like this.

Very often it would be a question of parallel rather than something totally new. I like, for example, writing about the city. I've lived all my life in a city, in Glasgow and I like cities very much. That's what I liked about József's poetry as well. He was obviously a city man, a city poet. And maybe there are things I would take across subconsciously when I was writing about Glasgow.

*Do you remember any poems which were for some reasons interesting for you as a translator?*

Yes. *Monkeyland* by Sándor Weöres, for example. The title itself, *Majomország*. I couldn't say monkeycountry, that wouldn't even have had the same rhythm as the original. It was lucky in a way that our monkey and your majom are similar. So I was able to keep quite close to the original in that point of view.

I also remember monkeyswaddies. I just couldn't use soldiers. It wouldn't have been the same.

### Monkeyland

Oh for far-off monkeyland,  
ripe monkeybread on baobabs,  
and the wind strums out monkeytunes  
from monkeywindow monkeybars.

Monkeyheroes rise and fight  
in monkeyfield and monkeysquare,  
and monkeysanatoriums  
have monkey patients crying there.

Monkeygirl monkeytaught  
masters monkeyalphabet,  
evil monkey pounds his thrawn  
feet in monkeyprison yet.

Monkeymill is nearly made,  
miles of monkeymayonnaise,  
winningly unwinnable  
winning monkeymind wins praise.

Monkeyking on monkeypole  
harangues the crowd in monkeytongue,  
monkeyheaven comes to some,  
monkeyhell for those undone.

Macaque, gorilla, chimpanzee,  
baboon, orangutan, each beast  
reads his monkeynewssheet at  
the end of each twilight repast.

With monkeysupper memories  
the monkeyouthouse rumbles, hums,  
monkeyswaddies start to march,  
right turn, left turn, shoulder arms -

monkeymilitary fright  
elected in each monkeyface  
with monkeygun in monkeyfist  
the monkeys' world the world we face.

*What are your future plans concerning your own poetry?*

Well, I am writing a series of poems on the idea of virtual reality. Not just about the actual technical side of it, but using it as a kind of entry into a more imaginative world. The title at the moment is *Virtual and Other Realities*, and I've got about forty poems so far.

*Thank you for the interview and I hope your new volume of poetry will be at least as well received as your previous ones.*

Glasgow, February 1995

AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE SZIRTES

*You were born in Hungary but in 1956 you emigrated to England as a child with your family. You were brought up and educated there, so you are primarily considered to be an English poet.*

Yes, before I came back in 1984 I had already published three books of English poetry. And at the time of the first two books I wouldn't have thought of myself as anything else but an English poet.

*When and why did you start to translate Hungarian poetry?*

It started in 1984 on my first visit. I was given a small reception at the PEN club. I was met there by about ten people, seven of whom are still amongst my closest friends. I came to Hungary because I had been given a grant by the Arts Council of Great Britain to do so. It was a three week stay and towards the end of the last week Miklós Vajda commissioned me to translate some poems by Kosztolányi: *Hajnali részegség*, *Marcus Aurelius* and *Szeptemberi ábitat*.

*Did you know Kosztolányi at that time?*

I knew Kosztolányi's name of course. I remembered reading some poems by him when I was a child. Miki gave me some literal translations and I tried to find forms

appropriate to the poems. At about the same time I was asked to read a few translations of Madách with a view to giving an opinion on them. Within a few months I was asked to undertake the translation myself.

*By now you have translated a lot of Hungarian poets. Especially modern poetry, but also earlier ones like Balassi, Zrínyi. First I would like to focus on the translations of the poets of Hungarian literary past. Were they special to you in any sense?*

There are basic problems in translating all poetry, because poems are rooted in language and can not simply be transplanted word to word fashion. Twentieth century poets are easier to some degree because you feel you have something in common with them – most of my early translations were of twentieth century poetry. The translation of historical material presents extra difficulties. Understanding is not the major problem; it is the finding of an appropriate language. There are historical differences as well as cultural and linguistic ones. And you have to make decisions about how far you want to match the nature of that language. That's an important question, as a poem is that form of utterance which can't be paraphrased. Seventeenth century poets think like seventeenth century people: seventeenth century language gives full value to seventeenth century experience. Language isn't a cloak under which some other meaning resides. Language is the body. If you try to translate a seventeenth century poet crudely into contemporary language you will create great strains. Nevertheless, we live where we do, not then and not there. So my task – as I began discovering when I translated Madách – was to find a language that has done foot in the historical period and the other foot in the present.

When I read Balassi, for example, I sense a vague resemblance to John Donne, or possibly George Herbert. I am in fact trying to locate something that already exists within English literary language and tradition. My Csokonai has elements of English rococo poetry – touches of early Coleridge perhaps, using the language of literary sensibility, that sort of thing. Arany, surprisingly enough, carried an occasional suggestion of Yeats, as well as of a range of early nineteenth century poets, including Landor and Byron. There is something in the way he too speaks that indicates a possible place in English verse.

*You are primarily a poet, but you translated Madách as well as Kosztolányi's Édes Anna. Were you commissioned to do these, or what made you translate anything else than poetry?*



Yes, I was commissioned. Madách was commissioned by Corvina, *Édes Anna* by an English publisher. Many of my early translations were commissioned from within Hungary but in a way it's better if an English publisher asks you to do something. For obvious reasons: better distribution to a better target audience. And the book gets taken more seriously by the English press. *Édes Anna*, *Szindbád* and Krasznahorkai's *Az ellenállás melankóliája* were English commissions. Much of the poetry, on the other hand, was suggested by Hungarian sources, though that is not always the case. Zsuzsa Rakovszky's book, *New Life*, wasn't commissioned by anyone. I just did it and offered it to Oxford. They liked it very much and went ahead with it.

*You translated Ágnes Nemes Nagy and Zsuzsa Rakovszky, both female authors. Does it make any difference to translate poets not of your gender?*

Well, I don't think it should very much. It doesn't seem to have caused me any particular problems, though it's for other people to judge of the results. Perhaps there was something in Rakovszky's poetry which appealed to me very directly. Maybe our poetry has something in common. There are many male poets I could not translate because they are too different from me. Poetry is a sensuous art and you respond to it. And if it opens out possibilities in English why not make the effort? It took me quite a long time to translate the first four or five poems by her, but the rest took only about three weeks. It was very very fast. I felt the language was working all by itself. I was understanding it from the inside. I couldn't, of course, guarantee that the language was hers, but it seemed like powerful poetry in English. Its effect was sufficiently like the effect of her poems on me. In any case, I don't believe mine is the last word on her poems: others have translated individual pieces (though not a complete book) and I couldn't claim they were wrong. I don't actually believe in the concept of the "right" translation. Some work well, others don't. All add something, even the bad ones. Each translation is a new reading of the original poem.

*You seem to develop personal relationship with most of the contemporary poets you translate. Does this fact change the way you read their poems?*

I'm not aware of it. The poems are the people to me. You have to know the person in the poem, not the one out of it. I remember meeting Weöres, some of whose poems I had translated. This was near the end of his life. He was a tiny man, with a faint, gentle handshake and a weak smile. He hardly said anything, yet he was the composer of wonderful poems. All that was brilliant and energetic in his person had turned into

poems. It may happen of course that you get to meet someone in the flesh, like them and think it would be nice to translate a few poems by them as a personal gesture, and this may work. But if you want to do a good translation it is the words on the page you have to listen to most intensely. I have met many contemporary Hungarian poets but only sometimes has the meeting preceded the translation. As concerns Nemes Nagy, I just knew she was a great poet. I met her quite early in the course of my visits and had translated only one poem by her (in fact I think she translated a few of my poems first.) The poem I translated came about because I knew translations of her by the Irish poet, Hugh Maxton, in a book that had been published in Budapest and Dublin. They were lovely, very fine things, but when I read Nemes Nagy in Hungarian I thought she sounded different. Maxton created a mystical Nemes Nagy, which is part of the truth, but I detected a more classical poet in her. There was some flavour or sound he hadn't got and I felt justified in trying to supply it. I got to know her very well, until she died in fact, but we never discussed translation in great detail. She knew I admired her and wanted to translate her, but she didn't see any of my translations. It was like that with Rakovszky too – she didn't want to interfere when I was translating her. On the other hand I did talk with Orbán Ottó and Vas István when I was translating them. I got to know how Ottó's poems should sound. He was using a series of variations on classical meters I simply couldn't hear well enough until he read them to me. It's not a meter much used in England so it was important that I should hear it – not just individual feet or lines, but the whole organic sound.

*Did he read the poems for you?*

Yes, he read a little bit for me and explained what he was doing. I also remember going to István Vas and asking him to read his poems aloud to me. It was a matter of locating the nature of the voice, and that is all tied up with issues of rhythm and music as well as other things. Some poets who are very hard for me may be easier for somebody else.

*Have you ever had a failure?*

I can't always tell. Sometimes I can feel the success quite clearly, at other times I am unsure. When that happens the translation remains a shot in the dark – people may like it or question it. Obviously I aim to make translations that convince me, but occasionally the only guarantee I have is a sense of competence. I know I haven't fallen over in the dark but I don't know where precisely I am. I don't feel I have translated Csoóri particularly well but some people like the versions. It's the same with Marsall

László. George Gömöri, my fellow editor of the English language anthology of twentieth century Hungarian poetry, *The Colonnade of Teeth*, asked me to undertake a few poems by Marsall, but they weren't poems I could imagine writing myself so I still find the effect difficult to judge. I think it helps if you can imagine a wardrobe with a set of poetical clothes that might fit you. If the clothes fit you can translate the poem. This wasn't the case with either Csoóri or Marsall, but sometimes you surprise yourself: you discover clothes you had never seen and they fit. It takes some getting used to though.

*Have the poems you really liked affected your own poetry?*

Oh, yes. The rhythm of Orbán's poems is a case in point. I became quite interested in his meters and thought it would be good for me to try them in my own work.

*Did you use it?*

Certainly. I wrote about twenty poems in that fashion, though I did throw out sixteen of them in the end. Their effect has persisted in the longer term too. They have added variety to my own natural speech patterns. In Zsuzsa's poems it was the pace that influenced me. I wanted to be able to fly a little like her and was ready to do so. None of this is direct perhaps but it is important. And she could write wonderful passionate poems that made me bolder in introducing such passion first into the English translation, then into my own work. If a poem provides something you temperamentally need, eventually it will make its way into your own experience.

*Yes, somewhere you said that a poem you translate should please you and at the same time teach you as well.*

Yes, it should enlarge and broaden you. I have benefitted a great deal from those I have translated. Some have found their way into my own poems in ways that probably remain unrecognisable to those unacquainted with Hungarian poetry.

*Have you ever adopted images as well?*

No. For me, imagery is very personal – the most personal part of my poetry. Even more personal than the music. It may be because I was not born English and English music came to me more slowly. I am still learning its possibilities. Of course the imagery of poets you admire stays with you, but I think it changes its nature. Crazy things happen: a green body lying on the table becomes a red head in the window...

*In an interview you say that a poem consists of sentences which give its meaning and a form or structure which are counterpoint.*

Yes. This is how I personally feel form works. I am not a formalist in the sense that I believe closed form is intrinsically better, but I do like the feeling of some specific shape, one or other particular stanza form, perhaps a rhyme scheme, all of which provide a musical framework. The sentence unit moves against that. I agree with Robert Frost in this respect. Sentences are the basic material of poetry for me. But they are played out against patterns and structures.

This isn't true for everyone. Perhaps you need a mind inclined to narrative, such as I have. My poems talk against song, against a counterpoint of rhythm and rhyme. But I rarely bring the music into the foreground.

*It must be very difficult to translate the music of the language. The meaning, or the message could be relatively easy to interpret...*

Music is the hardest to translate. Music is specific, I believe, to the genius of the language. It is intrinsic, pre-linguistic. It corresponds to some ur-sense of the world. Weöres is difficult precisely because of his musicality. But you cannot simply translate the music sound by sound. In a different language that would make a different music. The music of the receiving language has its own centre.

*At the end of the interview I would like you to analyse one of the poems you remember well or you like especially from the point of view of translation. I know that you particularly like István Vas's 'Rapszódia az Őszi kertben,' and the other poem I thought might have been interesting to translate was 'Lázár' by Nemes Nagy Ágnes.*

The poems of Vas and Nemes Nagy move at a very different pace. Vas, I think, is much closer to conversation, an ordinary conversation with romantic elements. These elements are part of the literary voice. Of course, he makes literary references and all the time you are aware you are reading literature, not simply overhearing a conversation. Yet there is an intimacy to his voice which is like talking informally. He is not addressing you from a mountain, he is not a magician in a cloak, he is not crying in the street. He is a voice in a chair, sitting and talking. In *Rapszódia egy Őszi kertben* his voice is both colloquial and literary. It adopts a rich musical timbre too and it is very important to catch that music, but even here his subject is fitted to talk rather than to song or public rhetoric. I am delighted to have written some of his lines in English: "Mit tud a virág, mit tud a tenyészet? Rettentő szép rakéták roppanva repüljete!" with

its little purring and explosive series of r,r,r,p perfectly embody the sense of a launched rocket. In my version it goes:

What do the flowers or vegetation know?  
Imperious rockets, pursue your explosive trajectories!

Vas's rhyme scheme is important too because the rhymes are part of the poem's manners, part of the courtesy of the poem. I had to write something equally courteous. Something in which the syntax was not too hard, not too tight. It didn't matter too much that every line should be the same length as it was in Hungarian. Vas's lines are irregular. If a poet is using something terribly strict, like rhyming couplets and very precise rhythms then, I think, that is part of the manners of the poem and the poem would lose a lot without it, so I try to follow it. If, on the other hand, a poet has a semi-formal approach, now long, now short, now with an ABAB rhyme scheme, now with ABBA, then I think it is less important to repeat that pattern precisely. I too will be semi formal in a similar way but not in the same places, unless that falls naturally.

With Vas it is a matter of feeling for the voice, for the right manner, trying to find an appropriate music. His syntax gives the translator plenty of room. Nemes Nagy is quite different. She is a highly compressed poet. The first poem of hers I translated was *Napló*, an early series of short epigrammatic poems. *Lázár* resembles those in some respects. It was very difficult.

As slowly he sat up the ache suffused  
his whole left shoulder where his life lay bruised  
tearing his death away like gauze, section by section  
since that is all there is to resurrection.

One of the difficulties for me was that the last two sentences of the original, which constitute the last two lines, are not full sentences. The word *mert*, which means 'because' or 'since' is normally expected to join to clauses into a single sentence but does not do so here. I couldn't reproduce this effect in English because it would have sounded more stilted than I think it does in Hungarian. I had to concentrate instead on what was happening in the poem as a whole. Part of the poem's power lay in the detached use of *mert* and in the rather enigmatic perception that hangs on it. (In what way is resurrection as simple as tearing away your gauze or mummy cloth? You would have had to have been resurrected first. Then it's not so simple after all...) It is the full rhyme that lends the poem its authority and carries us through the enigma, so I thought it important to achieve that. It was also very important to convey the sense of

grammatical concentration, which Nemes Nagy often uses in order to concentrate intellectual energy, without losing the naturalness of speech. Nevertheless I don't follow the sentence structure too closely in English. It seems less unnatural in Hungarian to leave a sentence hanging, but if I did so in my version the device would attract far too much attention to itself: people would notice that and not the whole poem. I lose the breath she provides at the end of each line but had I kept it, I felt, I might have lost more. The effect is more important than the local detail and the effect is epigrammatic or gnomic, like one of Blake's *Songs of Innocence or Experience*, *The Sick Rose* for example. These four lines took longer than the whole of *Rapszódia egy Őszi kertben*, and I'm still not absolutely sure it's finished.

*Yes, the words have enormous weight which might have been difficult to translate.*

It's true. That is the great difference between Vas and Nemes Nagy. He is conversational and human: she is compressed and godlike. Her words have an enormous weight. It's like moving a mountain every time. Perhaps Nemes Nagy's poems might be seen in such geological terms, her work is like a crystal mountain ...

*April 1998*