Approaching My Literature:
Readings from the Hungarian Exilic Experience
Volume 2
By Peter Hargitai

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APPROACHING MY LITERATURE:
TRANSLATIONS FROM THE HUNGARIAN EXILIC EXPERIENCE, VOL II

Peter Hargitai
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John Henry Cardinal Newman, in his classic essay, “The Idea of a University,” reminds us that “a University is not a birthplace of poets or of immortal authors, of founders of schools, leaders of colonies, or conquerors of nations. It does not promise a generation of Aristotles or Newtons, of Napoleons or Washingtons, or Raphaels or Shakespeares, though such miracles of nature it has before now contained within its precincts. Nor is it content on the other hand with forming the critic or the experimentalist, the economist or the engineer, though such too it includes within its scope. But a University training is the great ordinary means to a great but ordinary end; it aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them, and a force in urging them.”

Were Newman alive today, he would most assuredly encourage us in our efforts to raise “the intellectual tone of society” by broadening the scope of our inquiry into a body of work that has only recently become accessible. Historically, and in the main, American universities have provided courses in Anglo-American literature and to a lesser extent the great literatures of Europe, but very little in the way of course offerings about the “Other Europe,” and here I mean the lesser-known languages and literatures of Middle Europe or what had been the former Soviet Block. Since the end of the Cold War, interest in the literature from that part of the world has not kept pace with our need to assimilate it; in point of fact, our ignorance of the region’s diverse cultures continues to remain an uncharted void. Volume Two in the Series featuring translations from Hungarian exilic literature is an attempt, in part, to fill some of that void. What the volume is not is a traditional anthology of Hungarian writers and poets who are exiles in the usual sense; thus, the exclusion of writers who may be at the forefront of the Hungarian exilic experience such as Nobel Laureate Imre Kertész, György Faludy
and Sándor Márai. Yet by broadening the definition of exile to reach beyond geographical dislocation to questions of identity provoked by political, cultural, psychological and spiritual displacement, the volume is able to focus on writers who lived in exile in their own country or who ended up living in exile in their adopted country. These voices from the “other Europe,” whose creative spirit transcends exile of psychological displacement add a unique and invaluable chord to our appreciation of global diversity.

Volume Two of Approaching My Literature: Translations from the Hungarian Exilic Experience showcases two 20th Century Hungarian literary giants who were forced into a life of exile in their own country—the poet Attila József (1905–1937) and the literary historian and novelist Antal Szerb (1901–1945). Included in the volume is the work of Hungarian-American poet Ferenc Mózsi (1947–2007), perhaps the most innovative poet of his generation who risked his life in a daring escape from communist Hungary only to have his poems suffer rejection in both mainstream America and in his native Hungary; in addition, there are six Hungarian folk tales retold in English in which exile, often based on gender, surfaces as a recurrent theme.

At this juncture, I had better explain in what sense I consider the volume to be “my” literature; after all, I did not author any of the works, only translated them. Other than our shared language, what I have in common with the authors is a special variety of the exilic experience. This special form of exile, poignantly described in Professor Martin TUCKER’S Literary Exile in the Twentieth Century, begins with something called “primal exile” in which the child is ejected from the mother’s womb not unlike banishment from Paradise into a harsh, indifferent world; but the process continues as a rejection in one’s own family, society and country, with the tragic consequences of alienation and ultimately separation; and it is the trauma of this psychic separation that becomes a “nurturing stimulus to creative expression” (Tucker xv-xiii).

Attila József, Hungary’s greatest modern poet, lived in exile in his own country after he was expelled from the university because of a poem he wrote; Antal Szerb, an eminent scholar and literary historian was forced to work in a labor camp before he was executed in his country because he was born a Jew and because he wrote about taboo subjects like homoerotic love; Ferenc Mózsi, a pioneering stylist in an uncharted poetic terrain, left his native country and the Communist Block in a dramatic escape, the last leg of which included a marathon swim from Yugoslavia to Italy.

As a hyphenated American myself who fled Communism in the wake of the 1956 Hungarian revolution, I have much in common with the Hungarian-American poet Ferenc Mózsi, and this includes what he liked to refer to as “our well-documented obscurity.” Indeed, comparing ourselves to Attila József and to Antal Szerb may not only be unwise but well nigh foolhardy. Yet there is a connection that we could call, for want of a better word, affinity, the old-French word suggesting not only a common origin but a mutual interest verging
on attraction. As psychic exiles we have all
chosen to create imaginative literature to
be free as human beings and in the most
profound sense. The fact that we were will-
ing to sacrifice so much, to endure poverty,
humiliation, alienation, emotional labil-
ity, in some cases prison, and in the case
of Antal Szerb pay the ultimate sacrifice,
is a testament to the human spirit. Over
a mass grave of anonymous dead where
Antal Szerb's remains were found stands a
memorial in stone, an open book bearing
the following Szerb quote: “Freedom is the
concern not only of one nation but of all
mankind.”

Writers often take for granted that they
have the freedom to express themselves,
just as translators think they have the
freedom, irrespective of any other consid-
eration, to choose the work they want to
translate. Mercifully, in most cases, it is
neither monetary gain, political coercion,
political correctness nor the caprice of
literary fashion that leads a translator
to an author and his or her work. In the
best of circumstances it is personal affin-
ity. When I was yet an undergraduate in
the 1960’s, I could not help but to feel an
immediate kinship with the work of Attila
József. But the poet with the socialist past
was by no means popular even among
the “intelligentsia” in the conservative
Hungarian circles of Cleveland, and my
translation of his poems into English was
met with stone faces: Why didn’t I do a
draft of a patriotic Hungarian poet instead, like
Vörösmarty? No one seemed to understand
that I had no passion or even the requisite
enthusiasm for the nationalistic poems of
Vörösmarty. I continued working on Attila
József’s English versions in earnest, eventually
writing my masters thesis on the poet.
I published a brief selection of his poems,
*Perched on Nothing’s Branch* in 1986. (The
little book won the 1988 Harold Morton
Landon Translation Award from the
Academy of America Poets before going
through five editions—ed.)

In 1993, four years after the change of
regimes that signaled the end of the Cold
War, Attila József’s name was taken off a
street sign in the Hungarian city of Eger
because of the poet’s socialist past. At the
time, I was teaching Attila József in transla-
tion on the other side of the world in tropi-
cal Florida and happened to mention the
street name change to my students. They
responded by writing letters of protest to
*Élet és Irodalom (Life and Literature)*, a
Hungarian literary gazette in Budapest,
saying in effect that Attila József now be-
longed to the world and that included the
New World as well.

In the case of Antal Szerb, I discov-
ered his novel *Utás és holdvilág* (liter-
ally “Passenger and the Moonlight”) in my
aunt’s house during a Budapest visit in the
early 1980’s. Once I read the novel, I knew
I had to translate it. The reaction of some
of my Hungarian colleagues was not only
lukewarm but downright offensive: “Did
you know he was a Jew?” or “Of course you
knew he was a Jew.” At the time I did not,
and had I known, it would not have made
the slightest bit of difference. In 1988 I
headed for Hungary once again, this time
as a Fulbright Scholar, to work on my
English draft of the novel and to meet with
the author’s widow who requested that I
not publish the book until after her death.
I honored her request, and it was not until 1994 that I published my translation (The Traveler) with reprints in 1995, 2000, and an anniversary edition in 2005.

In the late 1980’s I was also translating poems from the great Hungarian metaphysical poet Ágnes Nemes-Nagy, but much to my disappointment a collection would not come together, and it would not be until 1997 that my next book of translations My POEMpire by Ferenc Mózsi would appear. The poet had sent me a copy of his Hungarian volume published in Chicago in 1985. The title Versvisszafolytva (literally “Choked Back Poem”) does not have a satisfactory English equivalent though it may hint at his frustration of trying to voice his Hungarian poems in a strange land whose tongue, ear, and poetic terrain are so vastly different from his. And because in his native country he was persona non grata for political reasons, he could never hope to publish there. Although my own poetics also differ from his, I felt a great sense of empathy for the poet and his work. Often he would work on his Hungarian poems in his travel agency or in his Chicago basement knowing full well that his poems may never see the light of day in any language. Mózsi became more and more obsessed with the Hungarian language and its poetic manipulations like few have in his native country because they had the luxury to take language for granted. He became a linguistic innovator playing his cat and mouse game with words in endless puns, ambiguities, bifurcated phrases, parenthetical double-speak and perverse word plays in which he was literally reinventing himself and the Hungarian language.

Eventually I published three volumes of poetry from Mózsi: My POEMpire in 1997, My Song of Songs in 2000, and (In) venting Being in 2005. Despite the appearance of a Spanish version of My POEMpire (Mi UNIverso) in 1999, critical reaction to these bilingual editions was next to non-existent. The pundits were ominously silent with the exception of one Hungarian scholar from Cambridge who went out of his way to chastise me for wasting my spirit on an obscure poet (“Mózsi is a nice enough bloke but…”). Naturally, as with most imaginative literature we will have to wait and see whether Ferenc Mózsi the innovator will survive the ultimate test of time. We have all heard the biblical adage, perhaps hackneyed into tatters by now, that a prophet is never accepted in his own land. In surveying the history of literature through the ages, the adage appears to be as sad as it is true and especially so in modern and post-modern Hungarian literature. Whether it’s the new poet of the steppes or the new poet on the Danube bank's steps, the critics and the literary historians are poised to attack anything that smacks of being new or original, and it is not unusual for a Hungarian poet or writer to first become famous outside of his or her country. This was certainly the case with Hungary’s only Nobel Laureate in Literature, Imre Kertész who was virtually unknown in Hungary at the time he received his prize. He is another Hungarian writer living in exile whose work is known chiefly in a language (German) other than his native Hungarian.

As one who has selected and translated the authors and their works for this volume
of the Series, I take full responsibility for who was included and who was not. I am committed to present in future editions the great Ágnes Nemes-Nagy alongside the poet Éva Petrőczi who suffered religious intolerance, and Ágnes Arany who became a virtual outcast because of an inter-racial relationship.

The literature of exile, once we become sensitive to its larger meaning, appears across gender, across the genres and across the ages. It is not surprising, therefore, how so many Hungarian folk tales address the exilic experience. I have translated or to be more precise “retold” thirteen of these in a publication titled *Magyar Tales* published in 1989 by the University of Massachusetts International Studies Program. For this volume I have selected six of these. In the first tale, three princesses Sun, Moon and Star are wooed by simple shepherds who are eventually banished from the kingdom by their father, the headstrong king; in another story, a woman is expelled from her country because she dares to ask the question: What if a woman were king? And so it goes. Banishment, the old word for exile, is as old as humankind. The storytellers and re-tellers of these tales take liberties one often sees in the oral tradition which happily adds, subtracts, alters and redresses myth to express a condition that we call exilic, and which, be it Hungarian, be it American, in its transcendence becomes unmistakably human.

August 30, 2010
Gulfport

Peter Hargitai
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