

Doing Something Uncustomary: Edwin Morgan and Attila József¹

Tom Hubbard

Early in 2006, if you walked up Rákoczi Street, one of the main boulevards in the centre of Budapest, you would have seen a series of three posters. Each carried a different iconic image of the city together with a question in English.

The posters were in green, red and blue. The green one asked: 'Did you travel here to get to know the people or to be where people don't know you?' The red one asked: 'Did you travel here to get to know the culture or to get a break from your own?' The blue one asked: 'Did you travel here to get to know the customs or to do something uncustomary?' Most of us, I guess, would be willing enough to answer the red and blue questions, and be piously positive about the first part of the green one while hoping that no-one was going to probe us about its second part. I don't know how Edwin Morgan would answer either part of the green poster, but red and blue could help us obtain a perspective on his relationship with Hungarian poetry and, in particular, the work of Attila József. There is a reasonable consensus that Morgan is Scotland's leading translator of poetry. His prolific output (Morgan 1996) includes versions of poetry from French, German, Spanish, Italian, Russian and Hungarian cultures. Regarding the last, in addition to József he has addressed himself to major figures such as Sándor Petőfi, Endre Ady, Miklós Radnóti, Sándor Weöres and many others. He enjoyed a particularly warm personal and professional relationship with Weöres. More recently, he contributed new versions of contemporary Hungarian poetry to the anthology *At the End of the Broken Bridge* (2005), for which the present author also received commissions. That Morgan is still active at the age of eighty-six is remarkable in view of the cancer with which he was diagnosed some five years ago, though unfortunately he was too frail to attend the launch of the anthology at the University of Strathclyde.

Let's take the red Budapest poster. Did Edwin Morgan engage with Hungarian poetry to get to know that culture or to get away from his own? I suggest that he intended to absorb

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Hungary but not to break with Scotland; indeed, he has consistently stressed what he sees as common to both cultures. There are two aspects to this. First, in interviews with Hungarian scholars (e.g. in Nagy 1998), he has drawn attention to the fact that both Scotland and Hungary have lived in the shadow of powerful neighbours. He has not needed to add that the cultures of both countries remain a mystery to the rest of Europe: the Scots and the Hungarians, for good and ill, are perceived as exotic. Second, Morgan was attracted to Attila József largely because he found in him a fellow city-poet. The two have in common a strong interest in the deployment of the imagery of the metropolis. Morgan has admitted that József's Budapest poetry may have influenced his own Glasgow poetry. But he has also paid tribute to a poet nearer home, the Scottish-born Victorian poet James Thomson, the author of the long poem *The City of Dreadful Night*, first published in 1874. Thomson evokes a dream vision of an archetypically alienated and alienating city, an urban nightmare of a kind that was to become more familiar during the post-Freudian twentieth century. Morgan writes of this poem:

[The city of dreadful night] becomes simply [...] any city that is very large and very old, it has huge buildings, great bridges, squares, cathedrals, mansions, slums, endless streetlamps. Since it is night [in the poem], the streets are relatively empty, but because it is a large city there are plenty of shadowy nocturnal wanderers who are the inhabitants of the place and the actors of the poem – the outcasts of daytime society, the tramps, the drunks, the drug-addicts, the half-crazed, the homeless, the sleepless, the lonely. The poem emphasises the isolation of all these characters: they murmur to themselves, they creep about wrapped up in their own thoughts, they appear as products of a dehumanising process in society which is becoming so competitive it has no room for failure; there are also of course psychological weaknesses which are not being blamed on society, but they too take their place within the parameters that society sets up, and the individual seems able to do less and less to change his condition.

(Thomson 1993: 24)

Much in that comment could be applicable equally to the urban poetry of Morgan and József, especially the latter. József's is a poetry of the exploited proletariat and the mentally disturbed: he himself was both.

Affinities between the two poets can be cited with a certain precision. There is a line in Morgan's poem, 'A View of Things' (Morgan 1985: 45-6) which reads like an echo of József's 'Külvárosi éj' ('Night in the Suburbs'): 'what I hate about decrepit buildings is their reluctance to disintegrate'. Consider these lines from the József poem:

Csönd, -- lomhán szinte lábraka
s mászik a súroló kefe;
fölötte egy kis faldarab
azon tűnődik, hulljon-e.

(József [n.d]: 268)

Morgan translates this as:

Silence. – The scrubbing-brush sluggishly
rises and drags itself about:
above it, a small piece of wall is in
two minds to fall or not.

(József 2001: 21)

Such images are not uncommon in Hungarian poetry, and this is not surprising if one walks through those parts of Budapest which are unfrequented by tourists. One of the best-known pieces by the contemporary poet Győző Ferencz (b. 1954) offers an example from the last years of the Kádár régime (1956-88):

VIGYÁZAT, OMLÁSVESZÉLY!

Ha épület volnék, most darabokban
Lemállanék rólam a vakolat,
És kiütköznék rajtam, úgy, ahogy van,
A megroggyant váz a felszín alatt: [...]

(Ferencz 1989: 51)

DANGER, FALLING DEBRIS

If I were a building, chunks of plaster
would now flake off and fall into the street.
From beneath the surface my mauled frame
would stick right out, as it stands in me: [...]

(Ferencz 1988: 78)

Here the derelict building suggests existential overtones and political undertones.

Morgan's own Glasgow, however, is a city which had a long reputation for some of the worst slums in Europe. The Scottish poet was well placed to respond to the drab city-scapes of Attila József. In the József poem to which reference has just been made, there appears that domestic animal which is most associated with street-wisdom: the cat. The first great poet of the city, Baudelaire, was also the most evocative of feline life. Cats can negotiate city life more skilfully than dogs, though both acquire a certain alertness in such an environment. In Morgan's version of the József poem, 'A View of Things' (József 2001: 21-24), a cat stretches its paw through the railings of a factory fence, and a politically-active working man, distributing illegal leaflets, sniffs like a dog and looks over his shoulder like a cat, to see if the coast is clear. In his sequence of 'Glasgow Sonnets', the eyes of a cat glitter under an abandoned baby-carriage, and an emaciated dog engages in joyless fucking. The implication in both the József and Morgan poems is that human life in large cities has become degraded to the less-than-human, and that people have had to develop the survival skills of the wild. In the Glasgow sonnet following the one

with the dog and the cat, a slum landlord makes an illegal bargain with a couple which has five kids and can't afford to reject his offer. Bored teenagers have already stripped the neighbouring houses of anything they can lay their hands on. Some survive, others don't. (Morgan 1985: 78-9)

Attila József (1905-37) is one of the most celebrated, most iconic poets of Hungary. His mother, who was abandoned by his father, took in other people's washing for a living. His early life was spent in a series of odd jobs, and his experiences lent his poetry its authentically 'proletarian' tone and content. He entered the University of Szeged but was expelled for his poetry, which was deemed to be subversive: one of the professors declared that he should not be allowed to teach in any Hungarian school. His statue now stands, in determined pose, in front of the main university building; at the other side of the square can be seen one of the most wildly eccentric examples of art nouveau architecture, the Ungar-Mayer House, but József's own life never knew such opulence. He joined the Communist Party but was expelled for his pioneering attempts to fuse Marxist socio-economics with Freudian psychology. Isolated, and afflicted himself with deep psychological problems, he committed suicide in a Lake Balaton resort by throwing himself in front of a train.

I find Morgan's translations of Hungarian poetry far more interesting than references to matters Magyar in his own poetry. The best-known example of the latter is his 'Siesta of a Hungarian Snake', where the poet has fun with the consonants s, sz, zs, and z (Morgan 1985: 17). We can smile, then pass on. The image, in 'Rider', of the nineteenth-century nationalist hero Lajos Kossuth taking 'a coalblack horse from Debrecen' and clattering 'up Candleriggs into the City Hall' doesn't offer any insights into Kossuth's actual speaking tour of Scotland in 1856 (Morgan 1985: 72). Perhaps that is a literal-minded response on my part, but the poet's attempt to be surreal is too self-conscious. In my view, Morgan is not at his best when he is being modishly (and somewhat pretentiously) allusive: easy fodder, no doubt, for literary Glasgow in its most self-congratulatory mode. Morgan deserves better than the city's piety towards him.

More productively we can turn to the third question posed on the Rákóczi Street posters: 'Did you travel here to get to know the customs or to do something uncustomary?' Clearly (and despite the gimmickry just mentioned) Morgan's engagement with Hungarian culture is a serious one. However, given the preconceptions of 'exoticism' suffered by Hungarian literature and the language in which it is composed, Morgan's active interest in the country's poetry might seem to many to be 'uncustomary'. Yet there were Scottish precedents. Hugh MacDiarmid - whose poetry has been the object of some of Morgan's most percipient literary criticism - did not himself attempt any versions of Hungarian poetry, but he wrote in defence of the position of Endre Ady (1877-1919) in European modernism. For MacDiarmid, Ady was one of a number of major

figures, from 'peripheral' European cultures, 'those, untranslated into English/ For lack of whom the perspective of poetry/ In that language is hopelessly inadequate' (*In Memoriam James Joyce*, in MacDiarmid 1978: 820). One might add that an ignorance of European culture renders a perspective on Scottish literature 'hopelessly inadequate', but there are few in Scottish literary academia who are listening. The poets, as usual, are well ahead of the academics. Two twentieth-century Scottish poets, both associates of MacDiarmid, actually went ahead and turned poems by Ady into – Scots! William Soutar (1898-1943) turned Ady's 'Sem utódja, sem boldog őse' into his 'I Lang to Gie Myse!' (Soutar 1988: 319) and Sydney Goodsir Smith (1915-75)'s 'Alane wi the Sun' derives from the Hungarian's 'Egyedül a tengerral' (Smith 1950: 11). These are both extremely free renderings of the Ady poems. This is more visually obvious in Smith's version, where he reduces Ady's six stanzas to his own four. (For fuller accounts of Ady in Scots see: Hubbard 2006; McClure 2000).

Morgan's approach to translation is very different. He attempts to follow the original as closely as he can, and is especially concerned to retain its tone. He has stated his principle of 'being a good servant to the foreign poet' (Dósa 2001: 14). Moreover, although Morgan writes very accomplished original poems in Scots, he has remarked that he deliberately opted for English when tackling József; his versions of Ady are also in English. He did say, though, that he 'thought briefly about Scots words for Attila József.' (Dosa 2001: 15) I will come back to this fascinating possibility – fascinating to me personally, at any rate – because Scots is now considered a working-class language and of course József's poetry deals strongly with proletarian themes.

The evidence, then, is that a Scot translating József - or any other Hungarian poet - into English *or* Scots would not be as 'uncustomary' or as 'exotic' as might first appear. What was 'uncustomary', in Morgan's view, was that József was writing an urban poetry of a kind that had not so far been attempted in either English or Scottish poetry – with the exception, of course, of *The City of Dreadful Night*. Moreover, although in our own time there now exist different English versions of many József poems, it was not always so. When Edwin Morgan first became interested in Attila József during the early 1950s, it had not been 'customary' to put him into English. At first knowing no Hungarian, Morgan discovered József's work in a book of Italian translations by Umberto Albini, published in 1952. With the aid of a Hungarian-English dictionary, Morgan duly worked his way through József's *œuvre*. Eventually he acquired enough of the language to attempt his own English translations of József and of the other Hungarian poets mentioned earlier. There is a curious parallel with the case of the American critic Edmund Wilson, who learned enough Hungarian in order to appreciate Ady, at a time when good English versions of that poet simply did not exist.

By 1985 Morgan's reputation as a translator of Hungarian poetry was well-established in Hungary itself, and in that year he was presented with the Soros Translation Award for his work on József. In 2001 these poems were conveniently collected in a slim volume from the Glasgow-based small press, Mariscat. The book includes a version of the particular poem ('Tiszta szívvel') which led to József's expulsion from the University of Szeged, here under the title of 'Heart-Innocent'. It opens thus:

Without father, without mother, alone
without cradle, without shroud I go
without God, without land and home
without kiss, without girl to know. [...]

(József 2001: 11)

Morgan has commented on how the work of a foreign poet has revealed itself to him before he has actually 'understood' it. For example, he writes of a poem by the Italian poet Eugenio Montale: 'his world stirs and reveals itself [...] there is a shimmer, a play of light on water and on crumbling buildings [that image again! – TH], a face glancing in a mirror, an accordion being played in the twilight [...]' (quoted in McCarey, n.d.) It is if there is an *ur*-poem beyond the actual words, an essence that one can appreciate in a 'deverbalised' condition. This idea derives ultimately from Walter Benjamin, but the eminent translator and former President of the Hungarian Republic, Árpád Göncz, has written of "the charm of half understood words" which every translator knows," (Göncz 1999: 293), and one could point also to the stages in a text where, according to Wolfgang Iser, the reader must negotiate 'indeterminacy' – the 'gaps' and 'blanks' in that text.

Such is the beginning of the process of engagement between Morgan and József. As for the end-products, what we find in both poets – in Morgan's own poetry at its considerable best and in his versions of József – is a poetry of struggle as opposed to a poetry of contentment, a poetry for alert citizens rather than for passive consumers.

Edwin Morgan told my Miskolc University colleague, Dr Attila Dósa, that the József poems which probably moved him most were those on the poet's mother, the overworked and terminally ill laundress (Dósa 2001: 12). He therefore tried hard to make a good translation of 'Mama', and under the title of 'Mother' it appears on page 10 of the Mariscat volume. He judges it artistically desirable, in stanza 2, to depart from the rhyme-scheme of the original, replacing *ccdd* with *cdcd*. The mother hangs up the clothes in the attic to dry, and here both Morgan opts for a cold northern climate – 'flying in the wind' – which is not emphasised by other translators of the poem, except for myself in my reference to 'the brisk air' in my forthcoming Scots version. I

wanted to turn in a decidedly Scottish poem, and I suspect that Morgan, consciously or otherwise, is doing the same. As for the last two lines of the poem, Morgan reverses their order. 'szürke haja lebben az égen,/ kékítőt old az ég vizében' becomes 'The wet sky shines washed with her blue,/ her grey hair streams where the clouds scud through.' (József 2001: 10) Morgan seeks to preserve the tone, according to his translation policy, but he is prepared – quite acceptably in my view – to make other changes in order to arrive at a readable poem in English. Interestingly, his tenth Glasgow sonnet closes with an image of the women of the slums carrying their washing: '[...] and when they trudge/ from closemouth to laundrette their steady shoes/ carry a world that weighs us like a judge.' (Morgan 1985: 82) This reads like an echo of the József poem.

As for 'Reménytelenül' – 'Without Hope' in József 2001: 48 – John Bátki (József 1973: 16) has cited a critical consensus which sees this poem as a response to József's expulsion from the Communist Party and his increasing isolation and existential anxiety. It is not one of the 'city' poems but if anything it is much bleaker. More than other translators of the poem, Morgan is faithful to the *abab* rhyme scheme. None of the versions, however, can convey the possible echo of Ferenc Kölcsey's 'Hymnus' in stanza 1, line 3. Kölcsey's 1823 poem provided the words of the national anthem and is therefore known to every Hungarian. The action of looking around and not finding hope can never have the same resonance in English (or Scots) as it will in Hungarian. This is a culturally-specific detail that cannot be carried over into another language, and there is no point in trying to find equivalences where they simply don't exist.

During the preparation of this paper I decided to attempt my own Scots versions, as I felt I could not adequately grasp Morgan's strategies unless I found my own way of getting into the guts of the poems. In stanza 2 both Morgan and I avoid the 'nyárfa' (poplar). I cannot speak for Morgan, but I saw the poplar as a south-European tree and therefore out of place in the north-European poem which I was trying to make; again I can only speculate that Morgan may have made a similar decision at that point.

Finally, if Morgan offers us a József filtered through a Glasgow and west of Scotland sensibility, I as an easterner have positioned my version in my native county of Fife. For decades our main heavy industry was coal, and many of the pits were situated near the sea. Even today the sand on the beach is mingled with coal-dust. Both my grandfathers were miners, so I had a close personal interest in attempting to evoke the proletarian flavour of József's poetry. In south Fife, not only ex-coalminers but working men generally address each other as 'sir'. The word doesn't have the sense of deference that we find in its standard English contexts; in Fife Scots it's a form of address between equals. To call your workmate 'sir' implies male bonding, but there's also more than a hint of mockery – proletarian banter, if you like, for example as in 'Ay, ay, sir,

wha wis that lassie I saw ye wi last nicht?’ So I opted for this usage in the first line of my (again forthcoming) version. In the József poem, however, the banter is much darker than in the example which I have just given. The Scots and the Hungarians are both famous for their pessimism, and I would suggest that in both our cultures the sense of humour is as blackly ironic as it’s possible to be. Attila József has a reputation as a gloomy poet, but that is hardly inconsistent with the grim smile which he wears throughout his work. That in itself is surely attractive to Scottish poet-translators. Sometimes an artistic ‘diaspora’ works out as a way of travelling not so much hopefully as homefully.

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