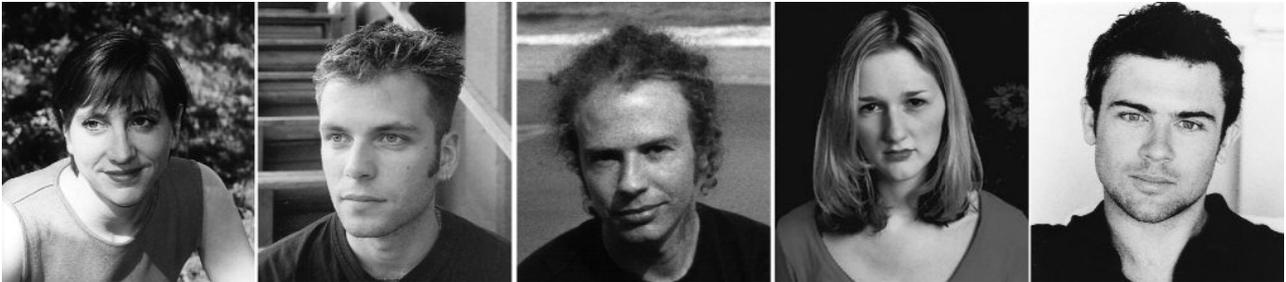


# BRITISH COUNCIL'S *CONVERGING LINES* POETRY TOUR HUNGARY MAY 2004

Polly Clark, Antony Dunn, Matthew Hollis, Clare Pollard, Owen Sheers



## Monday 3 May 2004

### Antony Dunn

Back on the road together. After a UK tour in 2001, and a tour in Croatia earlier this year, both as First Lines, we're off to Hungary.

We're broken in easily: picked up late afternoon from the airport by the British Council's Gabriella Gulyas and driven to the Art'otel in Budapest. Then it's on to Nyitott Muhely, a little gallery-type venue where The Bardroom has more or less taken residence for the week. Founded in 2001 by Jim Scrivener and David Hill, The Bardroom is a regular English-language show which uses a variety of venues around Budapest, featuring poetry, music and spoken word by local and visiting performers, and at whose initial invitation we find ourselves here, working with the British Council in the Converging Lines festival. The idea of Converging Lines is to put representatives from the British and Hungarian literary worlds together, to see what affinities, ideas and collaborations are sparked off. So it's good to be arriving in Budapest two days after Hungary's accession to the EU.

Tony Harrison's out here as part of the festival, too – partly to see the first Hungarian performance of his poem, *V*. All we have to do this evening is listen to him read some of his poetry, which is a pleasing start to the week. He reads *Initial Illumination* from his book *The Gaze of the Gorgon* and it's fantastically resonant, given what we've read in airport newspapers today about photographs from Iraq. It's a privilege for us to be sharing the festival bill with him, and he's set the bar high for us.

The evening ends with a reception for us hosted by His Excellency John Nichols, HM Ambassador to Hungary. Brilliant start to our week, but we're keen to crack on and do some actual work tomorrow...

## Tuesday 4 May

### Polly Clark

Aside from the 25 degree sunshine over the Danube, today's highlight was the translation evening, a long-standing fortnightly event hosted by the British Council in which Hungarian poets and translators meet to discuss their translations of poems in English. Translation is a topic new to all of us, and we didn't know what to expect. One poem from each of us had been circulated to the translators in advance, and after hearing us read the poems, we split off to separate tables to enable translators to ask us individual questions about our work.

My poem, *Szalon Sör*, was, it transpired, untranslatable, and it had been chosen as a kind of puzzle for the group. The poem which is about the beer from the town where I used to live in Hungary, Pécs, uses various Hungarian words, which need to stay as they are, unexplained in an English text. The juxtaposition between the Hungarian and the English gives the poem its foreign voice, and the translators were stumped by how to re-create this in a translation. It was fascinating to discover this in my poem, and also to talk more with the Hungarians about what the poem was saying about Hungary.

Tonight Antony is the first of us to perform to an audience – at the first of the week's three Bardroom readings. For once, he doesn't read *Lisdoonvarna*, but goes for an all-new selection of unpublished poems.



## Wednesday 5 May

### Matthew Hollis



Today we went back to school. Or rather, schools: five of them, each in Budapest, each visited by a different poet. As it happened, Polly and I visited our two schools together and so shared our two classes. We set off first for Mechatronikai Szakkozepiskola es Gimnazium and the Trefort Agoston – two Budapest technical colleges for students aged up to 17. We talked about metaphor and simile, about the multiple meanings a line of poetry can bring, how

to close read, and the importance of bringing your own experience to any reading.

The students did writing exercises in which they inhabited the world of any chosen animal – an eagle, a squid, a duck-billed platypus – and then walked around in that world, describing what they saw, how they saw, how they felt. In the second school the students thought about how to represent an emotion or a life event in a chosen object. (We asked them to turn out their pockets and write about what was in them –



keys, a chocolate wrapper, a tissue – each of which went on to reveal something about their family life.) The response was tremendous – bright, interested pupils (who had an inspiring teacher in Gyongyi Vegh) left with a renewed sense of wonder towards their dirty tissue or chocolate wrapper, and who knows, perhaps even a more serious belief in the different ways we can tell stories about our lives.

Evening. A reading at the Nyitott Műhely. Clare and Matthew read with local poets Anna Szabó and Mónika Mesterházi in front of a warm, appreciate, deeply handsome audience. Once again, the response was first rate. For some, the reading even passed too quickly, or so we later learned. But then, they would have much much more to come...

## Thursday 6 May

### Clare Pollard

An early rise, as we had to catch trains into the countryside to run workshops. Admittedly, Owen got the cruellest piece of timetabling, with his 6.15am start, but, unused to mornings as poets are, 8.10am felt pretty nasty to Antony and me too. We weakly ate yoghurt and tried to drink enough coffee to judder us into life before making our way to Szolnok. It was a long train ride – and I fear I was rather bad company for our lovely and patient guide for the day, Ildiko Magyar, when I dozed off for most of it – but worth it when we got there, and were immediately given more coffee (with rather telling urgency, after a quick look at us) then led to our respective classes.

My group seemed rather unsure what to expect – we were later told that creative writing is almost never taught in Hungarian schools, and they were prepared for some kind of lecture. Luckily, they soon got into the swing of imagery and alliteration, and wrote some wonderful and surprising poems that could have been by far more experienced poets. Everyone seemed pleasingly exhilarated by the experience, and I got a kiss and a red rose at the end, which Ildiko later explained (after everyone on the street outside stared at me) was a sign of true love.

On the train ride back, more alert this time, Antony and I enjoyed watching the

amazingly flat countryside tear past, looking out for storks' nests and trees tied with red ribbons which – Ildiko informed us – meant a proposal of marriage had been accepted. My experience was considerably enlivened by Antony letting me hear his band's song 'Budapest' on his personal stereo, written whilst he was over in Hungary to read a year ago.

When we all got back we realised it was our night off. After hearing about the others' happy workshop experiences in Veszprem and Szeged over a glass of wine, we set out for a wonderful meal, followed by a whirl on Budapest's dance floors. Returning at 2.30pm, Antony tried to play 'Budapest' to Matthew, but found that he plunged immediately into a deep sleep.

## Friday 7 May

### Owen Sheers

After yesterday's early starts and journeys to schools outside Budapest, today was a rare break in the schedule for us to catch up on some rest and spend some time absorbing the atmosphere and culture of Budapest. Probably not the early morning café culture though... With each of us having tales to share of our trips and workshops, together with the discovery of an excellent French restaurant around the corner, the previous night had been a long one, and although I had to leave the hotel to meet friends at 11am it was clear that for most, the afternoon culture of Budapest would have to suffice.



Walking to the Gellert Baths

We reconvened at 2pm at the British Council offices to sort out some admin with Gabi, fresh from a TV studio where she had been interviewed about the Converging Lines festival, doing battle with a presenter who came up with great questions like 'So, what makes a poem then?' As she had done all week Gabi whisked us through the admin with grace and efficiency and we were soon out and on the metro heading South to the magisterial Gellert Baths.

Having solved the labyrinthine puzzle of the Szecheny baths earlier in the week we entered the grand hall of the Gellert Baths confident that we would soon be gliding up and down the main pool along with the other blue-plastic-bathing-cap wearers. How wrong we were. Boys and girls were split up. A long winding walk through dark corridors followed, for a while under the baths themselves where we peered through portholes at the frog-kicking legs of the swimmers above us. Eventually we found

the changing room, but then there were shorts to be hired, Clare (whose ticket we had taken) to be rescued, towels to hire, money to find, lockers to lock and of course blue plastic bathing caps to don. All of which brought us out into the main thermal pool in dire need of its relaxing waters. But relax we did, in the beautiful communal opulence of the building, hot water spraying onto our backs from the mouths of roaring lions and the afternoon light filtering through the huge glass ceiling above us.



Antony & Clare: "refreshed," apparently

The Gellert Baths left us suitably refreshed for the night's event of a reading on the Kossuth Museum Boat moored on the river by the Liberty Bridge. This was a fantastic venue, and a good sized audience gathered to listen to the line-up of Hungarian and British poets. Polly and I were the readers tonight, along with David A. Hill, Júlia Lázár, Krisztina Tóth, CB Alexander and András Imreh. It was especially good to hear the work of Krsztina and András, both of whom we knew would be joining us for the Translation Weekend. It was also great to see a number of students and pupils we'd spoken to during the week in the audience – and even someone who'd first heard us in Zagreb a couple of month before!



Polly reading at the Bardroom

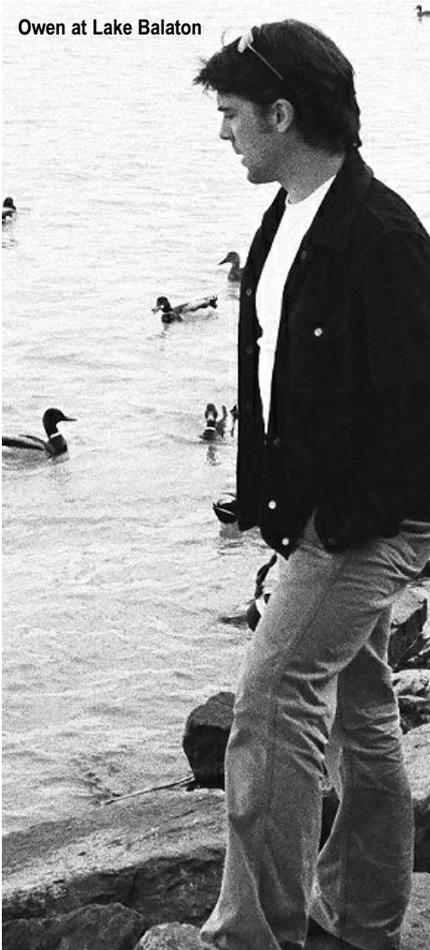
With CB Alexander's 'poems set to music' still ringing in our ears a large party of us, Hungarian and British, set off into Budapest to find a restaurant that would still serve us. We found one called 'Shakespeare's', complete with paper maché Romeo, Juliet and balcony above our table. The staff were understanding and let us order and once again the words and wine flowed, right through to what, strictly speaking, is the next diary entry...

## Saturday 8 May & Sunday 9 May

### Polly Clark

This was, for me, the high point of the trip. In the Translation House at Balaton we worked on two Hungarian poems each, from a prose translation, to make what Istvan described as a poem in English, with an English tradition, for an English audience. This proved both easier and more difficult than I imagined: easier because finally our poetic imagination had a real application that it was hungry for, and difficult because there were so many bumps and creases in our understanding of what the Hungarian poet was trying to express. It seems that Hungarian and English poetry have a lot of common ground, an interest in narrative and lyricism for starters, which makes both easier to understand for the other, and my own translation of Peter's poem in particular pleased me as a poem in its own right, as well as a faithful translation of his own work.

Owen at Lake Balaton



## Antony Dunn

However brilliant the rest of the week's been, this tops it. A beautiful house by Lake Balaton, eleven poets from Britain and Hungary, and two days to do some translations. So much of what we do on tour away from the UK, which we call cultural exchange, amounts to us simply reading at each other, but this feels like a real exchange. Fascinating in lots of ways: Owen and I are both translating the same poem by István László, *Burger King*. We sit in the sun and swap thoughts about it for a bit, then go our separate ways and come back the next morning with completely different poems. Yet István – a professional translator – says we've both done a fine job. It's brilliant to exercise our writing out here, and it's exciting that this project's going to have a life even after we go back to the UK. We'll be translating more of each other's poems over the next few months, and then touring literary festivals across the UK in October, when this group of Hungarians come to visit us for a week. This kind of long-lived relationship is exactly what these tours ought to be fostering, and this is an area where the British Council is making a fantastic contribution to the cross-pollination of world literature. Very grateful to be a part of it.

## Clare Pollard

The experience of translating was the revelation of my trip to Hungary – an utterly new and completely rewarding experience. The poet I picked from the hat – Anna Szabó – was one who seemed very close to me in her interests and attention to sound, and we immediately connected. I hope that the translations I pounded out that morning will be just the beginning of our work together. It was fascinating to see how each of the English poets coloured the work with their own distinct voices, and to hear how the rhythms of our own work had permeated the Hungarian language. Plus it was Mónika's birthday, so all got a slab of fantastically gooey cake.



## FINAL WORDS

### Julia Bird, on behalf of the British Council

My Hungarian trip began in December last year, when the British Council's Suzy Joinson and I met to discuss the various literature development projects we were planning. In passing, she mentioned that the BC was looking for someone to develop the UK leg of a tour of young British and Hungarian poets. She asked me if I knew of anyone who might be inter... and I'd signed the contract before she could even finish the question.

In a flurry of fundraising and programming, and in collaboration with UK festival organisers, Hungarian BC staff and the poets themselves, I built up the basic

structure of an October tour, but tried to leave space to incorporate ideas which might be generated by this visit to the translators' house at Balatonfüred.

Within an hour of landing in Budapest and meeting Gabriella Gulyas, I was at a reading on a boat which doubled (or tripled) as both restaurant and museum. I waved hurried hellos to the UK poets, introduced myself to the Hungarians and listened to the audience react to the dual language reading. One of András' poems raised a lot of laughs, and the British poets immediately started claiming translation rights, Polly the eventual winner.

The translators' house would make any British literature promoter jealous, its programme and resources are so extensive. I've never seen such a Babel-busting collection of dictionaries. The writing started almost at once, with István Snr's Saturday masterclass in the art of translation. Considering the length of Friday night's jollities, the enthusiasm with which the poets began work was impressive. For me, this energy characterised the whole weekend: enthusiasm for the work, the exchange, the conversation – but also for the unschedulable extras: the bird-spotting, beetle-naming and inhibition-shedding. Plans for the UK tour already include events and workshops and pamphlets and websites, but this weekend reminds me of the importance of leaving gaps in the programme, giving poets time to write, think or stare into the space above a lake. Lake Balaton it was this weekend, Lake Windermere it could be in the Autumn.

At the Sunday summing-up, all eleven poets presented very advanced drafts, even after only a day's work. I don't usually get this perspective of the writing process, and enjoyed the close-up view, particularly of the way in which different poets took such diverging directions from the same plain text translations. Polly and Owen both worked from one of Péter's poems, but unearthed two very distinct pieces of their own writing. What also intrigued me, and has done from the very beginning of the project, was the fact that the British poets are all so new to translation. Literature promoters never set out to make writers work against their inclinations, but I have been keen to see how the First Liners responded to this particular challenge. For their first attempts, they didn't try a few gentle exercises in French or Italian, they went straight to a language which is extremely distant from their own. András told me that the only Hungarian words to have found their way into English are 'coach' and 'biro'. As the project develops, I look forward to discussing their experience, the effect on their writing and thinking, and how we can reflect this in the events we present to UK audiences in October.

Even if the language is unfamiliar, the poets' voices are recognisable, however. As my Hungarian runs as far as 'cheese', 'cheers' and 'goodnight', I could only listen to the sounds and spaces of the translations that András, Ana, Monika, Péter, Krisztina and István Jnr made; but in a blind testing of the



UK poets' new work, I could have identified five out of five, such possession had they taken of their counterparts' work. I stopped being a literature administrator at that point, and became a poetry reader again, one feeling the exact opposite of homesickness.

On our last day, we went on a coach trip to clamber round the ruins of a fifteenth century castle. István Snr gave Clare and me two forint coins to flip into the castle courtyard well. We made our wishes while the others pondered the source of the water which filled the well repeatedly and ran off into a carp pond. *'That'll be ground water, then,'* said Antony to Matthew. Ground Water is the title of the latter's new collection, and this small exchange has stayed with me so memorably that I think that it might represent the heart of this translation project for me now: the discovery of something that is already yours in a setting you'd never before imagined.

I write this a week after my return, with two days to go until I hear whether or not the funding is in place to run the UK tour. My two forint wish is that it is.

## THE FIRST LINES POETS WOULD LIKE TO THANK:

**His Excellency John Nichols**  
HM Ambassador to Hungary

**The British Council in Hungary**  
Jim McGrath  
Gabriella Gulyas  
Nigel Bellingham  
Ildiko Magyar

**The Bardroom**  
Kálmán Faragó  
David Hill  
David A Hill  
Jim Scrivener

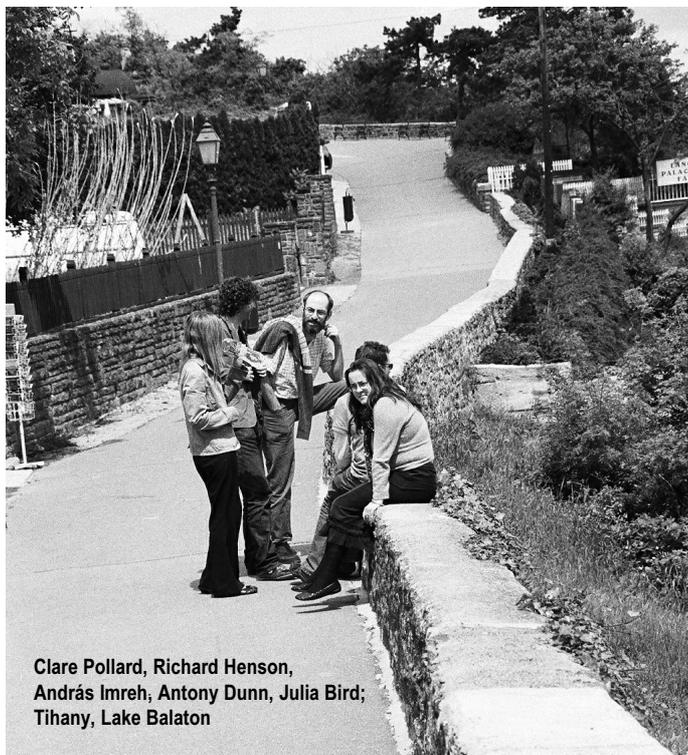
**The Poets**  
András Imreh  
István László Snr  
István László Jnr  
Júlia Lázár  
Mónika Mesterházi  
Péter Rácz, Leader of Hungarian  
Translators' House

Anna T Szabó  
Krisztina Tóth

**and**  
Gyongyi Vegh

... and to everyone else who was friendly, bought us a drink, took part in one of our classes, drove us around, or made our trip to Hungary more pleasant in any way.

Thank you very much.



Clare Pollard, Richard Henson,  
András Imreh, Antony Dunn, Julia Bird;  
Tihany, Lake Balaton



Owen Sheers, Clare Pollard, István László, Antony Dunn, Gabriella Gulyas;  
Tihany, Lake Balaton

# POSTSCRIPT

## First translations from Lake Balaton



### POLLY CLARK

Peter's poem is an attempt to get inside the mind of a mentally simple man who lives a life which follows a very regular pattern. To re-create in English the language of this man I decided to take out the 'I' and to allow a stream of consciousness in the poem, which then tightens towards the end of the poem when the speaker talks of the path he has created. The defining word to me in this poem is 'proper': though this man lives a limited life he dreams of creating something real and definite and proper is the word I felt he would use. I have made this word the title and made it the focus of the end of the poem.

### From the Horváth File

by Rácz Péter

#### Literal translation:

I squelch / splash in my slippers  
out to the shitter/ loo / john  
I squelch / splash to  
the oilclothes table  
because I got hungry mom  
washes dishes on that  
we'll eat because inside  
there's no room her back is stooped / humped  
mine is bent too  
but I got no asthma  
no no consumption  
it would be short of wonder  
here in the fresh air now again  
I can / must squelch / splosh to the woodpile  
because the dog's chain got stuck  
I squelched / splashed outdoor  
because I can't bear / stand inside  
the air at night in four by  
six yards not that I choke  
but I can't bear / stand there's the two of us  
so I go out  
I've trodden / walked a proper footpath  
out through the grass to the gate and back  
they will tell me I shouldn't walk there  
but then it will not be trodden  
there will be nothing there  
now at least there is a footpath  
through a few yards quite nice

### Proper

by Péter Rácz

#### Translation by Polly Clark

slipper squelch  
to the shitter  
splash  
to the oilcloth table  
hungry now  
mum wash dishes on that  
outside eat no room inside  
mum's back stoop ugly hump  
mine too  
but no asthma  
no death-cough  
always outdoors no wonder  
splash now  
to woodpile  
dog chain got stuck  
squelch out door  
can't stand air inside at night in four by  
six yards, nearly choke  
on the two of us  
so go out  
to proper footpath I have trodded  
out through the grass to the gate and back  
they will tell me I shouldn't walk there  
but then it will not be trodded  
there will be nothing there  
now at least there is a footpath  
a few yards, proper nice.

## BURGER KING

by István László

Mintha fejük egy gesztenye lenne,  
tuburkából kibújt barna fényrés,  
esznek a férfiak.  
Nem gondolnak nore, végtelenre,  
széthajtogatják az atzsírozott papírt,  
a fehér szalvétán átüt a majonéz,  
beleharapnak a hamburgerekbe,  
ahogy a sebben bennragad a géz,  
forog a szájukban az étel,  
utat keres a szájpadlas körül,  
mintha a nyeléssel megszületne,  
esznek, egyedül.

## BURGER KING

by István László

Translated by Antony Dunn (first draft)

As if their heads were so many conkers,  
brown light-cracks muscling through their cells of pins,  
the men are eating.  
They're not thinking of women, or of heaven,  
but banging open greased-up wrappers  
with mayo weeping through white napkins;  
they bite off more than they can chew  
while food-gauze comes like Velcro from its wounds.  
With mouthfuls barging round their mouths  
and pushing in along the tongue  
as if by being swallowed they'd be born,  
they are eating, all alone.

## from WINTER DIARY

by Anna T Szabo

translated by Clare Pollard

### 3. Around the Tree

In the ice-storm these cats now mate,  
light frozen on their soft, black skins.  
They stage their hot, furred winter show,  
wild things.

The silvered glass-tree snaps and cracks.  
I listen, until sleep defeats  
these sounds, that sound like prayers and cries,  
pained meat.

Just this. Again. From frost and dark  
begins the kitten. Life persists.  
This brutish sex obliterates,  
exists.

## BURGER KING

by István László

### Literal translation

As if their heads were a / horse / chestnut each,  
brown crack of light slipped out of its case of pins,  
the men eat.  
They don't think of women, of eternity,  
they unfold the greasy / oily paper  
the mayonnaise seeps / shows / comes through  
the white napkin,  
they bite into the hamburgers,  
as the gauze sticks to the wound,  
the food turns / around / in their mouths,  
it seeks its way around the palate,  
as if it could be / get born by the swallowing,  
they eat alone.

rhyme: a x x a x b a b x c a c

*[All our literal translations were supplied, where appropriate,  
with the rhyme scheme denoted as above. The letter 'x'  
represents a line that rhymes with no other in the poem.]*

## BURGER KING

by István László

Translated by Owen Sheers (first draft)

As if their heads were conkers,  
brown cracks of light pressing through split cases,  
the men eat.  
They don't think about women, the waiting years,  
but unravel instead the grease-proof paper,  
the mayo bleeding the white napkins,  
and sink into the burgers,  
pulling away like gauze from half-healed skin.  
The food turns in their mouths,  
gropes about the palate of bone  
as if it might be born in this swallowing,  
the men eat, alone.

