

BRITISH COUNCIL'S *CONVERGING LINES* POETRY TOUR UNITED KINGDOM OCTOBER 2004



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



András Imreh, István László Géher, Monika Mesterházi, Anna Szabó, Péter Rácz, Krisztina Tóth

WED 13 OCT

It all starts with transport problems, of course. I arrive in Manchester late afternoon, expecting to meet some of the others, but no one else has checked into our hotel yet. As I'm exploring the fixtures and fittings of my hotel pod, Julia Bird (freelance tour administrator working on behalf of the British Council for the *Converging Lines* project) calls from Manchester Airport. She and Clare Pollard have come up from London together, and are waiting for the Hungarian poets' flight to land. She's received an impenetrably crackly answerphone message from Gabriella Gulyas, Literature Programmes Manager for the British Council in Hungary. It's just possible that the Hungarian party has missed a connection and is now stranded in Munich airport.

We – that is, the five British poets including Clare and me, with Polly Clark, Matthew Hollis and Owen Sheers – first worked with the Hungarian poets in May this year. We visited Budapest for a week at the invitation of the British Council, gave a series of public readings and taught in a variety of schools in the city and right across the country. At the end of the week we decamped to the Hungarian Translators' House, near Lake Balaton, for a weekend. During that time we exchanged poems and began work on what we hope will be a long-running mutual translation project, culminating next year in the publication of a full-length, dual-language anthology of poems.

Owen turns up, and we go out for a drink while we wait to find out whether this tour's going to start on the correct day after all. Julia phones. The Hungarians are, indeed, stranded in Munich airport, and are now due to arrive just before midnight.

So Clare, Owen, Julia and I congregate at the hotel, where we're met by Chris Gribble of the Manchester Poetry Festival. Our trip to the Curry Mile in Rusholme is cancelled in favour of a rather more local dinner, then Julia goes back to the airport for the Hungarians.

Just before midnight they troupe into the hotel bar – András Imreh, István László Géher, Monika Mesterházi, Anna Szabó, Péter Rácz and Krisztina Tóth with Gabi leading the way. Fantastic to see them all again. Weary but warm hugging and helloing, Ibis's finest toasted sandwiches, a glass of wine, bed.

THU 14 OCT



We'll be appearing in public four times on this tour. Eleven poets on a stage at once seemed like rather an over-facing prospect, so we've decided that only five or six of us will take part in each event, meaning that everyone gets to do two of the four. Today's lunchtime reading for the Manchester Poetry Festival in Manchester Central Library sets the format.

As the only member of the British touring party who's (officially) here for all four events, it falls to me to chair the proceedings. Each of the contributing poets reads one or two of their own poems, written before our joint project began, to give the audiences a flavour of the work we'd naturally create as writers, rather than as translators. The Hungarians' poems are read in Hungarian and in translation (not our translations). Then there's a semi-scripted panel discussion designed to give the audience an accurate picture of our translation weekend at Lake Balaton. It's immediately apparent that the Hungarians are all very able and established translators – not just of poetry, and not just from English – while, for the Brits, the experience was a first taste of translation. In some ways, this far-from-level playing field is very good for the project. It gives us a fine group of practitioners to learn from, and perhaps it forces the Hungarians to think about the work from first principles, too.

We try and share with the audience some of the triumphs and trials of the translation work we've undertaken so far, using particular poems from this project as ways into discussing more broad truths about translation, and about the relationship between the Hungarian and English languages.



Of course, the project's about the poems themselves as much as anything, and we read a selection of the translations we've made. Then it's questions from the audience. And here in Manchester, we're delighted to find that there are 58 people in the audience – more than any of us had expected – and they're full of questions...

We've each been commissioned by the British Council to write a new poem (not a translation) springing from this project. It doesn't have to be about translating poetry, or about Hungary, or about Britain – in fact, it's an agreeably loose remit. We're going to end each public event with a reading of just one of these new poems, and it's my turn first. So *Budapest Lines*, written a few days after returning to the UK from Hungary this summer, gets its first public airing...

And then a late lunch. Perhaps this is where this tour's already proving to be so special. I sit next to István (one of the poets whose work I'd translated at Lake Balaton) and within minutes, prompted by an audience member's question about the sound of spoken Hungarian, we're deep into conversation about the differences between our languages and our poetry. It gets us through pizza, wine, a number of double espressos, and out the other side into the street. We could go on. Julia's devised a tour schedule which has plenty of this sort of time built into it, so we can explore these conversations properly on trains, in hotels, in restaurants.

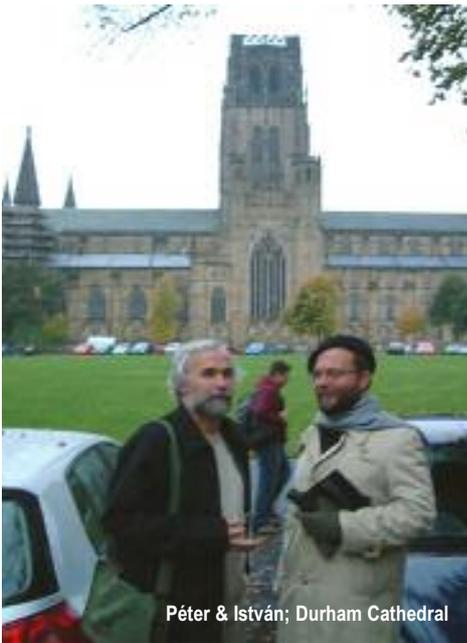
And literary conversation pieces don't come much better than our evening's entertainment. Courtesy of Manchester Poetry Festival, we're given tickets to see Michelle Scally-Clarke & Chloe Poems at Matt & Phred's Jazz Café. Half storyteller, half singer, Michelle Scally-Clarke isn't such a surprise to the Hungarians – all swinging dreads and warm, acerbic positivity. Chloe Poems, on the other hand... a politically charged, ultra-high-octane gay man in black bob wig and seventeen shades of gingham drag. For a while, we Brits are not sure that the Hungarians are enjoying themselves. Can they follow it? Do they object to it?

But then, over dinner in a restaurant down the road, I get caught up in a conversation with András, Anna and Monika about the performance – about Chloe's treatment of religion, about the different understandings of faith in Hungary and in the UK, about how that's represented in literature.



Gabi, Monika, Péter & Anna; Manchester

FRI 15 OCT



Péter & István; Durham Cathedral

Owen heads back to the Lake District, where he's Writer in Residence at the Wordsworth Trust. The rest of us catch an early train to Durham. More transport problems, naturally. Only two poets have managed to get out before the doors shut and the train starts sweeping us towards Newcastle, leaving six poets and two tour administrators wedged in the aisle by their own suitcases. Julia pulls the emergency cord. Poets and tour administrators alight with flea in ear. István and Clare appear relieved not to be stuck in Durham on their own for the next three hours.

More transport problems. It appears that taxis in Durham don't take passengers. They just drive through the station forecourt and wave at the queues.

We get a late lunch in Durham, then take the Hungarians to see Durham Cathedral. One contingent stays for evensong, the rest go back to the hotel to prepare for this evening's reading at Durham Literature Festival.

Polly Clark rolls into town to join the entourage.

The Gala Theatre's packed when we arrive for our reading. Although this is more to do with *The Vagina Monologues* being in the main house than it is to do with Anglo-Hungarian poetry translation. We're taken to a glamorous terrace room upstairs – well away from any actual audience. A few minutes before we're due to begin, though, they start arriving. Around twenty-five of them. The programme follows the same pattern as yesterday's, but we've a longer slot to fill, so we get to read more poems. Again, we're delighted with the audience, who've got a lot of questions, and who seem to be genuinely enthused by what we have to say about the project.

If they are enthused, we're hoping they'll do their own little bit for it. We've created a leaflet for every audience member, which contains four literal translations of poems by the Hungarians – the very same literal translations that some of the Brits worked from at Lake Balaton. These literal (or plain text) translations contain a range of alternatives, notes and suggestions, to reflect the shades of meaning carried by the Hungarian words or phrases. Some are annotated with details of the rhyme scheme, or the rhythm, or with explanations of the Hungarian colloquialisms employed in the poems. The audience is invited to take these leaflets home and have a go at translation for themselves.

In some ways, it's been rather easier for us, with access to the poets themselves. To be able to ask, *What did you mean, exactly?* and get an answer.

After the reading, the Hungarians are given their affectionate collective nickname – The Oil Tanker – as we try to manoeuvre them around Durham in pursuit of an

elusive Thai restaurant. We're almost an hour late for our table, lost, marvelling at the Friday-night sight of Durham's youth in the autumn cold.

After dinner, the Oil Tanker heads for the hotel. Two Brits, learning that the hotel bar (Bud Bigalow's Bar & Grill, oh *please*...) has closed at a reasonable hour, go in search of a wine bar that will serve them after last orders. And succeed.



SAT 16 OCT

Train to London. Spend some of the journey planning tonight's reading, and there's even some clandestine swapping of poems going on up the carriage. And, Kings Cross being the end of the line, we avoid any being-swept-on-to-Brighton kind of catastrophe.

An afternoon in a hotel bath for some, an afternoon in Covent Garden for others, then we meet at the Poetry Café, Betterton Street, for a pre-reading reception hosted by the Hungarian Cultural Centre in London. It's a privilege for us to be part of *Magyar Magic - Hungary in Focus 2004* - a series of concerts, exhibitions, film seasons and literary events throughout the UK celebrating Hungary's accession to the European Union.

The reading's upstairs in the Studio. It's not a big room, but it's packed. Standing room only, in fact, and it's really good to see a clutch of British poets in the crowd, along with novelist-of-Hungarian-descent Tibor Fischer and the eminent Hungarian poet and translator George Gomori. There are quite a number of Hungarian-speakers in the audience this evening, which refreshes the reading programme - excellent for the Hungarians to feel that their own poetry is understood as well as heard, I think. And excellent for the Brits to feel that about the Hungarian translations of our own English poems.

SUN 17 OCT & MON 18 OCT



Small minibus to the Lake District, where we're going to meet Owen again, and Matthew Hollis, for two days at the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere. Five hours, enlivened a little by some readings of Edward Thomas and getting lost trying to find lunch in Wigan. Arriving at the Thistle Hotel, Grasmere, we're further enlivened by our next transport problem. The boot of the bus won't open, and a number of us are left wondering if we'll ever see our luggage again. The driver climbs into the boot through the back seats of the bus (somehow) and gets himself stuck, too.

Matthew Hollis writes:

It was warming to see everyone again and to be in such friendly, stimulating company. Equally, it was exciting to be able to continue, face-to-face, the arguments and exchanges on translation that began back in Balaton in May. Conscious of our limited time together (by now it was Sunday evening and the Hungarians had a Tuesday morning flight), the pairing of poets took on a frantic quality, with poems and prose versions allocated with all the frenzy of a sorting office. Sometimes, too, there was a more private passing of notes, with poems pressed unexpectedly into your hand at the bar, in the car park and elsewhere. However it was achieved, each of us ended the evening with four or five new pieces to select from and work upon.

And over the next twenty-four hours that's exactly what we did, seeking out the poet we were to translate, but seeking the others too, for a second or a third opinion, checking ambiguities, entendres, puns, rhythm, form and rhyme. Some of us went walking together, over Red Bank and down into Elterwater, drawing on objects in the Cumbrian landscape – the turning bracken, the wild mushrooms, the windfalls and wildlife – to illustrate something about imagery or metaphor or language in our work. Others buried themselves in the new Jerwood Centre library, seeking the special avenues and backstreets that dictionaries can offer.



More transport issues: having baffled the other patrons of the Britannia Inn, Elterwater, with an impromptu, al fresco translation workshop, we discover that finding a taxi to get us back to the Wordsworth Trust will be trickier than expected. We've only got a little while until we're meant to be in front of a paying audience. And the walk across the hills will take rather longer than the time available to us...

Julia somehow creates a minibus out of thin air, and we're rushed back for a lightning tour of the stunning exhibition in the Trust Gallery – illustrations for Milton's Paradise Lost, including a dozen works by Blake. Extraordinary to see them in real life, as it were, and fantastic to be able to share something that monumental with our guests.



So we all came together in the evening to swap thoughts, questions, observations, and to gear up for that night's event.

Six poets engaged the audience with a series of readings and translations (some of which were done that day) before fielding questions on the problems and proximities of translation. Two-and-a-half hours had passed successfully: new works

had been read, old assumptions had been challenged (both the poets' and the audiences'), books had been sold, and Grasmere was buzzing to the sounds of Hungarian and English poetries. When one audience member asked us to summarise what this trip had brought us something became clear. That here was a generation of talented young British poets lucky enough to be introduced to their equivalents from Hungary, and from this had come an exchange of gifts. They had brought us the skills to unpack the art of translation; in return, we had found them an audience for their work up-and-down the UK (even publication in a leading poetry magazine). For the British poets, our poems now live in a new language in a new country, and likewise for the Hungarians. All of us are writing new work as a result.

Dinner in the Trust Restaurant, and the new work simply never stops. Julia, Clare, a young Australian backpacker who'd wandered into the reading in a moment of idle curiosity, Natalie Sturgis (the wife of the Wordsworth Trust's Artist in Residence) and I finish the tour by composing limericks – a line each – on napkins passed around our end of the table. We would donate them to the Trust as valuable literary artefacts, but decide in the end that Julia's rather colourful contributions create some difficulties here.

Hopefully this is just the start of things – already we had spoken of a continuation of exchange, of return visits, more translation and the possibility of an anthology. Certainly I believe that there is much good work still to come for the Converging Lines project. And as we said "Goodbye" to the Hungarians at the airport, we were corrected: "Viszlát!" said one. Goodbye, for now.

Antony Dunn, 2004

THANKS TO

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Julia Bird
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The Poetry Society & The Poetry Café
Robert Woof & The Wordsworth Trust, Grasmere

**all photographs by Péter Rácz,
or someone borrowing his camera**