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The Near-the-Knuckle Verse of Árpád Lőwy in English Translation

Abstract: This article concerns the author's personal and professional experiences with translating Árpád Lőwy's works into English. It carefully reconstructs the biographical and historical circumstances of the translator's interest in Lőwy's poetry, and discusses dilemmas inspired by the idiosyncrasies of the poems themselves, whose poignant, ambiguous, and nearly pornographic idiom might be initially seen as untranslatable. Moreover, the text includes some of the challenges implicit in translating Lőwy's works.

Keywords: László Réthy, Árpád Lőwy, poetry translation, pornography, Academy of Sciences, Gita Horváth, poignancy, innuendo, anatomy, folksong.

László Réthy (1851–1914) was a learned member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and curator of the Hungarian National Museum's numismatic collection. He was an ethnographer, archaeologist and towards the end of his life a contributor, out of 877 editorial staff, to the great early twentieth-century Hungarian equivalent of Encyclopaedia Britannica, the *Révai nagy lexikona* (1911–1935).

But under the pseudonym Árpád Lőwy he was the creator of wicked verses raging from the downright tasteless to the deliciously earthy. Depending upon the stance of the reader, they remain today open to accusations of pornographic, obscene content; some (though fewer) attain a purer eroticism. Perhaps it is befitting that among those attending the launch in

Budapest of *Permissive Piggery*, the present writer's volume of English translations of the selected verse of Lőwy, was a retired Hungarian professor of English and one-time Minister of Education, accepting the invitation because "I love smutty poems!"¹ The launch mainly comprised readings of selected items, first in the original Hungarian by another, much-published faculty member of Budapest's ELTE University and then in English by the translator – another academic, this time of Pécs University as well as performing folk singer. If you don't like smut, then Lőwy is not for you. But then probably neither is Shakespeare, and although Lőwy doesn't aspire to the dizzy heights of Shakespearean literature, Shakespeare does sink to the depths, as is periodically witnessed as the Bard is banned and bowdlerised.

When I am not translating or writing, I am a performer of folk songs. As I approach my seventieth year, I remember my student years spent mostly in the folk clubs in and around Exeter, the university and cathedral county seat of Devon. The Jolly Porter was particularly well attended at a time when the folksong club movement was at its most vibrant. Its resident singers included a four-piece male vocal group, Isca Fayre, whose repertoire included a song by the title *Both Sexes*.² The final lines of Verse 6 run "So Man with his wife is united, Yet man is the top of the tree," sung derisively but in the best of humour by the many representatives of the Fair Sex present. The song can be found among the manuscripts of the Victorian country parson and polymath Sabine Baring-Gould, later published in 1905 as *Songs of the West*. But it appears far earlier, in the American *The Echo; or Columbian Songster*, published in 1800. The song is about how God creates Eve for Adam out of his rib:

Old Adam was cast into slumber,
A rib taken out of his side,
And when he awoke, he with wonder
Beheld a most beautiful bride;

With transport he gazed upon her,
His happiness now was complete,
He prais'd the most bountiful donor,
Who thus had provided a mate.

She was not taken out of his head,
To rule and triumph over man,
Nor was taken out of heel;
To be rul'd and trampled upon:

¹ It would be tasteless of me to identify the gentleman!

² Isca Fayre, *Then around Me Young and Old* Candle Records, CAN 761, 1976. Vinyl. Track 6. The song is 728 in the Roud Index: <https://archives.vwml.org/songs/RoudFS/S500295>.

But she was taken out of his side,
 His equal companion to be,
 And this they both were united
 And man is the top of the tree.³

The equality of the sexes is seemingly achieved until “man” is, after all, placed above woman at the top of the tree. If in the 1800 printed version “man” may be seen to mean “species”, rather than “gender”, by the time the song was sung in the 1970s folk club, it is certain from the lusty voices raised with some frequency in this popular, oft-performed song that it is the gender meaning that has survived. In today’s age of political and social correctness, the song may not find favour. Yet it displays at heart an almost reverential attitude toward Woman quite at odds with that of Original Sin. The same reverence toward Woman can be found throughout the poetic genre of Lówy, albeit skewed – after all, this is essentially pornographic literature. It is not, however, the kind of tasteless and entirely chauvinistic writing to be found in the explicit later Victorian series, more or less coeval with the works of Lówy, *The Pearl: A Magazine of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading*, published in eighteen issues between July 1879 and December 1880 at a deliberately prohibitive price (£25) and small run (150 copies). By comparison, Lówy’s verse was read out to select friends in a fairly close circle:

Réthy chose his dearest friends from a circle of mainly social scientists, artists and influential politicians, the most distinguished of the intellectual elite, who were regular visitors to *Büzértanya*⁴, the home of Lajos Thallóczy in Vienna. Lówy’s poems were mostly composed for and performed in front of the often boisterous murmurings he organised here.⁵

In an email to the present author, the scholar and actor Ferenc Takács refers to the frequenters of *Büzértanya* as “the semi-clandestine Büzér (“Stinker”) Circle, Lówy’s farto-masonic sect.”⁶ The entry for Lajos Thallóczy in Veritas, the website of the Hungarian Institute and Archives for Historical Research, has to say of the *Büzértanya* that it was something of a sanctuary as well as a weekly club for professional Hungarian males (their host was a bachelor) living apart from their loved ones for longer or shorter periods. Members, who had to pay their dues, were exclusively drawn from the ranks

³ *The echo; or, Columbian songster: Being a large collection of the most celebrated, modern poetical writings, of different authors* Brookfield (Massachusetts), Merriam, E. 1800. SONG XXXVIII, 43–44, <https://archive.org/details/echoorcolumbians00merr/page/42/mode/2up>.

⁴ Stinkers’ Cottage!

⁵ Császtvay, Tünde, “A pornográf Lówy,” in 2000: Irodalmi és Társadalmi havi lap. 2006, július-augusztus. No page numbers, <https://ketezer.hu/2013/10/2006-julius-augusztus/>. My translation.

⁶ Takács Ferenc, Email text, of May 25, 2024.

of his close friends and confidantes. Here they were given licence, or encouraged, to let their hair down: typically, behaviour was rowdy, language more than colourful, all accompanied by audible farts, ostensibly as an aid to digestion. It was here that Lőwy found an audience: his audiences lapped up his obscene and erotic poems, read by the poet himself.⁷

László Réthy is described in *Constructing Race on the Borders of Europe*⁸ as an “ethnographer and poet”. Although his pseudonym is given here, the nature of his poetic output is not referred to, but only that he was editor of the journal *Ethnographia* (1890–1922).

László Réthy, the Man

The story goes that a special meeting was held by the Academy members, specifically to discuss how to silence the unknown author of the salacious verse. The loudest, most indignant of the voices was that of none other than László Réthy. This almost certainly apocryphal story – given that, unlike the graffiti artist Banksy, it is quite clear that a significant if privileged number of the initiated knew exactly that the ethnographer and all-round (if flawed) polyhistor and the versifier were one and the same person. They could hardly be unaware, given his entertaining live readings at the *Büzértanya* and elsewhere. That said, today awareness of the poetic output of Lőwy remains confined to aficionados, many of whom will be unaware of the other side of the coin: the academic, gloriously living at a moment in history preceding the necessity of meticulously citing, supporting or destroying the findings of one’s predecessors.

However, few if any would have been aware of the fact that the man was a manic depressive. Császtvay writes,

His life was full of sadness: after a brief marriage his wife fell ill, and they could hardly live together for ten years. He was afflicted with material problems throughout his life. His little boy died in his arms at the age of eighteen months. In his final years, as transpires in a letter to a close friend, he struggled with bouts of manic depression and persecution mania.⁹

⁷ Précised from the Hungarian original, see Judit Hammerstein, “Egy külön történet, Thallóczy Lajos vázlatos portréja” [An unusual historian: a thumbnail portrait of Lajos Thalloczy], *VERITAS Történetkutató Intézet és Levéltár*, <https://veritasintezet.hu/hu/mindennapi-tortenelem/7569-egy-kulonc-tortenesz-thalloczy-lajos-vazlatos-portreja>.

⁸ *Constructing Race on the Borders of Europe*, eds. Marsha Morton, and Barbara Larson (London, Bloomsbury, 2021), 155.

⁹ Császtvay, “A pornográf Lőwy.”

The lengthy letter in question, now preserved among the National Széchenyi Library's manuscripts, was to Dr Hampel József, curator of the Hungarian National Museum's Collection of Medals and Antiquities (1909-1911), a post which he himself had held. In it, he describes his condition graphically:

I am sick, and have been for two whole years... I suffer from depression and persecution mania, a condition that gets worse day by day. A damned maggot worms into my brain and I am racked with terrible pain. Fate has dealt oversensitivity and delusions that I have no strength to combat. Images flicker wildly before my eyes, bright, fiery, dark and terrible, fast as a cinematograph, and these images keep moving even in my dreams, hardly allowing me any rest. I spend sleepless nights on my bed, my brain is forever invaded with the thought that once, long ago, when I was young and inexperienced, I committed a formal error as I stepped into the Museum, for which I had to and continue to suffer. And in my imagination the weight of this error grew to such a degree that it became a mountain that I cannot shift from its place.¹⁰

Like many another man gifted with the ability to amuse others, in this case under the guise of a pseudonym, Réthy/Lówy the academic/versifier himself suffered from sad disorders that prevented him from lightening his own life burden.

On Lówy's Works

Few that now enjoy the near-the-knuckle verses of Lówy will be aware of the tragic life of their maker, and there has always been a strong argument that separates the person and the artist. I myself recollect being reprimanded as a student for trying to gain cheap points by referring to A.E. Housman as Alfred Edward, my tutor telling me that had the poet wished for his entire name to be known, he would have published as such. In brief, that I had no right to invade his personal space by using names properly given him by his parents but not shared by the poet with his readership. So let us cast aside the mental maladies of the man and concentrate upon the poems themselves and then the task of translating them.

It is typical of many an art form that has an obvious message that there is another, concealed except for the initiated. In the dramatic arts, this can be witnessed (or not!) across the centuries: the slapstick of the miracle plays domesticized the Christian message just as effective as modern subliminal advertising; Shakespeare enjoyed full houses throughout his career: an estimated "between fifteen and twenty per cent of Londoners regularly went to the theatre in Shakespeare's time. Some went frequently – once, twice, even

¹⁰ Cited in Császtvay, "A pornográf Lówy," my translation.

oftener, each week.”¹¹ To sustain this popularity, the part of Shakespeare’s oeuvre that today is studied by academics would have had to be supplemented by “pure” entertainment to be enjoyed by the wider public. (Which is not to say that academics have been lacking in appreciation of the slapstick and even bawdier aspects of Renaissance stage entertainment. It was the humourless puritans (note the small “p”!) who, then just as now, would have attempted to prevent plays from being staged. Shakespeare enjoyed the royal patronage of both Elizabeth I and James I. The Puritans (note big “P”) would eventually succeed in briefly banning the theatre altogether, and ever since there have been periods and places that have banned, bowdlerised, truncated and tut-tutted his works. Even now, a quarter of the way through the twenty-first century, when in the same breath one vociferates about the right to free expression but denies women the right to manage their own bodies, we are living in a time of political correctness – the accuracy of the commonly accepted adjective is debatable, but PC has entered the common tongue – when the decision to sing a ribald song or, in this case, to publish an article in an academic journal about a long-dead author of what to some is considered pornographic poetry, complete with translated examples, cannot be taken lightly.

To return briefly to the Bard, Steven Spielberg, the Shakespeare of the film world, has been just as creative in providing entertainments that appeal to several levels, including the bawdy. I remember a past colleague and dear friend, the late Steve Starkey, who pioneered the teaching of film studies in a Hungarian university English department, pointing out that in an early Batman film the eponymous hero encountered and overcame his villain through each of the four Elizabethan elements of earth, air, fire and water. Unless you attended a film course (or regularly spent beer evenings with Steve) you would never know that this superhero, under the guiding hand of a master producer, took the genre way past its limits as an early comic strip. When Hungarian TV secured the rights to showing the Monty Python series, it was considered necessary to precede each episode with a short explanatory introduction. Sadly, these very much played down the anti-establishment political import of the series, preferring to emphasize the British tradition of radio and televised absurd humour.

All this is rather a circuitous route to saying that the poetry of Lówy, whilst seen to many of his fans as no more than enjoyable “smut”, also has running through it a thread of serious comment that transcends the pornographic content. And while some of the items are no more than bravura in the rhymester’s art, short-lived poetic ephemera, other pieces have stood the test of time not only on the ribald level, but at deeper strata.

¹¹ Samuel Holroyd Burton, *Shakespeare’s Life and Stage* (Edinburgh, Chambers 1989), 191.

To date, *Permissive Piggery* has been aired twice to Hungarians, once in the southern university city of Pécs and once in the capital, Budapest. On each occasion the translator was joined by a Hungarian academic, and the items chosen to be read in the original and the translation were selected on the basis of both “cleverness” and enduring social relevance and even poignancy. The event took place over sixty minutes, divided into the readings themselves and some introductory remarks. The time constraint for an oral reading will be adequate when deciding upon which items to accompany the present text with. Certain of my favourites, I fear, lose their power outside the bilingual Hungarian-English context. Such a one is “A Hunnish Girl in Riga – on the Occasion of my Journey to Russia”, the story of how a pretty Hungarian chambermaid works her way through a host of towns (43 in total) in Greater Hungary, many of which have to be supplied with English rhymes until:

Thence overland
 To Cracow, whence a year ago
 To Riga she'd been called to go.
 “This tale has seen nor pen nor ink,
 It all was written on her chink.”

At which the strict meter is broken up with a postscript:

Should I read this verse in female company, the last couplet is modified as follows:
 No tall tale this, It all was writ
 Within the maiden's service permit.

(On hearing this version, a celebrated actress blurted out,
 “That's some permit she must have had?!”)

The construction is typical of several of the poems, in which the main bulk is free of anything more than innuendo. Here only at the very end does the sole direct reference to the female anatomy (“chink”) hit the audience who, initiated as they often were, would have been waiting for the “dirty language” to turn up throughout.

Translating Lówy

I fully confess that, like many another translator, I have taken no exam and no certificate adorns my wall. Instead, I have several shelves of books that bear my hand, among them a wealth of children's literature, modern dramas, art and social history books, a couple of film subtitles and *werk*, a recording of my English translation of Hungarian songs, and even a letter from the Vatican praising my translation of a play featuring the Chief Rabbi and Pope of Rome at the time of the Second World War. When approached

by the academic staff of the Hungarian National Museum, they know that I am likely to accept an entire book if there are a few lines of verse included. *The Square Around Forest*, a delightful book for children by the Hungarian author Lázár Ervin, demanded the invention of non-existent English words that mirrored the non-existent Hungarian words of the original. And even after four decades away from England, I always have a book of Telegraph cryptic crosswords on the loo. As I have always been fortunate in having a full-time university job, I have managed to avoid translating purely for income: my golden rule is only to accept translation work that I would enjoy reading if I were not the translator. Luckily, this includes restaurant menus (which cost the client a slap-up meal!), wine lists and viticultural news (which occasionally reward with a Christmas hamper) and festival itineraries (which make it unnecessary to go to the festival itself!). My friend Tamás Pintér says that translating literature and art is a good way to die poor young. Luckily, these are areas which the translator-bot will be proficient at last of all.

In the particular case of Lőwy, the previous paragraph in itself gives away the fact that I am not averse to a bit of near-the-knuckle, knockabout humour. Otherwise I would be unable to approach the man at all. I have a similar taste in my folk-singing repertoire, and suspect that some of the songs which I brought with me to Hungary in the late 1970s, then popular in British folk clubs, have now faded away from the home repertoire. I make no excuses – or there would be no use in sharing the poet at all.

However, it is vital when translating his work to operate at a variety of levels. Forgetting the smut, first of all Lőwy was a poet of his time, with strict rhyme and meter. If the translations are to be successful, they have to observe this, especially as his genre would inevitably sink into tired anatomical references should we go along the (also accepted) route of literal rather than literary translation. And so, of course, a Lőwy translation is *not* literal/mirror, as it is the piece as a whole that has to be conveyed. However, due to the nature of his works, the punctuated peaks of his poems must also contain a similar weighting: pee is not the same as piss, poo is not equal to crap, a cunt is not a chink, and so on.

Lőwy is poignant: how could he not be, and such spiritual pain? But his poetry follows the path of much humour – when a subject is too tragic to be a tragedy, make it a joke. In “Juvenile Scientists”, Lőwy contrasts youth with age, deriding the former until ruining the fact that with wisdom comes impotence. He is political: when I discovered his poem “Protekció”, I could only laugh, as this was one of the earliest words I had learnt in Hungarian, almost a century later. Lőwy entertained in the Viennese home of Lajos Thallóczy, a major player in the Dual Monarchy who had the ear of Emperor Franz Jo-

séph (he died in a railway accident returning from the emperor's funeral). His piece, "Material Cycle", relates the complex metamorphosis of a tramp's defaecation over a hedge into the centrepiece of a Habsburg meal. An only partly successful translator's bravura can be found at the end of the poem, as a rhyme and scansion have to be found for the dynasty. It would have been simpler to omit the Lotharing part, but the ungainly solution is, I believe, in itself worthy of Lőwyesque humour, especially as it provides the opportunity for some "g" alliterations. And that's always satisfying for the translator when handed on a platter!

And the beef which lately grazed with glee
Entered the Habsburg-Lotharing dynasty.
Tomorrow it metamorphs anew,
Its complex passage but a poo.

At the same time, it is best that the translator is familiar with the period in dual-monarchy history. It was not all that long since the 1848-49 bid for independence had been crushed, and even the youngest among the frequenters of Thallóczy's private, all-male Viennese soirées at the celebrated *büzértanya*.

About the Editor of the 1989 Edition

There are various people to whom I must acknowledge thanks for introducing me to Lőwy's poetry. First of all there is the young lady, a student of mine who a quarter of a century ago took pity upon me as I laboured over my PhD and decided to give me a copy of the 1989 edition of his selected poetic works, *Disznólkodni szabad*. Off and on, I tried out translating the poems in no particular order and with to particular end. Gradually, the completed items mounted up and by the time retirement and COVID arrived, almost the entire volume was complete. It seemed a shame not to take on the remaining few. It gradually became logical to take on private publication of the pieces. But what format? And did I need permission from the editor? And who was the editor? And what had become of the publisher, Orient könyvek?

Being in the lucky situation of having a savvy son, we discovered that the publishing house had basically entered and left existence with the Lőwy book, but that the editor and the illustrator were one and the same person, the lovely Gita Horváth, herself a talented writer who after a brief period in the limelight had essentially suffered a decades-long silence as first the socialist and then the new regime made life impossible. That notwithstanding, Gita *néni*, who shares her little apartment with a small dog in the Castle District of Budapest, is a lady of radiant disposition and in her mid-eighties still

a very attractive woman. Her “Poppy” series of tastefully courting and copulating flowers she distinguishes sharply from her pencil drawings for the Lówy volume, as bawdy as the texts themselves. With characteristic selflessness Gita gave permission to the present translator to use exactly the same illustrations for the English volume as for the original 1989 Hungarian selection. I cannot thank her enough. The English volume contains all of the poems included in the 1989 edition. However, at Gita Horváth’s request, it does not contain various little introductions to the poems, which she admitted were her own and not the poet’s. In one other respect the two volumes differ. I could not resist writing my own introductory piece of Lówyesque. And so I include it here for the reader’s delectation:¹²

TRANSLATOR’S DEDICATION

This is my personal acknowledgment
 To anyone who’s moved by pussy’s scent
 Or gets a spurious – or a serious – trip
 From blowing, farting, or plain letting rip.
 My English version’s humbly dedicated
 To anyone who’s ever masturbated
 Or otherwise ejaculated,
 Put differently, I give my heartfelt thanks
 To anyone who screws, or sucks, or wanks,
 My dears! Peruse the pages of this book -
 What better way to generate a f.....?

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¹² I am deeply grateful to the Hungarian scholar Gyözö Ferencz, who for the fee of a complimentary copy took on the task of translating my Dedication for use at the Pécs and Budapest book launches.

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Takács Ferenc. Email text, of May 25, 2024.

The echo; or, Columbian songster: Being a large collection of the most celebrated, modern poetical writings, of different authors Brookfield (Massachusetts), Merriam, E. 1800. SONG XXXVIII, 43-44. <https://archive.org/details/echoorcolumbians00merr/page/42/mode/2up>.

Wersy Árpáda Lówy'ego na granicy nieprzyzwoitości w tłumaczeniu na język angielski

Abstrakt: Niniejszy tekst poświęcony jest osobistym i zawodowym doświadczeniom Andrew C. Rouse'a związanym z tłumaczeniem dzieł Árpáda Lówy'ego na język angielski. Rouse starannie rekonstruuje biograficzne i historyczne okoliczności zainteresowania poezją Lówy'ego i omawia dylematy inspirowane idiosynkrazją samych wierszy, których przejmujący, niejednoznaczny i niemal pornograficzny język może być początkowo postrzegany jako nieprzetłumaczalny. Ponadto tekst zawiera wstępną eksplorację niektórych wyzwań związanych z tłumaczeniem dzieł Lówy'ego.

Słowa kluczowe: Réthy, Lówy, przekład poezji, pornografia, Akademia Nauk, Gita Horváth, powaga, insynuacja, anatomia, piosenka ludowa.

Grenzwertige Verse von Árpád Lówy in der englischen Übersetzung

Abstract: Dieser Text ist den persönlichen und beruflichen Erfahrungen von Andrew C. Rouse bei der Übersetzung von Árpád Lówys Werken ins Englische gewidmet. Rouse rekonstruiert sorgfältig die biografischen und historischen Umstände des Interesses des Übersetzers an Lówys Lyrik und erörtert die Dilemmata, die sich aus der Idiosynkrasie der Gedichte selbst ergeben, deren ergreifende, mehrdeutige und fast pornografische Sprache zunächst als unübersetzbar erscheinen mag. Darüber hinaus erörtert der Text einige der Herausforderungen, die mit der Übersetzung Lówys Werke verbunden sind.

Schlüsselwörter: Réthy, Lówy, Gedichtübersetzung, Pornographie, Akademie der Wissenschaften, Gita Horváth, Seriösität, Andeutung, Anatomie, Volkslied.