

Translating Esotericism: Hungarian

György E. Szönyi

geszonyi@gmail.com

This special issue takes as its point of departure that “the study of Esotericism has emerged in modern European and American academic culture, its basic terminology has philological roots in Western intellectual history, especially Greek and Latin, and relies on modern English as its lingua franca.” The question is: what kinds of difficulties arise when it is necessary for the academic discourse on esotericism to interact with or be translated into other languages, with reference to the terminology of the classical sources as well as their English interpretation. As I see it, the situation is even more complicated. While the classical source languages are, as it were, frozen (because they no longer change), the target languages, including English, are living and ever-changing, evolving media. A seventeenth-century English translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* sounds vastly different from its modern English version, not only because of its different philological grounding but simply because of the differences between Early Modern and contemporary English. And what happens if the translator must deal with a corpus that stems from a still organically changing language? For instance, think of German, in which the language of Jacob Böhme is radically different from that of Rudolf Steiner, even if they are treating the same phenomena or concepts.

Moving from these general dilemmas to Hungarian as the case in point, in the first part of this article I will provide a miniature overview of the development of the Hungarian language and offer some important examples of translations

using esoteric texts over the past centuries.¹ In the second part, I will look at two modern translations of the *Corpus hermeticum*, concentrating on a few passages of the Poimandres (CHI) that contain important Neoplatonic and Hermetic terminology.

As is well-known, the Hungarian language does not belong to the Indo-European family. While the ethnic origin of the Hungarians is still debated among anthropologists and historians, Hungarian is without doubt one of the Uralic languages, belonging to the Ugric family of the Finno-Ugric subgroup.² As an independent language, it has existed since about 3000 BCE, after which it has, of course, undergone major changes and interacted with several other languages. For about fifteen hundred years, Hungarian was influenced by Turkic languages north of the Caucasus, in the area between the Caspian and the Black Seas. Around the end of the ninth century CE, speakers of Hungarian occupied the Carpathian basin; and a century later, in 1000 CE, the first Hungarian Christian kingdom was established. Integration into the European feudal system led to strong linguistic influences from the neighboring Slavs as well as the Germans, and later from the Italians and the French.³ Of utmost importance was the impact of Latin, which became the official language of the Church, the feudal administration and, not in the least place, the schools.

The first written Hungarian texts date from the early Middle Ages and are mostly translations from Latin. The first sizable specimen is a funeral sermon (c. 1150) and the first lyrical poem is a lament of the Virgin Mary (c. 1250). From the fifteenth century onward, a rich codex literature emerged in Hungarian, and the Renaissance followed by the Reformation in the sixteenth century brought about a rapid development of the language as well as a proliferation of book printing, among them translations from Latin, Greek, German, Italian, and other languages.

1. See also Szönyi, "Occult Sciences." Here I thank Dr. Peter Sherwood (London) for his polishing my English, and help in questions of linguistics.

2. Abondolo, "Hungarian"; László, *The Magyars*.

3. Szakács, "The Hungarian Language."

From the fifteenth century onward, we can document how interest in alchemy and other esoteric lore developed in Hungary, and how the Renaissance caused an increase in intellectual curiosity. Important esoteric and occult books found their way into the expanding aristocratic libraries, beginning with that of King Matthias Corvinus (reigned 1458–1490), who was such an internationally known bibliophile that Marsilio Ficino dedicated the third book of his *De triplici vita* to him.⁴

Interested magnates acquired books about Hermeticism, alchemy and magic from abroad, and Hungarian students studying at foreign universities also brought such literature with them when they returned home. In this category, the diary of János Kolozsvári-Cementes (1570s–80s) is a rare monument of cultural history, as it contains the first summary of the theory and practice of alchemical transmutation in Hungarian. He was a supervisor of the royal mines in Transylvania and ended up as treasurer of the Transylvanian prince and Polish king, Stephen Báthory.

By the seventeenth century, the Jesuit universities as well as the Reformed and Unitarian colleges incorporated esoteric books in their libraries. In the early part of that century, we find the first references to esoteric authors and concepts in Hungarian. This was the period when debates over Paracelsus and his occult medicine dominated Central Europe. Although no translations were made in Hungary itself, Máté Csanaki in his book on the plague (1634) claimed that the disease could be cured by Paracelsian medicine.⁵ Another interesting example: András Prágai provided a discourse on esoteric topics in Hungarian attached as a lengthy preface to his translation of Antonio Guevara's *Dial of Princes* (1529; Hungarian edition 1628). Here he worked out a magical system of precious stones, and in his explanation referred to Hermes Trismegistus – the first mention in Hungarian. He also alluded to Giulio Camillo's memory theater and Heinrich Khunrath's *Theatrum sapientiae aeternae*. One is furthermore reminded of Pico's *Oratio* as well as Fludd's ornate emblematic pages, when one reads: "Man is a beautiful

4. For this paragraph and the following ones, see further elaboration in Szönyi, "Occult Sciences."

5. Csanaki, *Az dög-balálról való elmelkedés*, 131.

and noble creature of God, a creature who was formed to be like Him, and has been named by the philosophers a Microcosm, that is a little round world, containing heaven, earth, and seas. . . . It is not by chance that Hermes Trismegistus called man the greatest miracle of all miracles: *Homo est maximum miraculorum miraculum.*”

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Hungarian tongue changed a lot, as it was modernized and became assimilated quite strongly to the official languages of the Habsburg Empire, German and Latin. The ancient [Finno-]Ugric grammar remained, but the vocabulary as well as the logic of verbal expression evolved radically. While Latin words were easily adapted to Hungarian inflexion, many German words and expressions were not merely adopted but calqued (“Purgatory” < *Fegefeuer* > *tisztító tűz* [“purifying fire,” alternatively used for *Purgatorium*]). From about 1900 we can speak of modern or contemporary Hungarian; in fact, many translations from earlier texts of esoteric philosophy and fiction appeared in this period. The horizon stretches from János Molnár (professor of “philosophia, theologia, Latin, Greek and physics” at the University of Buda) who in 1760 gave a full account of the Hermetic philosophy in Hungarian.⁶ His argumentation was clearly influenced by Athanasius Kircher’s famous works when he referred to Hermes Trismegistus as a real historical person, admired the hieroglyphs as occult symbols (note that this was still before Champollion!), and speculated about the language of Adam in Paradise. But we could also mention the Hungarian translation of a French novel of alchemy from 1810, *L’Adepte moderne ou Le vrai secret des francs-maçons*,⁷ or Hungarian translations of the Theosophists and the Anthroposophists from the first half of the twentieth century. The academic study of esotericism in Hungary began after the first World War (by persons such as Ervin Baktay and Béla Hamvas who themselves were at least partly insiders), but this pursuit was interrupted during the decades of state socialism. Still, by the 1980s important

6. Szönyi, “Early Hungarian Hermetist-semiotician.”

7. Szönyi, “Modern Adept.”

works were republished (for example Hamvas's *Scientia Sacra*) and translations appeared of such books as Kurt Seligmann's *History of Magic*. The wave of New Age enthusiasm reached Hungary after the regime change in 1989. In addition to scholarly works of a high standard, innumerable classical and modern books on life-conduct, self-healing and popular fiction were published.

As mentioned above, Hungarian – while not an Indo-European language – is very flexible and capable of rendering even abstract concepts, phrases, or terms. This is illustrated by some expressions from the sample vocabulary of this project. In two cases, Hungarian will use one and the same word where English has two words or concepts: “spirit” and “ghost” are both *szellem* in Hungarian, but the latter case can be clarified by the term “apparition” (*kísértet*). *Boszorkányság* is primarily “witchcraft,” but it can also mean “sorcery.” But in this case clarification as *bűbáj* (“charm,” “bewitching”) would easily help, since charm (*Zauberei*) is a more general term than witchcraft that has a specific, cultural-historical reference. A reverse case might be the Hungarian *szeretet* vs. *szerelem*, meaning two kinds of love, the first being more spiritual and Christian in meaning (“brotherly love,” “caritas”), the latter being more emotional and sensual.

As a further step, it is tempting to compare modern Hungarian translations of some outstanding esoteric texts both with their originals and with English translations. One interesting example would be *The [First] Book of Enoch*, the full text of which survives in Ethiopian Ge'ez while parts of it have been preserved also in Ancient Greek, Old Church Slavonic, Aramaic as well as Hebrew, and of which modern critical editions/translations are available in English, German, French, and other languages. The first Hungarian translation was made by Béla Hamvas, one of the outstanding modern esoteric philosophers, a follower of the traditionalist school of the *philosophia perennis*. It appeared in 1945, in connection to his concerns with apocalypticism and the idea of the world crisis.⁸ While Hamvas was a polyglot, it is not clear which language/edition he used

8. Szönyi, “Occult Ascension.”

as his direct source for the translation. Another, more modern translation was published by István Baán in a collection of Biblical Apocrypha by a Hungarian Catholic academic press.⁹ This is a more philology-oriented translation, although it is based on Emil Friedrich Kautzsch's critical edition (1900), which was by then quite outdated. It is interesting to compare the two translations. I will spare the reader from quoting the original Ge'ez but use Nickelsburg and VanderKam's critical English edition of 2004 as control material. In Chapter I.1-9 (The Book of the Watchers: Superscription and Introduction), a number of important keywords and terms of the text can be found:

the Righteous; God; Holy One; the Chosen; the heaven of heavens; the Watchers; judgement; [God's] good pleasure; the myriads of his holy ones; wicked deeds and sinners.

What becomes obvious at first sight is that Hamvas offered a poetical and prophetically dense translation, often combining phrases or sentences, thus on occasions diverting a bit from the original or eventually skipping some details. Contrary to this, Baán's translation is very accurate, precisely word by word; however, it is a bit jerkier. As for the above key terms, often they use the same Hungarian rendering: the Righteous are *igazak*, the Chosen *kiválasztottak*, the Holy Ones are *szentek* ["saints"]. On the other hand, it is characteristic that Hamvas avoids using the word *Isten* ("God") as opposed to the Catholic Baán. Hamvas consistently uses *Úr* ["Lord"] for God. Most interesting is that they do not translate the word Watchers¹⁰ the same way. Hamvas calls them *Felvigyázók* ("supervisors"), while Baán uses the word *őrtállók* ("guardians").

Within the limits of this article, unfortunately no further comparison can be presented here. Rather, I will focus on two translations of the first passages of *Corpus Hermeticum* I, often referred to as "Poimandres." The first, by Gáspár Ladocsi, was published in the above-mentioned collection of apocrypha by Vanyó

9. Vanyó, *Apokrifek*, 38-145.

10. *Egrégoroi* in the early Greek translations from the original Aramaic.

and was based on the prestigious French Nock–Festugière edition.¹¹ In 2010, a new translation of the full *Corpus* was published, translated by the classical philologist Endre Hamvas (not to be confused with the above-mentioned Béla Hamvas). He used several critical editions/translations (Nock–Festugière 1946–54; Colpe–Holzhausen 1997; Brian Copenhaver 1992; Walter Scott 1924–36; etc.) and provided an extensive apparatus and introduction. While I do not think that either of these translations demonstrates any specificities of a Hungarian esoteric discourse, I find Ladocsi’s translation easier flowing and a bit smoother to read, while that of Hamvas is more puritanical and precise. Here are a few examples, in parallel with the Copenhaver translation:¹²

Copenhaver	Ladocsi	Hamvas
1/ Once, when thought came to me <i>of the things that are</i>	Az egyik napon, amikor a <i>létezőkről</i> [“those that exist”] elmélkedtem	Egyszer, amikor a <i>létezőkről</i> elmélkedtem
1/ <i>an enormous being completely unbounded in size</i>	<i>egy határtalanul nagy létező</i> [“unlimitedly great existing being”]	<i>egy meghatározatlan méretű létező</i> [“unmeasurably sized existing being”]
2/ “I am Poimandres,” he said, <i>“mind of sovereignty”</i>	Én a Poimandrész vagyok, <i>a Magában levő Értelme</i> . [“mind that exists in itself”]	Poimandrész vagyok, <i>a korlátlan hatalom Értelme</i> [“mind of the limitless power”]
3/ I said, “I wish to learn about the things that are, to understand their nature and to know <i>god</i> .”	A létezőkről szeretnék tanulni [“I wish to learn”], megérteni azoknak természetét, megismerni <i>az Istent</i> .	Meg akarom ismerni a létezőket [“I want to know”], meg akarom érteni a természetüket és meg akarom érteni <i>Istent</i> .
4/ ...I saw <i>an endless vision</i>	<i>egy határtalanul nagy látomást</i> láttam [“limitlessly great vision”]	<i>egy határtalan látomást</i> láttam [“a limitless vision”]
5/ But from the light ... <i>a holy word</i> mounted upon the <watery> nature	A fényességből pedig <i>a Szent Ige</i> áradt ki a Természet fölé	A fényből pedig <i>szent Ige</i> szállt alá a természetbe

11. Vanyó, *Apokrifek*, 23–38.

12. Poimandres I, paragraph numbers indicated (if the Hungarian translation is literal, I give no further explanation)

Copenhaver	Ladocsi	Hamvas
6/ "I am the light you saw, <i>mind, your god,</i> " he said, "who existed before the watery nature that appeared out of darkness. The <i>lightgiving word</i> who comes from mind is <i>the son of god.</i> "	Én vagyok, <i>az</i> Értelmem, <i>a te istened,</i> aki a sötétségből származó, nedves természetű megjelenése előtt már létezett. ["Mind had existed before the watery nature"] A z Értelemtől született meg <i>a fénylő Ige, az isten Fia.</i> [" <i>értelem</i> " can be mind or reason]	Az a fény én vagyok, <i>az</i> Értelmem, <i>a te Istened.</i> Létemben előbbre való vagyok a nedves természetnél ami előtűnt a sötétségből. ["I exist from before the watery nature that emerged from darkness"] Az értelemből származó <i>ragyogó Ige, az Isten fia.</i>
6/ "that in you which sees and hears is the word of the lord, but your <i>mind is god the father.</i> "	Ami tebenned néz és hall, az az Úr Igéje, <i>az</i> Értelmem <i>pediglen az isten - atya.</i>	Ami benned lát és hall, az Úr Igéje, <i>az</i> Értelmem <i>pedig az Atyaisten</i> [= Father-God].
8/ Since I was terrified	Egészen <i>magamon kívüli</i> voltam ["I was translated ~ 'out of myself'"]	Bár még <i>fel sem ocsúdtam</i> ["I have not got to my reason yet"]
9/ The mind who is god, being <i>androgynous</i> and existing as life and light, <i>by speaking gave birth to a second mind,</i> a craftsman, who crafted seven governors; they encompass the sensible world in circles.	Az Értelmem pedig isten, <i>hímmős</i> [=androgynous], fény és életként létezik, <i>az Ige</i> által <i>kibocsájtott egy másik, alkotó</i> Értelmet ["let out another creating Mind by the power of word"], aki a tűz és a lehelet istene, ő alkotta meg azt a <i>hét Kormányzót</i> ["created the 7 Governors"], akik köreikkel körülzárják az érzéki világot. [világ = world ~ cosmos]	Az Értelmem, vagyis Isten, aki <i>androgün</i> volt, életként és fényként létezett, <i>szavával egy másik alkotó</i> Értelmet <i>teremtett</i> ["created another productive Mind by the power of word"], aki <i>bét kormányzót</i> hozott létre, akik köreikkel veszik körül az érzékelhető kozmoszt.

If one compares the two Hungarian translations, it appears that the important conceptual keywords of the text ("the things that are," the Mind, God, Son of God, God the Father, the second Mind/Craftsman/Demiurge, the seven Governors, etc.) are

practically identical. If we further compare Copenhaver with some other English translations, such as Everard's (1657) or Scott's (1920s), we come to a similar conclusion. Both in the English and the Hungarian versions, the terminology is close to that of Judaism and Christianity (God the Father, Son of God). No wonder that Ficino and his contemporaries became so enthralled by this wisdom.

In conclusion: it is very true that any translation is also an instance of intercultural communication; and because of this, it can never be perfect. The cultural and historical contexts will always maintain filters and distortions.¹³ The dictum "seeing is believing" also holds for translators: they can only translate what their mindset allows them to comprehend. Nevertheless, there are shared notions, connecting cultural links. The case of Hungarian shows that even in a language so different from the majority of languages used in Europe, because of the common Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian heritage as well as the centuries of participation in a flow of Western intellectual history, it is possible to attain a level of "best practice" in translation and comprehension.

Bibliography

- Abondolo, Daniel. "Hungarian." In *The Uralic Languages*, edited by Daniel Abondolo. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Csanaki, Máté. *Az ég-balálról való elmelkedés* [Meditations on the Plague]. Kolozsvár [today Cluj in Romania], Abrugi György, 1634.
- Hamvas, Béla (transl. and intro.). *Henoch apokalypsisé*. Budapest: Bibliotheca, 1945.
- Hamvas, Endre (intro., transl. & edition). *Corpus hermeticum*. Szeged: Lectum, 2010.
- László, Gyula. *The Magyars: Their Life and Civilization*. Budapest: Corvina, 1997.
- Nickelsburg, W. E., and James C. VanderKam, eds. *1 Enoch, A New Translation Based on the Hermeneia Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004.
- Prágai, András, and Antonio Guevara. *Fejedelmek serkentő órája* [The Awakening Dial of Princes]. Bártfa [Bardejov in today's Slovakia]: Klösz Jakab, 1628.

13. Sherwood, "English and German Versions."

- Seligman, Kurt. *Mágia és okkultizmus az európai gondolkodásban*. Budapest: Gondolat, 1987.
- Sherwood, Peter. “The German and English versions of Sándor Márai’s *A gyertyák csonkig égnek: Die Glut and Embers*.” In *Comparative Hungarian Cultural Studies*, edited by Steven Tötösy de Szeptek & Louise O. Vasvári, 113–22. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2011.
- Szakács, Margit. “The Hungarian Language.” In *Encyclopaedia Humana Hungarica*. Vol 1. *Hungarian Prehistory from the Beginnings to 1038*. Budapest: Encyclopaedia Humana Association, 1996.
- Szőnyi, György E. “Occult Ascension in Troubled Times: The Ideals of Mankind in Rudolf Steiner and Béla Hamvas.” In *Ideals of Mankind*, edited by M. Kronegger & A-T. Tymieniecka, 29–43. Dordrecht / Boston / London: Kluwer, 1996.
- . “An Early Hungarian Hermetist-Semiotician: János Molnár.” *Semiotica* 128, no. 3–4 (2000): 561–81.
- . “The Occult Sciences in Early Modern Hungary in a Central European Context.” In *The Role of Magic in the Past: Learned and Popular Magic, Popular Beliefs and Diversity of Attitudes*, edited by Blanka Szeghyová, 29–45. Bratislava: Slovak Academy of Sciences, 2005. https://www.forumhistoriae.sk/sites/default/files/szeghyova1_0.pdf
- . “The Modern Adept: A Novel on Alchemy and Its Hungarian Reception in the Time of the Enlightenment.” In *Esotericism, Literature and Culture in Central and Eastern Europe*, edited by Nemanja Radulović, 79–91. Belgrade: Faculty of Philology, 2018.
- Vanyó, László, ed. *Apokrifek*. Budapest: Szt. István Társulat, 1980.