

“Essay on the Hungarian Translations of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.*” *Alice in a World of Wonderlands: Translations of Lewis Carroll’s Masterpiece.* Vol. 1. Eds. Jon Lindseth and Markus Lang. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, USA, 2015. 294-299.

## On the Hungarian Translations of *Alice*

By Anna Kérchy

Warren Weaver included a 1924 Budapest edition as the first Hungarian printing of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* citing the Lewis Carroll bibliography of Williams and Madan (1931) as his source. Williams, Madan, and Green (1962) also cite the book with no details. Since there is no trace of the edition in any Hungarian bibliography or library, it is considered a “ghost” edition that has never existed. Although an extensive survey was not made, no collector reports having the book either.

The first Hungarian edition found was published in 1927 under the title *Alice a Csodák országában* (*Alice in the Land of Wonders*) as a supplement to the children’s magazine *Tündérvásár* (*Fairy Market*). It was translated by the magazine’s editor Margit Altay, a popular woman writer of her time, largely forgotten today, who authored young adult and children’s literature, mostly girls’ adventure and romance stories under the pseudonym Aunt Marge. The numerous similarities—like the Mad Hatter’s song mocking the traditional German Christmas carol *O Tannenbaum*—suggest that her translation was partially based on Antonie Zimmermann’s first German translation of 1869. The title page labeled the book a reworking primarily because of omissions: the prefatory poem and certain passages were omitted, and chapters four and five were merged. Altay interpreted *Alice* as a piece of children’s literature similar to her own writings: a fairy tale about the adventures of a wealthy, upper-class girl, disregarding social problems and philosophical dilemmas, avoiding abstractions and ambiguities, an innocent read addressing uniquely child audiences. As a result she performed a systematic infantilization and idealization of Wonderland. She omitted nearly all of the jokes on death and the passages related to identity crisis, she replaced ominous onomatopoeia with more childish, playful ones (the “thump! thump!” of Alice’s landing after the fall became “oops-a-daisy!”), she harmonized self-contradictions (the “drink me!” bottle’s contents taste uniquely of sweets dear to children), she neglected the linguistically more challenging puns and the wild absurdities (like Alice’s footnotes), and she turned the remaining nonsense into infantile babble, senseless gibberish far from Carroll’s polysemic-polyphonic language games defamiliarizing discourse (“curiouser and curiouser” simply became *kavarcs-quacs*, *kavarcs-quacs*, in English something like “mixture-qtcha,” a coinage similar in sound to the Hungarian equivalent of “peek-a-boo,” *kukucs*). Altay’s translation replaced the speculative theoretical generalizations about the nature of reality and representation with particularities characteristic of the “once upon a time” setting of fairy tales. Her *Alice* only regrets that her sister’s book lacks pictures, and never ponders about the use and meaning of pictureless books in general.

This edition was difficult to find. The only recorded copy of the booklet is owned by the National Széchenyi Library in Budapest and is in a rather poor condition and under the protection of copyrights that remain with the translator until 2042. It can be copied by hand in the Library’s reading room, or, at most, photocopies of a single chapter can be purchased upon special request. This edition includes six ink-drawn replicas of Arthur Rackham’s illustrations by an anonymous artist.

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The second Hungarian edition entitled *Alisz kalandjai Csodaországban* (*Alisz’s Adventures in Wonderland*) translated by experimental psychologist and writer Andor Juhász around 1929 was the first to provide Hungarian readers with a full, unabridged text, decorated by Tenniel’s original illustrations. (In this essay the English order of names is used, personal name followed by family name. In Hungary the reverse is the case and Weaver followed that in his checklist.) Conforming to the contemporary custom Juhász used Hungarian names and Hungarian phonetic transcripts: Alisz for Alice, Dodó (a diminutive of the male forename Aladár) for Dodo, Mici for Dinah the cat, Hungarian statesman Deák Ferenc for Shakespeare, Lizard Feri for Bill, Tapsifüles (Flopsy Easter bunny) for the March Hare, Kókusz (coconut) for the Caucus-race. He came up with some quite clever solutions too: for example, the little girls learn arithmetic down in the syrup well and subtract all manners of things beginning with an *h*, *huszat*, *harmincat*, *hatot*, *hetet*, *havat* meaning “twenty, thirty, six, seven, and snow,” a pun on the idiomatic expression “to gather seven and snow” (*hetet*, *hatot összehord*) meaning “to talk nonsense.” A contemporary 1932 review in the literary journal *Korunk* commemorated Carroll’s centennial by lamenting Hungarian readers’ and academics’ unfamiliarity with *Alice a csodák országában* (*Alice in the Land of Wonders*) and *A tükörben* (*In the mirror*) while praising the novels as the “last reservoirs of lost human freedom” and innocence, capable of challenging the mainstream juvenile literary trend of aggressive adventure stories of war and colonization, and shedding light on the absurdities of life in a way enjoyable for children and adults alike.

The third Hungarian edition—the most influential so far—was published in 1935 (republished in 1936) by the highly established, excellent Hungarian poet Dezső Kosztolányi, and was illustrated by Dezső Fáy. As the title *Évike Tündérországbán* (*Evie in Fairyland*) attests, it was an ingeniously inventive but often far-fetched retelling of Carroll’s classic due to the translation technique of “domestication,” whereby the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign source text were replaced by narrative solutions more intelligible to the target-language reader, driven by the translator’s aim to reach an effect similar to the one produced by the original rather than to achieve textual sincerity via a mirror-translated replica of the source. In his essays on the art of translation, Kosztolányi repeatedly argued that translation per se is “practically impossible,” so instead of the identical reconstruction of the original, the translator should “reimagine” a work of art on its own right, integrated into the cultural context of the recipients. Kosztolányi’s “Hungarianizations” include the exchange of the diminutive form of a widespread Hungarian forename for the protagonist’s name, plum jam for orange marmalade, coffee and wine for tea, paprika for pepper, a card game called 21 for croquet—all cultural references easily decodable for Hungarian readers. Throughout his greatest poetic feat, the translation of the mock-didactic verse embedded in the prose narrative, Kosztolányi finds it important that these poems verify the heroine’s true identity through testing her capacity to properly remember poems, well-known to Wonderland inhabitants and all readers, who recognize the originals of the parodies and are amused by their distortions. Accordingly, instead of sticking to the English text, Kosztolányi invents parodies of popular Hungarian poems, nursery rhymes, folk tales, and songs. For example, “How doth the little crocodile,” initially a twisted rewrite of Isaac Watts’s “Against Idleness and Mischief” reads in Hungarian as “Crocodile baths / In a black lake / To see his mother / In Negro Land. / His skin is rough, / His feet are crooked. / Turn out, turn out / Iron-nosed witch” with an obvious mocking reference to the original lyrics of a popular playground singing game (“Little duck baths/ In a black lake/ To see his mother/ In Poland./ I say to you, I say to you/ Turn to me my sweet-bride.”) and to a favorite dreaded figure of Eastern European folk and fairy tales (the witch with the iron nose). Remarkably, due to the allusions

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to a common literary heritage, these lines—along with many others of the translation—have remained, for nearly a decade now, a perfectly meaningful and enjoyable nonsense for Hungarian readers.

In 1958 Tibor Szobotka revised and modernized Kosztolányi’s translation with the aim of bringing it closer to the Carrollian original by polishing many of its poetic liberties, which had been criticized for being “beautiful insincerities.” This revised translation entitled *Alice Csodaországban* (*Alice in Wonderland*) has been republished seventeen times since 1958 and remains the most widespread and well-known Hungarian version. Although the title page indicates Kosztolányi and Szobotka as translators, the average Hungarian reader attributes this text version to Kosztolányi, much to the regret of Kosztolányi scholars, like Ildikó Józán, who believe that Szobotka’s revision not only eradicated the earlier Hungarian version’s linguistic creativity and significations automatically available for his compatriots, but also tarnished his predecessor’s reputation by associating his own unnecessarily complicated and confusing version with Kosztolányi’s name. Szobotka’s obsessive insistence on textual sincerity can be held responsible for the troubling perplexity Hungarian readers feel on facing Alice’s pondering, after the recital of her poem, about perhaps “not getting it quite right” and “altering the words,” a reaction they fail to understand because they are unfamiliar with the “right” version, and thus unaware of a parody taking place. Hence, nonsense was transformed into meaninglessness. To do Szobotka justice, some of his modifications did work: he turned “the drunken brush-maker” (punning on the Hungarian idiomatic expression “to drink like a brush-maker”) into Crazy Hatter to revive the connotations related to Carroll’s Hatter whose derangement was commonly interpreted by fellow Victorians in terms of mercury poisoning, a “maddening” side effect of his trade. Some other solutions by Kosztolányi were kept in the revision, like the “wooden dog” (*fakutya*), a literalized embodiment of the Hungarian metaphorical idiom with an uncertain etymological origin: “to giggle/grin like a wooden dog,” wherein the wooden dog is an archaic term for a sledge making a screeching sound like laughter on ice and for a boot-horn shaped like a smile—certainly a strange equivalent of Carroll’s Cheshire Cat. Interestingly, Juhász’s word choice of “wooden cat” (*facica*) used the same pun in a less recognizable, more twisted form that nevertheless complied with Tenniel’s illustrations decorating the 1929 edition, whereas Tamás Szecskó’s drawings depicted a grinning dog in two remarkably different styles: his first cutesy, mannered, and light sketch-like illustrations in the 1958 edition featured an obviously manufactured wooden dog, of the Hungarian vizsla breed, with bolts at its joints, benignly smiling at Alice portrayed as “rather a prim little miss,” while Szecskó’s more refined illustrations to the 1974 and all the succeeding Kosztolányi-Szobotka translations included the picture of a sharp-toothed, grinning creature with a British bulldog’s head and a massive wooden body, reminiscent of the Trojan Horse. Hungarian semiotician Özséb Horányi’s essay “Two Portrait Galleries. Remarks on Alice and Company” published in 1994 in *Semiotics and Linguistics in Alice’s Worlds* analyzes Szecskó’s illustrations that appeared in 1974 and thereafter, but erroneously cites the 1958 edition.

The latest translation, a combined edition of the two Alice books, entitled *Aliz kalandjai Csodaországban és a tükör másik oldalán* (*Aliz’s Adventures in Wonderland and on the Other Side of the Looking Glass*) and published in 2009 as a fancy, large-format, hardcover volume, was the product of the collaboration of one of the most popular young contemporary poets, Dániel Varró (responsible for the embedded poems) and his sister, children’s writer-illustrator Zsuzsa Varró (responsible for the prose parts). Their work was distinguished by a linguistic creativity, a witty play with the strange sound, the rhythmic, rhyming, musical quality of

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unusual words and compounds. This emphasis on sound—besides being the adoption of a clearly Carrollian virtue—might have resulted from their first encounter with Alice in the form of a radio-play on LP record that evoked Wonderland’s atmosphere with peculiar voices, eerie noises, and a dreamy music which ravished many Hungarian children in the 1970s and 1980s and admittedly proved to be influential on the Varrós’ translation. This was a highly self-conscious and self-reflexive translation informed by an understanding of nineteenth-century English culture, Carroll’s life, their retrospective mythologization, and a critical awareness of the flaws of Kosztolányi’s “mis-translations” that the Varrós aimed to correct in order to challenge Alice’s canonical evaluation. Revision joined homage on numerous occasions, as in the case of the translation of the “dormouse” that was reimagined—under the influence of chronologically erroneous speculations in Martin Gardner’s annotations—as a wombat meant to mockingly refer to the Rossetti’s pet Carroll might have encountered, while the inclusion of the word “marmot” (*mormota*) among the things beginning with an *m* the little girls draw from the treacle well is clearly a nod to the former translator Kosztolányi’s word choice. The Varrós argued in an interview that the previous Hungarian translations were wrong in suggesting that the novels were simply sweet and funny pieces of children’s literature. They rather regarded the text as a serious linguistic experiment, a feat in paradoxical logic, complex witticisms, and a trial of miscommunication with unkind, peevish, pugnacious trickster figures (reflected in the names of the Insane Hatter or Nasty Chubby, for Humpty Dumpty) who frighten children and amuse only adults with a taste for the macabre. Thus, one might conclude that nearly a century after the first Hungarian edition the translators’ views of the book’s target audience have undergone an absolute change.

Carroll inspired many other outstanding Hungarian authors, including Sándor Weöres, the father of Hungarian children’s poetry whose translation of “Jabberwocky” was published under the title “*Szajkóhukky*” in his 1958 collection of poetry translations. Interestingly, the Hungarian dubbing of Tim Burton’s 2010 *Alice in Wonderland* movie borrowed several nonsense-neologisms from Weöres’s translation. Contemporary Hungarian nonsense poet Attila Havasi rewrote “Jabberwocky” as “*Dal a Rézfaszú Bagolyról*,” a song about the copper-penis owl, the Hungarian equivalent of the Bogeyman in his 2005 collection *Manócska meghal, avagy a Lét csodás sokfélesége* (*The Death of an Elf or the Wonderful Diversity of Being*). The young hero of Dániel Varrós’ book-length epic poem for children *Túl a Maszat-hegyen* (*Beyond the Splotch Mountain*, 2003) visits the Land of Nonsense (*Badarország*), a fantasy-space governed by language-games reminiscent of Carroll’s.

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