

ATTILA JÓZSEF

POEMS

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**LONDON
THE DANUBIA BOOK CO.**

1966

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Notes.

Curriculum Vitae.

I was born in Budapest in 1905 and I am Greek Orthodox by religion. My father, the late Áron József left the country when I was three years old and the National Council in Aid of Children sent me to live with foster-parents in Öcsöd. Here I lived until I was seven and I even started working, as a swineherd like most poor children in the country. When I was seven years old my mother, the late Borbála Pöcze, brought me back to Budapest and enrolled me for the second class at elementary school. My mother supported us (my two sisters and myself) by taking in washing and doing domestic work. My mother worked at a number of different houses and was away from home from morning till evening, so I was left without any parental supervision, stayed away from school and played about in the streets. In the reader for the third class, however, I found some interesting stories about King Attila and threw myself in reading books. These tales about the King of the Huns interested me not simply because my name was Attila but also because my foster-parents in Öcsöd had always called me Pista. They consulted the neighbours about the name Attila and I heard them come to the conclusion that there was no such name. This astounded me, I felt they were casting doubt on my very existence. I think the discovery of these stories about King Attila had a decisive effect on all my ambitions after that. In the last analysis perhaps it was this experience that led me to literature, that made me a thinking person, the kind of person who would listen to the opinions of others but would examine them carefully in his own mind, the kind of person who would answer to the name of Pista until it was shown that his name was really Attila, as he himself had always thought.

War broke out when I was nine and our lot became progressively worse. I did my share of queuing. There were occasions when I joined a queue at the foodstore at nine o'clock in the evening and just when my turn was coming at half past eight the next morning they announced that all the cooking fat had gone. I helped my mother as best I could. I sold fresh water in the Világ Cinema, I stole firewood and coal from the Ferencváros goods station so that we should have something to burn. I made coloured paper windmills and sold them to children who were better off, I carried baskets and parcels in the Market Hall, and so on. In the summer of 1918 I had a holiday in Abbazia on the Dalmation coast under the auspices of the King Karl Holidays for Children Fund. My mother was now ill with a tumour of the uterus and I applied on my own for assistance from the National Council in Aid of Children. So I went to Monor, and spent a short time there. Returning to Budapest I sold newspapers and I trafficked like a little banker in postage stamps and, later, in the white and yellow inflation money. During the Rumanian occupation I worked as a boy waiter selling bread in the Café Emke. I was at the same time attending secondary school, having passed the five classes of elementary school.

My mother died in 1919 at Christmas time. The Orphans' Board appointed Dr. Ödön Makai, now deceased, to be my guardian. One year I served all spring and summer on the tugs Vihar, Török, and Tatár of the Atlantica Ocean Shipping Company. At this time I took my exams, as a private student, for the fourth class of secondary school. Then my guardian and Dr. Sándor Geisswein sent me to train as a novice with the Salesian Order at Nyergesújfalu. I only spent two weeks there since I am Greek Orthodox and not Roman Catholic. From there I went to Makó where, shortly afterwards, I got a free place at Demke college. During the summer I taught at Mezőhegyes in order to earn my board and lodging. I passed out of the sixth class at Grammar School with full marks in spite of the fact that, lacking the guidance of a good friend, I had several times tried to commit suicide as a result of my troubles at puberty. My first poems appeared at this time: 'Nyugat' published some of my poems written at the age of 17. They took me to be an infant prodigy but it was just the fact that I was an orphan.

After passing out of the sixth class I left grammar school, and the College, because I felt very idle in my loneliness. I did no studying because I always knew the lesson perfectly well after the teacher had explained it, my full marks bore witness to that. I went to Kiszombor as a crop watchman and day-labourer, then I became a private teacher. However two of my old teachers were kind enough to urge me to take my matriculation certificate and I decided to do so. I took the examinations for the seventh and eighth classes together and thus passed out a year earlier than my class-mates. I only had three months to prepare, however, which is why I just got a 'good' in the seventh class exam and only a 'satisfactory' in that for the eighth class. My Matriculation Certificate was better than my mark in the eighth class exam: I got 'satisfactory' only in Hungarian and History. It was at that time that I was prosecuted for blasphemy for one of my poems. The High Court acquitted me.

After that I hawked books for a time here in Budapest, then, at the time of the inflation, I worked as a clerk in the Mauthner private banking establishment. After the introduction of the Hintz system I was transferred to the accounts department and shortly after this, much to the annoyance of my senior colleagues, I was entrusted with supervision of the currency values to be issued on accounts days. My enthusiasm was somewhat dampened by the fact that, in addition to my own work, my senior colleagues used to foist some of their work onto me. Nor did they omit to chaff me about my poems appearing in the press. "I used to write poetry when I was your age" - they would say. Some time later the bank failed.

I decided once and for all that I would be a writer and I would find some employment closely connected with literature. I enrolled myself for Hungarian and French Philosophy in the Arts Faculty of Szeged University. I attended 52 hours of lectures and seminars a week, 20 hours of which were necessary for my end of term examination, which I passed with distinction. I ate when and where I could and I paid my rent out of the royalties on my poems. It made me very proud that Professor Lajos Dézsi declared me to be competent to undertake independent research work. But all my hopes were blasted when Professor Antal Horger, who was my examiner in Hungarian Philology, called me up for interview and before two witnesses - I still know their names, they are teachers now - stated that as long as he was there I should never become a secondary school teacher because, as he said, "the kind of person who writes this sort of poem" - and here he held up a copy of the periodical 'Szeged' - "is not to be trusted with the education of the rising generation". The irony of fate is often mentioned and this really is a case in point. This poem of mine, 'With a Pure Heart', became quite famous. Seven articles have been written about it, Lajos Hatvany in more than one place described it as a representative document of the whole post-war generation 'for future ages', Ignotus, writing about it in 'Nyugat', said that he had "cradled and fondled this beautiful poem in his soul, murmured and mumbled over it" and in his 'Ars Poetica' he made this poem the model of modern poetry.

The next year I went to Vienna and enrolled at the university there. I was then twenty years old. I made my living by selling newspapers outside the Rathaus-Keller restaurant and cleaning the premises of the Collegium Hungaricum. The director, Antal Lábán, put a stop to this when he heard about me. He gave me lunch in the Collegium and arranged some pupils for me. I coached the two sons of Zoltán Hajdu, Managing Director of the Anglo-Austrian Bank. From a frightful hovel in Vienna where, for four months, I hadn't even any sheets, I went straight to Hatvan as a guest in the mansion of the Hatvany family. Then the lady of the house, Mrs. Albert Hirsch, paid my travelling expenses for me to go to Paris at the end of the summer. I enrolled myself at the Sorbonne. I spent the next summer at the sea-side in a fishing village on the South of France.

After that I came to Budapest. I attended two terms at Budapest University. I didn't take my teacher's diploma since, in view of Antal Horger's threat, I thought I wouldn't get a post anyway. Then when the Foreign Trade Institute had just started up I was employed there on French correspondence. (I think that my former manager, Mr. Sándor Kóródi would be quite willing to supply a reference.) Then I was overtaken by a succession of such unexpected blows that however toughened I was by life I simply could not go on. The National Health Service first sent me to a sanatorium, then I was recommended for National Assistance, because of severe depression. I left my job since I realised that I could not stay on as passenger in a young growing institution. Since then I have been living on my writing. I am the editor of 'Szép Szó', a literary and critical periodical. Apart from my mother tongue Hungarian I read and write French and German, I am experienced in Hungarian and French business correspondence, and I am a good typist. I have learnt shorthand and with a month's practice would regain my speed. I am familiar with the technicalities of printing and can express myself clearly and precisely. I consider myself to be honest and I am, I think, intelligent and a hard worker.

(1937)

(Attila József died in the same year.)

Translated by Thomas Kabdebo and Michael Beevor

1925

With a pure heart.

Without father without mother
without God or homeland either
without crib or coffin-cover
without kisses or a lover

for the third day - without fussing
I have eaten next to nothing.
My store of power are my years
I sell all my twenty years.

Perhaps, if no else will
the buyer will be the devil.
With a pure heart - that's a job:
I may kill and I shall rob.

They'll catch me, hang me high
in blessed earth I shall lie,
and poisonous grass will start
to grow on my beautiful heart.

Translated by Thomas Kabdebo

1926

At last.

I have scrubbed boilers, I have cut seedlings,
On rotting straw mattresses I've found sleep;
Judges have sentenced me, fools have mocked me,
My glitter poured forth from cellars deep.
I've kissed a girl who sang even as
she was baking someone else's bread,
I was given clothes and I gave books
to peasants and to workers instead.
I was in love with a well-to-do girl
but her own class wrested her from me;
I ate but once every other day
and I got an ulcer finally.
I've felt that the world, too, was a turning
inflamed stomach and that slimy thing,
our dyspeptic love was our mind, while war
was nothing but bloody vomiting.
Since sourish silence has filled our mouth,
I kicked my heart that it might shout with rage.
How could my active mind content itself
with lulling songs composed for a wage.
They offered money for my great vengeance;
Priests have said: trust in the Lord, my son.
And I knew, he who returned empty-handed,
with axes and hoes and stones would come.
I have flashing eyes and the will to win,
and I must have the willingness, the means
to do justice and so to take sides
with these severest of memories.
But what concern are memories to me?
Rather, I lay my worthless pencil down
and start grinding the scythe's edge instead,
for time is ripening in our land
with a silent, threatening sound.

Translated by John Székely

1927

Attila József

Gay and good was he, though headstrong,
yes, when it came to right or wrong.
Good food he liked, and in his sphere
resembled God himself since long.
The coat he wore did once belong
to a Jewish doctor. His dear
relatives said: "Clear out of here!"
To Greek Orthodoxy did he adhere
which gave him a priest but no sweet song.
In him died all the thinking throng.
And now let all be of good cheer.

Translated by R. Bonnerjea

1928

Bed-rock.

In China swings the mandarin.
New death from cocaine poisoning.
With rustling straw and so to sleep.
New death from cocaine poisoning.

Though shop windows be dressed to kill,
poor men see right through to the till.
With rustling straw and so to sleep.
Poor men see right through to the till.

Help yourself to sausage and bread.
Guard well your life and keep your head.
With rustling straw and so to sleep.
Guard well your life and keep your head.

And then one day by hook or crook
You'll find a wife who'll kiss and cook.
With rustling straw and so to sleep.
You'll find a wife who'll kiss and cook.

Translated by Michael Beevor

1929

Kings of Bethlehem.

Little Jesus, God bless Thee, God bless Thee,
Royal kings we are all three.
Above us shone a blazing star,
on foot we've come from very far.
A little lamb so surely said
that Jesus Christ lay here in bed.
My name is King Melchior,
Help me, help me, my dear Lord.

Good day to you, Son of God, Son of God,
Silly old priests we are not.
News of your birth has travelled far,
King of the poor we've heard you are.
Hence our little visitation,
heaven's kingdom's our salvation.
My name's Jasper and I think
I'm a kind of worldly king.

Greetings to you, Saviour, Saviour,
Our land is much sunnier.
All our sausage we have eaten,
our fine boots look weatherbeaten,
six handfuls of gold we have got,
also incense in a big pot.
King Balthazar, yes, that's me:
The Saracen of the three.

Flushes-blushes sweet Mary, sweet Mary,
little mother she's happy.
Casting down her eyes she peers
at her Jesus through her tears;
hear the shepherds' music-playing,
feeding time bears no delaying.
Kindly three kings make your bow,
I must bid you farewell now.

Translated by John Székely

1929

Grief

In my eyes grief dissolves;
I ran like a deer;
Tree-gnawing wolves
In my heart followed near.

I left my antlers
A long time ago;
Broken from my temples,
They swing on a bough.

Such I was myself:
A deer I used to be.
I shall be a wolf:
That is what troubles me.

A fine wolf I'm becoming.
Struck by magic, while
All my pack-wolves are foaming,
I stop, and try to smile.

I prick up my ears
As a roe gives her call;
Try to sleep; on my shoulders
Dark mulberry leaves fall.

Translated by Vernon Watkins

1932

Night on the outskirts.

Slowly the light's net is lifted
Out of the yard, and our kitchen
Fills with darkness
Like the hollows deep in a pool.

Silence -
The scrubbing brush creeps to life,
Above it, a patch of wall
Hesitates, hangs, not sure
Whether to stay or fall.

A night that wears oily rags
Heaves a sigh,
Halts in the sky;
Then settles on the outskirts,
Waddles over the square
And lights a bit of moon to see by.

Like ruins the factories loom.
But inside them a denser gloom
Even now is being produced. It sets,
A foundation for silence.

Through the windows of textile mills
Fly moonbeams in sheaves -
Moon thread till morning weaves
On motionless looms a fabric
Of girl workers' dreams.

Farther on, like a cloistered graveyard,
The foundry, bolt makers, cement works
Echoing family crypts.
Too well these workshops keep
The secret of resurrection.
A cat's claws on the fence;
And the simple night-watchman sees
A ghost, a flashing signal.
Coolly gleam
The beetle-backed dynamos.

A train whistle blows.
Dampness seeps into
The shadows, the boughs
Of a fallen tree.
The dust on the road grows heavy.

In the street a policeman,
A muttering workman, pass.
Now and then a comrade
Flits past with leaflets -

Keen as a dog on the track ahead,
Listening, cat-like, for noises behind him;
avoiding the lamps.

The tavern door belches out
A tainted light, its windows
Vomit, leaving puddles.
Inside, a half-stifled lamp
Slowly swings,
A solitary labourer keeps awake.
While the inn-keeper snores and wheezes,
He bares his teeth at the wall,
His grief climbs the stairs. He weeps,
Cries out for the revolution.

Cold metal, the water clinks.
A stray mongrel, the wind
Wanders. Its great tongue hangs
To touch the water, and laps it.
Straw mattresses are the rafts
That drift on night's currents.

The warehouse's hulk is aground.
In the foundry's iron dinghy
The smelter dreams red babies
Into the metal moulds.

All is damp, and heavy.
Mildew draws a map
Of misery's regions.
And there, on the dry meadows,
Rags and paper litter
The ragged, papery grass.
How they would whirl and fly!
They stir, but inertia holds them.

Night, your sluggish breeze
Is a flapping of soiled sheets.
Like frayed muslin to cord
You cling to the old sky,
As wretchedness clings to life.
Night of the poor, be my coal,
Smoulder here on my heart,
Melt the iron in me, to make
An anvil that never will split,
A hammer that clangs and glints,
A smooth blade for victory, night!

Grave this night is, and heavy.
I too shall sleep now, my brothers.
May our souls not be smothered by want.
Nor our bodies be bitten by vermin.

Translated by Michael Hamburger

1932

Tell me what lies in store for a man...

Tell me what lies in store for a man
who gets no chance to hoe or dig,
from whose moustache no crumb dangles
and who's idle among dark worries;
anyone's spuds he'd plant for a third
taut there isn't an inch of free land left
and his hair is falling out in tufts
- he hasn't even noticed it yet?

Tell me what lies in store for a man
who has five acres and a bit,
his scraggy hen squawks at the stumps
the nest of his worries is the pit.
His yoke doesn't creak and his ox
does not bellow - he hasn't any
from the bottom of the mug rises the steam
as he feeds his small family?

Tell me what lies in store for a man
who lives alone who works alone,
he has no pepper and salt for his soup
the grocer would not sell things on loan.
He has a chair - to make fire with
a cat sits on his cracked stove
he rhythmically swings the key of the door
he gazes and goes to bed alone?

Tell me what lies in store for a man
who works to keep his family;
They quarrel over the cabbage stalk
only the big girl can go to a movie.
The wife just washes - a slave to sludge -
her mouth has a taste of vegetables
when strictness turns the burning light out
silence eavesdrops, darkness gropes about?

Tell me what lies in store for a man
who is out of work and lounges about,
a woman is clapping the lid in his place
or a small blond boy with a colourless face;
he vainly looks through the factory fence
- he carries baskets when he is awake -
if he pilfers things he is easily caught
when falling asleep, they give him a shake?

Tell me what lies in store for a man
who weighs out potatoes bread and salt,
wrapped in newspapers, sold on tick
he leaves the balance-pan upswept.
Muttering he potters in the dark
- the debts are large, the rent is high -
it's no good charging more for the oil
there's no profit - he doesn't know why?

And tell me what lies in store for a man
who's a poet, afraid and sings like this,
his wife washes floors and he
spends the day typing out copies.
His name, if he has one, is just a trade-mark
like washing powders of utility
and his life, if he still has a life
belongs to a poor men's posterity.

Translated by Thomas Kabdebo

1933

Ode.

1.

I am sitting
here on a glittering wall of rocks.
The mellow wind of the young summer
like the warmth of a good supper
flies around.

I let my heart grow fond of silence.
It is not so difficult,
- the past swarms around -
the head bends down
and down hangs the hand.

I gaze at the mountains' mane
every leaf reflects the glow
of your brow.
The road is empty, empty,
yet I can see
how the wind makes your skirt flutter
under the fragile branches of the tree.
I see a lock of your hair tip forward
your soft breasts quiver
- as the stream down below is running away
behold, I see again,
how the ripples on round white pebbles
the fairy laughter spouts out on your teeth.

2.

O how I love you
who, made to speak
both, the wily solitude which weaves its plots
in the deepest caverns of the heart
and the universe.
Who part from me, in silence, and run away
like the waterfall from its own rumble
while I, between the peaks of my life,
near to the far,
cry out and reverberate
rebounding against sky and earth
that I love you, you sweet step-mother.

3.

I love you like the child loves his mother,
like silent pits love their depth
I love you like halls love the light
like the soul loves the flame,
like the body loves repose.
I love you like all mortals love living
until they die.

Every single smile, movement, word of yours
I keep like the earth keeps all fallen matter.
Like acids into metal
so my instincts have burnt
your dear and beautiful form into my mind,
and there your being fills up everything.

Moments pass by, rattling
but you are sitting mutely in my ears.
Stars blaze and fall
but you stand still in my eyes.
Like silence in a cave,
your flavour, now cool,
still lingers in my mouth
and your hand upon the waterglass
and the delicate veins upon your hand
glimmer up before me again and again.

4.

O what kind of matter am I
that your glance cuts and shapes me?
What kind of soul and what kind of light
and what kind of amazing phenomenon am I
that in the mist of emptiness
I can walk around
the gentle slopes of your fertile body?

And like the word
entering into an enlightened mind
I can enter into its mysteries...

Your veins like rosebushes
tremble ceaselessly.
They carry the eternal current
that love may blossom in your cheeks
and thy womb may bear a blessed fruit.

Many a small root embroiders through and through
the sensitive soil of your stomach
weaving knots, unwinding the tangle
that the cells of your juices may align
into clusters of swarming lines
and that the good thickets of your bushy lungs
may whisper their own glory.

The eternal matter happily proceeds in you
along the tunnels of your bowels
and the waste gains a rich life
in the hot wells of your ardent kidneys.

Undulating hills rise
star constellations oscillate
lakes move, factories operate
millions of living creatures
insects
seaweed
cruelty and goodness stir
the sun shines, a misty arctic light looms -
unconscious eternity roams about
in your metabolism.

5.

Like clots of blood
these words fall
before you.
Existence stutters
only the law speaks clearly.
But my industrious organs that renew me
day by day
are now preparing for silence.

But until then all cry out.
You,
whom they have selected out of the multitude
of two thousand million people,
you only one,
you soft cradle,
strong grave, living bed
receive me into you!...

(How tall is the sky at dawn!
Armies are dazzling in its ore.
This great radiance hurts my eyes.
I am lost, I believe...
I hear my heart beating
flapping above me.)

6.

(By-Song.)

(The train is taking me, I am going
perhaps I may even find you today.
My burning face may then cool down,
and perhaps you will softly say:

The water is running, take a bath.
Here is a towel for you to dry.
The meat is cooking appease your hunger,
this is your bed, where I lie.)

Translated by Thomas Kabdebo

1934

Consciousness.

1.

The dawn has unloosed the sky from the earth
and at its clear soft word
the beetles, the children
come tumbling out into the light of day;
no haze in the atmosphere,
the sparkling lightness floats everywhere!
During the night, like butterflies,
the leaves have settled on the trees.

2.

Blue, red, yellow poly-daubed
pictures I saw in my dreams,
and I felt: this is the order of things,
not a floating dust-speck's out of place.
Now gloom-like my dream spreads out to my limbs
and the iron world is the order.
By day a moon rises in me and when it's night
outside - a sun shines here within.

3.

I am thin, just bread I eat sometimes,
amongst these frivolous prattling souls
its for nothing that I seek something more sure
than the throw of the dice.
There's no roast shoulder nuzzling at
my lips, or child at my heart.
For all its skill the cat can't catch mice
outside and inside at the same time.

4.

Like a pile of hewn timber
the world lies heaped up on itself,
one thing presses and squeezes and
interlocks with the other,
so each is determined.
Only what is not has a bush,
only what will be is a flower,
what is crumbles into fragments.

5.

In the goods station yard
I flattened myself against the foot of the tree
like a slice of silence; grey weeds
reached up to my mouth, raw and queerly sweet.
Dead still I watched the guard, (what was he sensing?)
and, on the silent waggons,
his shadow which kept obstinately jumping
upon the lustrous dew-laden coal-lumps.

6.

See, here inside is the suffering,
out there, sure enough, is the explanation.
Your wound is the world - it burns and rages
and you feel your soul, the fever.
You are a slave so long as your heart rebels -
you become free by making it your pleasure
not to build yourself the kind of house
in which the landlord settles down.

7.

I looked up from under the evening
at the gear wheels of the skies -
from glistening threads of chance
the loom of the past was weaving law,
and again I looked up at the sky
from under the vapours of my dreams
and I saw that the fabric of the law
was always bursting apart somewhere.

8.

The stillness was listening - the clock struck one.
You could rediscover your youth,
between dank cement walls
you can imagine a little freedom -
I thought. And, then, as I stand up
the stars and the Great Bear
glimmer up there
like bars above the silent cell.

9.

I have heard the iron weep,
I have heard the rain laugh.
I have seen that the past is split
and only images can be forgotten;
and that I can do nothing but love,
bowed down under my loads -
why must I forge you into a weapon,
gold of self-awareness!

10.

He has fully become a man
who has in his heart no mother, father,
who knows that he gets life
only as an extra to death
and, like something found, he will give it back
at any time, that's why he keeps it safe,
who is not a god and not a priest
either to himself or anyone.

11.

I have myself seen happiness,
soft it was, blond and three hundredweight.
Its curly smile was tottering
On the strict grass of the yard.
It settled into the soft warm puddle,
blinked, and gave a grunt at me -
to this day I see how hesitantly
the sunlight toyed amongst its downy hairs.

12.

I live by the railway line. Many trains
go past here and, time and again,
I watch the lighted windows fly
through the fluttering fluff-darkness.
So through eternal night
rush illuminated days
and I stand in each cubicle of light,
I lean upon my elbows and am silent.

Translated by Michael Beevor

1934

Mother.

For a week now, again and again,
Thoughts of my mother have racked my brain.
Gripping a basket of washing fast,
On, and up to the attic she passed.

And I was frank and released my feeling
In stamps and yells to bring down the ceiling.
Let someone else have the bulging jackets,
Let her take me with her up to the attic.

She just, giving me no look or thrashing,
Went on, and in silence spread out the washing,
And the kneaded clothes, rustling brightly,
Were twisting and billowing up lightly.

I should not have cried but it's too late for this.
Now I can see what a giant she is.
Across the sky her grey hair flickers through;
In the sky's waters she is dissolving blue.

Translated by Vernon Watkins

1935

Lullaby.

The sky is letting its blue eyes close;
The house its many eyes closes, too.
The quilted meadow lies in a doze:
Go to sleep softly, little one, do.

The wasp and beetle are both asleep;
Their heads are down on their feet, and through
Darkness, a drone in the dark they keep:
Go to sleep softly, little one, do.

The tram has fallen asleep as well,
And while its rattling slumbers, too.
It tings in its sleep a little bell:
Go to sleep softly, little one, do.

The coat is sleeping across the chair,
The tear is sleeping where it's worn through;
No more to-day will it stretch the tear:
Go to sleep softly, little one, do.

The ball and whistle are both at rest.
So is the wood where the picnic grew.
Even your sweets by sleep are possessed:
Go to sleep softly, little one, do.

All will be yours in the crystal ball;
You'll be a giant, it will come true;
But just let your little eyelids fall:
Go to sleep softly, little one, do.

A fireman, soldier, herder of sheep,
You'll be all three, and each will be you.
See, your mother is falling asleep:
Go to sleep softly, little one, do.

Translated by Vernon Watkins

1935

Humans.

In our family goodness is a guest.
Interest arranges all things like a host
Foolishly, but the rich were long aware
Of this, and now it dawns on most of the poor.

Every entanglement works loose at last.
While we are sure of our truth and hold it fast,
Our lives gloss over those with bad designs.
A change of setting does not change the lines.

Yet at the top of our voices we all sing,
Borne on the gusto wine and powders bring.
Mouth empty, our spirit sinks: we drain the vats.

He is best who, bearing disillusion, pauses.
We are as full of small and mordant causes
As the murmuring willow grove is full of gnats.

Translated by Vernon Watkins

1935

Belated Lament.

My fever's ever thirty-six degrees and still
mother, you're not with me.
Like any loose, easy girl when called at will,
You have lain down by Death's side readily.
From the gentle autumn landscape and many
kind women I try to piece you together,
But there's no time left as the all-consuming
fierce fire grows hotter.

As I was returning home for the last time
the wars had just ended,
And in entangled and ruined Budapest
Many shops were left breadless and empty.
Crouching on train-roofs I brought you potatoes,
While the sack was filled with millet already;
Stubborn me, I had got a chicken for you,
But you were nowhere to be.

Your sweet breast and self you took away from me
and gave them to the worms.
My, how you consoled and chid your son, but see:
False and deceitful were your kind words.
As you blew on my soup, stirring it, you said:
"You're growing big for me, eat, my precious, eat",
But your empty lips taste oily dampness now -
How greatly you misled me!

If only I'd eaten you!.. You brought me your supper
but did I ask for it?
Why did you bend your back over the washing?
That now in a box you should straighten it?
See, I'd be glad if you would strike me once more,
Now I'd be happy for I'd return your blow;
You are worthless for you're trying not to be,
You spoil it all, you shadow.

You're a greater swindler than any woman
who deceives and betrays.
Stealthily you deserted your living faith
You bore out of your loves amid your wails.
You gipsy! what you have given, cajoling,
In the final hour you stole back the lot.
The child feels a quick impulse to swear; mother,
don't you hear it? Tell me off.

Slowly light enters my mind and the legend
has vanished like a dream.
The child that clings to the love of his mother
now realizes how silly he's been.
Deceit awaits him who's born of a mother:
He's either deceived or to deceive he'll try.
If he struggles on, he'll die of this but if
he gives in, of that he'll die.

Translated by John Székely

1936

By the Danube.

1.

As I sat on the bottom step of the wharf,
A melon-rind flowed by with the current;
Wrapped in my fate I hardly heard the chatter
Of the surface, while the deep was silent.
As if my own heart had opened its gate:
The Danube was turbulent, wise and great.

Like a man's muscles when hard at his toil,
Hammering, digging, leaning on the spade,
So bulged and relaxed and contracted again
Each single movement, each and every wave.
It rocked me like my mother for a time
And washed and washed the city's filth and grime.

And the rain began to fall but then it stopped
Just as if it couldn't have mattered less,
And like one watching the long rain from a cave,
I gazed away into the nothingness.
Like grey, endless rain from the skies overcast,
So fell drably all that was bright: the past.

But the Danube flowed on. And the sprightly waves
In playful gaiety laughed at me again,
Like a child on his prolific mother's knee,
While other thoughts were racing through her brain.
They trembled in Time's flow and in its wake,
Like in a graveyard tottering tomb-stones shake.

2.

I am he who for a hundred thousand year
Has gazed on what he now sees the first time.
One brief moment and, fulfilled, all time appears
In a hundred thousand forbears' eyes and mine.

I see what they could not for their daily toil,
Killing, kissing as duty dictated,
And they, who have descended into matter,
See what I do not, if truth be stated.

We know of each other like sorrow and joy,
Theirs is the present and mine is the past;
We write a poem, they're holding my pencil
And I feel them and recall them at last.

3.

My mother was Cumanian, my father
Half-Szekler, half-Rumanian or whole.
From my mother's lips sweet was every morsel,
And from my father's lips the truth was gold.
When I stir, they are embracing each other;
It makes me sad. This is mortality.
This, too, I am made of. And I hear their words:
"Just wait till we are gone..." they speak to me.

So their words speak to me for now they am I,
Despite my weaknesses this makes me strong.
For I am more than most, back to the first cell
To every ancestor I still belong.
I am the Forbear who split and multiplied,
Shaped my father and mother into whole,
My father and mother then in turn divide
And so I have become one single soul.

I am the world, all that is past exists:
Men are fighting men with renewed anguish.
Dead conquerors ride to victory with me
And I feel the torment of the vanquished.
Árpád and Zalán, Werbőczy and Dózsa,
Turks, and Tartars, Slovaks, Rumanians
Fill my heart which owes this past a calm future
As our great debt, today's Hungarians.

I want to work. For it is battle enough
Having a past such as this to confess.
In the Danube's waves past, present and future
Are all-embracing in a soft caress.
The great battle which our ancestors once fought
Resolves into peace through the memories,
And to settle at last our communal affairs
Remains our task and none too small it is.

Translated by John Székely

1936

It deeply hurts.

Without-within
from lurking death
(like a mouse frightened 'til it squeaks)

when inflamed
you take refuge
in a woman's arms, in her lap her knees.

Not just the soft
warm thighs lure.
but you are thrust there by the sheer must too
that is why all
who find a woman
want to embrace 'til the mouth turns white too.

Doubled burden
and doubled treasure
when you love and cannot find your mate
as homeless you are
as helpless is
the wild beast when doing its needs.

And you shall find
no other refuge
though threaten your mother with a knife
and yet there was
someone who would
have understood these words; but refused to be my wife.

There is no place
among the living
creatures for me in this state. Left alone,
my head just whirrs,
like a rattle I feel
in the hand of a child who is left alone.

For and against
what should I do to her?
No shame on me to find just only one
solution, since
an outcast I am
frightened by dreams and dazed by the sun.

Culture
peels off from me
like clothes from others in happy love

but where is it
written that she
should just watch me suffer alone?

Both baby
and mother
do suffer when the child is born

but since
for this song
just cash I'll get; with shame I am torn.

Come and help!
you little boys, let your eyes
burst where she passes by.

Innocents
squeal under boots
and say to her: it deeply hurts.

Faithful dogs
get under wheels
and bark at her: it deeply hurts.

Women
big with child: abort
and sob to her: it deeply hurts.

You whole and sound ones
fell over and break your bones
and mumble to her: it deeply hurts.

You men,
who have torn at each other for women,
don't hold it back but say: it deeply hurts.

Horses, bull
who are being castrated to draw the yoke
cry out to her: it deeply hurts.

Mute fish
get caught on hooks under the ice
and gape up at her: it deeply hurts.

All living things
everything, which quivers with pain:
the place where you live, the garden should burn;
with charred bodies
as she falls asleep
come to her bed and yelp with me: it deeply hurts.

Make her hear this
as long as she lives
for caprice, her own worth she has denied
without-within
from the living fugitive
the very last refuge she has deprived.

Translated by Thomas Kabdebo

1937

Welcome to Thomas Mann

Just as the child, by sleep already possessed,
Drops in his quiet bed, eager to rest,
But begs you: "Don't go yet; tell me a story,"
For night this way will come less suddenly,
And his heart throbs with little anxious beats
Nor wholly understands what he entreats,
The story's sake or that yourself be near,
So we ask you: Sit down with us; make clear
What you are used to saying; the known relate,
That you are here among us, and our state
Is yours, and that we all are here with you,
All whose concerns are worthy of man's due.
You know this well: the poet never lies,
The real is not enough; through its disguise
Tell us the truth which fills the mind with light
Because, without each other, all is night.
Through Madame Chauchat's body Hans Castorp sees,
So train us to be our own witnesses.
Gentle your voice, no discord in that tongue;
Then tell us what is noble, what is wrong,
Lifting our hearts from mourning to desire,
We have buried Kosztolányi; cureless, dire,
The cancer on his mouth grew bitterly,
But growths more monstrous gnaw humanity.
Appalled we ask: More than what went before,
What horror has the future yet in store?
What ravaging thoughts will seize us for their prey?
What poison, brewing now, eat us away?
And, if your lecture can put off that doom,
How long may you still count upon a room?
O, do not speak, and we can take heart then.
Being men by birthright, we must remain men,
And women, women, cherished for that reason.
All of us human, though such numbers lessen.
Sit down, please. Let your stirring tale be said.
We are listening to you, glad, like one in bed,
To see to-day, before that sudden night,
A European mid people barbarous, white.

Translated by Vernon Watkins

1937

Ars poetica.

I am a poet - what do I care
for the art of poetry as such?
Once risen up in the sky, the star
of the night river's not worth much.

I've done with the milk of story books;
time's slow seeping will never stop.
I quaff great draughts of reality,
neat world with foaming sky on top.

Pure and sweet is the source - bathe in it!
Calm and tremulousness embrace
each other; from the foam wise chatter
rises with elegance and grace.

Other poets - what concern of mine?
Wallowing in fake imagery
belly - high and fired with bogus wine
let them ape out their ecstasy.

I step past the revels of today
to understanding and beyond.
With a free mind I shall never play
the vile role of the servile fool.

Be free to eat, drink, make love and sleep!
Weigh yourself with the universe!
I shan't hiss my inward curse to creep
and serve the base bone-crushing powers.

The bargain's off - let me be happy!
Or else all men will insult me;
growing spots of red will mark me out,
fever will suck my fluids dry.

I'll not hold my disputatious tongue.
I cry to knowledge and to truth.
The century, watching me, approves;
the peasant thinks of me, and ploughs.

The worker's body feels my presence
between two of his stiff movements;
for me the shabby youth is waiting
by the cinema at evening.

Where scheming villains are encamped to
attack my poems' battle-lines,
regiments of brotherly tanks go
out and rumble abroad the rhymes.

I say that man is not grown-up yet
but, fancying he is, runs wild.
May his parents, love and intellect
watch over their unruly child.

Translated by Michael Beevor

1937

There was a beauty.

There was a beauty. There was sweetness.

I contemplated

a delicate rose.

And reality smashed down on me

like a loose boulder.

The boulder is just an image.

It'll be best to

tell everything.

The daily grind's edifying

and has the whip-hand.

My instinct followed the right track.

When that man came in

it boomed like breakers:

"I know him. Electricity.

He'll switch off the mains."

I was sharpening my pencil

the knife in my hand.

If I stab this man

I know that I shall be at peace,

at last reconciled.

I was embittered. Well, all right.

The whole flat will be

dark and depressing.

An animal can protect its home.

This war's different.

Violence will just be futile.

I'll get beaten up,

turn sick and twisted.

And no light. Where there's rule of law

cash is armament.

The technology of war's changed.

The splendid hero

needn't draw his sword.

Five pound notes are bomb explosions,

pennies are shrapnel.

That's the way I reasoned it out.

So I said: "Hallo"

and stepped aside.

At nightfall the generous moon

smiled at the outcome.

Translated by Nicolas Krasso and Lucien Rey.

1937

Behold I have found my land...

Behold, I have found my land, the country
Where my name's cut without a fault
By him who is to bury me,
If he was bred to dig my vault.

Earth gapes: I drop into the tin,
Since the iron halfpenny,
Which at a time of war came in,
Has outlived its utility.

Nor is the iron ring legal tender.
New world, land, rights: I read each letter.
Our law is war's, the thriftless spender,
And gold coins keep their value better.

Long I had lived with my own heart;
Then others came with many a fuss.
They said: "You kept yourself apart.
We wish you could have been with us."

So did I live in vanity.
I now draw my conclusion thus.
They did but make a fool of me,
And even my death is fatuous.

I have tried all my life to keep
My footing in a whirlwind fast.
The thought is ludicrously cheap
That others' harm matched mine at last.

The spring is good and summer, too,
But autumn better and winter best
For him who finds his last hopes through
Family hearths he knew as guest.

Translated by Vernon Watkins

Notes.

1. Attila József wrote over 600 poems. No one can claim that by selecting 20 of his most characteristic or most significant verses he has done justice to the poet. At best, the poems selected are landmarks, showing the historical development of the poet's genius, at worst, they reflect the selector's taste who excluded poems, others would have liked to see published in the first volume of József's verse to appear in English.

2. Translating for this volume started in 1956 when the editor decided to settle in England, and found, to his dismay that the poetry of Attila József was virtually unknown in the West. Since the 'Poetry of Attila József' was to have been the title of his doctorate in Hungarian in Eötvös Lóránd University Budapest, he decided that the way to translation started with philological research. The survey of translations from József in English has shown that by 1965 nearly 200 of his poems were rendered into English. From the 'New Hungarian Quarterly' published in Budapest to the 'Octagon' published in London, 21 English, Hungarian, Australian, American, and Canadian newspapers, periodicals, magazines and anthologies have published whole poems or extracts from József. Among many other notable contributors, the translators included Laurie Lee, Vernon Watkins, Anton Nyerges, J.C.W. Horne, I. Duczinska, Edwin Morgan, and R. Bonnerjea.

3. In March 1965 a translating group was formed in London to translate a number of poems by Attila József in a way that withstood both textual analysis and comparison with the original. The work consisted of socio-biographical background studies, semantic analysis of poems, stylistic analysis of verse, and a preparation of 71 variants of 16 poems that found their way into the present volume. Four other poems: 'Welcome to Thomas Mann', 'Grief' (Vernon Watkins); 'I saw beauty' (N. Krasso and L. Rey); and 'Attila József (R. Bonnerjea) were done independently, but they were found so happily matching the mood of the originals that they were included at the expense of other translations which would have been closer to the originals in the sense of the narrow letter only.

4. Examples of variants - a translation in progress - may illustrate one way of trying to achieve the effect of the original poem:

a. 'literal translation': 'From a pure heart.'

I have no mother no father
no God no homeland
no cradle no pall
no kisses no lover.

For the third day I have eaten
neither much nor little
my twenty years are a power
I sell my twenty years.

If nobody wants them
the devil may buy them.
With a pure heart I will break in
if need be: I will kill a man.

They will catch me and hang me
(Then) cover me with blessed earth
and poisonous grass will grow
on my beautiful heart.

b. 'semantic translation': 'With a pure heart.'

I have no father, no mother
no God, and no homeland
no cradle, no shroud
no mistress, no kisses.

Three days I haven't eaten
either much or little.

Twenty years are my power,
I shall sell my twenty years.

If nobody wants them
the devil will buy them,
with a pure heart I shall rob
and I'll kill if I have to.

They'll catch me and string me up,
they'll lay me in blessed earth,
and deadly grass will grow
on my beautiful heart.

Notes to semantic translation (by Michael Beevor): "In Hungarian this has a straightforward rhyme structure: aabb etc. It is difficult to reproduce this in English without distorting the extreme simplicity of the sentiments expressed and producing an altogether jolly effect. The poem is wholly devoid of humour and is a clear expression of the much despised emotion of self-pity combined with the mawkish truculence of youth raging at its own impotence."

c. 'verse translation': 'With a pure heart'

Without father without mother
without God or homeland either
without crib or coffin-cover
without kisses or a lover

for the third day - without fussing
I have eaten next to nothing.
My store of power are my years
I sell all my twenty years.

Perhaps, if no one else will
the buyer will be the devil.
With a pure heart - that's a job:
I may kill and I shall rob.

They'll catch me, hang me high
In blessed earth I shall lie,
and poisonous grass will start
to grow on my beautiful heart.

5. Re-creation by association of ideas is still a remaining possibility and translations produced in this way may often surpass, match or approach the effect of the original. There can be no doctrines. Let Vernon Watkins' translation illustrate this final point:

'By the Danube'.

On the bottom step that from the wharf descends
I sat, and watched a melon-rind float by.
I hardly heard, wrapped in my destined ends,
To surface chat the silent depth reply.
As if it flowed from my own heart in spate,
Wise was the Danube, turbulent and great.

Like a man's muscles bending at his toil,
Hammering pitching, leaning on the spade,
So bulged and then contracted in recoil
Each wave that rippling in the current played.
It rocked me like my mother, told me a wealth
Of tales, and washed out all the city's filth.

And drops of rain began to fall, but then,
As though their fall, had no effect, they stopped.
Yet still, like one who stayed at the long rain
Out of a cave, my gaze I never dropped
Below the horizon. Endlessly to waste,
Drably like rain fell all bright things, the past.

The Danube just flowed on. And playfully
The ripples laughed at me as I reclined,
A child on his prolific mother's knee
Resting, while other thoughts engaged her mind.
They trembled in time's flow and in its wake
As tottering tombstones in a graveyard shake.

2.

I am he who has gazed a hundred thousand years
On that which he now sees for the first time.
One moment, and fulfilled all time appears
In a hundred thousand forbears' eyes and mine.

I see what they could not because they must
Drag hoes, kill and embrace, for this enrolled,
And they, who have descended into dust
See what I do not, if the truth be told.

We know each other as sorrow and delight.
I, in the past, they in the present live.
They hold the pencil in the poem I write.
I feel them and evoke what they now give.

3.

My mother was Cumanian, and half Szekler
My father half Rumanian or entire.
The nurture from my mother's mouth was nectar
And from my father's lips the truth was pure.
When I stir, they embrace. Then, soon or late,
This makes me sad. This is mortality.
Of this I am made. Such words as these: Just wait
Until we are no more - they speak to me.

They speak to me, for now I am they, robust
Despite whatever weakness made me frail,
And I think back that I am more than most:
Each ancestor am I, to the first cell.
I am the Forbear split and multiplied
To make my father and my mother whole;
My father and mother then in turn divide,
and so I am made one, a single soul.

I am the world; all that is past exists;
Where nations hurl themselves against each other,
With me in death the conqueror's victory lasts,
In me the anguish gnaws of those they smother.
Árpád, Zalán, Werbőczy, Dózsa, Turks,
Tartars, Rumanians, Slovaks, storm this heart.
If in great depths a quiet future lurks,
It owes the past, to-day's Hungarians, part.

I want to work. Enough of conflict goes
Into that need which must confess the past.
The Danube's tender ripples which compose
Past, present, future, hold each other fast.
The battle which our ancestors once fought
Through recollection is resolved in peace,
And settling at long last the price of thought,
This is our task, and none too short its lease.

London, March, 1966 Thomas Kabdebo.