There and Back: An Interview with Tom Hubbard

Attila Dósa

ABSTRACT

In this interview, conducted during the fourteenth ESSE Conference at Brno in the Czech Republic, Scottish academic and writer Tom Hubbard speaks about his recent work of poetry and fiction, such as *The Flechitorium* (2017) and *Slavonic Dances* (2017). He also discusses the stimulating forces behind and the stumbling blocks on the long road towards Scottish independence. He fears and is anxious about the consequences of Brexit on the multifaceted exchange in the arts and literature that Scots have been keen to maintain with other nations throughout the centuries. At the center of his discussion lies his view of Scotland's place in a nexus of international exchange that would be, ideally, based on mutual and informed interest in each other's cultural achievement—in literature, music, and the visual and performing arts. (AD)

KEYWORDS: Brexit, Tom Hubbard, literary translation, Scots language, Scottish culture, Scottish poetry

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Tom Hubbard (born 1950, Kirkcaldy, Fife, Scotland)—academic, bibliographer, librarian, novelist, "makar" and wandering scholar—has been instrumental in what has been termed the "internationalization" of Scottish letters. He was among the founders, and was appointed the first Librarian, of the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh before embarking on a series of global Visiting Professorships at the Universities of Connecticut, Budapest, Grenoble, and North Carolina, Asheville. He has given talks and readings in about a dozen countries and in

about half a dozen more he has conducted research on behalf of the Bibliography of Scottish Literature in Translation (BOSLIT), a key resource designed to enhance the understanding of the international impact of Scottish Literature. His year at Budapest (when he also paid an academic visit to the Department of English at the University of Miskolc), as well as his research for BOSLIT, relate to his work on *Scotland in Europe* (2006), a collection of essays on the European reception of Scottish fiction and poetry from the Middle Ages, which he co-edited with R. D. S. Jack in 2006. He served on the executive committee of Scottish P.E.N. and undertook or otherwise supervised comparative research programs on Scots, Catalan, and Swiss languages and cultures. He is author of numerous articles on Scottish literature, with special reference to the history of poetry in Scots, and has edited poetry anthologies, including ones featuring Hungarian poetry in Scots translation and vice versa. He has translated poems from several languages including Hungarian, and some of his own poems appeared in Hungarian translation in the literary review *Nagyvilág* (2001). A former Honorary Fellow at the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, Hubbard currently works as a full-time writer and is a widely published author of poetry and fiction. His poetry collections include *Scottish Faust* (2004), *The Chagall Winnocks* (2011), and *Parapets and Labyrinths* (2013). A portion of his poetry tends to nurture strong roots in the local lore of Fife where he comes from and has been loyal to—see his latest collection *The Flechitorium* (2018), discussed at some length in this interview. However, he is just as ready to explore and absorb foreign inspirations, which he derives not only from literature, but also from its sister arts such as painting and music. His first novel, *Marie B*. (2008), was inspired by the widely-praised diary of Ukrainian–French painter Marie Bashkirtseva, while *Slavonic Dances* (2017), a set of three interlinked novellas on Eastern-European encounters, borrowed its title from Czech composer Antonín Leopold Dvořák. In this interview, Hubbard talks about the stimulating forces behind, and the stumbling blocks on the long road towards Scottish independence, as well as

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about his fears and anxieties concerning the consequences of Brexit on the multifaceted exchange in the arts and literature that Scots have been keen to maintain with other nations throughout the centuries. The interview was conducted on 31 August 2018, during the fourteenth ESSE Conference organized at Masaryk University, Brno, in the Czech Republic. I am grateful to Mrs. Noémi Dojcsákné-Koncz at the University of Miskolc for her assistance in transcribing this interview. All remaining errors are mine, of course.

Attila Dósa: Let me ask you first about the Scottish independence referendum of 2014. In Hungary, I remember we were looking forward to it with some expectations, and we were feeling some sympathy for the Scots. Actually, we were hoping that this referendum would set an example, or a precedent, for Szekler autonomy in Romania, where there is this enclave of Hungarian community called the Szeklers, who have been working hard for their autonomy for a long time.

Tom Hubbard: Kodály wrote a cantata called *Székelyfonó*…

AD: That's right. Now, the end result was different. It was an unsuccessful referendum—or wasn't it?

TH: It was embarrassing.

AD: And why was it embarrassing?

TH: Because, as my daughter said at the time, Scotland must be the first country to actually vote against its independence, and she felt very ashamed about that and so did I. I think one of

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the possibly civilizing effects of independence that Scotland missed voting for is that nationhood in Scotland is defined as a civic phenomenon rather than an ethnic phenomenon. Scottishness is not defined by ethnicity. It is defined by your place in a civic society: if you come from another country, and you settle in Scotland, and you make your contribution to the economy in your job, that makes you a Scot. This was reflected in the criteria for enfranchisement, in who would be eligible to vote in the referendum, which meant that it was people who actually lived in Scotland, wherever they came from, from England or Poland or Hungary, who had the right to vote. But Scots who lived outside of Scotland were not enfranchised, so the Scottish diaspora was not able to vote. This was based on the principle that the people who should be enfranchised should be people who are actually living and working *today* in Scotland rather than people who had been born in Scotland but had gone to work abroad.

AD: I think we saw the end result from Hungary, from the other end of Europe, partly as an economic compromise—it was better for Scotland to stay in the British economy, which appeared to be strong at the time—and partly as the beginning of hope for some further work, further struggle and, as I said, our sympathies were with the Scots, and we said, okay, maybe next time you would succeed. Now, what can you tell me about the conflicts and the issues at stake from an insider's perspective? You said that it was embarrassing, but what could have been the reasons for the failed initiative? Economic compromise? Or fear of the unknown?

TH: Lack of confidence, fear of the unknown, an insufficient awareness on the part of the Scottish population about their own culture. Although we have a much better situation now—more Scottish history and a certain amount of Scottish literature is taught in the schools than

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in the past—there is still a lack of consciousness of our own culture and traditions throughout Scotland, and there is an assumption that anything that comes from the south-east of England must be superior. Most of our media come from the south-east of England, and the media have the perspectives of the south-east of England. So, a lack of confidence, or ignorance, as I would say, of our own culture, let alone of the cultures of the rest of the world. That was a big contributory factor. Fear of the unknown, well, there is a very heavy irony in that, now that we're in the mess of 2018. You are asking about what happened in the past that would lead up to the 2014 Scottish referendum result. One of the things that we were told was that if we voted for independence, we would be thrown out of the European Union, and this is what the Unionist parties got together for. They were in cahoots and they came out with all the stuff like Scotland will be isolated, and it will become a backwater if we break away from the United Kingdom. What we could not have foreseen then, and it's a specific kind of retrospective irony, is that on the horizon there was not at that time any talk of Brexit. But the irony hit a lot of us very painfully, when it became clear that Scotland, every part of Scotland, every division of Scotland voted against Brexit. So, there was a figure of 62% in favor of staying in the European Union, but, as you know, throughout the UK as a whole, especially in England, the vote was about leaving, so we were told we've got to leave with the rest… Tough! So, having been told that if we became independent, we would be thrown out of the European Union, we voted against independence. And now, we *are* thrown out of the European Union. It is going to have devastating effects on Scotland's cultural relations with the rest of Europe. Just think of the simple practicalities of mobility between countries, of people being able to come and visit us, and work in Scotland: from now on, they'll have to get visas. We are hearing a lot of really terrifying stories about people in Scotland who have married someone from outside Scotland, and they're up against a great deal of bureaucracy, not knowing if their spouse is going to be allowed to settle in Scotland. In Scotland, where we

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welcome immigrants. We want people to come, and we want to learn from other cultures, but that's going to become more difficult because of the Westminster *Diktat.*

AD: Of course, this raises many different questions. One, perhaps, apart from all the political reasons that you have just mentioned, is what really tempted the Scots to vote against Brexit. Where does this interest in, or affiliation with European cultures come from?

TH: This is a complex issue, and I'd be very wary of oversimplifying it. There is a certain kind of rather vague sensibility that we are not affected to the same degree by the insular mentality that prevails in much of England, especially in the non-urban areas. London voted very strongly to stay in the EU, but there you to talk about a sophisticated and multicultural urban center; it has people from all over the world as well as its indigenous population. But England as a whole voted to leave, and because Scotland has a small population, England has just overwhelmed us. But to answer your question: why are we more *attuned* to staying in the EU? I don't think that we Scots should get too self-righteous about being less insular than the English. After all, we're not altogether free of racism, there is parochialism, we must concede that there is inward-lookingness in Scotland as well. But it's not as vocal, and it's not as aggressive as it is down South. Although I have witnessed aggressive racism in Scotland, it's not as pervasive as it is in England. It may well be that, as a relatively isolated country, the Scottish people have felt that they want to be part of that larger entity, which is Europe. Historically, Scotland has had strong ties of its own with particular European countries like France. We know about the Auld Alliance, although that traditional friendship between Scotland and France can be rather exaggerated and sentimentalized. But there are cultural and economic ties, causing Scotland to leapfrog over the UK in such instances, and that may well

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be a factor. I don't have to hand any statistics as to why people in Scotland voted to remain in the European Union, there may well have been studies on that, I'm just not aware of them, as perhaps I should be. I would strongly suspect that such studies have been carried out by professional political scientists, because the questions will have been asked and people in Scotland will probably have given very different answers to why they voted to remain in the European Union. We would really need to have quite hard, scientifically commissioned and collected data related to that in order to be able to answer that one in any meaningful sense.

AD: Alex Salmond said after the referendum that they would carry on the work and added that within a generation another referendum should be held: he was quite confident of that at that time.

TH: Maybe even earlier than that…

AD: Is there any hope left, or has Brexit completely punctured the hopes of Scotland to become an independent country in the near future?

TH: I think in the short term there's going to be a lot of gloom because of Brexit, but we have a generation coming up, which doesn't have quite the same ideology of Britishness behind it. This ideology of Britishness, although it is not as strong in Scotland as it is south of the border, has still been a factor. We have institutions like the monarchy, the whole panoply of Westminster, its pomp, all the pageantry of Britishness, which earlier generations were loyal to. We have to remember that during the Second World War Britain was united against Nazi Germany. It wasn't necessarily consciously united against an ideology that we call fascism; it was objectively a war against fascism, but it was mediated in Britain as a patriotic defence of

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Britain against Germany, rather than a struggle against fascism as such. But I think the generations coming up are really not quite so fixated on all these trappings, on all these signifiers, if you like, of Britishness, as those earlier generations understandably were. When the war ended in 1945, people who were in their twenties then were waving Union Jacks, and at that time the whole question of any slight autonomy for Scotland just wasn't there. It was very definitely on the back burner, it was thought to be the fantasy of a few cranks. Well, that changed in time. I think generational change is going to make a big difference. We see that throughout this continent: we think of, say, a novel like Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, where you have ideological contentiousness between generations. One could see that as a kind of key text for how a generation succeeds another, and it has got its own way of perceiving how things are going, and will make its decisions accordingly. Certainly in Britain, they're trying to make the most of Prince William and his spouse to try and maintain the glamour of the monarchy once the old lady dies. She's well into her nineties and I think that they are really rather terrified that Charles just doesn't have the same popularity as his mom has, or as his son has, so they would be very conscious, they're trying to build up Prince William as the future king who's going to keep the kingdom together. I'm not really quite sure if that's going to work and I don't obviously hope it would.

AD: You have quoted your daughter's words as saying that Scotland is the only country that voted against its own independence. Now, critics have claimed that Scotland as a modern multicultural and multilingual country is so much aware of its own cultural identity and difference that there is no need for the Scots to formally assert their national belonging. We are living in a globalized world, that's one of the recent bywords, and we're entering a post-national phase, so, perhaps, Scots simply didn't feel the need to express their national belonging politically. What do you think?

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TH: I'm not sure of that, I suspect this is just some kind of fantasy on the part of some pundits. It seems to me to be suggesting a kind of false dichotomy that one cannot be both multicultural and at the same time have regard to one's own indigenous traditions. Consider this very city that we're in just now, and think of Janáček, whose Conservatoire is just across the road from us, and his house is just up the road there. He is someone who's deeply rooted in Moravian culture, and he composed his operas on the basis of the speech rhythms of this part of the country, and yet, his work has travelled. I remember going to hear the Scottish Opera performing Janáček's operas in Glasgow. So, there I think is a very strong example of someone who is very much rooted in his local traditions but is universal as well, because we can recognize the basic passions that his characters articulate in his operas as being both local and universal. The local and the universal don't cancel themselves out. I think any suggestion that somehow they necessarily cancel each other out is extremely perverse. The most cosmopolitan of us in Scotland can still have a sense of identity, but we want to share it. We don't want to keep Scottish culture to ourselves, we don't want to turn inwards, but we want to share our culture with you guys, we want to learn more about your culture, we are both students as well as professors, if you like. [Laughs]

AD: Anyone talking to you would certainly take notice of your Scottish accent, which I very much like. But, another related issue, or another commonplace if you like, in critical studies, is the concept that Scottish writers live and work between and across languages. How do you see that as a writer of poetry and fiction? Do you perceive Scotland as a multilingual place, and if you do, do you benefit from it?

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TH: We're talking about the use of Scots and Gaelic as well as English. I think we have a very flourishing contemporary literature in Scots and in Gaelic as well as in English. A lot of it is uneven, but that's the way of things, that not all of it is high quality. It is flourishing at all points of the spectrum between sheer genius and mediocrity. But I would want to widen that beyond this holy trinity, or the linguistic trinity of Scots, Gaelic, and English to how we engage in Scotland with languages beyond our indigenous ones, and again that links up with how we respond to the philistine rubbish that is Brexit. I would hope that we will defy Brexit and then Scotland will become more, not less, interested in other countries and in other cultures, and will try to learn their languages. One thing that shames me is that we're sitting here talking in English, your English is superb, and my Hungarian is very, very basic, and I'm conscious of that. It's too dubious to claim that the Scots are more polyglottal than the English, I think it's greatly more complex than that. As Margery McCulloch was saying at one of our Scottish seminars the other day, we should not try patting ourselves on the back too much [laughs]. We may or may not be over-complacent, but we can get over-confident. There are two extremes: of being over-confident about Scottish culture and of not being confident at all. There has to be a happy middle way, I would say. I would hope that we could be more open, that we could make an effort to learn or at least try to learn other peoples' languages. Although French and German are taught, there has always been a constant threat to the teaching of languages in schools: that money is going to be taken away soon, and that is already happening at university level, too. There have been threats to Modern Languages Departments that they'll lose their funding, and it seems bizarre, it's crazy, it's outrageous, but we cannot take it for granted that there is always going to be the provision that we have now, limited as it is, for learning other languages. I would hope that we're just not going to follow on with all this chauvinistic nonsense that Brexit is encouraging. Certainly, as regards the other arts, it's much easier for there to be that interaction. There's just not the same

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problems there are with languages, so I would hope we will continue to have exhibitions of artists from other parts of the world in Scotland, in Edinburgh and Glasgow and Dundee, and in other arts galleries and arts spaces throughout the country. My fear is that the Brexit-created bureaucracy is going to make that a lot more difficult, but hopefully we can reciprocate by exhibiting our visual arts works in other countries. And similarly with music, as you know at the Edinburgh Festival we have visiting orchestras and singers. Just across the road from here, as we've said, is the Janáček Conservatoire, where Magdalena Kožená, the great mezzo-soprano studied. She appeared at the Edinburgh Festival very recently, so we very much hope that we can continue to welcome great artists in their various media to our country and that we can continue to send our talented people in various arts to other countries. It is much easier to have that kind of intercultural exchange than it is on the linguistic side, but I hope that the translation would continue. Translation is never perfect, but it's better than no exposure to our sister literatures, still better than nothing at all.

AD: Speaking of cultural interaction: you have just given a presentation on Scottish and Czech cultural relations, and I think it's an important part of your academic work. Could you say a few words about that?

TH: Yes, but it's not just my academic interest. It's very germane to my work as a creative writer but, you know, often the academic side and the artistic side are very closely related. About my book that was published last year, *Slavonic Dances*, which I'll be talking about tonight, a reviewer said that he thought I had written that in response to Brexit to assert Scottish connections with mainland Europe. In fact, I started writing the book a good time before the vote was taken, and I remember that I actually finished writing it before we got the result of the EU referendum, but again… [a bird chirping] We've got a wee performer there!

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He must come to the Edinburgh Festival, and do a kind of ballet around our sculptures! And we might even build a statue to him! [Laughs] Where was I? ... This cross-fertilisation could influence us, not just in translating from other languages, but also have an impact on the content of our work that could actually re-orient our artistic practice and also re-orient our academic practice. I think there is far too little awareness in Scottish literary circles and Scottish academic circles about the influence of mainland European writers on creative practice in Scotland itself. Often the study of Scottish literature in Scotland can be very narrow. In my talk this morning I cited the impact of Proust on Muriel Spark, who is very much a modernist writer. I think we should pay more attention to just how strong that continental influence can be on specific Scottish writers, because otherwise we can get into a kind of self-generating loop, on the one hand, of the obsession with how we relate to England (obviously, it is a big issue) and, on the other hand, with how different parts of Scotland relate to each other. So, it can become very incestuous. I think we have to recognize what we have learned as writers, as well as pedagogues/academics, from European culture, and to consider what countries like your own can learn from our creative and academic practice. It's a question of dialogue. Too often I've come across a rather complacent attitude that it's nice that the Hungarians, the Czechs, the Poles are translating us, we've got these other nations translating our novels, so that you can come across James Robertson in French and so on, which is great, I'm delighted at that. I just wish we in Scotland were as interested in receiving the literatures of other countries, and were as curious about them as they are about us. It's very odd that we have Departments of Scottish Literature and English Literature at universities, but they have little or no contact with their colleagues in the Departments of Modern Languages, while among the members of staff there will be native speakers of these languages who have come to live here to lecture in French, German, Spanish, Italian, or

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whatever, but there is a lack of communication between the people who are involved in Scottish studies and the expertise in these language departments.

AD: I'm curious about the inspiration behind your first novel *Marie B.*, published in 2009. It's based on the real-life story of Maria Bashkirtseva, a Ukrainian-French aristocratic painter, who died in 1884, aged 26. How does she fit into your academic interest in cosmopolitanism in general, and in specific European cultures? What can we learn from her life story?

TH: One point, which might answer all these questions, is my fascination with her dual inheritance, Ukrainian and French; if that's not cosmopolitan, I don't know what is. She grows up in Nice as a spoiled, dilettante young girl with a sense of entitlement, but she does return for a while to her father's estate in Ukraine. Encounters with local peasants, together with her discovery of the expansive landscape: that all leads her to a greater maturity, and she returns to France, determined to study painting seriously. From then on the action of the novel takes place in Paris. I've been a visiting professor in France, at the University of Grenoble, and since *Marie B.* appeared, I've edited books of academic essays on Baudelaire and Flaubert. French fiction tends towards concision, and I think that's influenced my own writing. I mentioned Turgenev earlier, and he's also had an impact on me, not least in the part of *Marie B.* which takes place in Ukraine. Maria Bashkirtseva developed into an artist of achievement as well as of promise, but her early death came tragically just before the time that French painting—indeed European painting—was entering new phases; we're talking of post-impressionism, of the various modernist schools of painting. She was a pioneer feminist journalist, and I represent that in the novel, and her outspoken diaries were posthumously censored by her conventionally-minded mother. Maria Bashkirtseva seems to me to be a good

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role model for both young women and young men, as someone capable of changing her personality and attitudes dramatically for the better, and for her legacy in both words and images. I have the working-class Ukrainian and French characters speaking in various forms of Scots; that seems to me to be more realistic than having them speak in standard forms of English. You have to make decisions as to appropriate strategies of transposition. It's to do with an awareness of sociolinguistics.

My second novel, *The Lucky Charm of Major Bessop*, appeared in 2014, and it's subtitled "A Grotesque Mystery of Fife." It's set in my home county in Scotland. In some ways it reverses the method in my first novel; where *Marie B.* has these non-Scottish characters speaking Scots, *The Lucky Charm of Major Bessop* has chapters which take the action beyond Fife and Scotland to mainland Europe, especially the Netherlands, and specifically Amsterdam.

AD: In the Scottish studies panel that we've just had, apart from you, I think all of the contributors came from Eastern Europe: Czechia, Serbia, Armenia, and Hungary. Is this a disappointment, or is this a success, in terms of Scottish Studies?

TH: Well, I'm delighted at it, and it takes me back to a memory. I visited Poland in 1989, just as the changes were getting underway, the communists had the round table discussion with Solidarność, and the partially free elections were in the offing. I remember I was there with a delegation, an unofficial delegation, and we visited a theater, an avant-garde theater in Lublin, in Eastern Poland, which used to be a great centre of Jewish culture until the war. And I met a guy there who was one of the actors, and I was very impressed by the non-verbal theater that was going on there. We got chatting about this and that, talking about Scotland and Poland, and then a year later I was giving a lecture at the University of Mainz in Germany. It was

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quite a big audience, and the same guy came up to me at the end and re-introduced himself. I thought, wow, I met you in Poland, in Lublin last year and so, so what are you doing here in Germany? He said he was studying the aesthetics of Schelling. His English was very good, we got chatting again and he was invited to join us for dinner. And as we were walking through the streets of Mainz he started talking about Alasdair Gray, and this was in 1990, and I was absolutely amazed at his knowledge… How did he manage to get a hold of Alasdair Gray's work, which he was reading in the original English in 1990? What the hell did I know about contemporary Polish literature, let alone being able to read it in original Polish? I just felt incredibly moved and humbled, and I still have that strong emotion, these twenty-eight years on. I thought, well, I've got an awful lot to learn. I hadn't even read most of the Alasdair Gray texts he was referring to. It was a revelation. I can't say I was surprised by what he said, I was surprised, really, at how he had managed to get a hold of these novels at that time, just within months of the Berlin Wall collapsing, and then, to be able to not just read them but to digest them, and be able to talk intelligently to someone from Scotland. I had a strong sense of my ignorance, as far as the contemporary period was concerned, of the literature of his country.

AD: Finally, could you say a few words about your recent work of poetry, *The Flechitorium*?

TH: Yes, in which you played a significant part. [Laughs] I won't explain the title; I will leave it enigmatic for people to look it up on the web. It contains poems but there is also a short story at the end, darkly Faustian in character, which serves as a kind of rounding-off epilogue. The pieces are all based on Fife folklore, or Fife history, or have some kind of specifically Fife resonance. There are ballads, which are based on traditional models, and the language is in Scots, though not exclusively in Scots, there's material written in English as

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well, but again, I suppose I was taking again Janáček as one of my mentors in basing the poetry on a speech rhythm of the particular part of the world I live in, just as Janáček was doing here in Moravia. And what links that book to you, Attila, is that twelve years ago when we were doing all that work in Budapest and Miskolc, you very kindly guided me in translating a couple of poems by Lajos Áprily, or Áprily Lajos—please excuse my pronunciation—who lived from 1887 to 1967, and had visited Scotland and translated Burns into Hungarian. I gather he's regarded as one of the best, maybe the best translator of Burns into Hungarian. And so much had he done that I thought let's return the favor and do something with his poems and bring them to Scotland—bring him *back* to Scotland, because he had visited Scotland, he'd been in St Andrews. It was nice of you to assist in the translation, as you had studied at St Andrews. So, there were these Hungarian St. Andrews poems that we worked on, turning one into Scots and one into English. You got me to perform them at Miskolc University, and that was great fun. I decided to include these in the book and give you an honourable mention there, so I'm not the sole author of this book, but you're a collaborator, as I've written in the inscription, you're a co-conspirator!

AD: Thanks very much indeed, thank you very much.

TH: They flew, twelve years, they just flew…

August 31, 2018, Brno

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