

**COURTLY LITERATURE  
IN RENAISSANCE HUNGARY AND ENGLAND:  
BÁLINT BALASSI AND PHILIP SIDNEY**

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While numerous studies have been devoted to English—Hungarian cultural contacts of the 16th and 17th centuries, such as travellers and peregrinants, Hungarian Renaissance literature, produced for aesthetic purposes, remains a *terra incognita* on the map of English or American scholars. Until recently, one of the major obstacles was the lack of translations from early Hungarian literary works; this has now partly been resolved by recent publications which contain the most important lyrical output of old Hungarian literature as well as some important excerpts of the prosaic oeuvres.<sup>1</sup> My paper tries to highlight one segment of our Renaissance culture which offers good points of comparison for the students of the Elizabethan period.

The aesthetically minded Hungarian, who wants to introduce the foreigner to the Renaissance literature of his country, would, naturally, wish to start with **Bálint Balassi**, the greatest Hungarian poet of the 16th century. Balassi also fully matched the contemporary European standards of literature, while developing some specifically Hungarian and 'Balassian' poetical features. But how to transmit his poetry to foreigners which is encaged in the amber stone of a strange, hardly accessible language and was fostered by a culture so ambiguous for the inhabitants of Western Europe: contemporary and akin, at the same time remote and barbarous.

For the English speaking world, fortunately, there seems to be a convenient and intriguing parallel: the life and poetry of Sir Philip Sidney.

The biographical convergencies of the two poets and Sidney's travels in Hungary have been well covered by both English and Hungarian scholars.<sup>2</sup> What I attempt in the present essay is to pair the two poets, according to their literary activities, by employing in my comparison the terms of historical poetics and some aspects of the sociology of literature.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach, I hope, can help to answer the obvious question: why it might be

profitable for a Renaissance comparatist to study the literature of 'old Hungary'?

To make the comparison more justifiable, however, a brief summary of the biographical parallels might still be useful.

Both poets were born in the same year (1554), Balassi on October 20, Sidney on November 30. Both their fathers were high aristocrats, famous military leaders, owners of numerous estates and castles. Both of them had excellent teachers: Sidney among others John Dee, the queen's astrologer and renowned scientist; Balassi had Péter Bornemisza, leading writer of the Hungarian Reformation and author of the first Hungarian classical tragedy which preceded *Gorboduc* with a few years. Sidney studied at Oxford, Balassi in Nürnberg, but neither of them went for a degree — they rather preferred travelling as a natural expansion of regular schooling.

Both of them had early experiences of courtly life, Sidney in London, beside Elizabeth, then, criss-crossing Europe in various royal and princely centers; Balassi in Vienna, in Cracow and at the court of the Transylvanian Princes. In 1573 Sidney even visited Hungary and we cannot be sure if the two youths did not meet personally. In the lesser known part of the humanist correspondence sent from the Continent to Sidney, there are references to many prominent Hungarians, among others, to Balassi and his father.<sup>4</sup>

The similarities between the two poets' literary programs will be reviewed later in this essay; it should be noted here, however, that both were pioneers in institutionalizing literature by recognizing the importance of the audience-response, literary community, groups, and 'academies'.

Even their deaths were of the same kind: heroic Christian deaths. Sidney was mortally wounded at the siege of Zutphen, where he fought as a volunteer commander for the Protestants against the Spanish. Balassi was hit by cannon fire at the siege of Esztergom, where the joint imperial and Hungarian armies sought to recapture the ancient Hungarian city from the Turkish occupiers. Both of them suffered blood poisoning and during their several days' struggle with death they "performed" exemplary conversions and Christian departures. The contemporaries monitored these model passings-away, and the poets were not only commemorated by quickly published volumes of *epicedia*, but their fate also became promptly mythicised, and the growing legends played a part in the subsequent canon-formation of their works.<sup>5</sup>

Before starting our survey of their poetics, we should refer to the circumstances of their literary activity and also to the significance of courtly culture in the Renaissance states.

### I. Courtly Literature in the English and the Hungarian Renaissance

Since Burckhardt we know that the social basis of the Italian Renaissance was the rising urban population, a basically bourgeois layer which dictated the strategies of money-making, and even the rules of government and the style of leisure, to their local aristocracy. But we also know that this process was soon reversed, and the wealthy and powerful middle class started imitating the nobility. What we define as Renaissance culture is a curious blend of this bi-directional movement. North of the Alps the situation was even more paradoxical. Although the bourgeoisie was not as strong as in Italy, many of the cultural ideals of the Italian revival seemed attractive to the local leaders. New ways of money-making yielded new wealth everywhere in Europe (in Spain colonization, in England enclosures, in Poland and Hungary the increasing meat- and wine-export) but this wealth remained mostly in the hands of the aristocracy. This is why we witness the mixture of classical and Italian elements on the one hand, and a great deal of chivalric and high-courtly ideals on the other, in the Renaissance culture of most European countries.

Looking at the most general characteristics of the English and the Hungarian Renaissance, we find strikingly similar phenomena, and, naturally, greatly differing features, too. The socio-historical framework could hardly be more different. In spite of the fact that in the mid 16th century both countries were 'on the fringe' of civilized Europe and neither of them played a leading role in continental politics, England was on the way to integration, consolidation, and a rising wealth which was going to lead to the formation of the world's leading empire. On the other hand, Hungary was disintegrating. After the 1526 Mohács disaster (cf. Thomas More's *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*) the country was torn between two *de facto* (and even *de jure*) rulers while the fall of Buda to the Turks in 1541 established a third power within the historical Hungarian territories.

This situation resulted in the fact that while in other parts of Europe Renaissance culture was concentrated around strengthening royal courts and became the mode of expression for the growing integral national spirit, in Hungary, our vernacular Renaissance came into existence while suffering

the lack of such a central power and made claims for national sentiments, while at the same time registering the tendencies of political disintegration.

An interesting similarity between these two radically differing political models was that both in the rising Western national states and in politically declining Hungary it was the nobility which first became interested in sponsoring the new type of culture and the new literary and artistic fashions. England — in spite of the early appearance of capitalism and industrialization — remained essentially an aristocratic, courtly culture. This curious fact can be explained by the overwhelming impact of the court of Elizabeth which invited everybody — from lords to burghers — to imitate it. This phenomenon coincides with a general European trend of the late Renaissance, which Arnold Hauser referred to as the revival of chivalry.<sup>6</sup> In Hungary there was no capitalistic development, nor a growing bourgeoisie. The result was that culture, developing in Renaissance directions, necessarily had to take a courtly shape, sustained by magnates, who, in the absence of a royal court in Hungary, tried to create courtly centers with a microclimatic culture. They exercised patronage much like the rulers of other countries, supporting schools and printing presses, inviting writers and scholars to their palaces, employing artists and musicians.

The examples to be followed were not very far from Hungary. I have already mentioned the great regional courtly centers in all of which Balassi was a frequent visitor: Vienna, Cracow, the Transylvanian capital, Gyulafehérvár (today Alba Iulia in Rumania), and Pozsony-Pressburg (today Bratislava in Slovakia). After the fall of Buda the latter became the site for hosting the Hungarian diet (Parliament) and the coronation of its rulers.

This developing urban culture, however, should not deceive the modern cultural historian. The strongly feudal basis of the Hungarian Renaissance is unmistakable beneath it, and thus we arrive at the point where the social development of Eastern and Western Europe became strongly divergent. The lack of the strong burgher communities undoubtedly made the Eastern Renaissance a self-contradictory formation, finally leading to the foundation of the second serfdom, a product of practically total refeudalization.

To sum up my thesis: we can see that both in England and in Hungary the system of noble patronage had a decisive role. In the case of the English and the Hungarian Renaissance two totally different socio-political formations lead to a cultural product in many ways so parallel to each other: in England the very strong and spectacular center of the Queen which outshone and *mutatis mutandis* united the most various social groups; in Hungary, the unstable political circumstances and the lack of urban

development produced an aristocratic layer responsible for the achievements of the national Renaissance.

Another peculiar — and rather unfortunate — feature of the Hungarian Renaissance was, that, in contrast to the continuous (however belated) development of the English Renaissance, here the cultural tradition shows sharp discontinuities. The 15th century witnessed an early blossoming of an Italian type of Humanism and courtly splendor under King Matthias, which did not evolve into a vernacular Renaissance like in France; nor can we see a strong medieval vernacular literary tradition which, as in England, could have been upgraded in the 16th century.

There were poets, however, in England, too, who believed that the future was more important than the past and who were desirous of creating something new and entirely different from everything that had been known in their literatures before. Sidney was one of these in England, and Balassi was *the* one in Hungary.

## II. Balassi's Art Contrasted to Sidney's

(Poetics) Although both poets had a complex literary and poetical tradition at hand, they were also conscious of starting something new. The lack of an appropriate tradition was most apparent in love poetry. During the Middle Ages, England did not produce such versatile and great chivalric love poetry as the French troubadours, the German minnesinger, or the poets of the *dolce stil nuovo*. In Hungary such a tradition seems to have been missing almost entirely.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, as Professor Ringler notes, "Sidney, looking at the English poetry of his own time and before, found it inadequate, and found none of his countrymen suitable guides to aid him in making it better".<sup>8</sup> Much the same can be said about Balassi.

Sidney had a conscious aim not only to introduce new topics into poetry but also to reform English poetic diction in order to prove its flexibility and perfect suitability for high level expression and refined form. Following the path of the Pléiade, he looked at the classics with great reverence, but at the same time defended the English language, and, with the aim of demonstrating its excellence, compared it to other vernacular languages (among others, to Hungarian!)<sup>9</sup> rather than to the classical idiom. This was a characteristic feature of late Renaissance literature everywhere, witnessing the rise of the national languages against the primacy of Greek and Latin. Balassi set up a similar program announcing new topics and arguing for the

excellence of the national language: "I too desired to enrich the Hungarian language ... so that all may realize that what can exist in other languages can also exist in Hungarian...".<sup>10</sup>

It is equally interesting to look at the two poets' views on the nature and function of poetry. In their programmatic writings (by which I mean Sidney's *Defence* and Balassi's much shorter but equally pioneering Preface to his *A Pleasing Hungarian Comedy* which was meant to fulfill the same role in Hungary as Sidney's apology in England) they seem to have put the stress on the entertaining features of literature, referring to invention rather than to didactic, or prophetic, 'sacred inspiration'.

Sidney differentiated among three categories of poets: the first "...imitate the unconceivable excellencies of God ...". The second deal with philosophical matters, and the third are set apart as "indeed right poets ... they which most properly do imitate to teach and delight, and to imitate borrow nothing of what is, hath been, or shal be; but range, only reined with learned discretion, into the divine consideration of what may be and should be".<sup>11</sup>

Balassi seems to have in mind a similar classification when he comments on the nature of the poetry he intends to write: "I have not been able to write a story i.e. history, scientific writing, ... nor could I write from the Holy Scripture, for quite enough has been and still is written about that on both sides. Therefore I had to produce something that, as I have explained earlier, would bring joy and a gay spirit even to the sad. It will not bring offence to anyone, because there is honest love in it."<sup>12</sup>

The dialectic contamination of three currents — a pragmatic approach (teach and delight); the Aristotelian principle of imitation; and the expressive theory of the platonic poetical fury — seems to be a very characteristic feature of both poets. Their theoretical programs and their poetry complement each other like two sides of the same coin: while they boast with their own inventions or imitate others' achievements (*licentia poetica* as Balassi calls it), their best poems come inspired by love's supernatural power which is but a class of Plato's sacred madnesses.

Whatever Sidney writes about imitation, when he comes to formulate his own poetic diction he flatly rejects the Aristotelian principle:

But words came halting forth, wanting Invention's stay,  
Invention, Nature's Child, fled step-dame Studie's blows...

...

'Foole', said my Muse to me, 'looke in thy heart and  
write'.  
(AS 1)

Balassi was much less of a theoretician than Sidney. In an unforgettable poetical image, however, he also recorded his inspired state being overtaken by poetical fury:

My mind's on the boil, wild as an anthill  
with many a new poem  
For only you are in my heart the fire  
of love's delicious flame...  
("A Prayer to Cupid", English by Keith Bosley & Peter  
Sherwood in Klaniczay, ed. 1985, 167)

**(Iconography)** The inclination towards Platonism encouraged our poets to develop an elevated love poetry and their insistence on the cultivation of invention spurred them to be individual and try to express their feelings by means of inspiration. At the same time, Platonism also demanded — as much as any other trend in Renaissance humanism — a confrontation with tradition. Lyric poets simply could not bypass the warehouse of Petrarchism, the stock of which dominates the iconography of both poets.

The scope of this paper does not permit an extensive analysis of motifs and iconographic details, I shall only briefly list the dominant common elements in Sidney's and Balassi's lyrics:

- images of the planets, fire, sea, angels, all this equated with the beloved's beauty, eyes, soul;
- various appearances of Cupid;
- other common emblematic motifs, such as swans, cranes, pelicans, salamanders, personified jealousy and others;
- *basium* (that is kiss)-poems; and 'remedia amoris' motifs (escapes to other, consoling females when the idealized beloved proves to be unconquerable).

The similar texture of poetry is not surprising as both poets — although not to the same extent — used the same sources of inspiration: Vergil, Ovid, Horace, Petrarch, the Neo-Latin poets (Marullus, Angerianus, and Janus Secundus) and some of the contemporary Italians and Germans: Sidney took notice of Sannazzaro's poetry, Balassi paraphrased Castelletti and Regnart. In addition — in accordance with the geographical areas — Sidney studied Spanish and French literature while Balassi's uniqueness in the

European Renaissance lyric lies in his familiarity with Slavic, Rumanian, and, above all, Turkish poetry and philosophy.

In spite of all this, we cannot say that they exploited the common sources in the same way. Our comparison becomes really interesting when we look at the divergencies, when we examine how a common cultural heritage brings different fruits in different contexts. All this demonstrates the variety within the unity of the same tradition — European Renaissance poetry. It is obvious that both Sidney and Balassi were attracted to the ideals and formal characteristics of international Petrarchism, and as part of an attempt to enrich their national cultures they consciously intended to create something like that in their own vernacular languages. It is also certain that they saw the character of their own poetry as something refined, courtly and addressed to an aristocratic audience rather than to the general Protestant reading public of their times.

In this context, their individual rewriting of Petrarchism becomes equally important. It is proper to apply to both poets what Marion Campbell recently noted about Sidney: "It is the business of critics to recognize that there is no monolithic interpretation of Petrarch. The history of the readings of Petrarch is at least as varied as the range of readings of Sidney that we are trying to use Petrarch to arbitrate between."<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the critic has to observe the synchronic interactions of texts as well as their diachronic progression in a parallel manner.

The common ideal and the unifying poetic tradition brings Sidney's and Balassi's poetry into a common category but the sociological and political differences between Hungary and England (as noted earlier) explain the divergencies in the resulting poetry they produced. There is one common denominator, however, from which they set out in different directions: this is their varying degree of detachment from Petrarchistic clichés, or, to be more precise, their very special treatment of the Petrarchan heritage.

A closer look at this aspect, the individual characteristics of rewriting Petrarch, places the two poets at opposite ends of the same field. Sidney got acquainted with Petrarchism at its ripest form, and he absorbed it so quickly that he could at the same time detach himself from it. A characteristic feature of his poetry is the ironic approach to the Petrarchistic clichés, such as in AS 71:

So while thy beautie draws the heart to love,  
As fast thy Vertue bends that love to good:  
'But ah', Desire still cries, 'give me some food.



Sometimes his invention arrives at almost manneristic extravagances — like in the following little footnote on the Renaissance iconography of horses:

I on my horse, and Love on me, doth trie  
 Our horsemanships, while by strange worke I prove  
 A horseman to my horse, a horse to Love;  
 And now man's wrongs in me, poor beast, descrie. (AS 49)

Balassi's relationship to his sources was more serious and more naive. While he seems to have tried hard to follow the prescribed patterns and become a 'poeta doctus', his natural inspiration often drew him back to a fresher, simpler style, which recalled the medieval May songs as much as the refined Renaissance *conchetti*.

I don't want this world without you, fair love  
 Who stand beside me: good health, my sweetheart!

My woeful heart's cheer, my soul's sweet longing,  
 You are all its joy: God's blessing be yours!

My precious palace, my fragrant red rose,  
 My lovely violet, live long Julia!

But when he finishes his song, the closing image could be taken from any Petrarchan iconography, indeed, from many a Sidney poem:

Thus Julia I greeted, seeing her:  
 I bowed knee, bowed head and she merely smiled.  
 ("When He Chanced Upon Julia He Greeted Her Thus"  
 English by Bosley and Sherwood, Klaniczay, ed. 1985,  
 164)<sup>14</sup>

No wonder that Balassi's detachment from Petrarchism is of a different nature than that of Sidney. The English knight had already overstepped the tradition and looked at it with benevolent — sometimes frustrated — irony; in the poetry of Balassi we observe a stronger presence of the 'popular register' which never allows erudition to overgrow emotional inspiration.<sup>15</sup>

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No talk about poetry becomes meaningful without offering an encounter with the poetry itself, in its entirety, evoking a complex experience instead

of theses resulting from isolated examination of fragments, images and distilled ideas. Sidney's poetry is widely known and his most famous poems have been exposed to various examinations, close readings, and explications. In the followings I would like to take a bird's eye's view of two of Balassi's poems in order to demonstrate the evolution of his voice from a skillful follower of international patterns to a dramatically individual variant of European Petrarchism.

Balassi was twenty-four when he got acquainted with Anna Losonczy (daughter of a famous Hungarian baron and commander who had been killed by the Turks), and they fell in love. By then the woman was the cultured and attractive wife of an elderly high-ranking magnate, so a liaison followed. This relationship inspired Balassi to address Anna with a dozen love lyrics. As literary historians agree, this affair was responsible for the birth of Renaissance love poetry in Hungary. Balassi's apprenticeship in poetry was characterized by an effort to imitate fashionable foreign models of his day (Italian 'padovanas' and Regnart's lyrics) and to follow the elements of contemporary Hungarian poetical patterns; but his feelings were so strong and naturally overflowing that they actually flooded through the chosen patterns.

After a period of passionate rhyming he became conscious of contemporary lyrical trends and conventions and tried to follow more advanced foreign models which had not existed before him in Hungarian poetry. His becoming acquainted in 1583 with the volume, *Poetae tres elegantissimi* (Paris, 1582) which contained the Latin lyrics of Marullus, Angerianus, and Janus Secundus proved a decisive point in this development. From this moment his poetry became complicated through various modes of role-playing. He consciously hid himself in enigmas and among the scenarios of poetical conventions; this shows that — apart from having experienced a 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' — he must also have consciously considered the idea of audience-reception.

It was at this time that he revived his interest in his old love, Anna, who was by now an aging widow, possessing an attractive dowry rather than personal charm. The lady must have seen through Balassi's motivation. All of a sudden he found himself in the situation of the Petrarchan lover: he had to imagine that he was desperately in love with a woman who did not accept his wooing and did not return his feelings. Balassi, following Janus Secundus, renamed his beloved Julia, and his achievement became a superb monument of Hungarian lyrical poetry, a blend of fine poetical invention, an adaptation of an intricate mythological framework, and the transmission

of direct experiences of nature in its rough, Hungarian reality. All this can quite clearly be seen in one of the best poems of his middle period:

**A Prayer to Cupid**

- (1) My love who long since in many torments  
have kept me, in deep dole  
To you now I cry weeping bitterly  
in agony of soul:  
Make my sorrows less with loving-kindness  
do not be so cruel!
- (2) By parting made gall poisoned by recall  
I'm flung in the abyss,  
And face to face brought with the sins I've wrought  
in my foul thoughtlessness.  
From whose great burden as from mortal sin  
bid now my soul be loose!
- (3) The darkness of night brings a sweet respite  
brings to all creatures rest -  
Men from their affairs, beasts from their labours  
are for a space released:  
Day and night alike leave me wide-awake  
alone, in anguish, lost.
- (4) You have born away with you all my joy,  
all my good humour hence:  
The love you kindled has never dwindled  
but sears my grieving sense.  
Burns upon my mind, your eyes that looked kind,  
your soft, fair countenance.
- (5) Cupid, do not brand with such grave wound  
her face on my heart so  
Who hates me to death steals my every breath  
looks on me as her foe:  
Soften her to me, or if that can't be  
snuff out my love, my woe!
- (6) But what shall I say? Salamander may  
not live without the fire,  
So I from my grief can find no relief  
cannot live without her:  
No! to die, to eat poisoned honey, sweet  
with bitter were better.

- (7) My soul in your eyes like wax in fire lies  
and melts - see the tears brim! -  
For your fair eyes' light is my spirit's plight  
if anger slant its beam  
But restores my life lightens my great grief  
if it smile a welcome.
- (8) As fair trees and flowers don't regain their powers  
unless the spring sheds dew  
So my cheerfulness, my joy dies unless  
it is revived by you:  
Comfort, then, console beloved of my soul,  
griefless let me live now.
- (9) Why, O wise Nature in one great creature  
are all fair things combined?  
How the world's wonder every heart's kindler  
in one sweet form confined?  
How an angelic, blessed, lightsome look  
contracted to mankind?
- (10) She is bright with gems, just as fresh blood gleams  
on ice in the sunlight  
Brilliant her eyes as stars in the skies  
on a fair winter night  
With which long ago she forced me to bow  
my freedom to her might.
- (11) O small frame with great glorious beauty straight  
from heaven radiant!  
How can cruelty and harshness so be  
mixed with embellishment?  
Pity now your slave who burns with your love  
your suffering servant.
- (12) My mind's on the boil wild as an anthill  
with many a new poem  
For only you are in my heart the fire  
of love's delicious flame:  
Your words are the fair and echoing air  
that drives away my gloom.

- (13) With clasped hands, bended knees and with bowed head  
 to Julia I prayed  
 When of her kindness as of a goddess  
 mercy I expected  
 That she have mercy, no more torment me:  
*amen* to that I cried.  
 (English by Bosley & Sherwood, in Klaniczay, ed. 1985, 164–8)

The reader may immediately notice the general direction of progress in this poem. In Balassi's terminology it is an 'inventio poetica' which means it has a kind of a narrative framework, and, indeed, it is the lover's prayer to Cupid to whom (as we know from other poems of the cycle) he had vowed fealty. He has not gained much from this vassalship so far, consequently he begs the little god to lift his oath. The monologue, however, is soon addressed directly to the beloved, whose indifference causes much the same effects in Balassi as in other European followers of Petrarch (stanzas 1,2,4). But we also have here a fresh image taken from everyday life rather than from rhetorical manuals (stanza 3: "Men from their affairs, beasts from their labours / are for a space released ...").

Stanzas 4–5 develop a complex but highly traditional description of love's enflaming and burning effects which culminates in the emblematic image of the salamander: the torturing fire is really the lover's natural environment outside of which he cannot exist (stanza 6).

In stanza 7 we have an eye-image, which, as an opening window, leads us out from the world of bookish humanist topoi to wide nature in stanza 8: "As fair trees and flowers 'don't regain their powers / unless the spring sheds dew ..." The following reference to the poet's soul transcendentalizes Nature, which, consequently, gains a definite Platonic aura in the following stanza. Here the poet bursts out in a kind of hymn of praise to his Julia: "Why, O wise Nature in one great creature / are all fair things combined? ..."

Stanzas 10 and 11 can be seen as an elaboration of the microcosm—macrocosm theme: first Julia (microcosm) is compared to the elements, seasons and stars (i.e. to the elemental and celestial worlds of the macrocosm) then her "small frame" becomes the container and mirror of heavenly beauty (here we have the third macrocosmic world, the angelic hierarchies).

Stanza 11 also echoes a common Petrarchistic cliché about the cruel character of the Lady but the self-pity of the lover suddenly turns into the already quoted high-intensity image about his mind being overtaken by poetical fury. According to the Platonic doctrine, his frenzy is inspired by

the beauty of her beloved and by the elevating force of love (the lines: "My mind's on the boil wild as an anthill ...").

Concluding this climax, a quiet, moving scene closes the song: the lover bends and kneels before his sovereign idol and in an almost religious trance calls for mercy: "To Julia I prayed / mercy I expected / That she have mercy, no more torment me: / Amen to that I cried".

This poem shows Balassi as an inventive and skillfully rhyming representative of international Petrarchism and his Julia-poems alone should be enough to earn him a decent place in the Pantheon of this school — had he written his poems in a more easily accessible language. But this is not all we can say about his art.

Balassi's poetical development reached its zenith in 1588–9 when his hopes of gaining the love (and hand) of Anna-Julia vanished and when his life arrived at yet another crisis. At that point he decided to leave the country and pursue military adventures in Poland, but before doing so he wrote a few poems in which he synthesized his poetic achievement, set up a new life-program for himself ('to become the soldier of Mars and Pallas instead of Venus') and, above all, with the intention of publication or, at least, circulation, he worked out the compositional plan of a lyrical collection of all the poetry he had written to that time. I shall return to the importance of his advanced ideas of volume-composition, but first I should like to introduce another poem, his most unique masterpiece. It deserves to be a standard anthology-piece of Renaissance poetry.

Being desperate and trying to get out of the strangling net of his hopeless love, he looked for 'remedia amoris': partly in the traditional way, as is nicely commemorated in his poem 'He Wrote This about Susanna and Anna-Maria in Vienna'. But he also found another means of escape: by turning to Mars and seeking *virtú* and fame in the fierce struggle of Christian Europe against the pagan Turkish conquerors.

His poem, the 'Soldier's Song', does not follow the epic treatments of mythological heroic combats (such as the medieval romances, Ariosto, or Spenser); rather, he creates a new, purely lyrical genre. Referring to the soldiers who defend the Hungarian borders adjoining the Turks-occupied territories, he calls it "In laudem confiniorum". This genre would be much imitated in the following decades, usually labelled as "cantio de militibus pulchra" or "cantio militaris", that is, "Soldier's Song".

What is unique in Balassi's "Soldier's Song" is the way he employs the arsenal of humanistic rhetoric and the imagery of love poetry for the

purpose of expressing patriotic feelings combined with hymnic praise of nature and an encomium of individual, adventurous free life.

Puttenham would have called this song a "carol of honor",<sup>16</sup> but in its special combination of elements and subject matter, to my best knowledge, the poem is without parallel in contemporary poetry.

**In Praise of the Marches: Soldier's Song**

- (1) Brave men, what could be in any country  
fairer than the Marches?  
Out there in the spring many fair birds sing  
for which man yet searches:  
The fields are fragrant and dew heaven-sent  
everything unparches.
- (2) Hearing news of foes the brave man's heart grows  
often excited there  
And though he hear it not, for sheer spirit  
the brave man turns to war:  
He will risk the grave, kill, capture, be brave  
his brow rippling with gore!
- (3) Beneath bloody flags every brave man wags  
a banner-bearing lance:  
He rides the field, faced with a mighty host  
and — see in the distance —  
With leopard-skin, dome of bright helmet, plume  
each one's magnificence!
- (4) Good Arab horses prance in their courses  
and when the bugle blared  
Some stood guard, others dismounted to doze  
at morning where they'd heard  
The cock crow, for night after night in fight  
all are weary and tired.
- (5) To win a good name and excellent fame  
they leave all things behind:  
Their humanity and their bravery  
all men should bear in mind  
When hawk-like they fly hunting, racing, high  
over fields as the wind!

- (6) When the foe is in sight they give a glad shout  
and each one breaks a lance:  
If matters are grim in the fight, they come  
back in utter silence  
Blood-soaked, retreating, often defeating  
even in their defence!
- (7) The great, wide fields, fair groves and forests are  
the parks of their pleasure:  
By spying out way and battle-site, they  
learn to read and measure:  
Hunger after fight and thirst and great heat  
and tiredness their leisure.
- (8) Their good sharp sabres lighten their labours  
for all the heads they yield:  
Many are lying bloody and dying  
hurt on the battlefield -  
Beasts', birds' guts often the only coffin  
of such brave bodies felled.
- (9) Men of the Marches, your country's riches  
brave young men worth our praise!  
Throughout the wide world your good name is told:  
and as he blesses trees  
With fruit, may God bless you with good success  
in all your fields and ways!  
(English by Bosley & Sherwood, in Klaniczay, ed. 1985, 172–4)

There is hardly an eminent scholar of Hungarian Renaissance literature who has not tried to analyse this set of nine perfectly constructed stanzas. Some have praised the simplicity of the poem, explaining how it moves away from humanistic artificiality towards a fresh realism which depicts the brutality of soldier life with a still beautifying poetic diction. Others have emphasized Balassi's success in avoiding the traps of narrative: he does not develop a plausible sequence which would correspond to the chronological evolution of combat; he remains purely lyrical, flashing up pictures which exist independently and are kept together by form and structure rather than thematic correspondences. Examining the structure of the poem with regards to possible divisions of the nine stanzas, some readers have called it a 'three-pillar' composition which follows a strictly symmetrical pattern. Others have discovered in it the reflection of the *aurea sectio*, and still others a hidden number symbolism hiding the shape of the Holy Cross in the distribution of the keyword "meadow" throughout the poem.<sup>17</sup>



What we witness here is really amazing: a poet who not long ago still struggled with the incorporation of humanistic ornaments into his more archaic, medieval-type lyrics now creates a surprisingly modern poem. He reduces the rhetorical images to the minimum, and also treats moral didacticism very sparingly. Instead, he flashes up clear-cut sensuous images, he juxtaposes the lights and odours of a sunny morning in the country (stanza 1); the sounds of galloping horses and the blowing wind across the plane (stanza 3); the shining-glittering minute details of armor (stanza 3); and thus he reaches his intellectual message at the exact middle line of the poem: "Their humanity and their bravery / all men should bear in mind." Even this is not didactic, explicatory, rather a laconic and affirmative statement, after which he immediately shifts back to the terrain of sensuous images: "...hawk-like they fly hunting, racing, high / over fields as the wind!" (stanza 5).

The second part of the poem paints the darker side of the soldier's life: the combat (stanza 6), the hardships (stanza 7), and the often inevitable death with its cruel naturalism: "Beasts', birds' guts often the only coffin / of such brave bodies felled" (stanza 8). In the concluding stanza, the question of the first line is passionately answered following again the tone of encomium. This statement is likewise verified by a nature-image which smoothly evolves into a reference to a wider, cosmic force and ultimate harmony — God who is guardian of trees and soldiers alike: "...as he blesses trees / With fruit, may God bless you with good success / in all your fields and ways!"

**(Composition of Poem Sequences)** One of the most fascinating aspects of Balassi's talent remains to be discussed. By way of conclusion I would like to refer to his skills as *artifex*, maker, a constructor of poetic structures. In this respect the comparison with Sidney will be apt again.

Looking at the poetry of either Balassi or Sidney, we find that both set up their collections very carefully, and with the intention of conveying special poetical messages. The idea of 'lyrical biography' as an organizing principle is present both in *Astrophil and Stella* and in the poems of Balassi's "Julia-cycle", but at the same time both of them contain more than the base narrative of a 'lyrical novel'. In fact, there has been a conviction among a number of scholars that an underlying number symbolism, present in Sidney's as well as in Balassi's poetry, serves to express their deep, but hidden Christian message.

Among others, Thomas Roche has most recently analysed the structure of Sidney's sonnet-cycle.<sup>18</sup> I will refer only to Balassi's cycles now. He has generally been acknowledged as a superior constructor of compositional structures in old Hungarian literature. His "great cycle" contains 66 poems, but we have evidence that he had intended to expand it to 99 and then, by adding a prologue, to build a collection which would imitate Dante's *Commedia*.<sup>19</sup>

From the level of stanzas up, number-symbolism can be felt in his entire oeuvre. The famous Balassi-stanza is a combination of 3 x 3 elements with internal rhymes and caesuras (aad bbd ccd). By the end of his career he arrived at the one stanza poem, which could be paralleled with the sonnet as an equivalent of the entirely closed poem-structure.

As for the collection, Balassi's "book" was to be introduced by three hymnes, written to the three persons of the Holy Trinity, and, as one may expect, altogether consisting of 99 lines. In the first, addressed to the Father, Balassi promised:

If you redeem me, the following goods will result in: / First  
is, that I shall praise you till my death...  
(‘On the First Person of the Holy Trinity’ – literal translation)

Literary historians have long been pondering the seriousness and content of this promise. What would the praise consist of and how would it be carried out? According to a fairly recent – and fascinating – hypothesis, the "praise till death" would have been executed in the employed number symbolism, embracing his poetry from stanza construction to whole poem sequences, performing a sacred ternary system even when literally talking of love.<sup>20</sup>

As I have mentioned, at the end of his career Balassi arrived at a poem structure which contained only one Balassi stanza. He never wrote sonnets, but by the end of his individual poetical development he created an entirely closed structure, practically equivalent to the sonnet in aesthetic function. His last poem, surviving in his own handwriting in the company of four other one-stanza poems, reads as follows:

Julia longest, Celia the most  
 I have loved to this day:  
 From that one, grieving, from this one, loving  
 I have gone on my way:  
 Now Fulvia burns and the flame returns —  
 till when I cannot say!  
 ("On Fulvia", English by Bosley & Sherwood, in Klaniczay,  
 ed., 1985, 183)

Some critics have interpreted the form of these short poems as Balassi's attempt to create epigrams in Hungarian.<sup>21</sup> A newer — and in my opinion more plausible — hypothesis explains the distillation of the one Balassi stanza from the earlier, open constructions into an individual, complete generic unit, on the analogy of the development of the sonnet from a special stanza of the provencal *canço*.<sup>22</sup> In this context Balassi appears in the extraordinary role of a poet who in one person, and in one oeuvre, created the Hungarian troubadur lyric as well as Renaissance courtly poetry.<sup>23</sup>

Many more aspects could be included here to make my selected topic more complete, but I hope that even this fragmentary picture will serve to raise some interest in the lyrical achievement of the Hungarian Renaissance.

I have taken into consideration the social-political differences between Hungary and England, countries situated on the two fringes of 16th century Europe, and was none the less able to identify the parallels in the ideals and efforts of some of the leading poets. All this should warn us against employing too easily deterministic formulas in cultural analysis: culture does not always subserviently follow the patterns of political and economic history. Or does it? A Hungarian critic, Antal Szerb, fifty years ago evaluated Balassi's poetry while referring to Sidney and Spenser, in the following words:

As for his culture, Balassi can be paired with the best European poets of his age, but what about his civilization? The Platonism of Sidney and Spenser required a high lifestyle, and a court, glamorous with a sophisticated civilization where such lives could be lived. Balassi, the solitary rider of Hungarian forests and Hungarian frontiers could only dream of such a lifestyle, developing an ideal which would nurture great poetry, giving Heavenly Love a form.<sup>24</sup>

Until recently this comparison, with its parallels and contrasts, has not been challenged. But today's renaissance of Sidney-research has done a lot to change the traditional image of the English poet. The ideal hero of Romanticism is disappearing to give way to the image of a passionate, but highly responsible young man, who, torn between the contradictions of his age and his own nature, tried to realize something of the new ideas but often ended up with noble failure.

Huizinga's opinion was typical for the legacy of 19th century mythologizing about Sidney, when, following Burckhardt's admiration for the harmonious Renaissance individual, Sidney was treated as "a spiritual treasure for the world". Tillyard likewise spoke about Sidney's platonizing as something that "created an enthusiastic idealism". Today's studies are more inclined to see Sidney in the context of Elizabethan politics, and treat his idealistic posture as a product of Elizabethan propaganda, amplified by nineteenth century romanticism.<sup>25</sup>

Balassi's literary image has been changing in the other direction. Szerb and his generation saw in him the instinctive genius, something of a prefiguration of the Romantic poet. Recent research, on the other hand, has proved that Balassi, while being an aristocratic amateur much occupied by politics, warfare, and the usual feudal struggle for life, in fact became a kind of *poeta doctus* who more consciously studied Renaissance literary conventions than had previously been thought.<sup>26</sup>

The new emphasis falling on each poet might help to work out a new type of comparison which will follow new paths, diverging from the traditional trails of contextual criticism and thematic comparative studies. The latter have become known as pursuing issues like "source", "influence" and "allusion". In the case of Sidney and Balassi such an approach is excluded as they did not know about each other's poetry. On the other hand, the surprisingly great similarities of their literary development offer a good chance to examine in European perspective what Gary Waller has set up as a program for Sidney studies alone: how the poets rewrote the diversities and contradictions that made up the language of their time.<sup>27</sup> Studying the functioning of Petrarchism in two geographically and culturally different late-Renaissance media should enhance our perception of that era as well as enable us to examine an interesting case of intertextuality.

## Notes

1. The *Old Hungarian Literary Reader*, an anthology entirely dedicated to early Hungarian literature was edited by Tibor Klaniczay and published in Budapest in 1985; Douglas Kirkconnell's recent collection of Hungarian poetry, the *Hungarian Helicon* (1986), also contains a few fine English renderings of our Renaissance poetry.
2. On Sidney's engagement in Central Europe see: Pears 1845; Gál 1969; Osborn 1972; Evans 1973; Szőnyi 1980; Barlay 1986; Nagy 1990, Gömöri 1990 and 1991.
3. This is not the first time that Sidney has been used for this type of comparison. Babin (1953) has offered a similar comparative study by juxtaposing Sidney and the Spanish Garcilaso de la Vega, in order to trace convergencies and divergencies of Platonizing love poetry in European literature. Babin's study employs the comparison of image patterns. I have tried to do something similar in my article, "Self Representation in Petrarchism" (1990).
4. A list and analysis of these references can be found in Gömöri 1991.
5. In a longer study published in Hungarian, I have compared the extraordinary similarities between the reception and canon-formation of the two poets (Szőnyi 1989). For a shortened English version see Szőnyi 1994.
6. Cf. Hauser 1957, 2:144—72.
7. See the article of Ferenc Zemplényi in this volume.
8. Sidney 1962, xxxiv. All subsequent quotations from Sidney's poetry follow Ringler's edition.
9. Cf. his famous remark in the *Defence of Poesie*: "In *Hungarie* I have seene it the manner at all Feastes, and other such like meetings, to have songs of their ancestors valure, which that right soulderlike nation, think one of the chiefest kindlers of brave courage" (quoted from Sidney/Feuillerat 1962, 3:24).
10. Cf. Balassi's Preface to his pastoral drama, *A Pleasing Hungarian Comedy*; English text in Klaniczay, ed., 1985, 185.
11. As summarized by Hamilton 1977, 111. The appearance of Platonic elements have been a recurrent topic in the studies dealing with both poets. Cf.: "The question of the extent of Sidney's idealism in poetry is, of course, a complex one about which there is a considerable disagreement and little hope of arriving at a definitive answer" (Connell 1977, 21). The Platonic world picture of the *Defence* is emphasized by Davis 1969, 30; and Robinson 1972, 132. Idealism and hermeticism are traced in Sidney's literary circle by Jayne 1952; Mahoney 1964; Yates 1964; Phillips 1965; French 1972; Steadman 1974; Council 1976; Heninger 1983. It is interesting, that in a later article than in his large monograph, Heninger put a greater stress on the Aristotelian, "realistic" element in Sidney's literary theory (Heninger 1984 and 1989). Balassi's Platonism has been asserted by Zolnai 1928; Eckhardt 1972, 152; Bán 1976, 122—39; Szőnyi 1980; Horváth 1982, 110. No doubt, Balassi never treated the philosophical doctrines as thoroughly as Sidney may have done, this overtone, however, can surely be felt in his poetry.
12. Cf. his *Preface*, English text in Klaniczay, ed., 1985, 185.
13. Cf. Campbell 1984, 84—5.
14. The poem was composed to the tune of a refined Turkish rhythm: a8a8a8a8, unfortunately the English translation reflects very little of the original melody.

15. Compare the opinion of Kalstone 1965, 2 on Sidney, and Eckhardt 1972, 252 on Balassi, respectively.
16. *The Arte of English Poesie* (1598); cf. Donker & Mudrow 1982, 90.
17. Cf. Klaniczay 1961, 267–271 (as military song with the vocabulary of love-lyrics); Varjas 1970 (“three pillars”); Süpek 1971 (number symbolism); Julow 1972 (complex analysis, Christian symbolism); Komlovszki 1976 (“aurea sectio”); Nemeskürty 1983, 1:161–165 (thematic analysis).
18. See Roche 1982, *passim*.
19. Some scholars insist on the idea of the mere “lyrical biography” (Varjas 1976; Nemeskürty 1978; 1983). The idea of the theological construction-plan was asserted by Gerézdi–Klaniczay 1964, 471, and extensively argued for by Horváth 1982, 31–103.
20. This is Horváth’s theory, originally proposed in 1973 and extensively argued for in Horváth 1982, 67–78.
21. Cf. Eckhardt 1972, 337.
22. Ferenc Zemplényi’s view as quoted in Horváth 1982, 112. It should be noted, though, that the origin of the sonnet is equally obscure. As for the Balassi stanza there are arguments to establish its derivation (1) from foreign, mostly medieval models; (2) from earlier Hungarian metrical patterns; (3) from Balassi’s own invention. The point in the theory of Zemplényi–Horváth is that as the sonnet – as an entirely closed and self-contained structure – emerged from sequentially built medieval poetry, Balassi also realized the superiority of the closed structures and by the end of his career created such a poem – whether inspired by other models or not. It remains a question if he ever came across sonnets in any language he knew (he was well versed in nine languages, among others Latin, Italian, German, Polish, and Turkish). Even if he did, as is most probable, he evidently felt the metrical structure of sonnets inapt for the rhythm of Hungarian which generally contains longer words than the Indo-European languages and in the 16th century especially preferred longer lines. The Balassi stanza consists of three 19 syllable lines – the English translation could render these at best into 16 syllable lines (see his last poem, quoted above). It is notable that in Polish, the first sonnet was written in the 1580s, while in Hungarian only in the late 18th century.
23. Horváth 1982, 218. This thesis – ever since having been proposed by Horváth – has been in the focus of debates in Hungarian Renaissance scholarship. The opposing group of scholars maintain that there had been courtly love poetry before Balassi – only it has not survived.
24. Szerb 1982, 153.
25. The phrase, “noble failure” derives from McCoy 1979, 9 (*Rebellion in Arcadia*). Huizinga is quoted in Van Dorsten, ed., 1986, ix. An effort to radically demythicize the Sidney-image is the provoking article of Hager 1981. The numerous studies in Van Dorsten 1986 also consciously aim to learn “not only how true [the traditional Sidney-image] is, but also how it came about, and why” (*ibid.*). For a comprehensive view see also Katherine Duncan-Jones’ new biography (1991).
26. Cf. Imre Bori’s afterword in Balassi/Horváth 1976. Also Ács 1982; Komlovszki 1982; Zemplényi 1982.
27. Waller 1984, 69.

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