

THE MEDIEVAL HERITAGE IN HUNGARIAN RENAISSANCE POETRY

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To begin this short paper which, by its nature, is more of an exposition of problems than their exhaustive treatment, I would like to refer to two critical statements. The first is from an early study by Tibor Kardos¹ where he warns us that the Renaissance arrived in Hungary at a time when its world was already at the point of dissolution. In this way the outgoing medieval culture is still present beside the new Renaissance and nascent Baroque elements. Kardos's paper was written before the rediscovery of Mannerism which we can safely include too in the cavalcade of 16th century styles. Of course, *mutatis mutandis*, what he was saying had equal validity for the rest of Europe, for no other country caught up with Italy before the 16th century. We should, however, be aware of how difficult it is to isolate the High Renaissance and Mannerism in a literature where the first and greatest Renaissance poet, Bálint Balassi, was born as late as 1554.

My other quotation comes from the first pages of G. M. Cohen's useful survey, of *The Baroque Lyric*, where the author flatly states that "the majority of the examples, both Renaissance and Baroque, that we shall examine in this book will be sonnets. For... 'it is the medium chosen by the Baroque poets for much of their finest work. Its strict pattern demanded a compression, the absence of which mars many of their lyrics that were written in looser forms...'"² (I need not stress that Cohen does not distinguish between Mannerism and Baroque). Many of us have wondered about the lack of metrically closed poetic forms in old Hungarian literature, especially about the lack of the sonnet. Lately, Iván Horváth has treated the problem with much perspicacity in his important book on Balassi.³ He speaks *in extenso* about the closed strophic forms in use, the rhetorical constructions which, however, do not result in metrically closed structures. He rightly links this phenomenon to Medieval poetic forms, but the typological parallel he draws between Balassi as the creator of a type of courtly poetry in Hungary (let us not forget that he wrote not only the first such poems in Hungarian, but also the first and only pastoral play, a

characteristically courtly genre) and that other creator of European vernacular poetry in general, the first troubadour, William IX of Aquitaine, justified as this parallel is, somewhat blurs the issue, in that even the Balassi stanza is essentially liturgical in origin and is in no way connected with courtly forms. It is here that we arrive at the crux of the matter: the real cause of the lack of the Hungarian Renaissance and Baroque sonnet; the predominance of loose and verbose structures, and the complete lack of any sort of chivalric courtly cultural and literary tradition in Hungary. Iván Horváth is more permissive in this regard as for his purposes it is enough to state that as far as the age of Balassi or his immediate predecessors are concerned there was no such tradition, while with regard to the many breaks and ruptures in Hungarian literary history, due to historic misfortunes "there might have been Hungarian troubadours, let us say in the age of Sigismund", or earlier, but whose memory, had they existed, had been completely lost by the age of Balassi.⁴

Here I tend to be much more radical than Horváth: I think everything we know about Medieval Hungarian literature and culture can only lead us to a firm conviction that (1) there never had been a chivalric courtly poetry in Hungary, and (2) this fact had far reaching consequences not only for Medieval Hungarian literature, but also for the Renaissance and, we could safely add, right up to the present day.

In a forthcoming paper⁵ I have treated the Medieval aspects of the problem. To sum up briefly: historically, it seems, there was no basis for such a culture, as the institution of chivalry itself was slow in its formation and never became established the way it was in Western Europe, neither in customs and in the number of knights, nor in ideology. In this respect it was interesting to note that neither of the oldest surviving Hungarian dictionaries takes any notice of the key terms of chivalric ideology, the very term "court" is mentioned only in an architectural context and there is no trace of the courtly-villain opposition, at least in a moral sense. In a still unpublished book by the late Ágnes Kurcz⁶ the author argues that the chivalric ideal (e.g. *fidelitas* or the *miles christianus*) was put forward as the propaganda of the royal court or chancery. As far as literature is concerned, there have been widespread speculations upon the subject, as always in philology when there are no texts to go on, but the issue seems far clearer when viewed in an international context. Regarded in this way it seems that from all the registers⁷ of Medieval literature there is only one of which we find no trace in Hungary: this is courtly poetry, in epic as well as in lyric. There is ample evidence for the registers connected with the

clerics: goliardic and liturgical poetry abound. There is no doubt that there was such a thing as popular poetry in the Hungarian Middle Ages, only we do not quite know what it was like.

There is even some remote probability that pre-courtly forms of poetry (something like the *chanson de geste* and the romance on antique subjects) might have existed, if only in a rather uncourtly way. But there is simply nothing to testify the existence of courtly lyric and courtly romance — and the only way I can explain this total silence of all sources is to suppose that these genres simply did not exist in medieval Hungarian literature.

Nor did they later. Iván Horváth's book has sufficiently demonstrated the reason why we are to accept the well-known claims of Balassi himself as to being the creator of courtly love poetry. His claims are strengthened by the testimony of his younger friend and disciple, János Rimay, the leading poet of the next generation. But besides all that has been said, not only are the texts that have come down to us all popular or goliardic in character, but also none of the lost or unidentifiable poems cited by Balassi or by others for their melodies would alter this picture, at least as far as the titles show. The very generously preserved epic poetry so much in vogue in the 16th century demonstrates the same situation. In Western Europe the Renaissance and Mannerism brought a final flourishing of chivalric themes and a searching examination of chivalric ideals, which were by this time mythically detached from any actual living experience. Still, the laughter they evoked, cheerful in Ariosto and bitter in Cervantes, or the distance created by allegorizing in Spenser, did not deter these great writers from attributing some importance to these ideals by confronting them and putting their significance to the test. Not so in Hungary. The Hungarian epic poetry of the age has roughly two great genres. The first are the rather primitive songs of historic reportage about actual events in this tormented epoch which later gave way to the sophisticated Vergilian epic of which Hungarian literature in the 17th century produced a masterpiece in the *Obsidio Szigetiana* of Miklós Zrínyi. The second was the Humanist romance, mainly with Biblical or antique plots and mostly with a moralizing tendency.

But again, as in Medieval literature, what is lacking between popular and primitive history and learned Humanist narrative (which we should regard as the heir to the Medieval clerics) is precisely the chivalric type of stories. Roland and Charlemagne, Arthur and Amadís formed the favoured and widely popular reading topics of Western Europe. We even have data suggesting that one or two more educated Hungarian magnates might have had some such books (e.g. the count Boldizsár Batthyány, who even had

connections with hermetic circles, had, for example, a copy of *Amadís*). But the reading public ignored these stories, because as there was no Medieval chivalric tradition, they were not sensitive to them. The lords and magnates of the age imported only the modern, Renaissance courtly customs and ignored their Medieval roots. I would even be diffident in this respect about the important Hungarian version of *Euryalus and Lucretia*, freely translated in verse form by an unknown poet probably close to Balassi from the prose story of Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, which seems to me much less chivalric in character than is normally considered. Naturally, all this implied the neglect of an important part of Western European culture.

What importance does this fact have with respect to the poetic forms and genres of late 16th century Hungarian poetry? The truth is that the absence of the courtly lyric (in the Provençal manner) robbed Hungarian literature of a formal experience and training of the utmost importance. All Medieval poetry, courtly or clerical, was characterized by a series of independent, self contained strophes, a loose succession of which formed the poem. Even the order of strophes could vary from manuscript to manuscript. But there was an important difference: in spite of the metric variety of some (mainly late) liturgical or goliardic poetry, it was first of all the *grand chant courtois* which engendered those new metric forms that taught European poets to compose not only stanzas but poems. By the over-refinement of troubadour *canço* stanzas they created such sophisticated forms that the creation of the sonnet happened as if of itself (by the Sicilian disciples of the troubadours). The *sestina* was invented for example by a provençal poet, Arnaut Daniel whom Dante called "il miglior fabbro del parlar materno". Even popular structures, dancing songs, like the *villancico* (*villanelle*) and the *rondeau*, had a comparable effect by their influence on French courtly poetry. This was the formal tradition Hungarian literature always lacked and this is felt in the 16th-17th centuries as well as even later. For, in contrast to troubadour lyrics, goliardic poems and hymns were amply present in Hungary and it seems that the metres learnt from them were rather simple. These kinds of poems share the propensity of all Medieval poetry for a series of self contained strophes but for the main part without the formal sophistication of the troubadours and their followers. It may be significant that one of the most famous goliardic poems, the *Confession* of the Archpoet has been found in Hungarian folklore. It has a most simple metre which had great significance in the Hungarian poetry of the future.

Many important characteristics of late Renaissance and Mannerist poetry can be explained by the fact that formally, and sometimes generically, it is the follower of goliardic and liturgic verse. Usually it prefers simple isomorphic and isorhyming stanzas. As Hungarian is an agglutinating language, the rhyme evokes parallelisms which are also repetitive in nature, so instead of progress or the play of inner tensions there is always the successive series of short, independent units, not hierarchically built, but basically parataxical in nature. Perhaps this repetitiveness is also responsible, besides ideological reasons, for the fact that the poetic means of expressing a world felt increasingly complex by the great European poets of the age, the paradoxes, antitheses and oxymora so important in late Renaissance and Mannerism, and really in Petrarchism itself, are hardly present in Hungarian poetry. Even the most important characteristically Mannerist Hungarian poet, János Rimay could strip a well-known Petrarchist image, the opposition of cold and warm, freezing and burning, of all antithetic significance by placing the contrasted elements far from each other, in different lines:

Sok rend nagy kárával,
 s némelly halálával
 tűzében nagy kínra fült,
 Tülem elrémültél,
 nagy távul kerőltél,
 szived ellenem meghült.
 ("Szóltván nevemen...")

Instead of antithesis he is using the *figura etymologica* ("napról napra veszten vész") which is logically just the opposite: for all its stylistic play it is not contrastive but repetitive.⁸ This trend would probably explain the almost exaggerated importance of *apo koinu* in old Hungarian as the most frequent form of inversion.

It is not accidental that the great formal metrical invention of the Hungarian Renaissance, the Balassi strophe, so rich in philosophical and theological implications,⁹ is still only stanzaic and by virtue of its rich inner rhyme pattern even more parallelistic. The more significant then, that its characteristic rhyme pattern and inner division which carries its theological meaning derive, as Iván Horváth has rightly shown, from the Victorine sequence, a liturgical and not a courtly form. Horváth may have been right when speaking about its popular and courtly connections in European

medieval poetry, however, Balassi himself most probably knew instead its liturgical and clerical uses.

Beside the Medieval clerical registers, the other great inspirational source of Hungarian poetry was the Latin verse of international Humanism. Here again there is a line of influence which goes poetically very much in the same direction. Humanist elegy and epigram, ode and panegyric had the same looseness of structure as Medieval poetry, only mostly in a nonstrophic form. Moreover, by its imitation of the ancients, it consciously sought to differ in many of its poetic precepts from the vernacular lyrics of the age. The predominance of international Humanist Latin influence might have been an important cause for the Hungarian neglect of the vernacular literature of modern Europe, which was a continuation, directly or indirectly, of precisely that chivalric courtly poetry Hungary had not known and which had to fight all over Europe with Humanist Latin for its right to exist. It is perhaps significant that all the known sources of Balassi's poetry are Neo-Latin: Humanist Petrarchist or protestant Humanist poets. The very fast and deep penetration of Latin Humanism into Hungarian letters, well before the appearance of vernacular Renaissance literature — the force of which can be seen even from the unparalleled practice of Hungarian poets giving Latin titles to their vernacular works — might perhaps best be explained by the clerical — as opposed to courtly — nature of the Hungarian Medieval literary heritage.

A Humanist Latin characteristic in Hungarian verse is the widespread use of acrostichs as a purely formal, inorganic way of regulating the number of stanzas and determining the structure and length of the poem. I know only one example of a meaningful, allegorical use of acrostichs in the epoqe, only one case where it contains new information: the poem of 1604 attributed with some probability to count István Illésházy, *Ferendum et sperandum*. Otherwise it is striking that even poems with rich Mannerist imagery mostly fail to organize this figurative system into a meaningful structure, or to build conceits from them which would structure the whole poem: there are few Hungarian poems with such powerful conceits (some poems of Balassi, e.g. the beautiful ones about the cross or the swans, perhaps one of Rimay and the anonymous poem, probably inspired by the Rimay circle, *Pöngését koboznak...*).

It is characteristic that another crucially important invention of Renaissance poetry, the composed volume of poetry, was only introduced by the two greatest poets of the age, Bálint Balassi and János Rimay, and neither got finally to the stage of being published. Their plans can actually only be

reconstructed by complicated and ingenious philological hypotheses. In contrast to the platonic poetic philosophy of Balassi's volume (sacred and profane love, symbolism of numbers, etc.) Rimay seems to have left out completely his own love poetry and composed a meditative volume of prose and verse of almost exclusive religious and moral purpose. Even so, it represented too daring and original a venture in contemporary Hungarian literary life to succeed in getting printed.

Late Renaissance and Mannerist poetry everywhere brought about a rediscovery of many Medieval elements, but this had specific effects in Hungary where the Medieval tradition itself was one-sided. In Western Europe the renewal of religious poetry meant a more personal, searching relation to God, full of crises and inner conflicts, often mystical, always face to face with death and the problem of salvation. Most of this is absent from Hungarian poetry: instead of mysticism we have the plain chant of the community. Most of the Hungarian poets of the age were insensitive to the tragic contradictions of life Western European Mannerism was so conscious of and which make this poetry seem so modern. A good example of all this is the long poem about the Last Things by Mátyás Nyéki Vörös, the *Tintinnabulum*. The Last Things: what a Mannerist preoccupation for personal meditation! And Nyéki Vörös's much praised rich, modern imagery could bring it close — only that the poem totally lacks the great discovery of the age, the involvement of the personality. The poet's attitude is as objective as it can possibly be, underlined in this by the hymnical structure. Instead of a personal analysis of man's, of *his* own relationship to the Last Things the poem is an endless enumeration of sermons, exempla and admonishments. This is why, for all its richness, his imagery cannot be called visionary, it does not have the sort of subjective presence which would give personal meaning to its preachings and maxims. It makes up in length for what it lacks in intensity. The paraphrase or translation of psalms, so popular in the Hungary of the age, offered, after all, two possibilities: a way of either showing a personal religiosity or more often, disguising its absence, in varying degree with the different poets. Nyéki Vörös also wrote a *certamen* about the Dialogue of Body and Soul: the very favourite poetic debate of the Middle Ages. Somewhat surprisingly, the sort of personal meditation which is really modern, comes through rather in prose, in the works of István Báthory or later, in those of Mátyás Hajnal.

To sum up: Hungarian poets were, on the whole, insensitive to some of the great themes of the age — the relativity of all values, the world as dream or stage, or even as something cruel and absurd. They tended to

portray corrupted nature through strong images, especially Rimay and his circle, but without sensing the importance of this theme in theology or in a philosophy of history. They embrace stoicism, but a rather tame version of it,¹⁰ at least until the heroic Baroque solution of Zrínyi. A consequent opposition of reason and sensuality, a confrontation with the new scientific discoveries (e.g. Donne, "At the round earths imagied corners") are also absent. In contrast, probably at the instigation of Balassi and his followers, there is a type of poem which was to have a great future in Hungarian poetry and which is almost or totally unknown in Western Europe: the lament over the tragic destiny of the country, the conflict of a man forced by political and/or military reasons to leave his home or his country, the anxiety of a possible foundering of the whole of Hungary in the murderous wars it had to wage. This kind of poetry was to be the very original Eastern European voice in — to use the image of twentieth-century Hungarian *poeta doctus*, Mihály Babits —, the great European concert.

Notes

1. Tibor Kardos, "Adatok a magyar irodalmi barokk keletkezéséhez" [Notes on the birth of Hungarian Literary Baroque]. *Magyarságtudomány* 1942: 63.
2. (London: Hutchinson UL, 1963), 12.
3. Iván Horváth, *Balassi költészete történeti poétikai megközelítésben* [The poetry of Balassi in the light of historical poetics] (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982).
4. *Op. cit.* pp. 259–260.
5. Ferenc Zemplényi, "A középkori udvari kultúra funkcióváltozása a reneszánszban" [The functional change of Medieval courtly culture in the Renaissance]. In Print.
6. Ágnes Kurcz, *Lovagi kultúra Magyarországon a 13–14. században* [Chivalric culture in Hungary in the 13–14 centuries]. (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1988). Her conclusions are equally negative.
7. I employ the term "register" as a socio-literary complex, which determines genre, public, ideology and in certain cases even the choice of language. I am following here, with some modifications and using the term in a more general way, the definitions put forward by Paul Zumthor (*Essai de poétique médiévale*. Paris, 1972) and Pierre Bec ("Quelque réflexions sur la poésie lyrique médiévale. Problèmes et essai de caractérisation". In *Mélanges. Rita Lejeune*. Gembloux, 1969, 1302–1329.) See also my "A korai trubadúr-költészet kérdései és Guillem de Peitieu 'új dala'" [Problems of early troubadour poetry and the chansoneta nueva of William IX]. *Filológiai Közlemények* 1978: 428–429.
8. See my paper, "Rimay és a kortárs európai költészet" [Rimay and contemporary European poetry]. *Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények* 1982: 612.

9. Horváth, *op. cit.*, Chapter I. *passim*. See also the article of Gy. E. Szőnyi in this volume.
10. See my paper on Rimay, 606–607, in reference to Tibor Klaniczay, "A magyar késő-
reneszánsz problémái. Sztoicizmus és manierizmus" [Problems of Hungarian Late
Renaissance. Stoicism and Mannerism], in his *Reneszánsz és Barokk* (Budapest, 1961),
303–39.