

Nikolaus Lenau and Germanic Literary Interest in Hungary during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century*

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The importance and utilization of exotic themes in the works of German and Austrian poets and writers became quite fashionable and widespread during the first half of the nineteenth century. This phenomenon was part of a broad intellectual and cultural movement in the Western (especially German-speaking) world, which was manifested in a growing interest in the culture and folklore of the East Central European nations and other foreign countries. This movement had its roots in the eighteenth century in the "noble savage" concept of Rousseau and more specifically in the philosophy of the many-sided Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder's philosophy was a mixture of romantic and nationalist ideas, at the heart of which stood the glorified people, the *Volk*, which in his view were the sole possessors and carriers of the national genius. Herder believed that the national genius manifested itself in indigenous native cultures, especially as expressed through the medium of the mother tongue. He was therefore attracted by the folk songs, ballads and artistic expressions of all nations, especially those which had remained unspoiled by the new cosmopolitan culture and enlightened values of the West—the so-called *Naturvölker*.¹

The majority of the East Central European nations, including the Hungarians, could accordingly be said to fall into this category. The vicissitudes of their history had prevented them from reaching the level of material plenty and political peace necessary for the development and wider diffusion of cosmopolitan sophistication save among their upper classes. At the same time, however, their unspoiled indigenous cultural and ethical values stimulated a nostalgic longing among the peoples of the West, who lived amidst greater material and intellectual abundance. This interest was further enhanced by the Romantic Movement of the early nineteenth century which, besides drawing inspiration from the past, was also intrigued by the uncommon, the exotic and the unusual. One of the results of this search for the exotic was the renewed orientation toward America, where many a culturally and politically disillusioned European hoped to find Utopia; another was the famed "ex oriente lux" movement, resulting in the importation of Oriental themes. These movements directed the attention of Austrian and German poets to the East

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Central European nations, as the nearest eastern countries with exotic and romantic peculiarities and connections.

Specific interest in Hungary was first stimulated by the Austrian Josef von Hormayr (1781-1848) who was intent on furthering a common "Austrian" patriotism within the component nationalities of the Habsburg Empire.² Hormayr was convinced that the history and cultural traditions of these nations, in addition to belonging to the individual nationalities, were also part of the common heritage of the Monarchy as a whole. He thus proposed that these traditions be treated as part of the whole spectrum, incorporated into a new form of *Kaisertreue*, (loyalty to the Emperor) and regarded as a kind of "Habsburg nationalism". Furthermore, in harmony with the ideas of the age, he proposed a shift in emphasis from the Emperor and dynasty to the peoples of the Monarchy. He hoped to accomplish this by encouraging the literary treatment of each nationality's cultural past within the context of the common Habsburg tradition.

While in retrospect Hormayr's ideas seem utopian and unattainable under the aegis of nationalism, he soon found an eager supporter in the person of the Hungarian Baron Alajos Mednyánszky (1784-1844)³. Similarly devoted to the unity and common traditions of the Habsburg realm, Mednyánszky pointed out (in Hormayr's literary journal *Archiv Für Geschichte, Statistik, Literatur und Kunst*, (Archives for History, Statistics, Literature and Art) Vol. XVIII) that the cultural traditions of the nationalities of the Habsburg Empire are so diversified and rich that they are inferior neither to antiquity nor to the German Middle Ages. This was evident to him from the abundance of available material for dramas, ballads and novels which, stemming from the individual traditions of the varied peoples of the Monarchy, could be molded into a unique literature. Being a Hungarian, Baron Mednyánszky naturally based his argumentation mainly on Hungarian historical traditions, wherein he pointed to a wealth of material that easily could be utilized for literary adaptation.

Hormayr's and Mednyánszky's initiatives soon produced a growing trend within the German-speaking literary world of Austria, which led to the adoption of various non-Germanic materials. Among these, Czech, and Hungarian themes predominated and gave rise to such historical dramas as Theodor Körner's *Zrinyi* (1812) and Franz Grillparzer's *König Ottokars Glück und Ende* (King Ottokar's Fortune and Demise, 1825), *Ein Treuer Diener Seines Herrn* (A Faithful Servant of His Master, 1826) (about the Hungarian Bánk Bán), and *Ein Bruderzwist in Habsburg* (A Fraternal Struggle within the House of Habsburg, 1848). Some of the lesser manifestations of this movement were Caroline Pichler's drama *Ferdinand der Zweite König von Ungarn und Böhmen* (Ferdinand the Second King of Hungary and Bohemia, 1816), her novel *Die Wiedereroberung von Ofen*. (The

Reconquest of Buda, 1829) and Carl Herlossohn's *Der Ungar*. (The Hungarian, 1836).⁴

A great number of the German-speaking poets and writers who turned to Hungarian themes like Karl Beck, Johann Nepomuk Vogl and Ludwig Foglar were born in the Carpathian Basin,⁵ while others had various connections with Hungary, such as Adalbert Stifter and Josef Zedlitz. But there were some who had no such connections and were drawn to the country only because they were attracted by its exotic qualities. For the most of these Austrian writers, among them Heinrich Lewitschnigg, Moriz Hartmann and Ludwig August Frankl, it was the Hungarian landscape and its peculiarities which served as the "extraordinary" and acted as the necessary magnet.⁶ These writers and poets regarded the wandering gypsies, the forbidding *betyárs* (peasant highwaymen) and the dashing hussars of Hungary as part of the exotic East, and the literary treatment of these figures afforded ready-made possibilities for them. It is to be remembered, however, that while the literary creations of those writers relied upon Hungarian scenes and themes, the results of their efforts were not Hungarian in spirit. This was almost universally true, even though some of these well-meaning writers—like Vogl, who dedicated a whole volume entitled *Klänge und Bilder aus Ungarn* (Sounds and Images from Hungary) to the favorable treatment of Hungarian themes—travelled extensively in Hungary to gain first-hand knowledge about the land and its people.⁷ Yet, notwithstanding these commendable aims and strenuous efforts, their works were essentially unsuccessful. Vogl's literary accomplishments, for example, hardly ever surpassed the bounds of mediocrity. Neither his love of the Magyars and his affectionate treatment of Hungarian genre pictures, nor his somewhat strange custom of mixing Hungarian words with his German-language poetry, could compensate for his lack of poetic strength and for his inability to grasp and to give expression to the genuine Magyar spirit. His efforts were not sufficient to dispel the air of artificiality in his poems dealing with Hungarian themes.

At this time German-speaking writers outside of Austria also began to show interest in Hungary. Many came to the country and wrote about their impressions and experiences.⁸ Thus, similar to the epoch of the Turkish occupation of Hungary (16th and 17th century) when the country was known as the land of fierce battles and exotic adventures, the land of the Magyars once more became fashionable in the German-speaking world and its literature.

The most talented Austrian poet who at this time turned to Hungarian subject matter was Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1850). Born in Hungary of German parentage, he spent his childhood and youth on Hungarian soil, completing his secondary education at the Piarist Gymnasium in Pest. The two years spent in the wine-growing region

of Tokay, and the frequent trips to Mosonmagyaróvár (Deutschaltenburg) subsequent to his settlement in Austria, afforded him the opportunity to get a close and intimate look at what can be termed as the "exotic" in Hungary. Hungarian peasant life, the lives of the *betyárs* (peasant highwaymen) and the wandering gypsies greatly impressed him and he was fascinated by Hungarian folk songs and gypsy music. Since with his background he fitted perfectly into the Austrian intellectual climate of the late 1820's, it was quite natural for him to try his hand at gaining popularity through poems with Hungarian themes. His treatment of Hungarian subject matter, however, differed from the customary adaptations of this kind. Critics generally agree that his poems dealing with Hungarian themes are free of the affected and forced elements prevalent in the works of fellow German and Austrian poets. But after all, Lenau had a great advantage over them, for the impressionable years of his youth were spent in Hungary, leaving their mark on his emotional and intellectual world. Furthermore, not even the passage of time could obliterate these youthful impressions from his mind. He personally witnessed and experienced many of those aspects of Hungarian life which remained a closed book to most of his fellow German-speaking writers, who knew about these either from the romantic and largely misleading travelogues of their adventurous predecessors or from their own brief and superficial glimpses of the country. Thus, since these poets wrote about something known to them only through the accounts of others, they tried in vain to capture the spirit of a strange and alien world. Lenau, on the other hand, simply relived his past and drew freely upon the spiritual heritage which had become an inextricable part of his own intellectual and emotional world.

Consequently, as a result of his background and past experience with certain aspects of Hungarian life that caught his fancy, Lenau's poems are generally correct in detail, and the sum of his poems dealing with Hungarian subject matter presents a less distorted picture of the country and of Magyar national life than the poetry of his predecessors and contemporaries. Yet, even Lenau was unsuccessful in portraying a balanced and representative image of contemporary Hungary. Like his fellow Austrian and German poets, he too utilized the same Hungarian images and figures and it is true that the gypsies, the talented carriers of both Magyar folk melodies and the so-called "gypsy music", the *betyárs*, the peasant Robin Hoods of the forests and *pusztas* and the *csikóses*, the tough herdsmen of the plains, are all Hungarian types. But they represent only a minute part of Hungary and the Hungarian world of Lenau's time. Like his fellow German-language poets and writers, Lenau seldom, if ever, treated the other, larger part of contemporary Hungary. To him the peasants, burghers, the commercial classes and the various types of lesser and higher

nobility (95% of Hungarian society) might as well not have existed. Naturally, Lenau and his fellow Austrian and German poets had the right to select those elements of Hungarian life and society which appealed to them. But in doing this, they presented an image which was not representative of Hungary as a whole, and thus did an unintentional disservice to the country. In their search for the exotic, they portrayed a relatively unimportant part of Hungarian life and overlooked the much more important elements of basic human values, beliefs and moral and political ideals which soon shook the very foundations of not only Hungary but the Habsburg Empire as well.

The stereotype view of Hungary which was propagated by Lenau and the contemporary German-language poets was further strengthened by the great influx of Western tourists and travelers in search of the unusual. It is clear, that despite certain differences in their approach, the foreign writers, poets and travelers recognized and wanted to recognize only those aspects of Magyar culture which were foreign to them and therefore could be classified as "exotic". They over-emphasized these traits, projected them over the whole country, and treated them as if these were the dominant characteristics of the entire Hungarian nation.⁹ As a result of these activities, the view presented by these writers and travelers about early and mid-nineteenth century Hungary became the conventional Western image of the country well into the twentieth century. To them Hungary appeared as the romantic land of the vast *pusztas*, wandering gypsies, gypsy virtuosos, ungainly *betyárs*, intriguing music and intoxicating Tokay wines. That this view remained prevalent even in the nearby German world had been recognized by many critics. "What do the German people know about Hungary?" asked Professor d'Ester of the University of Munich in the 1920's. And he answered: "If a newspaper confronted its readers with this intriguing question, the answers would fail pitifully. Hungary—'O yes, of course, Hungarian dances, Hungarian gypsy music'—the man who appreciates music would say; 'paprika, *puszta*—would be the reply of one who has a more realistic frame of mind."¹⁰

A similar view was expressed by the Hungarian János Koszó. "Every Hungarian who spends a considerable period of time in Germany," he said, "makes the rather unpleasant discovery that his homeland is still viewed in the romantic light of the early nineteenth century, which image has no relationship whatsoever to today's reality".¹¹ One might add that it never did reflect Hungarian reality in its entirety.

That the stereotyped image of Hungary, epitomized above, is the product of the past century is beyond doubt. And it may be true, as some critics claim, that Lenau's role in the development of this image, though unintentional, is immense. Several of them hold him expressly

responsible for these distortions and at least one, Zsigmond Szántó, even believes that it would have been much better had Lenau not written anything about Hungary.¹² Szántó contends that if a poet who was born and educated in Hungary retained such an erroneous and one-sided picture of the country of his birth, then one can at least question his genuine interest and knowledge of the country. This is all the more so—claims Szántó—as the years of Lenau’s poetic activity coincided with the great years of Hungary’s national revival, when the resurgent Hungarian culture produced some of the country’s greatest poets (Sándor Petőfi, Mihály Vörösmarty, Sándor and Károly Kisfaludy, Ferenc Kölcsey, János Arany, etc.), novelists (Miklós Jósika, Mór Jókai, József Eötvös, etc.), and political thinkers (István Széchenyi, Lajos Kossuth, Ferenc Deák, József Eötvös, etc.), most of whom apparently remained unknown or at least unimportant to Lenau. Through his treatment of Hungarian subject matter, he merely strengthened the already prevalent and grossly misleading view of Hungary as a land of primitive if appealing barbarism and a cultural and intellectual vacuum. Lenau, of course, was completely unaware of this, and he was rather proud of his part in again making Hungary familiar abroad. “What did people abroad know about Hungary before us?” he boastfully asked Karl Beck at their first meeting, clearly claiming credit for allegedly having placed Hungary once more on the map of Europe. But is this claim valid? Did Lenau, or Beck for that matter, add anything worthwhile to what was already known about the country from the well-meaning but naive writings of Vogl and others? Szántó does not seem to think so, and one must, in general, agree with him. Hungary had already been known in the German-speaking world prior to Lenau’s time as a productive but forsaken land of untamed Magyars who—so it appears—were either hussárs, *betyárs* or primitive swineherds. According to these beliefs, the sum total of the activity of these Magyars consisted of drinking, dancing, singing and drinking again; they were wholly untouched by the progress of time and civilization. In general, they had to be intoxicated to be enthusiastic about anything. But once they became enthusiastic, not even the spilling of human blood could be a matter of grave concern to them. All in all, from the point of view of a civilized Western man, the most worthwhile things in Hungary were the good Tokay wines and the melancholic and fiery gypsy music.¹³

While they are not in the least malicious or consciously critical, many of the important elements in Lenau’s poems dealing with Hungarian subject matter seem to agree with this assessment, and therefore they unintentionally strengthened this faulty and far-from-correct picture. This is the reason why one of his most recent critics, Ede Szabó, questioned the validity and even relevance of Lenau’s

poetry to Hungary. Szabó contends that they are

already somewhat covered by the dust of time. Their external romanticism, the *puszta*, the *betyár*, (peasant highwaymen) the *csárda*, (wayside inn) the gypsy and others fail to present a lasting genuine image of Hungary. Moreover, not even in their own time did they depict anything but a partial portrait.

Their value and authenticity is slight and too greatly bound to an age, and although some are marked by literary brilliance, for the present-day readers, they are mere curiosities.¹⁴

What these critics failed to consider was that Lenau was a poet, and as such, he was more interested in writing highly-personalized impressions of his youth than in giving a more prosaic but balanced account of contemporary Hungarian society and culture. One must also keep in mind that, notwithstanding his one-sided presentation, Lenau's basic sympathies for the land and culture of his birth are evident in his imagery and the sincerity and immediacy in his treatment of Hungary and the Magyars. It was not his intention (at least he never claimed so) to present an all-inclusive portrait of the whole spectrum of Hungarian society. Like any other lyric poet, Lenau only wished to preserve some fond memories of his childhood, and at the same time use the imagery of these memories to portray completely unrelated emotions which filled his sensitive soul. Later in his life some of these images became associated with his fervour for the Hungarian national movement—a movement which he apparently never knew very well. To Lenau, therefore, Hungarian genre pictures served the purpose of imagery and they were not intended to portray his native land in all its meaningful reality. Thus his poetic works should be evaluated in the context of their artistic imagery. This is precisely the point that the above critics failed to take into consideration.

NOTES

1. See Herder, "Über die neuere Deutsche Literatur," [Regarding the more recent German Literature] *Samtliche Werke* [Complete Works] (Hildesheim, 1967), I, 131-357. Cf. Friedrich Heer, *Europäische Geistesgeschichte* [European Intellectual History] (Stuttgart, 1953), pp. 565-570, and Ernest Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston, 1955), pp. 230-233.
2. Gusztáv Heinrich, *Magyar elemek a német irodalomban* [Hungarian Elements in German Literature] (Budapest, 1909), pp. 38-39.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
5. For a full treatment of Karl Beck's life, literary accomplishments and relationship to Hungary, see Ágnes Huszár Várdy, *Life and Works of Karl Beck: A Poet without a Country*. Dissertation. University of Budapest, 1970.
6. Béla Pukánszky, *A magyarországi német irodalom története* [History of German Literature in Hungary] (Budapest, 1926), pp. 488-489.

7. Heinrich, p. 40.
8. Some of the most important travel narratives are: Graf von Hofmannsegg, *Reise in einigen Gegenden von Ungarn, bis an die türkische Grenze*. [Travels in various Regions of Hungary, up to the Turkish Border] (Gorlitz, 1800), Ernst Arndt, *Reisen durch einen Teil Deutschlands, Ungarns, Italiens, Frankreichs, in den Jahren 1789-99*. [Travelling across Parts of German, Hungary, Italy, France, in the Years 1789-99] (Leipzig, 1804), August Ellrich, *Die Ungarn wie sie sind* [The Hungarians as they are] (Berlin, 1831), and Hans Norman, *Ungarn, das Reich, das Land und Volk wie es ist*. [Hungary, the Kingdom, the Land and the People as it is] (Leipzig, 1833).
9. The awakening of Hungarian nationalism and its effect on the outcome of events during the first half of the nineteenth century is discussed by Gyula Farkas, "Der ungarische Vormärz, Petőfi's Zeitalter," [The Hungarian Vormärz. The Age of Petőfi] *Ungarische Jahrbücher* [Hungarian Yearbooks] XXIII (1943), 5-186, and by Hugo Hantsch, *Die Geschichte Österreichs*. [The History of Austria] (Graz, 1953), II, 318-340.
10. As quoted by Mária Dukony, *Az Alföld a német irodalomban* [The Hungarian Plain in German Literature] (Budapest, 1937), p. 14.
11. János Koszó, "Das romantische Ungarn in der neueren deutschen Dichtung," [Romantic Hungary in the more recent German Literature] *Deutsch-Ungarisch Heimatsblätter* [German Hungarian Fatherland Review] I (1929), 21.
12. Zsigmond Szántó, *Lenau viszonya a magyarsághoz* [Lenau's relationship to the Hungarians] (Lugos, 1899), pp. 22-23.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Ede Szabó, "Lenau in Ungarn," [Lenau in Hungary] *Lenau Almanach*, 1965-1966, p. 90.

Recent Publications in Hungarian Art History

Reviews by Alfonz Lengyel

Christian Art in Hungary, Collections from the Esztergom Christian Museum. By Miklós Boskovits, Miklós Mojzer and András Mocsi. (Budapest: Publishing House of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1965. \$14.50)

Miklós Mojzer presents a short but excellent analysis of the collection at the Christian Museum in Esztergom, András Mocsi wrote the notes for the Trecento and Miklós Boskovits those for the Quattrocento periods respectively. The importance of the book lies in the fact that it introduces the Hungarian medieval masters to the English speaking public: specifically, it evaluates the works of Master Bat I., Tamás Kolozsvári, Master of Janosrét, Master B.E. and Master M.S.

The painting *The Legend of Sta. Catherina* by Master of Bat I. is a most unusual pictorial representation in that Sta. Catherina, a princess of Alexandria, appears on either side of the canvas which is divided by the image of a romanesque column. However, Master of Bat I. followed the Italian Quattrocento practice of including a Trecento icon within the composition. This typical Quattrocento representation is well documented in the book.

Tamás Kolozsvári, the most celebrated painter in Hungary during the reign of Sigismund, followed the practice of the Italian early Quattrocento by placing the figure of King Sigismund, portrayed as a Roman captain, into the scene of the *Crucifixion*.

The development of an Italian Renaissance in Hungary was not accompanied by the immediate demise of the Gothic influence and a dualism of styles prevailed for a time. This phenomenon is clearly apparent in Kolozsvári's altarpiece. Despite the strong Renaissance influence apparent in the picture, the miniature kneeling figure of the donor is presented in typical Gothic style, complete with medieval inscription. Such an inscription also appears above the head of King Sigismund; it is written in Latin, utilizing Gothic style letters and reads: "*Vere filius die erat iste.*"

Other artists such as Master of Janosret and Master B.E. followed the Flemish school, while Master M.S. echoed the great German Renaissance masters and Schongauer and Durer belonged to the Danube school.

The *Crucifixion* by Master M.S. was painted in 1506 in a flamboyant Gothic style. The portrayal of a Turkish figure as the executioner is remarkable. This type of anti-Turk propaganda appeared