

A Study in Austrian Romanticism: Hungarian Influences in Lenau's Poetry. By Agnes Huszar Vardy, with an historical introduction on the Age of Romanticism by Steven Bela Vardy. State University of New York College at Buffalo Program in East European and Slavic Studies, No. 6. Buffalo: Hungarian Cultural Foundation, 1974. 173 pages. \$6.00.

Austrian Literature has seldom been accorded a life of its own, yet whoever studies it soon learns that it is distinct from German: in spite of identity of language, Austrian literature has its own being. A good example of this is to be found in Nicholas Lenau, one of the chief lyric poets of German *Weltschmerz*. In her study of this representative of Austrian Romanticism, Agnes Huszar Vardy concentrates on one of the factors that distinguish the literature of this country from those of other German-speaking states: the input of the nationalities which formed the Austrian empire. One of these, Hungarian, had a cultural heritage essentially independent of the Austrian, though the cultural exchange between Hungary and its German-speaking neighbor had always been significant. In Lenau's time it entered a unique phase. On the one hand, German-speaking Hungarians became interested in the language and traditions of the Magyars, while on the other, repeal of repressive legislation allowed the teaching of Hungarian in the schools of the country. To this was added the flurry of activity that accompanied the linguistic, literary and political interests of the Reform Age, and it is clear that few poets could have remained unaffected. Lenau certainly did not.

In her study of Lenau, Professor Vardy presents the various influences that Hungary exerted on the poet between his birth in 1802 and the time when, owing to pressure from his wealthy grandfather, he settled permanently outside of Hungary. It is important to note that these were the years of Reform, and the spirit of the times, as Steven B. Vardy points out in his introduction, enabled Lenau to learn more of the rural, non-German conditions than his Germanic and primarily urban background would suggest. This awakening of interest in their Magyar homeland by German settlers accounts for part of Lenau's Hungarian heritage. Agnes Vardy, however, concentrates on the more definitive Hungarian influences in the poet's childhood and youth.

The poet's father, an officer in the Habsburg bureaucracy, died young, so that Nicholas was brought up by his mother, the daughter of patrician burghers of Pest. The family's traditions, consequently, had been tied to Hungary in spite of their retaining a basically German culture. The poet's education reflected this: instruction in Hungarian at the provincial town of Tokaj after the mother's remarriage, studies at the notoriously pro-Hungarian Piarist gimnasium in Pest, and

lessons from the tutor József Kövesdy. Professor Vardy effectively proves that in poems such as "Die Bauern am Tissastrande," "Die drei Zigeuner" or the Mischka poems, Lenau is drawing on the remembrances of his youth. "Lenau's subjective description and use of Hungarian imagery," she argues, "while stemming from immediate experience, reveal intense emotions which show more understanding of the Magyar frame of mind, customs and traditions than that of his fellow Austrian and German poets."

Several areas of "typically" Hungarian life are considered: gypsy music, pictures of hussars, *betyárs* and gypsies. Extensive quotations from the poems (these are given in full in the appendix) and selections from the poet's letters give proof of Lenau's obvious attachment to the scenes of his youth. The point is indubitable, yet well argued. However, one would wish for greater depth in the analysis of the poems. The author tends to rely heavily on paraphrase and summary; though the observations on the poems are generally valid, one always feels that she draws back from the poem upon stating its particular Hungarian implications.

A near exception to the above generalization is found in the comment on the "Schilflieder," in which Agnes Vardy argues that the imagery of the reeds reflects the poet's psychology. In mentioning the role of music in the formation of Lenau's Hungarian and poetic heritage, she is again perceptive. Unfortunately, such probing is abandoned too soon, and instead we have commentary with little commitment: in discussing "Die Werbung" she notes that the system of recruiting soldiers by means of a dance was fairly common in Eastern Europe in the early 19th century, yet fails to explain that the name of the dance, "verbunkos," is a characteristically Hungarian distortion of the German "Werbung." Such clues to cultural exchanges should not be ignored. Similarly, in discussing the cultural revival of the 1820's, she fails to stress that, though *some* of the Austrian and German-speaking nationals living in Hungary tended to consider Hungarian traditions as part of the overall Austrian "Volksgut," a significant majority never did so: Hormayr and his colleagues prepared the way for a renewal of Hungarian, not Germanic culture. Such superficial statements seem to point to both a fear of being challenged and a reluctance to probe the sources deeply. They are consistent with what this reviewer feels was Agnes Vardy's failure to get to the "meat" of the poems.

The information given through the use of Lenau's letters and the interpretation of the poems give the reader a new perspective on both Lenau and Austrian Romanticism. Professor Vardy introduces the poet as a charming, gifted and tragic person. The numerous pictures included in the work, illustrating both Hungary and Lenau's life, provide an added dimension.

A disturbing aspect of the mechanics of this volume is the handling of the German material. Translations of the poems are given as part of the text, enclosed in parentheses. I believe such prose English versions should have a less prominent place—as footnotes or in the appendix. The reader who is unfamiliar with German could then consult the English, while others would not be annoyed by interpolations. Similarly, both the introductory essay and the main work abound in bracketed translations of obvious terms: *Weltschmerz* [world grief], *Vormärz* [pre-March]. Thankfully, these are relatively more restrained in the body of the work.

The introductory essay is useful for the background it gives on Austro-Hungarian relations in the early 19th century, but the style is choppy; it has a tendency towards the use of clichés and awkward, fragmented sentences. The style of the book itself is more lively and interesting, even when the dissertation flavor remains. This is particularly evident in prompting the author to explain rather than explicate the poetry of Lenau. One is especially disappointed after the “Preface” suggested in-depth research in Vienna and Budapest, which the book does not bear out.

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