

The Image of Hungarian Poetry in the English-Speaking World

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Hungarian men of letters have always been influenced by Western European literary movements from which they borrowed themes, styles, and ideas, only to naturalize them. Rather than imitate foreign models, they adapted various currents of world literature to Hungarian themes, language and meter (in this respect, especially, the models had great impact), and, to some extent, Hungarian tastes. Latin works of the Middle Ages, for example, received a Hungarian flavor by changing a locale or substituting a king's name. By permitting local customs to slip in also, the universal material immediately gained national coloring. This process was enhanced during the Renaissance and Reformation when Hungary's political position differed greatly from that of the new nation states of Western Europe, and all literary activity naturally mirrored the political and military situation, as well as the religious disputes. The years following the expulsion of the Turks and the Rákóczi Revolution increased Western influences. Not only did German literature — or rather, French Enlightenment through German intermediaries — play a role, but direct contacts with France and the Low Countries also enriched Hungarian cultural life. This era also saw the beginnings of the "backward" *litterati*, i.e., those men of letters who resisted the new trends identified with the Austrian rulers and who maintained the earlier tradition of the *kuruc* poetry with its typical Baroque dualism of spirit and flesh and its echoes of Cavalier poetry. In short, the late Renaissance and the early Baroque received a unique development in 18th century Hungary. The tradition represented by Zrinyi and Balassa was integrated into later tradition through this process of popularization.

English literature gained a prominent position in Hungary only in the latter half of the 18th century. From then on, however, it continued as an important factor, occasionally even eclipsing German influence. Presently American literature seems most popular, but then this is a world-wide phenomenon. The converse, namely English scholarly in-

terest in Hungarian literature, has been far more limited. We can discern a vivid influence of Hungarian themes and point to significant German, Italian and French poets who have come under the spell of Hungarian literature, or at least of a major Hungarian poet, but there is relatively little Hungarian literary influence on England. This might be blamed on the distorted image of Hungarian literature among Englishmen, and also on sheer ignorance. Yet there have been at least three periods when active interest was shown in Hungarian literature.

The first important reference to Hungarian poetry may be found in Sir Philip Sidney's *The Defense of Poesy* (1595). As a diplomat, he had travelled to Vienna and thence to the outposts of the Imperial forces on the Turkish frontier. This journey naturally took him into Hungary, specifically Pozsony (Bratislava), where he was the guest of a Dr. Purkircher; the French diplomat Languet had introduced them. Although Sidney's tutor assumed that the young man's visit would last only about three days, it lasted almost a month.¹ He met Lazarus Schuendi, commander of the imperial forces in Hungary, and in visits to the *végvárok* (outpost fortresses) gathered a lasting impression about military tactics and the life of soldiers in Hungary. Of a romantic and chivalric turn of mind, Sidney seems to have responded eagerly to the stimulus of this lifestyle.

Even more than the military information he gathered, Sidney seems to have valued his literary contacts. "In Hungary I have seen it the manner of all feasts, and suchlike meetings," he wrote in his *Defense of Poesy*, "to have songs of their ancestors' valor, which that right soldierlike nation think one of the chief kindlers of brave courage."² The context, it should be noted, was the discussion of lyrical poetry. Sidney defended this genre against those moralists who saw only the work of the devil in the appeal to the emotions. He introduced his discussion with these rhetorical questions:

Is it the lyric that most displeaseth, who with his tuned and well-accorded voice giveth praise, the reward of virtue, to virtuous acts? who giveth moral precepts and natural problems? who sometimes raiseth up his voice to the height of heavens, in singing the lauds of the immortal God?³

Thus, to Sidney, the appeal of these Hungarian songs was in their moral and patriotic tone and in their natural or "rude" style which, he felt, could be compared with the "Lacedaemonians." He conjured Pindar to substantiate his claim that victory in battle was to be celebrated over victory at the tourney. In short, in his contemporary world, Sidney could find heroic poetry that compared with the classical in dignity and nobility only in Hungary.

The mention of the songs of the "végvárak" was not an isolated instance of Sidney's interest. In his long romance *Arcadia*, he mentioned the oriental method of fighting that was practiced by the Hungarian knights or cavalry during the Turkish wars. In fact, his description parallels Bálint Balassa's in "Katonaének":

But this straunge land more straunge conceits did yeeld:
Who victor seem'd was to his ruine brought;
Who seem'd o'erthrown was mistress of the field:
She fled and tooke; he folow'd and was caught.
So have I heard to pierce pursuing shield
By parents trained the Tartars wilde are taught,
With shafts shott out from their back-turned bow.⁴

Sok vérben fertezvé
Arcúl reá térvén
Úzöt sokszor megvernek.⁵

With the generalization typical of many Renaissance authors, Sidney equated Tartars with Turks: the former fit the content of *Arcadia* better, and in any case, little distinction was made between the oriental nations in Renaissance England.

Evidence of Sidney's loyalty to the dying code of chivalry abounded in his works, but so did references to world affairs, notably the Turkish wars. He seems to have been regarded as an authority on Eastern European affairs in England and Queen Elizabeth's interest in the Emperor's situation demanded an awareness of Turkish movement in this region of Europe. Thus, we find numerous references in Sidney's later correspondence attesting to his continued connection with friends in Hungary.

In spite of this auspicious beginning, it was not until the 19th century that Hungarian poetry again aroused interest in England and led to translations of Hungarian works. Language, of course, continued to pose an unsurmounted barrier, but now several popularizers abroad began to interpret Hungarian literature. Admittedly, these mediaries often did more harm than good; but their efforts must nevertheless be acknowledged, for they did bring Hungarian poetry into the consciousness of some of the English and American public. Sir John Bowring, diplomat and businessman, poet and translator, was among the first important intermediaries.

The Hungarian literary historian, János Hankiss, has pointed out the

limitations of Bowring and others: their inability to overcome the “bécsi spanyolfal, amelyre ‘Mikosch’ vagy ‘Ungar Janosch’ torzképe volt ráfestve.”⁶ Bowring had to depend on Carl Georg Romy, Ferenc Toldy and finally, on Karl Maria Kertbény for his information. Not knowing any Hungarian himself, he used the German anthologies published by these men, or he obtained German versions of Hungarian songs. Since these sources were not critical in their selections, and since the German translations were often inaccurate, Bowring and the others formed a distorted picture. Admittedly, the exoticism of Hungarian literature, real or imagined, was emphasized in the English versions. This is what the readers expected, and this is what they were given. As Hankiss has stated, “A művelt külföldi ragaszkodik a magyar táj idilli zártságának, ember és föld szoros összetartozásának föltételezéséhez.”⁷

As early as 1827 Bowring published one of Sándor Kisfaludi’s “folk-songs” in the May issue of the *Monthly Review*. Undoubtedly, he was working from one of the many German anthologies or periodicals that carried numerous examples of the suddenly popular “Magyar” folk-song. Later, Bowring turned to Georg Romy’s *Magyarische Anthologie* as a source. It is ironic — and was unfortunate for the acceptance of Hungarian literature in Western Europe — that these sources represented the “distortions” rather than the true poetry of Hungary. They emphasized the sentimentality and exoticism of Pre-Romanticism at a time when both Hungarian writers and European tastes had progressed beyond this. Consequently, while Petőfi and his friends fought against the cheap success of unrealistic and sentimental verse, it was precisely such poems that became known abroad as Hungarian literature.

The ambiguous or divided response to Hungarian literature can perhaps best be illustrated by the reactions to specific works. Bowring’s *Poetry of the Magyars*, for example, received generally good reviews. The quality of the translations was uneven, the selection was strongly influenced by popular taste, but the introductory essay on the Magyar language and the estimate of Hungarian literature was surprisingly accurate. Yet, though interest in the book was lively enough, it failed to have any real impact. This occurred chiefly, I believe, because enthusiasm for things Hungarian was mostly emotional, based on English sympathies for the Revolution of 1848–49. Such emotional commitments had a counter-effect, too: *Frazer’s Magazine*, departing from the general trend of eulogy, published a review slanted at least as severely in the negative direction which illustrated its thesis by citing garbled letter-sequences purporting to be the Hungarian text.⁸ Similarly, the *Athenaeum* displayed prejudice or at least ignorance when it spoke of *János*

Vitéz as "a confusion of aimless marvels, strung together without skill."⁹ The reviewer had expected a realistic work and refused to read the poem as the allegorical fairy tale it is.

Inasmuch as Bowring came to rely on Kertbény more and more in his later work, his translations suffered. The false but persistent image of Hungarian literature as primitive, sentimental and exotic owes much to these early distortions. Even the later association with Hungarian émigrés such as Ferenc Pulszky and Louis Kossuth failed to overcome this early impression.

In the 19th century, the impact of the Hungarian Revolution was such that others besides Bowring became interested in Hungary. Both in England and in the United States periodicals carried freely translated versions of Hungarian poetry, especially that of Petőfi. For example, *Howitt's Journal* had already published some of Bowring's verse translations in 1847, and in 1852 the *National Era* printed a few Hungarian poems based on rough English texts given to the journalist and novelist Grace Greenwood by one of Kossuth's aides.¹⁰

Such popularity, however, only served to reenforce the extant image of Hungary and Hungarian literature and totally failed to draw the attention of any of the major poets — even of those who, like Matthew Arnold, Walter Savage Landor, Charles Swinburne or John Greenleaf Whittier — wrote about the Hungarian Revolution. This is not surprising, given the quality of these early translations of Hungarian works. Not even the translations of the late 19th century and of the early 20th corrected the situation. A gradual change came when two important translators emerged in North America. The first, William Loew, undertook to make the poetry of Petőfi and selected other 19th century poets available to English speakers. His versions were accurate but unpoetic.¹¹ Watson Kirkconnell's *Magyar Muse* (1933) was better, though the selection was heavily weighted in favor of minor contemporary poets.¹²

As in the mid-nineteenth century political events had inspired a wave of interest in Hungary, so too, in the mid-twentieth century the Hungarian Revolution again drew attention. The anthology, *From the Hungarian Revolution*,¹³ edited by David Ray, collected poems on the Revolution by various non-Hungarian poets as well as the poetry of many of the Revolution's participants which had first appeared in Hungarian in the volume *Füveskert*. This, however, was only the beginning; since the 1960's other works have appeared in English: a reprint of Frederick Reid's *History of Hungarian Literature*, Joseph Reményi's *Hungarian Writers and Literature*, and David Marvyn

Jones' *Five Hungarian Writers*.¹⁴ Such critical studies have done more for the cause of Hungarian belles lettres than volumes of poor translations ever could. They give critical analyses of the best in Hungarian literature, discuss literary movements, and explicate significant qualities in comparative terms. Here, Hungarian poetry is not viewed as an exotic creature but rather as an individual phenomenon of European literature. The same concern is seen in some recent articles that have appeared, and is the thesis of the anthology of modern Hungarian poets published by Corvina and Columbia University Press, and edited by Miklós Vajda.¹⁵

Some fifty years ago Henri Baldensperger, one of the founders of the comparative study of literatures, remarked that the middle of the 19th century ought to have been the era of Hungarian literature. This never occurred, but the image of Hungarian literature is finally escaping its limitations: both the "exotic" mold of the past hundred and fifty years and the limitations of purely journalistic interest which too often led only to publication in insignificant and little-read anthologies. A similar but more recent threat, publication chiefly within the Hungarian community without reference to the wider literary scene, also seems to be effectively countered. Hungarian literature now stands a chance of becoming known and appreciated for what it is.

NOTES

* Presented at the first annual Conference of the American Hungarian Educators' Association, Cleveland, Ohio, November 29, 1975.

1. Languet to Sidney, Letter of September 22nd, 1573, quoted in John Buxton, *Sir Philip Sidney and the English Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1954), pp. 61-62.
2. Sir Philip Sidney, *The Defense of Poesy*, in *Tudor Poetry and Prose*, J. William Hebel, et al., eds. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1953), p. 819.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Sidney, "First Eclogues (1593), Ec. II. 11:400-430," in *The Complete Works of Sir Philip Sidney*, Albert Feuillert, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), p. 351.
5. Bálint Balassa, "In laudem confiniorum," in *Összes versei és Szép magyar komédiája* (Collected Poems and His Fine Hungarian Comedy) (Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1961), p. 550.
6. János Hankiss, *Európa és a magyar irodalom a honfoglalástól a kiegyezésig* [Europe and Hungarian Literature from the Conquest to the Compromise] (Budapest: Singer és Wolfner, 1939), p. 350. Translation: "the Viennese screen upon which was painted "Mikosch" or "Hungarian John" as distorted pictures."

7. *Ibid.*, pp. 545-546. Translation: "The cultured foreigner insists on the idyllic unity of the Hungarian scene, on the assumption of the close unity of man and nature."
8. Review cited in Aurel Varannai, *John Bowring és a magyar irodalom* [John Bowring and Hungarian Literature], *Irodalomtörténeti füzetek*, 60 (Budapest: Akadémiai kiadó, 1967), pp. 103-113.
9. *The Athenaeum*, 29 March 1851, p. 350.
10. *Howitt's Journal of Literature and Popular Progress*, 11 (July-Dec., 1847), 28, 237-238; *The National Era*, VI (Jan. 22, 1852; Jan. 29, 1852; Feb. 12, 1852).
11. William Loew, *Gems from Petöfi and Other Hungarian Poets* (New York: P.O. D'Esterházy, 1881); *Magyar Songs: Selections from Modern Hungarian Poets* (New York: Samish and Goldman, 1887); *Magyar Poetry: Selections from Hungarian Poets*, enlarged and revised ed. of the two above-mentioned works (New York: Author-Translator's Edition, 1899); *Modern Magyar Lyrics* (Budapest: Tisza Testvérek, 1926); *Translations from the Hungarian: Toldi; Toldi's Eve; Ballads; Selected Lyrics* (New York: The Cooperative Press, 1914); *The Tragedy of Man by Imre Madách* (New York: Acadia Press, 1881); *Childe John by Alexander Petöfi* (Budapest: Hungarian Studio, 1920).
12. Watson Kirkconnell, *The Magyar Muse: An Anthology of Hungarian Poetry 1400-1932* (Winnipeg: Kanadai Magyar Újság, 1933).
13. *From the Hungarian Revolution: A Collection of Poems*, David Ray, ed. Adapted from the Hungarian *Füveskert*, ed. by Tibor Tollas (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1966).
14. Frederick Riedl, *A History of Hungarian Literature* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1963); Joseph Reményi, *Hungarian Writers and Literature: Modern Novelists, Critics, and Poets*, ed. and with an introd. by August J. Molnar (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1964); David Marvyn Jones, *Five Hungarian Writers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).
15. *Modern Hungarian Poetry*, ed. and with an introd. by Miklós Vajda, foreword by William Jay Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977).