ANGLO-IRISH AND IRISH POETRY IN HUNGARIAN: THE LITERARY OFFSHOOT OF AN HISTORICAL PARALLEL

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As an historian, as well as a student of literature, I would contend that history does not create the literature that will characterise it nearly as much as literature will presage history. The ideas of the French encyclopaedists had demolished French feudalism spiritually long before the Bastille was actually razed to the ground. Through Lucretius, Petronius and, from a different angle, the writings and activities of the Stoics, the politheistic religious framework of Rome had been made ridiculous, well before the early Christians could show up its corruption. One could even go as far as to say that the spirit of a new era will come flowing steadily down the chimney and create an atmosphere in the house which, eventually, leads to an explosion. Political history will then take account of tangible events: how the windows and doors were replaced. Sometimes the roof as well. Sometimes the whole house.

Arthur Griffith, one time printer, journalist and editor, later politician and statesman, published in the 24 December 1903 issue of *The United Irishmen,* a poem by William Butler Yeats that had not been anthologised before or since. It was no literary masterpiece, and its reappearance in Griffith's journal marked a certain uneasiness in the relationship between these two great personalities of the twentieth century Irish Renaissance. Griffith had had the temerity to correct Yeats's punctuation in the poem to which the poet took exception. The poem, 'How Ferencz Renyi Kept Silent' described a Hungarian hero of the 1848–49 revolution and war of liberation, a certain Ferencz Renyi, who had withstood the most terrifying psychological pressure at the hands of his captors, the Austrians, and never betrayed his comrades. Renyi's fiancée was killed in front of his eyes yet he remained true to his friends and to the cause. Yeats wrote:

> We, too, have seen our bravest and our best
> To prison go, and mossy ruin rest
> Where houses once whitened vale and mountain crest,
> Therefore, O nation of the bleeding breast,
> Libations from the Hungary of the West.[1]

Awkward as it may be and Victorian verse in style, still by virtue of its content the poem was found fit by Griffith to herald a new age. According to Griffith Ireland was to gain its independence by adopting the Hungarian method. Subsequently *The Resurrection of Hungary* — a political pamphlet — was launched in 1904 and became an instant hit.[2]

The parallel was put into practice in 1907 when *Sinn Fein* was established — a non-militant organization working for peaceful change. In 1916 an upsurge of the more violent, post-Fenian spirit resulted in the Easter Rising. After 1922 Sinn Fein became the advocate of forceful change, differing, very much, from the Sinn Fein of 1907. What is interesting, or even remarkable, is the claim by both the non-militant and militant wings of Sinn Fein, at various times in their existence, that they were equally rooted in Irish tradition and history, and that they could find parallels in Hungarian history.[3]

It was the group of Young Irelanders, John Mitchel, Thomas Davis and William Smith O'Brien who, after they had been exiled from Ireland, realized that their fate and the fate of their country, was very similar to those of Louis Kossuth's group and that of Hungary. Davis wrote in the 1840s:

> And Austria on Italy — the Roman eagle chained —
> Bohemia, Servia, Hungary, within her clutches grasp;
> And Ireland struggles gallantly in England's loosening grasp.[4]

So it was, through the writings, correspondence and personal accounts of these *Young Irelanders* that the idea of a Hungarian parallel entered the Irish consciousness. William Smith O'Brien, for instance, visited Hungary in 1861 and observed at first hand the spirit of the so-called Hungarian passive resistance: the non-payment of taxes, the peaceful disobedience in civic matters that eventually induced Austria to grant Hungary its constitution and restore its parliament.[5] A compromise was struck in 1867 between

Austria and Hungary and its architect was the Hungarian statesman Ferenc Deák.

Hungarian resistance, similar to Ireland's, had had two different traditions. Apart from the peaceful way of Deák there was the armed resistance of Kossuth in 1849, and his conspiratorial armed struggle for independence between 1849 and 1867 directed from abroad with the help of covert international diplomacy. So when we come to a point of agreement, a Compromise, an historical watershed, it cannot be claimed unequivocally that it was the result of the peaceful resistance led by Deák solely; it was also the result of the armed resistance displayed by Kossuth in 1849 and afterwards.

In Ireland in the year of 1867 three Fenians were tried and sentenced to be executed. The affair produced a public outcry and then a protracted correspondence where two sides were polarised: those who believed that resistance by violent means was in vain, and those who claimed it was the only way to achieve independence. John Francis O'Donnell, the poet, journalist and contributor to *The Nation,* wrote a poem, 'Cui bono' in 1867 which evoked both of these Hungarian ways of resistance:

They failed, I grant you — Klapka failed —
But not the cause for which he bled;
Disaster, blood and tears entailed
Till beaten Hungary ran red
And Europe howled and Europe railed
Above the victors and the dead

But still the mighty Magyar race
Persisting, won the doubtful day;
An empire charmed to sudden grace,
Achieved its mission — forced its way:
The nation's sons got breathing space,
Its heart resumed its pulse and sway.

Are we unworthy less renown?
Are we unworthy less reward?
We who, despite our master's frown,
Cling to tradition of the sword,
And prize the axe that strikes us down,
More precious than the spiteful word.

I say — let history answer this —
For us, we freely risk the chance,
And, meanwhile, be it joy or bliss,
Our constant motto is: Advance.
Top ladies, whispered voice and kiss;
For freeman, rifle, sword, and lance.[6]

So there were two traditions for the parallel. Given another hundred years, or so, the configuration will have altered.

Ireland, excepting one province with two differing traditions, has achieved independence, but not the way Griffith would have conceived it: united yet free, royalist yet independent. Hungary lost many of her former territories — most notably Transylvania with over two million Hungarians living there — which changed masters and thus many former Hungarian citizens had to change their allegiance and support successor states. The remaining country of Hungary gained, lost, regained its independence much later. Meanwhile literary traditions live on and literature, particularly poetry, takes new courses, or rather, after the interlude of being filled with nationalistic fervour keeps its normal course of evoking eternal themes in novel ways.

Late twentieth century Hungarian readers are in turn attracted to Irish literature for a variety of reasons: the first was the link, the historical parallel already illustrated. Second, in the awakening of national consciousness in the early nineteenth century, Hungary took the course of hanging on to its esoteric language. One of its best poets, Ferenc Kölcsey, coined the phrase; 'a nation lives in its language'. In contrast Ireland has only kept its national language as a precious relic. English is the language of everyday communication, and most Irish poets write poetry in English, the only language they know or know well. Ireland has, however, kept its national religion through adversity. Hungarians think that the language change in Ireland may have had beneficial effects as well. Having English as a mother tongue Irish poets could immediately join the mainstream of world literature, and enjoy almost instant recognition abroad. Hungarians, locked in their own tongue, cannot communicate their poetry on a competitive world level.

So the Hungarian curiosity about Irish poetry in particular might be stated as a conundrum thus: what happens to a people who lose their language but preserve their national identity when they communicate via a world language? Furthermore: do their affinities

with Celticity survive? What is it like to be sons and daughters of a small nation, economically second fiddle to a larger one, but culturally on a par with it? These are the kind of questions to which Hungarian literati are searching for answers and this is partly the reason why they would like to see a comprehensive anthology of Irish poetry available in Hungarian.

The choice of particular poets and poems for such an anthology is, to a certain extent, dictated by precedent. Thomas Moore, Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, Yeats and Samuel Beckett have already been introduced to the Hungarian public through judicious translations and/or a selection of their poetry in translation. World fame was their portent. Beyond such classical figures, selection depends upon the following: (a) Merit in contemporary literature, as already recognised by international acclaim: poets like Seamus Heaney, Thomas Kinsella, Austin Clarke, Patrick Kavanagh, Louis MacNeice. (b) Contemporary poets who have already found their way to certain Hungarian poet translators: Richard Murphy, Tom Paulin, Seamus Deane. (c) Representatives of a school of poetry, such as the earth-bound local patriots like John Hewitt of recent years, or Pierce Ferriter, the soldier poet, who seem to have near equivalents in Hungary. The same is true of the drinking songs of Carolan (though you would have to substitute wine for whiskey), folk poetry, Medieval songs written to the Virgin Mary, and love poems whose universal validity is evident. (d) Individuals who behave like Hungarian wits: such as Oliver Saint John Gogarty, hitherto unknown in Hungary.

In my anthology of Anglo-Irish poetry and poetry in Irish, *Tört álmok* ('Broken Dreams') of nearly four hundred pages there are some thirty poems offered in two different translations by two different people. Not because one is better than the other, but because both are equally convincing. For example, 'Epic' by Patrick Kavanagh was translated by Dezső Tandori and by me, separately. Both translations kept very close to the original in meaning, both attempted to approximate the original form, both texts used expressions from everyday, literary and idiomatic language, emulating the original, and both seemed to achieve a poem that could have been written in Hungarian, saving the Irish names in it.

There is a large poetry reading public in Hungary and a special demand for poetry in translation since a landlocked country, locked also into an esoteric tongue, relies to a great extent for information on translations.[7] Two thousand copies for a first volume of poetry is

not rare, and the publishers of *Tört álmok* sold over five thousand copies. These numbers should convince anyone that reading poetry is not an elitist pastime but it is within the everyday experience of an educated person. It is an expectation, even though by mid-1993 there occurred a — hopefully — temporary lapse in publishing due to the withdrawal of state subsidies as publishers like all other state owned businesses became reorganised and privatised.

English is now the second language in Hungary, having overtaken German, French and the once compulsory Russian. There have been in the past bilingual volumes of poetry — *Samson Agonistes,* for instance, or *Fleur du mal.* I believe that an enterprising publisher today would recoup his investment by publishing bilingual texts, because more and more readers fancy themselves as amateur comparatists who want to see the original text and (also the compromise, which is called) the translation.

Poetry is the most instant, the most vivid, the most life-enhancing of all literary forms. Readers of poetry, at least in Hungary, want to expand their own lives through experiencing the lives of others via the medium of poetry. While in the reading experience a reader subconsciously looks for familiarity of temperament and sentiment he or she *overtly* looks for the exotic, what is to him or her exotic: the charm of a distant green island, the nearness of the sea, the spiritual dimension and the buoyancy that characterises the Irish poem — as seen from that distance.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION. A SMALL NATION'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE WORLD. Csilla Bertha and Donald E. Morse

1 Opening Address of Welcome at the 1989 conference of the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature held in Debrecen. All further references are to this unpublished essay.
2 András Csorba, *Magyar–ír kapcsolatok 1867-ig* (Debrecen: Tisza István Tudományegyetem Angol Szemináriuma, 1944), pp. 7–8.
3 Thomas Kabdebo, *The Hungarian-Irish 'Parallel' and Arthur Griffith's Use of his Sources* (Maynooth: St. Patrick's College, 1988), pp. 2–3.
4 Opening Address of Welcome at the 1989 conference of the International Association for the Study of Anglo-Irish Literature held in Debrecen. All further references are to this unpublished essay.
5 Kabdebo. *op. cit.,* p. 5.
6 István Pálffy, 'Hungarian Views of Ireland in the Nineteenth Century', in *Literary Interrelations, Ireland, England and the World; Reception and Translation,* ed. by Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok (Tübingen: Narr Verlag, 1987), p. 33.
7 See, for instance, Duckworth Barker, 'Regionális irodalmi kísérlet Nagy-Britanniában' *Erdélyi Helikon,* 1930, 785–9.; 'Ír drámaírók', *Erdélyi Helikon,* 1931, pp. 76–9.
8 Csilla Bertha, 'Tragedies of National Fate: A Comparison between Brian Friel's *Translations* and its Hungarian Counterpart, András Sütő's *A szuzai menyegző', Irish University Review,* 17, 2 (Autumn) 1987, pp. 207–22.