

## Review Article

# A New Literary Monograph Series

*George Biztray*

Steven C. Scheer, *Kálmán Mikszáth* (1977), 161 pp.

Clara Györgyey, *Ferenc Molnár* (1980), 195 pp.

Anna B. Katona, *Mihály Vitéz Csokonai* (1980), 170 pp.

(All published by Twayne Publishers: Boston, MA)

Twayne Publishers have produced hundreds of monographs about major writers from virtually all parts of the world. A few years ago, Twayne initiated a Hungarian Series as part of its major World Authors Series. For a number of reasons this event should be considered important by everyone involved in the study of Hungarian literature. First, this series is unique in the English-speaking world, where publishers have never attached particular priority to monograph series that introduce individual authors. Secondly, the volumes reviewed here are the first and thus far the only full-length books written in English about the whole oeuvre of Mikszáth, Molnár and Csokonai. By the time one finishes reading the volumes a third point emerges which demonstrates their importance. I shall return to this in the conclusion.

The monographs follow the standardized formula of the Twayne series. Written with the intention to introduce Mikszáth, Molnár, and Csokonai to readers who know little or nothing about Hungary, all three authors provide useful historical and cultural background information.

The first in the series is the book on Kálmán Mikszáth by Professor Scheer, whose judgments are convincing in many crucial aspects. Scheer outlines for the English-speaking reader the difference between Mór Jókai, the first great Hungarian prosaist, and Mikszáth, who belongs to a younger generation, by detailing Jókai's fixation with the War of Independence (1848-9), which no longer motivated Mikszáth's artistic aspirations. Scheer presents a well-proposed, extended argument for the permanence of irony in Mikszáth's oeuvre, which challenges

the shaky but surprisingly uniform attempts of recent Hungarian literary scholarship to establish three developmental stages in this oeuvre. Especially fortunate are the comparisons between certain artistic characteristics of Mikszáth's prose and achievements of writers well known from world literature, such as the juxtaposition of the structural unity in *A tót atyafiak* and *A jó palócok* with Joyce's *Dubliners* and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Despite the assets of the first Twayne monograph on a Hungarian writer, I cannot conceal numerous critical points which surfaced while reading this volume. Professor Scheer deliberately adopts structuralistic methods and some terminology in presenting Mikszáth. In this sense, the intention of making "the reading of this book worth the while of the advanced Mikszáth scholar as well" (p.7) was perhaps realized. It is rewarding to find that modern critical approaches can be successfully applied in the analysis of classical Hungarian literature. One questions, however, whether catering to academic scholarship and adopting its fashionable terms and methods should be the aim of a popularizing monograph series, especially in the case of less-widely known literature such as Hungarian. Professor Scheer also demonstrates how historical, social and formal methods can be utilized simultaneously with rewarding results. In my opinion, however, his structuralistic zeal is misplaced.

Since the author of the volume points out the significance of irony in Mikszáth's prose, the reader may not understand why Scheer is indifferent to Count István Pongrácz's "madness" (Mikszáth himself repeatedly asked in *Beszterce ostroma* whether the Count was really mad) or why he insists that Mikszáth never identified with his characters. In fact, Mikszáth had a romantic leaning to the cult of young innocence, especially virginity; he hardly ever described young lovers in ironic terms. Despite this, the evaluation of Mikszáth in the concluding chapter as a romantic and visionary rather than a realist leaves a feeling of dissatisfaction in the reader. This interpretation is not implausible, but the author defines realism as if it was identical with naturalism. Perhaps a more discriminating discussion, comparable to György Lukács' argument on realism and naturalism, would have resulted in a more complete description of Mikszáth's place in Hungarian literature.

The principles serving as a basis for the critical apparatus were, in my opinion, unsatisfactory. Scheer uses a double set of references, citing quotations from the fifteen volume collection *Mikszáth Kálmán Művei*, (which is incorrectly listed as *Mikszáth Kálmán Munkái* in the Notes, p. 151) and employing other references from *Mikszáth Kálmán Összes Művei* (whose publication did not conclude in 1973 as listed in the Bibliography).<sup>1</sup> The reason for this confusing practice is not explained to the reader. Moreover, critiques of Mikszáth reviewed by the author are haphazardly selected. Fine critical evaluations, such as those of Négyesy, Gyöngyösy and Rejtő are missing; whereas Béla Illés, the notorious political opportunist and literary nonentity, is referred to as “a more recent critic” of Mikszáth. North American scholars of Hungarian literature and culture could surely afford to be more selective in choosing their references, especially from post World War II Hungary.

In comparing the volume on Mikszáth with the second in the series, Clara Györgyey’s monograph on Molnár, the following question is raised in the reader’s mind: what separates greatness from skillfulness? Probably the fact that greatness yields to a wide variety of interpretations and approaches, whereas skillfulness does not. It would be impossible to apply Professor Scheer’s structuralist method to scrutinize Molnár’s dramas. This method surely never occurred to Györgyey either. In this respect, her monograph is a lucid, straightforward, easy-to-read account of Molnár’s works. If anything, the monograph is slightly “positivistic” with its numerous plot summaries, careful chronologies and personal background information.

Why is Mikszáth a great writer? If there are those who dislike him it is not because of the quality of his work. In Molnár’s case, those who dislike him also question his place in Hungarian literature. One may question if there is anything genuine about his works at all. Györgyey is fair in pointing out Molnár’s weaknesses, that is: narcissism, snobbishness, repetitiveness, eclecticism, and a lack of genuine human depth beyond technical sophistication. It is undeniable, however, that Molnár’s plays have been among Hungary’s best known cultural export items. Györgyey emphasizes Molnár’s “Hungarian-ness,” perhaps in order to down-play the often heard charge of rootless cosmopolitanism. Still, any theatre or TV audience, whether North American or Hungarian, will find *Olympia* or *The Play’s the*

*Thing* equally entertaining. In Molnár, we admire the skill, the genuine craftsmanship of knowing how to use each word and each second on stage to attain a maximal effect; which is, of course, no small accomplishment. Because such skill is easier to appreciate than genius, Molnár will be with us for a long time. It is almost unbelievable that no single monograph before Györgyey's has attempted to summarize Molnár's artistic achievements in English.

There are certain sections, especially with regards to the background information, which may raise questions in the reader's mind. An example of this is the statement that the turn-of-the century urban middle class which made Budapest an economically advanced, politically progressive and culturally brilliant metropolis, consisted virtually of Jews. This is "substantiated" by a single, fairly biased quote from Ignóty. Györgyey occasionally leaves the otherwise wisely followed golden middle road in her use of idioms as well. Perhaps inspired by Molnár's style, she describes episodes from the author's life in language which is hardly suitable for a literary monograph, even if it aspires to reach a wider reading public. The following quote is such an example:

Molnár admired his boss, József Vészi, perhaps the most influential editor in the country. Vészi liked to invite handsome, brilliant young intellectuals to his frequent parties. He had four highly cultured daughters. It did not take Molnár too long to select sixteen-year-old Margit, who had a devilish, challenging look in her eyes. (p. 35)

The semantic exaltation of the adjectives lends a gossipy character to the style which the bulk of the monograph does not warrant.

In order to follow the sequence of the series, we go backwards in chronology to Anna Katona's volume on Mihály Vitéz Csokonai (no. 579) which was actually published in the same year as Györgyey's monograph on Molnár (no. 574).

Csokonai was born in the Hungarian university and peasant-merchant town Debrecen, a centre of advanced European knowledge, yet also of extreme conservatism. Coincidentally, Professor Katona is also a native of Debrecen; her sensitive interpretation of Csokonai's background, schooling and attachment to his native town, are, in particular, assets to her work.

Katona also succeeds in convincing the reader that a poet as heterogeneous as Csokonai may be represented in his multifaceted totality.

To accomplish this was no easy task. Csokonai was, in one person, a classicist, a mannerist, an early naturalist, the first to introduce folk elements in modern Hungarian poetry and, concurrently, the most refined rococo poet of his nation. Finally, he was also a versemaker of incredible vulgarities, banalities, and hardly appreciable folksy "humor." The explanation of why so few book-length studies have been written about Csokonai for almost two centuries may be in the variety and unevenness of his oeuvre. Katona surveys all the paradoxical tendencies in Csokonai's works, (tendencies which are dominant in certain periods of his activity) and makes repeated cross-references to them, while also tying them in with similar trends in world literature. The result is a successfully integrated Csokonai monograph in which the artistic genius of the author serves as a unifying focus for the kaleidoscope of writings produced during a tragically shortened life.

The art-centred analysis of Csokonai's oeuvre, characteristic of pre-World War II interpretations, is a welcome change from the nonsensical ideological speculations which have characterized critiques of Csokonai during the past decades. It has become customary to write about Csokonai's "balking" after the Jacobin dictatorship in France and the execution of Martinovics and his comrades in Hungary. Moreover, his work was characterized with labels such as "dark pessimism" and "submission to the reaction." Fortunately, however, the generosity of Hungarian party critics proved victorious. The following quote is particularly illustrative of this type of Csokonai "criticism": "Nevertheless, we cannot let the enemies of the revolution, the reactionary nobility, claim Csokonai's post-1795 writing for themselves." <sup>2</sup>

Katona neatly disregards these irrelevant ideological interpretations by stating that Csokonai's "business was not politics but poetry," (p.101) and that he never wavered in his ideals of patriotism and enlightened humanism. As for the reactionary nobility, Katona retorts that "a nobility that also produced a Festetich and a Széchenyi (*sic*, referring to Ferenc Széchenyi) cannot be dismissed as reactionary as a whole" (p.100).

The volumes contain many technical errors. In particular,

the indexes share serious shortcomings which would be relatively simple to correct, that is: poor Hungarian orthography (e.g. mennyegző); the lack of proper diacritical marks ("Locse" instead of Lőcse); incorrect word division ("Hus-zár"); and misspelling of not commonly used but historically important names ("Ráckoczy," "Ropespierre," "Noble Prize"). Such glaring errors and misspellings, some of which are detectable by non-Hungarians as well, may considerably damage the prestige of the series.

The notes and bibliography sections of the Mikszáth and Molnár volumes share many of the same annoying problems found in the indexes. These sections in the Csokonai monograph are in correct form, however, the index in this volume is similar to the other two in the frequency of errors. Concepts such as "Calvinistic," "citizen," "existentialist" and "modern" are also listed in the index; such listings are too general to be useful. Moreover, it is highly unusual to include adjectives as main entries in an index.

It would be unfair to dwell only on these aspects of the three monographs. Overall, they are proof of the existence and necessity of autonomous North American Hungarian scholarship. Moreover, these authors provide alternatives to the biases of recent Hungarian criticism. In contrast to thirty-five years of predominantly one-dimensional interpretations, Scheer demonstrates that it is futile to insist on an ill-defined Mikszáthian realism, since Mikszáth was at least as much of a Romantic as he was a "realist." Györgyey illustrates that technique cannot be discarded for ideological reasons; the expectations of the audience are more important in the theatre than historical materialism. Finally, Katona argues for a poetry-centred Csokonai interpretation in the spirit of the great pre-World War II tradition of János Horváth and Antal Szerb.

It is refreshing and rewarding to learn from these monographs that ideology may have a place in literary evaluation, but that its place is fairly marginal and is actually filled by different, even contradictory ideologies which nevertheless do not diminish poetic greatness. It is equally rewarding to realize that these are the kind of volumes which, although they may never find the way to ten million Hungarians, will still primarily inform a potential reading public of millions of

English speakers about Hungarian literature. The greater and the more urgent need is to correct the formal shortcomings of the series.

#### NOTES

1. *Mikszáth Kálmán Művei* (Writings of Kálmán Mikszáth) (Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1965-1970), 15 volumes.

*Mikszáth Kálmán Összes Művei* (The Complete Works of Kálmán Mikszáth) (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1956- ).

2. *A magyar irodalom története* (The History of Hungarian Literature) (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1965), Vol. 3, p. 236.