

## Book Reviews

Marianna D. Birnbaum, *Janus Pannonius: Poet and Politician* (Zagreb: Opera Academiae Scientiarum et Artium Slavorum Meridionalium, 1981).

This is a broad and detailed account of the life, times and work of Janus Pannonius. In keeping with its subtitle, it places equal emphasis on the historical and literary importance of this Renaissance bishop. Little has until now been generally known about Janus in western countries, and so much, as this book demonstrates, is available to scholars on the subject, that this book is most welcome.

It is far more than a factual account. Birnbaum takes care, on occasion, to make us vividly conscious of Janus' emotions during the major crises of his life. His immersion in the cultural life of the Italian Renaissance, for example, began at the highly impressionable age of thirteen, when his uncle Joannes Vitéz, Bishop of Várad, sent him to be educated in Ferrara in 1447. This period is described together with a wealth of background material about the school of the great humanist Guarino Veronese (under whom Janus studied). Birnbaum does not neglect Janus' emotional response to this experience either, as evidenced in the following passage:

Without any doubt, Guarino represented the humane ideal for Janus...He deeply believed that Guarino incorporated the best qualities of a scholar and a human being, and to resemble him remained his keenest aspiration. (p. 28)

It is, of course, Janus' writings that make such statements possible, and Birnbaum, properly allowing for the necessarily filial tone of earlier poems addressed to the master, points out that even in later letters Janus still speaks of his former mentor as a humane model. Scholarship here is at the service of emotional empathy. And as the book progresses we develop an increasing awareness of how much Janus' Ferrara experience of Renaissance

Italy meant to him, and remained a cultural lodestone to him in his later career as an eastern European bishop involved in court-politics.

The book is, however, more than a sympathetic and scholarly biography. Janus was appointed Bishop of Pécs well before the age of thirty in the Chancery of King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary who was himself a young man. Birnbaum deals with Janus' career and studies the questions of foreign policy that were urgent at the time. Perhaps the most important one was whether Hungary should concentrate on keeping the Turkish threat at bay, or to plunge itself into power-seeking towards the west, ignoring the Turks. Matthias finally chose the latter, and Janus strongly disapproved, even to the point of conspiring against the king. Birnbaum is not afraid to take a clear political position on these events: that Matthias was wrong and Janus right, as Matthias' eventual failure demonstrates. The author at times writes as a historian as well as a biographer.

Similarly, she prefaces her treatment of how Neoplatonism influenced Janus' poetry with a compendious few pages on the place of Neoplatonic philosophy in the thought of the late Middle-Ages and Renaissance. In the end, however, Birnbaum returns to the subject of Janus (who in a trip to Italy in 1465 met the great Neoplatonist Marsilio Ficino), and illustrates how, though influenced by the vocabulary and ideas of that school, our apparently secular bishop turned that system on its head, accepting re-incarnation, or pretending to, but hoping to return as an animal (regardless what kind) in the afterlife, provided it was not a human being. In this area as well Birnbaum is both a biographer and historian of the Renaissance.

Another passage that shows the breadth of this book and the adeptness of its author is the one analysing the change that came over Janus' poems praising Matthias:

The more displeased Janus grew with Matthias' policies, the stronger and more inflated his praise became. (p. 140)

Birnbaum suggests that the later, apparently sycophantic poems are actually an exercise in irony, but "irony meant for a man who would no longer appreciate irony"; a process similar, perhaps, to a chill interruption of politeness into the conversation of an estranged friend. This passage provides a good example of the

close relation between history and literary criticism. An overview of Janus' relationship with Matthias helps the critical elucidation of the poetry; and the hypothesis provided by Birnbaum's interpretation of these particular pieces of poetry helps in the more detailed reconstruction of Janus' relations with his kind at the time of the latter's negotiations with Frederic III (1470).

The book deals carefully with the difficult subject of Janus' relationship with religion which was problematic to say the least because for our information we rely on poetry that is frequently oblique and ironic on the subject, and commonly secular in orientation. Birnbaum sensibly emphasizes that very secularity as the key to the matter, insofar as a key exists, and disagrees with scholars who have labelled the poetry as heretical. For to be heretical the poetry would not only have to be incompatible with Christianity but at the same time profess to be Christian, which it does not.

Birnbaum is equally careful with the much-contended question of Janus' nationality. The author avoids partiality, and arrives at the conclusion that Janus was Croatian, but that nationalistic attempts to claim him for Croatia or for Hungary are misleading. Being a typical product of the Renaissance, Janus was international, he represented Hungary in the mature work of his career, but he was mentally committed to the ancient Latin world, using Latin as his language, and classical Latin metres for his poetry. In doing that he was, of course, playing the part of an Italian humanist of the *Quattrocento*.

On specifically literary matters the book is sound. For example, it confronts the duality of Janus' poetry (parts of it very immediate, giving a strong sense of a particular person in a particular condition, other parts thoroughly conventional and rhetorical) by sensibly drawing attention to the "gap between the image and the thing itself which the poets of the Renaissance had no intention of closing." This refers to the completely symbolic use of images such as the rose, inherited from the Middle Ages by Janus and other Renaissance poets. Still, the vividness of Janus' descriptions of his sufferings from consumption, for example, remains startling in contrast with his conventional and rhetorical passages.

As should be clear by now, the book is admirably multi-disciplinary. The only major criticism to be made is of the English style, whose faults clearly come from the author's not

being a native speaker of this language. Even this criticism must be moderated however, in light of the fact that in the English-speaking world it is precisely our poor knowledge, until now, of this major figure of the fifteenth century that makes this fine piece of scholarship so welcome.

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Paul Várnai, ed., *Hungarian Short Stories* (Toronto: Exile Editions, 1983).

The volume under review is a collection of fifteen short stories written by contemporary authors. When a new collection appears there are at least two questions that come to mind: 1. Is it a broad enough sampling of the literature the editor meant to introduce? 2. How does it compare to similar publications preceding it?

It should be stated right away that the volume falls short regarding selection. There should have been at least fifteen authors assembled, instead of thirteen, and each should have been represented by one short story only. Also, absent are such writers as Füst, Tersánszky, Veres, Szabó, Sarkadi, Fejes, Czakó, Bertha, Esterházy, Ördögh, Vámos—just to mention a few. There are no women writers included—Jókai, Szabó, Gergely, and a number of others, would have offered ample choice.

Dobai's opening piece is rather poorly conceived, introducing a filmscript style. Its shortcomings are amplified by a shaky translation. Mészöly's *Report on Five Mice* is, in turn, a very powerful story. Man's historical cruelty toward his fellowman has made us so callous that tragedies must be transferred to the world of animals and insects; from this new vantage point our feelings of pity and compassion may be elicited. Killing is made easier when distance is created between the murderer and his victim and especially when *life* is reduced to numbers. Killing a family of mice becomes a mathematical and not a moral problem when their fate is reconsidered in a geometrical progression. We have to read about mice in order to relive the horrors of Auschwitz. This kind of modern allegory was earlier used by Örkény in his *Honeymoon on Flypaper*. His *Requiem*—also performed on stage as part of *In Memoriam Ö. I.*—is included in this volume. The story is a perfect example of Örkény's preoccupation with memories, and our facing the past which seems invariably more important than the present. A contemporary echo of *The Return*