

Lóránt Czigány  
**The Oxford History of Hungarian Literature**  
 From the Earliest Times to the Present

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Historiography has at least two clearly distinguishable facets: it organizes a certain amount of data into a narrative structure, establishing some connection between *explanandum* and *explanans*. Accordingly it is possible to criticize any work of historical writing on the basis of factual knowledge and on that of the theoretical concepts underlying the explanation of "data". As it must be taken for granted that a single author who sets himself the enormous task of writing the history of a national literature from the earliest times to the present, cannot achieve this end without lapses of inaccuracy. I shall focus primarily on the metahistorical aspects of this present work.

Lóránt Czigány is a critic who left Hungary in 1956. Living in the West, he pays regular visits to his native country. Because of his double allegiance, he is ideally suited to the writing of a history of Hungarian literature combining an international horizon and the familiarity with cultural changes in present-day Hungary. What the reader living in Hungary might expect is no less than a timely corrective to his parochialism and national complacency.

What kind of vision of Hungarian literature does a critic unbiased by local interests have? Looking at the table of contents, it is somewhat surprising to see that Petöfi (1823–1849) and Jókai (1825–1904) are the writers whose works are discussed in separate chapters. Petöfi is certainly one of the three most important Hungarian poets of the 19th century, and Jókai is no minor novelist, but few readers today would maintain that they are the most representative verbal artists of the Hungarian language. It is possible that Czigány has remained insensitive to the somewhat equivocal popularity of Jókai? Critics have always emphasized the latter's artistic inferiority to Zsigmond Kemény (1814–1875). Besides, statistical studies indicate that Jókai has lost much of his popularity in recent years, even among children, who used to represent the bulk of his reading public. In any case one cannot help observing that Czigány gives too much emphasis to Jókai's historical romances, which in the title of chapter XIII. he himself characterizes as a form of "national escapism" (p. 217.); whereas he pays much less attention to works written for a more serious public.

In general the book tends to make Hungarian literature seem much less "adult" and civilized than it actually is. We may justly draw examples from the 19th century, because this is the period with which Czigány seems most familiar. While the uneven, and sometimes rather superficially sensationalist fiction of Jókai is analyzed over 12 pages, the activity of Kemény, a major representative of psychological realism, is summed up over 4 1/2 pages. It is no wonder, then, that this sketchy outline is full of blind spots. Some of Kemény's major works are not even mentioned: the highly influential imaginative portraits of leading statesmen, *István Széchenyi* and *The Two Wesselényis* (both published in 1851), are ignored along with the long theoretical essay *Drama and the Novel* (1853), the *nouvelle* *Alhikmet the Old Dwarf* (1853), in which the hero dreams his second life, and the "romance" *Nightmares on the Mind's Horizon* (1853), a highly original experiment with narrative time and point of view. These facts are important, because they could have helped the reader understand the international aspect of 19th century Hungarian prose. Kemény's use of the genre of the historical portrait makes him a contemporary of Macaulay, his speculations concerning dramatic fiction foreshadow the theoretical essays of Henry James, his cult of the fantastic and the *Doppelgänger*, the

interdependence of chronotopes and point of view, and the techniques of presenting the consciousness of characters originate in the works of such Romantics as Hoffmann and anticipate later developments. Without such points of reference, a reader unfamiliar with Hungarian will hardly suspect that Hungary has at least one writer who can bear comparison with the major novelists of the 19th century. What is more, the brief characterization of Kemény's *œuvre* is also marred by factual errors. To mention but one example, it is incorrect to assume that before the revolution of 1848 Kemény supported the group of statesmen called the "Centralists".

The treatment of Kemény and Jókai is no more than one of the many cases which reveal an inappropriate use of value categories. The career of Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936), the only Hungarian writer who may be regarded as a major artist in both narrative fiction and lyric verse, is discussed over 4 1/2 pages, whereas the works of Ferenc Molnár (1878–1952), whose fame rests upon financially successful, but unquestionably light and superficial comedies, are granted almost as much space.

In his introduction Czigány is critical of earlier histories of Hungarian literature, both Marxist and non-Marxist. In principle there is nothing unsound or illegitimate in emphasizing the blindnesses of other scholars; the trouble is that this book is far too unfamiliar with revaluations made over the last two decades, and represents value-judgements that are somewhat outdated. It would not be taking the matter too far to suggest that outworn clichés of a simplistic Marxist interpretation of literature sometimes crop up in Czigány's evaluations, as for example when he remarks that in *Twenty Hours* (1964) Ferenc Sánta (1927–) cannot "provide a solution" (p. 467.), or when he praises Jókai in the following terms: "in the few masterpieces he produced he could be true to life and draw character as competently as the best of his realist contemporaries" (p. 217.).

It is enough to consult the index of the book to see that many important writers have been left out of this history of Hungarian literature. Pelbárt Temesvári (?–1504), a religious writer of European standing, Sándor Bölöni Farkas (1795–1842), the author of a highly influential *Voyage to North America* (1834), Miklós Wesselényi (1796–1850), one of the most important Liberal thinkers, and János Asbóth (1845–1911), an outstanding essayist and the author of *A Dreamer of Dreams* (1876), the most original Hungarian novel of its age, are not even mentioned. Misplaced emphasis often goes hand in hand with the total or partial neglect of works which scholars analyzed as major literary achievements. Thus, it must be taken as a serious omission that Ferenc Rákóczi II (1676–1735) is treated only as a political figure and neither his Jansenism, nor his autobiographical works (*Confessions, Mémoires*) are taken into consideration; Dániel Berzsenyi (1776–1838), a major poet widely read today gets no more space than András Fáy (1786–1863), a lesser prose writer known only to experts; the activity of István Széchenyi (1791–1860) is summed up without a single reference to his *Diary*, which by general consent is a *chef-d'œuvre* of 19th-century literature; the lyric as well as the essays of János Arany (1817–1882) are neglected; neither the earlier nor the later book of Lukács on aesthetics is listed among his works; of all the volumes of Sándor Weöres (1913–), *Medusa* (1944), probably the most important is left unmentioned; the poetry of János Pilinszky (1921–1981) is briefly characterized on a single page, without even referring to his greatest poem *Apocrypha*; and Milán Füst (1888–1967), the author of strikingly individual dramatic monologues written in *vers libre*, is placed on the level of Oszkár Gellért (1882–1967), an eclectic minor poet.

Instead of enumerating further details, one should probe the reasons for the unevenness of this book. Of a number of possible explanations, the most pertinent may be the rather low level of conceptualization. At least two conditions are indispensable to a literary history: a sound terminology used in the analysis of individual works and an overall design. The former implies an ontology of the work of art, the latter a teleology. The author of this book seems to have less than enough of either. An expert on some details of literary history—in 1976 he published an extremely useful book on the reception of Hungarian literature in Victorian England—he is not well-versed in theory. He can speak of literary devices but has no individual conception of the semantic strata of a lyric poem or a novel. That is why he offers plot summaries but hardly ever analyzes a novel. He makes interesting remarks about prosody or characters, but works of art are never presented as structured wholes.

The absence of terminology may be partly responsible for certain problems of style. I am fully aware that it is very difficult to write in a language other than one's own, but cannot agree with the practice of overusing Hungarian words in a text written for English-speaking readers. If we speak of "the *istenes* poetry of Balassi" (p. 54.), a "blend of refined Rococo and *népies* elements" (p. 81.), "the birth of *irodalmi tudat*," "a *főrangú* poet" (p. 86.), "a *magyaros* trend" (p. 88.), or we add English suffixes to Hungarian words (*megyes*, *Honvéds*, *népszínműs*, *kurucs*, *kubikosos*, etc.), we not only create clumsy phrases but also give the impression that the Hungarian words are untranslatable technical terms. As this is not so, the frequent use of Hungarian words has no justification.

The stylistic coherence of a narrative will depend at least partly on how convincingly causal relations are developed in the text. In other words, the narrator must find organic connections between the phenomena he presents; otherwise his story-telling might seem arbitrary. The reading of meaning into the past is, without doubt, a complex, indeed risky business, but a history which fails to offer its readers direction will lack sense and purpose. This is not, of course, to demand that the literary historian seek continuities where there are none, but to insist that discontinuities themselves be interpreted by, and critically incorporated into, the narrative.

Material is not always well organized in this book, and again this shortcoming may be put down to the lack of a comprehensive terminology. Ordering is not simply unusual, but indefensible. Writers are taken out of context and discussed at a far later stage, damaging the coherence of the narrative. József Katona (1791–1830) is discussed in a chapter following one on Hungarian Romanticism, although his play *Bánk bán* (1820) anticipated Romanticism. The views of Széchenyi are expounded even later, despite the fact that his *Weltanschauung*, egotistical sublime, theory of national character, sense of irony, and visionary style exerted such a decisive influence on his age that by general consent he is regarded as the first Romantic writer in Hungary. The fiction of Ferenc Herczeg (1863–1954) is analyzed at the end of the chapter on Jókai, whereas Kálmán Mikszáth (1874–1910), the writer whose anecdotal technique of narration served as a model for Herczeg is discussed only in the next chapter.

Such radical departures from the usual ordering of material could only be justified by strikingly original explanations. Instead, we are presented with rather conventional classifications. It is enough to glance at the titles to see how old-fashioned the principles underlying the pattern are. Two of the most crucial chapters are called "The Writers of the *Nyugat* (I)" and "(II)", with subtitles as follows: "A View from the Ivory Tower: Mihály Babits," "Homo aestheticus: Dezső Kosztolányi," "A Poet of Loneliness: Gyula Juhász," "A Sophisticated 'Weltschmerz': Árpád Tóth," "The Minor Poets," "The Bitter World of Móricz," etc. Some of these labels may remind one of the dingy legacy of the 1950's. Today few critics would believe that Babits, a religious poet who fought for European community and Kantian moral standards was an artist of the ivory tower, or assume that Kosztolányi, struggling with post-Nietzschean nihilism, can be characterized as a *homo aestheticus*. As for the rest of the subtitles just quoted, their meaning is far too general, no matter how hard we may think about them.

The conclusion seems inescapable that the author of this book has no strikingly original conception of Hungarian literature as a whole. This becomes especially evident in the last chapters, where ordering is strictly formal. Transylvanian literature is discussed in two sections (before and since World War II), and a similar division is made in the final chapter on recent developments (before and since 1956). Ordering is political and/or geographical, for our critic does not wish to think in terms of artistic trends. Lost in the material, he falls back on enumeration: one writer follows another without any principled justification of the succession. No explanation is offered for the appearance of a given writer in one chapter rather than another. Of the writers living abroad since the last war, Sándor Márai (1900–) is put into "Survival of the *Nyugat* Tradition," while László Cs. Szabó (1905–1984) is mentioned in the last chapter, after many of his younger colleagues have been examined, none of whom have anything in common with the essay-writing of the 1930's, which should be the historical context for Cs. Szabó's work.

As suggested at the very outset of this review, there may be several levels of conceptualization in

historiography. The higher of these levels are absent from this book. Its genre is scissors-and-paste chronicle rather than history proper, because it reports facts in a rather narrow sense. Causal explanation is rarely given; it quite often happens that facts are not connected by explanatory links or incorporated into a historical narrative; and so the validity of this book depends entirely on the truth of its components, a set of facts. As a chronicle Czigány's work may be more useful for those who seek to know "pure facts," i.e. names and titles, than for readers curious to know how these are connected.

In literature Hungarians have produced less of lasting value than three or four of the biggest European nations, but their tradition is long enough to make it an almost impossible task for a single scholar to write the nation's entire history. If a scholar sets himself the task of publishing a work like this, it must be taken for granted that his knowledge will be uneven. Accordingly, I do not criticize Lóránt Czigány for not devoting more than 90 pages to the first 600 years of Hungarian literature, because he is obviously less familiar with the period 1200–1800 than with the last two centuries. It cannot be denied that a narrator who makes original value-judgements may constitute a form of linkage among the events entering into a particular history; and so the fact that a history of Hungarian literature is written by a single scholar may also be an advantage. The trouble is that no such focus can be felt in this book.

It is a further misfortune that Czigány's work was written between 1973–1978, and published without systematic updating. Some more recent data, however, are registered, and this makes it rather conspicuous that the author does not take note of the new generation of prose writers who emerged in the 1970's and brought a fairly radical reevaluation of the past. In general, he seems to be little aware of changes in taste, does not view history as an interaction between the present and the past, and does not seem to look upon Hungarian literature from a wider international perspective. As he pays little attention to some international trends in ideas or in art, his less informed readers may not appreciate the significant influence of Stoicism, the philosophy of Bergson, or *Jugendstil* on Hungarian culture. Furthermore, Czigány fails to avail himself of the advantage he has over his colleagues living in Hungary: strangely neglecting Hungarian literature written in Western countries, he gives a list of names rather than a summary of trends and an analysis of works. If a reader is interested in the work of Márai, whose work is largely inaccessible in Hungary, he will not find much more in Czigány's book about this writer than in Aladár Schöpflin's *History of Hungarian literature in the 20th Century*, published in 1937.

The aim of Oxford University Press was to fill a gap and bring out an authentic history of Hungarian literature. That intention as well as the author's courageous efforts to cope with the insurmountable difficulties of summarizing eight hundred years of literary tradition deserve our unqualified respect, but it must be admitted that this book falls short of fulfilling its extremely ambitious purpose. This is, of course, regrettable, especially if we consider the fact that in all certainty readers will have to wait for quite a long time before another important publisher commissions a scholar to write a judicious reappraisal of a literature little known to the world, because written in a language inaccessible to the majority of potential readers.

Eötvös Loránd Tudományegyetem,  
Budapest

Mihály Szegedy-Maszák