

REVIEWS

Hungarian Philosophy

Mester, Béla: *Magyar philosophia* (A magyar nyelvű filozófiai irodalom forrásai. Sorozatszerkesztő Laczkó, Sándor – Tonk, Márton), IX. Kolozsvár–Szeged: Pro Philosophia, 2006. 323 pp.

In recent times, there has been an increasing number of efforts to grasp the scope and the nature of an intellectual phenomenon called ‘Hungarian philosophy’. The author of the book under discussion, Béla Mester belongs to a generation of philosophers whose familiar vernacular is antimetaphysical reasoning and sociological foundations which helps to attach a specially national intellectual agenda to international mainstreams of philosophical discussions.

The book entitled *Hungarian philosophy* contains several case studies in Hungarian and Transylvanian philosophy and intellectual history of the 19–20th centuries, including such figures as Gusztáv Szontagh, János Asbóth, Béni Kállay or János Székely. In a unique and highly stimulating way, Mester conceives the scope of Hungarian philosophy as a network of or a dialogue between different – Transylvanian, Upper Hungarian, Budapest- or Debrecen-centred – traditions grappling with their own special – regional or confessional – determinations.

In harmony with the usage of the 19th century period examined, Mester uses the term ‘philosophy’ in a rather narrow sense. He conceives it as an integrative social science or even as a set of beliefs synthesizing the basic assumptions concerning the nation’s collective identity. As a part of another stimulating methodological issue, he confronts the presumptive aims of national philosophy to other intellectual traditions targeting the same goal: above all, to the tradition of Hungarian literature. Mester has, much more exhaustively than any other philosopher before, expounded the rivalry of literature and philosophy in Hungarian culture during the 19th century with all the efforts of philosophers for achieving the academic and social emancipation of their discipline.

Offering sometimes pathbreaking, though separate case studies, the book cannot be considered as an even approximatively comprehensive survey of the connections and conflicts between literature and philosophy in the 19th century. Mester does not examine, for example, Imre Madách and his *Tragedy of Man*. It would also have been useful, from this point, to read more about the attempts to canonize István Széchenyi or Dániel Berzsenyi as “national philosophers” (75–76). Even in the context of his protagonist, Gusztáv Szontagh, the author does not deal with his literary achievements (108).

It is a special feature of Hungarian culture that debates on the disciplinary and institutional independence of philosophy took place in the same critical period of the first decades of the 19th century, when philosophy and natural sciences began to separate from each other. There is little doubt, then, that a complete spectrum of literary genres could, although partially outdated, be established in Hungary, as well as in other national cultures of East-Central Europe, while blank areas of philosophy, testifying the missing links to researches on natural philosophy can hardly be filled out retrospectively. Literature needs only one root and one medium, e.g., language, to survive. Philosophy, on the contrary, can hardly exist without recurring to an ontology based on contemporary insights of natural sciences. Mester’s account of revisiting the extent and proportions of Hungarian national intellectual canon, literary or philosophical, shows us the necessary methodological prerequisite that further investigations has, in the first order, to be aware of the historical context of its very formation. A non-contextual comparative analysis of the philosophical corpus in 19th century Hungary on the one hand and the literary tradition on the other is rendered here rather problematical by the fact that one has to deal with philosophical texts of engaged, but often isolated individuals grappling with a newborn terminology. These almost forgotten texts emerge from the past in their original formulation which is often mysterious and cloudy, from linguistic point of view, even for philosophically cultivated native Hungarians. Literary texts, on the contrary, have undergone – ortographically, lexically and syntactically – a continual refinement achieved by successive philologists.

Another contrastive notion of philosophy in Mester’s book is the way of reasoning developed by theologians of various denominations, teaching in confessional colleges. It is in this connection that Mester states that Gusztáv Szontagh’s main concern was to found a philosophical discourse as a dialogue of intellectuals, independent from religious institutions, on core issues of politics and society. Szontagh’s efforts, apparently, led to dead-ends: the representants of the next generation of philosophers such as Bernát Alexander or Károly Böhm were united in choosing alternative ways of establishing Hungarian philosophy: the former cast for the mere reception and adoption of the outcomes of contemporary Euro-

pean intellectual currents, the latter for the task of a heroic system-building in new-Kantian style.

Mester's principal historical goal consisted in drawing new consequences concerning the overall liberal and Kantian characteristics of Hungarian philosophy in the 19th century. When examining the reception of John Stuart Mill's thought in Hungary, Mester contextualizes the utilitarian arguments in the liberal versus conservative controversy of domestic politics (170–171). He sees the motives of the popularity of Mill's social philosophy in the aspirations of his Hungarian contemporaries to establish a new political science on the basis of Mill's insights (176).

Despite Mester's mainly contextual arguments, the adequate meaning and signification of the received foreign ideas in Hungarian intellectual life should sometimes have been precised even by a more detailed consideration of their social and political surroundings. An example: Concerning the reception of Benthamian utilitarianism in Hungary, it would be, as Mester holds, the common denominator of the adherence to the principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" which united the reformist patriotes ideologically. But one can also argue for a rival interpretation of utilitarian rhetorics in Hungarian political life, according to which the divergent forces of a society based on prerogatives and privileges had rather to be held in equilibrium on the basis of a sort of Pareto optimality strategy. Hungarian intellectuals of the Reform Era – including Ferenc Kölcsey, whose famous painted figure drawing on Bentham's volumes is here referred to – admired Jeremy Bentham, above all, as the author of treaties on philosophy of law, quoting his arguments against the allegedly indisputable authority of ancient laws a number of times during their work of legislation. Similarly, the great Hungarian political theorist, József Eötvös rejected Bentham's moral position, while accepting, at the same time, his legislative principles.

Concerning the overall Kantian characteristic of Hungarian philosophical thought in the 19th century, Mester's account is not thoroughly convincing. While referring to the popularity of Kantian terminology, he does not examine, under of the surface of usage, eventually existing deeper intellectual connections. Working with a special terminology can be quelled from a looser metaphorical usage and does not involve necessarily the acceptance of a given theory as such.

Besides approaching substantial questions, Mester also deals with the auto-reflection of Hungarian philosophy on its own existence, for, as he puts it convincingly, "[t]his discourse is obsessed, in quite a monomaniac way, with the question of its existence or non-existence; backwardness or singularity; provincialism or universalism" (72). In addition, he argues that in the present state of the art of research into Hungarian philosophy, the work of antiquary is also indispensable. As he says in his case study on Péter Litkei Tóth: "We should maintain our skills in interpreting texts and ways of reasoning of a given era as well as these

texts themselves should be maintained, irrespective of the fact that for the moment we have little idea about what they will be, in the future, good for" (161).

There is, in fact, surprisingly few insights in these texts which would be worth to be revisited with a special philosophical curiosity. The details of the contemporary debates Mester analyses seem, indeed, to support this judgement. The controverse, for instance, concerning Hegel's notoriously ambiguous *Doppelsatz* from his *Outlines of the Philosophy of Law* between Litkei and Szontagh, resulted in a mere defence of this proverbial dictum about the interconnectedness of rationality and actuality against old Hegelian attacks on the one side and its presentation as an all-absorbing pantheism on the other. All this can hardly be taken seriously even in the context of continental discussions over Hegel's heritage.

In Béla Mester's latest book a considerable philological and interpretative work has been done in a jungly area of Hungarian intellectual history. Mester's task was not only to modify some emphasis of an existing narrative but much more to fulfill some preliminary requisits of an historical reconstruction in the hope that these endeavours once might be brought together in a grand synthesis on Hungarian philosophy.

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The Posthumous Success of a Writer from Central Europe

Sándor Márai: *The Rebels*. Translated by George Szirtes.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. 278 pp.

Reading in translation a novel that you know in the original is a strange experience, especially if your language (and culture) is that of the original text. The value of the translation depends largely on what the reader expects from a translation. Faithfulness to the original I find a very vague and therefore problematic ideal, so I ask for a well-written text in the target language. Although I am not a native speaker of English, my impression is that *The Rebels* reads extremely well, so I am perfectly satisfied.

Of course, all translations may raise questions. Some of the decisions may have been made by the translator, others by the publisher. The original title, *A zendülők*, seems to carry more specific implications than its English equivalent. The sixth volume of the standard nineteenth-century dictionary of the Hungarian language (compiled by Gergely Czuczor and János Fogarasi and published in 1874) makes it clear that the first meaning of the verb "zendül" refers to music, and Géza Bárcei's short etymological handbook, first published in 1940, confirms this ex-

planation. Both mention a second, figurative meaning, but both insist on the primary significance of the first. The adjective “zendülő” (ending in “k” in the plural) is still widely used as referring to musical sound, loud but pleasing. The English title makes more serious the activity of the boys, the members of the “gang” who are the heroes of the novel. The Hungarian title is more ironic, in harmony with the end of chapter 2, when the boys learn that “there were many gangs just like theirs”, in other words, what they had shaped as a private world was not private at all. The word in the title is never repeated in the Hungarian novel, in sharp contrast to the English version. In the source text it is synonyms that play a dominant role, while in the target text it is repetitions. As a result, the Hungarian text has more shades of meaning, it is more playful and even enigmatic, whereas the translation is more explicit and less nuanced.

As the relationships between an original and a translation are those characterizing a dialogue, it is understandable that in some cases the English version has connotations absent from the original; in others, certain characteristics of the world of the Hungarian novel are lost. At the end of chapter 2 it is stated about a character that “he rolled his Negro eyes absent-mindedly”. At least that would be the literal rendering. In 1930 “Negro” was a purely descriptive adjective in Hungarian, free of pejorative connotations. The translator himself must have been aware of this when giving a literal translation of a similar sentence in the opening chapter: “His great black eyes shone and turned with a confused light deep beneath his brow, the whites as large as a Negro’s”. In the next chapter, however, “swiveling his Kentucky minstrel eyes” has specific connotations somewhat foreign to the world of a novel about the city of Kassa in 1918.

Such solutions are perfectly satisfactory as the results of a creative reading. The difficulty consists in finding the limits of freedom. At some point the gang comes under the ambiguous influence of an actor who has arrived in the city. His stage name is Amadé Volpay. The young boys’ sexual inexperience is exploited by this actor. In an improvised theatrical performance he transforms Tibor Prockauer into a young woman and ends a ritualistic dance with him by kissing the boy. Volpay is portrayed as a somewhat demonic figure, foreshadowing the character of the totalitarian dictator in the author’s later novels. “There was something of Nero in Amadé. Nero himself had been an actor”, says the narrator, and some readers may take these words as an allusion to a novel by Dezső Kosztolányi, a writer Márai admired. In that work, published in Hungarian in 1922 and in English in 1927 with an introduction by Thomas Mann, the Roman emperor is portrayed as the archetype of the dictator as actor.

In the English text of *The Rebels* Volpay is said to be Jewish. This is an addition that might be somewhat problematic. Márai was extremely sensitive to the fate of Jews in his homeland. He had a Jewish wife and in 1944, during the German occupation, he condemned those Hungarians who failed to do their utmost to

save those who were being sent to concentration camps. After the end of World War II in his diary he criticized those Jews who joined the Communist movement. The word Jew does not occur in the Hungarian novel. If there is a character who could be Jewish by implication, he is the pawnbroker, who has a last name (Havas) that was often adopted by Hungarian Jews and who in the fourth and closing chapter tells the boys about his visit to a rabbi in Lemberg.

Undeniably the translator had to face difficulties specific to novels full of historical allusions. Some of these would have asked for an explanation, so their absence is fully justified, since most people are reluctant to read novels with footnotes. To mention but one example, “kuruc” denotes those Hungarians who opposed the Habsburgs in the 17th century. The substitute for this word, “rebel”, may be a bit misleading in so far as some readers might think of a possible link with the members of the gang, but such details are of no great significance. There are, however, some textual components that could have been preserved because they contribute to the message of the novel. “There is a nice expression: *to sweep something under the carpet*”, says one of the characters. Translating proverbs is notoriously difficult.

The English expression has a literal equivalent in Hungarian. Márai used a somewhat different saying. His sentence starts with the words: “As the Germans say: (...)”. Our author was born in Kassa, a city which today belongs to Slovakia. Márai became a firm opponent to the Nazi régime from the moment Hitler came to power, which is especially important in view of the fact that he was born into a German bourgeois family (his original name being Grosschmied). He lived and published in the Weimar republic of the 1920s and never ceased to bewail the demise of the German-speaking bourgeoisie of the region once known as Upper Hungary. The German proverb is just one of the numerous elements referring to the culture of that minority. Among the characters of *The Rebels* Colonel Prockauer, his son Lajos, who “had returned a few months previously as an ensign, having lost one arm at the front”, and Tibor, the boy who becomes “fed up with the game” played by the gang, represent this community.

When there are different versions of the source text, the publisher (or the translator) has to make a choice. The Hungarian text of *The Rebels* has different versions. In the second edition, published in 1945, the definite article in the title was dropped and there are minor changes in the text. The final version appeared in Toronto in 1988 for the first time as the opening section of the six-part sequence of novels about the German bourgeoisie of the author’s native Kassa, under the title *The Work of the Garrens*. Márai considered this work to be his chef-d’oeuvre, as is clear from the Introduction he wrote for it one year before he committed suicide in San Diego, California.

The English translation of *The Rebels* is based on a book published in 1930. There may well be good reason for this: Knopf may have wished to present the

text as a separate novel. Still, it would have been a good idea to include one sentence in the "Note about the author", informing the reader that the version of *The Rebels* regarded by its author as definitive belongs to a roman fleuve.

To the question as to how much of the historical context of the action is lost on a foreign reader no general answer is possible. At the outset, a middle-class boy is visiting a cobbler, the father of the only lower-class member of the gang who remembers his experience at the front. His name, "Zakarka", is Slavic. He tells the boy that as a member of the Austro-Hungarian army he had to execute some soldiers. When the boy asks him about the identity of the soldiers, he gives the following answer: "Czech officers. Traitors from the motherland's point of view". A well-informed reader would know that during World War I some Czechs decided to sympathize with the Slavs fighting on the other side, which in the case of the Eastern front meant the Russian army.

The Rebels is not only a novel about the anarchistic life of adolescents who have to grow up in the absence of their fathers fighting far from their homeland, but also about the end of a multi-ethnic Central European state, although less explicitly than Márai's *Embers*, Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, or Joseph Roth's *Radetzky*. 1918 was the last year of the Great War. A few months after the boys' May picnic Czech troops fighting for an independent Czechoslovakia occupied Kassa. The second part of Márai's sequence of novels is about this occupation.

Who are the rebels? They are adolescent boys in the hinterland of World War I, neither children nor adults. Their main activities are playing games, acting, gambling, gratuitous lying, and stealing money to buy useless trinkets. "It was a second childhood, guiltier than the first but less restrained, more exciting, more sweet. (...) It wasn't like their fathers' lives, lives that did not appeal to them in the least." They defy the laws of the adults. Their game is over when the community of boys coming from different sections of society proves to be an illusion, and their semi-autonomous world is destroyed by Ernő Zakarka, the cobbler's son, who cheats at cards and betrays the other three boys to the actor and the pawnbroker, two adults who exploit the youngsters' innocence. His betrayal has an element of class struggle. The ideology he advocates was to serve as a pretext for the Hungarian Commune that started with a coup d'état on 21 March 1919 and lasted 131 days. Irrespective of the political implications that may be read into the novel by those familiar with Márai's later attacks on Communism, the boys' graduation party, and colonel's return from the front, and the traitor's suicide, three events that are almost simultaneous, bring the action to an abrupt end and constitute a closure that might earn the praise of a discriminating reader.

The Rebels is arguably a better novel than *Embers* (1942), which became a bestseller in Italy in 1998, attracted much attention in the second German translation at the 1999 Frankfurt Book Fair, and was successful in London in a stage ver-

sion by Christopher Hampton with Jeremy Irons in the principal role. There is a link between the two narratives. "The candle had burned right down." This sentence, which occurs after the traitor has finished his self-justifying speech, anticipates the title and basic metaphor of the later novel. Both *Embers* and *The Rebels* are about the end of the Habsburg Empire. It seems possible that their impact has something to do with the current nostalgia for a Central European state which may have been preferable to the political arrangements replacing it.

It is worth remembering that although Márai spent several decades in the United States, during his lifetime none of his books was published in English. *The Rebels* is his fourth work to appear in this language since 1996. More could follow, in view of the fact that in other languages many of his works are available. One of his autobiographical works, published in 1934, is widely regarded as a unique representation of the lifestyle and value system of the middle class in Central Europe, and a selection from his diaries or one of his late novels could be a moving testimony to an author forced to live in exile because of his unconditionally strong opposition to totalitarian régimes.

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