

Baroque tradition in early Romanticism Grounding the modern literary canon in Hungary

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ABSTRACT

The elaboration of a canon of literary tradition was a key issue within the renewal of Hungarian literature at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries. The leading figures of the movement, Ferenc Kazinczy (1759–1831) and Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838), both saw Miklós Zrínyi's (1620–1664) poetry collection *Adriai tengernek Syrenaia* (*Syrena of the Adriatic Sea*), published in 1651, as a model that offered aesthetic value, national ideology, and an example for reforming the literary language. The present study examines the extent to which these aspirations may be linked to the poetic modernity of Zrínyi's time, the first half of the 17th century, and concludes that the *Syrena* volume was not simply a model for the successors, but it can be philologically proven that Kazinczy and his circle (mainly by following Francis Bacon) continued the agenda initiated by Zrínyi. In this sense, the waves of modernity do not follow one another, but are layered on top of one another in the history of Hungarian literature.

KEYWORDS

Hungarian literary history, national tradition, language renewal, baroque and romantic modernity, Miklós Zrínyi, Francis Bacon, John Milton

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In the middle of the 17th century, literature written in the Hungarian and the Croatian language produced two volumes of poetry, the combination of which (published within ten years)¹ was an unprecedented undertaking in Europe. Two aristocratic brothers, Miklós Zrínyi and Péter Zrínyi, descendants of an ancient Croatian royal family, sang first in Hungarian and then in Croatian the unparalleled heroic deeds of their great-grandfather, who had stopped the Turkish army's campaign against Vienna in 1566 by sacrificing his castle and himself. The Sultan, Suleiman the Great, died in the last days of the siege, so the event was indeed of sufficient weight and magnitude to serve as the basis of an Eastern European heroic epic. Nevertheless, literary fashions would have dictated otherwise. The nearest great model, Torquato Tasso's epic of Jerusalem (*Jerusalem Liberated*, 1575/1581), was now a generation and a half old, and *Szigeti veszedelem* (*The Siege of Sziget*), a poem about religious ideals (martyrdom and a holy war against the pagans), was written in the language of heroic epic in a highly ironic and politicised age. The Hungarian volume *Adriai tengernek Syrenaia* offered an ingenious solution to this problem: the author surrounded the heroic epic with lyrical poems that made the martyrdom of Sziget a nostalgic station in a subjective story of spiritual development and a fictional lyrical autobiography, a powerful glimpse into the past, and rebellion against the power of love. This way, the work has contributed to a topical poetic issue in the world literature of the age: the fusion of lyrical and epic forms.²

My theme is the creation of the classical tradition in Hungarian literature (and literary history), and the study of how the work of Miklós Zrínyi became the basis of the classical national canon. The *damnatio memoriae*, which removed the Croatian paraphrasing of the Hungarian original from literary memory, is only the starting point of this process. The process itself was in fact more complex than that. My two main theses and the conclusions drawn from them may be summarised as follows:

- a) The poet Miklós Zrínyi enters the programme for literary revival as a national classic at the turn of the (widely understood) 18th and 19th centuries; *Adriai tengernek Syrenaia* is republished for the first time after its Vienna edition of 1651 in 1817.³ The leading figures of the movement, Kazinczy and Kölcsey, regard Zrínyi as virtually the only poet worthy to be considered as a paragon and origin of the renewal.
- b) Because Zrínyi wrote his epic and the lyrical cycle surrounding it in Hungarian, it was not read in a medium (of the Italian literary debates) where it would have been accurately understood, and its poetic context was not known to the author's Hungarian contemporaries. The canonisers of the *Syrena* rediscovered – quite independently of its poetic values which they also appreciated – the layer of tradition that Zrínyi had hoped to lay the grounds for.
- c) All this leads to the conclusion that Zrínyi's "modernity" (a key term in the Italian poetic debates of the early 17th century) is not simply a precursor, a reverential reference point for the modernity of Kazinczy's generation, but a reprise of the former, delayed by a good century, a kind of "replanting" of the tradition of modernity, whether we understand

¹*Adriai tengernek Syrenaia* Groff Zrini Miklos (Vienna: Cosmerovius, 1651); *Adriaszokoga mora Syrena* Groff Zrinszki Petar (Beneczih [Venice]: Turrini).

²Monographic adaptation: Bene (2021b).

³Kazinczy (1817). (The edition was actually published at the end of 1816.)



the term in a horticultural sense or as an equivalent of „installing” used in information technology.

In the following, I will discuss the main points of these claims by briefly looking at some selected examples. I will begin with tradition, or more precisely its Hungarian equivalent, the concept of tradition. József Kármán’s epistolary novel entitled *Fanni hagyományai* (*Fanni’s Legacy/Traditions*) is the programmatic document of Hungarian sentimentalism. It appears as if, a mere fifteen years later, Ferenc Kölcsey were responding to this novel with his essay *Nemzeti hagyományok* (*National Traditions*) (1826), an analysis of the shortcomings and fragmentation of the Hungarian literary tradition. Kármán still used the word *hagyomány* in its concrete, literal (legal) meaning (designating the letters and documents left behind by the unfortunate girl, i.e. the pieces of her legacy); in Kölcsey’s concept, although the word ‘traditions’ is still in plural form, the concept is already moving towards an abstract, contemporary meaning, evoking the complex, self-forming image of *tradition*.⁴ In between these two instances, there is the decisive transformation of Hungarian literature and intellectual life, at the beginning of which the poet-philologists⁵ are still searching for Zrínyi’s “traditions”, and at the end of which Zrínyi enters into tradition, becomes the object of interpretation, the most important precursor and point of reference of the “tradition” to be recreated.

Kölcsey’s study is also important in terms of clarifying relationships between ancient classicism and the national classics. In the scheme of the *Nemzeti hagyományok*, Zrínyi’s *Szigeti veszedelem* fits into a precise historical typology. In contrast to the primary, organic, Homeric type of ‘national’, Zrínyi’s epic is the offspring of the secondary, inorganic, Roman tradition (namely Virgil, who imitated and paraphrased Homer), which was shaped by external influences. The reduction also means formation of a critical canon: in contrast to the Virgilian ideal, Kölcsey considers Ovid to be the root of corruption, and therefore the Hungarian follower of Ovid, István Gyöngyösi, receives the harshest condemnation of all.⁶ Furthermore, he dismisses the lyric of *Szigeti veszedelem*, and of Zrínyi’s composition in this volume he is only interested in the epic. Instead of an „archtext”, Kölcsey is seeking an „archpoet” struggling with fate (and will in fact create this archpoet in *Zrínyi második éneke* (*Zrínyi’s Second Song*) – his poem which was to determine interpretations of the Zrínyi-tradition for generations to come).

It is striking how far Kölcsey veers at this point from the position of his master and former friend Kazinczy, who always had the whole of the *Syrena* volume in mind. *Kazinczy’s* (1817) edition of Zrínyi (and his programmatic cult of Zrínyi) is linked to the renewal of poetic language, since Zrínyi’s preface to the *Syrena* volume offered an express model for the free mixing of traditions, both linguistically and poetically. “I have mixed Turkish, Croatian and Latin words in my poems, because I thought they would be more beautiful this way, but the Hungarian language is poor: he who writes history will believe my words”,⁷ Zrínyi tells the reader. Kazinczy took the neologism of Zrínyi as seriously as he did the consciously archaic usage in *Syrena*, as well as the unusual syntactic structures which pushed the boundaries of grammaticality to their

⁴On the history of the concept of tradition, see Prickett (2009).

⁵On attempts to publish the *Syrena* edition before Kazinczy: Bene (2021b), pp. 35–42.

⁶Kölcsey (1960), vol. I. pp. 518–519.

⁷Zrínyi (1958), vol. I. pp. 9–10.



extremes. At the time of the most heated debates on the renewal of language, Zrínyi's work became a fundamental point of reference and a source of supporting argument for Kazinczy, for whom extinction threatened the language not because of excessive innovation, or deviation from the 'genius' of the Hungarian language, but rather because of rigid adherence to tradition.

Thus, for Kazinczy, well before his edition of Zrínyi's poems, Zrínyi embodies an open model of culture, a poetics that freely mixes and blends traditions, rather than a model, as Zrínyi was to represent for Kölcsey, who organically develops from his own traditions (and turns to external patterns only out of necessity, due to ruptures in or a lack of tradition). In an epistle addressed to Berzsenyi in 1809, Kazinczy outlines the image of the "Muse of the Foothills" (the ideal Hungarian poetry he hopes for) thus: "My name is Xenidion and Etelke". He also translates the Greek name, saying that "my song [...] is a song of foreigners". The Muse's kins are "Torquata, and Louison, and Goetchen" (i.e. the muses of Italian, French and German poetry), from whom he learned the song as "Virgil and Horace wove a wreath from the flowers of Pindar and Homer". The only example of this procedure in Hungarian antiquity is Miklós Zrínyi, the poet of *Syrena*. This is why he becomes the star of Kazinczy's Hungarian literary canon ("... Zrínyi shines like a star in our sky").⁸

Kazinczy's and Kölcsey's programme of exploring the past and building a literary canon, which undoubtedly centred on Miklós Zrínyi as far as the history of poetry was concerned, radically diverged after their common beginnings, and later generations continued to read Kazinczy's Zrínyi edition in Kölcsey's interpretation. Two equal but diametrically opposed options of modernity unfold in the canonization of the poet of *Syrena*, an optimistic and a pessimistic, a progressive and a tragically ironic, an individualistic and a collectivistic, a cosmopolitan and a national alternative. To some extent, each has found its own self-justification in Zrínyi. But which one is closer to Zrínyi's modernity, the modernity of the 17th century?

The debate between orthologists and neologists, Gyöngyösi fans and Zrínyi devotees, was ultimately a struggle for the correct interpretation of tradition: it was ultimately not a linguistic-stylistic struggle, but one in the politics of cultural memory. Its archetype is the famous *Querelle*, the 17th century debate of ancients and moderns. Although the debate culminated after Zrínyi's death, it is a very important result of research into the period that its immediate and intellectually much more important antecedents have been revealed in debates on poetic theory in early 17th century Italy.⁹ The simple lesson of Charles Perrault's and his contemporaries' pedantic work is that we are not bound by any tradition, because we are better than the ancients. Homer is obsolete, the moderns write better epic... The Italian intellectual elite has gone far beyond this level. The Servite philosopher Paolo Sarpi, who cannot really be accused of Baroque extravagance, but who experienced deeply the intellectual crisis of the age (and who, for example, wrote an outstanding historical account of the failure of the Council of Trent), sums up the idea well in a letter written in 1610:

We have examined in every detail the writings and teachings of the ancients, but in the process we have changed the meaning of all the words they used [...] I can only say that we have misjudged everything, and while we claim to publish the works of the ancients, we are in fact presenting our own.¹⁰

⁸Kazinczy (1979), pp. 13–18.

⁹Fumaroli (2005), pp. 33–93.

¹⁰Paolo Sarpi to Jacques Lechassier, 14 September 1610; cited in Guaragnella (2003), pp. 40–41.



The superiority of the modern over the ancient is not a triumph of civilisation, but a necessity born out of painful realisation, at least with the best writers of the age. One of Zrínyi's favourite authors,¹¹ the great critic Traiano Boccalini, condemns the "insatiable desire for novelty" of the "disillusioned moderns", but distinguishes between those who cynically rejoice in it and those who appreciate the weight of the hermeneutical loss.¹² In the field of poetry, the crisis of the politics of memory means that the previously stable antique canon can no longer hold; and that established patterns and techniques of imitation and literary memory are faltering. The catalogue of Zrínyi's library, his manuscript book entries, and the covert and overt references in his works bear ample witness to the fact that he found himself – and felt himself to be – in the midst of an early modern poetic revolution, the most important figure of which (at least in his own view) was the extravagant Giovan Battista Marino, a poet fracturing tradition and practicing a pre-post-modern poetics of allusion, writing an extremely Ovidian and sensual poetry.

Behind the literary battles, of course, there were philosophical clashes. The scientific revolution of the 17th century made it clear that the two forms of knowledge, the natural sciences and the humanities, were becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile.¹³ The use of traditional humanist rhetoric and traditional literary genres made it increasingly problematic (virtually impossible) to describe new mathematical and physical models of the world. After Galileo's discoveries, space and time in natural science expanded and multiplied.¹⁴ Marino, an ardent follower of Galilei, rejected Tasso's model of the great heroic historical epic not out of sheer eccentricity but because in his view the multiplication of possible worlds in natural science made the form of the catalogue, rather than the narrative, the modern genre.¹⁵ This is why the sprawling enumeration, extending even to the theological backgrounds, is the most important stylistic feature and structural principle of his *Adone*. We have several possible narratives of the origins of the world and the workings of transcendent forces, the Christian narrative and divine order being only one of these options.¹⁶

However, not everyone thought in this way. Marino's epic on Adonis was banned by Pope Urban, himself one of the great poets of the age who advocated a conservative turn against the modernists.¹⁷ Zrínyi, after finishing his studies, had the opportunity to meet the poet-pope in a personal audience (the visit was organised by Archbishop Pázmány in 1636), and was presented with a book of the pope's own poems on the occasion. The first major poem in the volume is an elegy entitled *Poesis probis et piis ornata documentis primaevae decori restituenda* (*On Poetry to be restored to its former splendour by virtuous and pious testimonies*), a veritable literary encyclical that puts forth a new programme: the return to Greek forms and sacred themes, a rejection of sensuality and a sacralisation of desires and affections. The poetics of Marino, which

¹¹Boccalini's work in the Zrínyi Library: Klaniczay (1991), pp. 222–223 (BZ 75; kat. 182)

¹²Boccalini (1910), vol. II. p. 3.

¹³Cf. Snow (2012), pp. 1–40.

¹⁴"... in the universe described by the new cosmology [...] there is no world, since the universe is populated by a multiplicity of worlds, and each world can be considered as a centre as rightly as any other". Schmal (2013), p. 150.

¹⁵He sees in the replacement of the historical principle by the encyclopaedic one the key to Marino's modernity, which is why he calls it "the first modern epic." Barberi Squarotti (2012), p. 19.

¹⁶Pozzi (1976), p. 99; summarised in: Frare (2010).

¹⁷Details of the following, with literature: Bene (2021b), pp. 404–411.



desecrates the muses and identifies them with the sirens, is condemned to excommunication, and its mythical reference point, Orpheus, is anathemised for eternity.¹⁸

Zrínyi obviously learned a lot from this example. On the one hand, he focuses on and rehabilitates the genre of heroic-religious epic, culminating in martyrdom for faith, which Urban and his circle missed in “modern” Baroque poetry. On the other hand, the lyrical composition surrounding the epic is narrated by Orpheus, the alter ego of the loving and suffering poet, who remains in the hell of emotions, i.e. symbolically dies. Yet I would not say that Zrínyi implemented a poetic agenda inspired by the poet-pope, or that the *Syrena* volume may be seen as some kind of anti-modernist manifesto. If it were, why would the author proclaim himself on the title page, in clear allusion to Marino, as the *Siren* of the Adriatic Sea? (After all, the Neapolitan poet provocatively called himself the “little son of the siren”, and his followers and admirers repeatedly referred to Marino as “siren”).¹⁹

The Hungarian poetry collection, with the heroic epic at its centre, does not follow one path or the other, but represents a specific synthesis between the two modern schools, classicising Roman Baroque and Marino’s “avant-garde” Baroque.²⁰ The key to understanding this is provided by two authors. One of them, Tasso, has already been mentioned. Zrínyi (presumably familiar with Tasso’s theoretical works) used Marino’s poetic language to find a way different from Marino’s to present heroic and religious ideals in an ironic age. The other name, however, is a surprising and yet logical source: Francis Bacon. Philologists have long since shown that Zrínyi knew, and even alluded to Bacon in the prose of *Vitéz hadnagy* (*The Valiant Lieutenant*), but the context for these references was missing. We will, however, fare better by examining the poetry itself. Zrínyi read Bacon’s essays in an Italian translation of an adventurous fate, published in Venice.²¹ This volume contained the early composition entitled *De veterum sapientia* (*On the Wisdom of the Ancients*), which established the English philosopher’s reputation on the Continent, and the final chapter of this allegorical-modernist mythographic work happens to be about sirens! What is more, the work is a version of the myth of Orpheus, according to which Orpheus saves the Argonauts from the seduction of the dangerous sea creatures in a different way from Odysseus saving his own shipmen: he himself competes with the sirens’ song at Trinacria. At this point, philosophical analysis turns into poetic typology. The sea creatures represent pleasure-centred, sensual poetry.

They were the teachers of Catullus and Petronius, while Orpheus, who out-sang their song, is the singer of religiously inspired poetry, who “by loudly chanting and resounding the praises of the gods, confounded the voices and kept himself from hearing the music of the Sirens”. For, according to Bacon, “divine contemplations exceed the pleasures of sense, not only in power but also in sweetness”.²²

Perhaps it is not an exaggeration to see in Bacon’s mythographic essay the poetic programme of the *Syrena* volume, the key to the interpretation of the parabolic lyrical narrative. Poetry can only be conquered by poetry, and sweet love poetry can only be surpassed by an even sweeter

¹⁸ „Orphea cur canimus penetrantem ad Tartara, victor / Si spolians Erebum Chistus ad astra redit?” Barberinus, 1631, no page no.

¹⁹ Marino (1993), p. 34. For a summary analysis of the motif, see Nagy (2018), p. 10.

²⁰ For a detailed presentation of the poetic context, see Bene (2021a).

²¹ Bacon (1639); Zrínyi’s copy: Klaniczay (1991), p. 346 (BZ 232; kat. 441). On the publication history: Hartmann (2010).

²² „Le Sirene o vero la Voluttà”, in Bacon (1639), pp. 254–259. Translation of the chapter (based on the Latin original): Bacon (2014).



religious poetry. The emphatic and deliberate use of the epithet *dulcis / dolce* is not only found in Bacon's work: Zrínyi uses it in the same sense, as a poetic term, to denote love poetry. At the beginning of the epic, he qualifies his own attempts at creating an idyll by exclaiming: "I played with the *sweet* poem of love", and at the climax of the volume, in the much-discussed first stanza of the poem *Feszületre (Onto the Crucifix)*, he returns to the same idea: "you have cried enough [...] my *sweet* Muse".²³ At the end of the preceding love cycle, Orpheus remains in hell, symbolically dying, and in the preface to the volume the poet quotes Petronius²⁴ – it is as if we were facing an imaginative poetic solution to the Pope's programme (the disappearance of Orpheus and the rehabilitation of religious sentiment).

I believe that this small selection offers sufficient material and support to illustrate how the contextual elements discovered or re-thematised by Kazinczy (and more broadly by the literary revival of Kazinczy's age) are deeply related and closely connected to the intellectual-historical and poetic context of *Syrena*. The main point of reference in Hungary for debates on the sublime at the end of the 18th century was John Milton²⁵ – the same Milton who visited Italy a year after Zrínyi, in 1638–39, and who (before deciding on the theme of *Paradise Lost*, i.e. on the genre of biblical epic) paid a visit to Giovan Battista Manso of Naples, the most knowledgeable expert on the Tasso and Marino heritage.²⁶ His reflections were aimed at combining the two great models and writing a national epic about King Arthur (which he abandoned only because of a lack of historical sources). For both Milton and Zrínyi, one of the most important models of sublime expression was Tasso's method, of the so-called "parlar disgiunto", fragmented diction (subverting word order, abandoning conjunctions), which Tasso – presumably following Pseudo-Démétrios – used with full awareness in his *Jerusalem Liberated*.²⁷ We do not know to what extent Kazinczy was familiar with Tasso's theoretical writings. What we do know, however, from his surviving notes and correspondence is that he incorporated Zrínyi's turns of phrase, based on Tasso's archaizing and neologizing discourse, and the poetic language developed by Zrínyi that pushed the boundaries of grammaticality also modelled on Tasso, into his famous translation of Ossian.²⁸ In this way, examples of the "sublime" (*sublimis*) style of the 16th and 17th centuries (going back to Hellenistic models) were introduced through Zrínyi into the reception of Ossian, which had a fundamental influence on Hungarian national romanticism.

The issue also had literary-political implications. The programme of the journal *Orpheus* (1789–1792), edited by Kazinczy, which played a decisive role in the revival, can be most closely associated with the Orpheus chapter of Bacon's mythographic work and the concept of 'poetic wisdom' that could be derived from it.²⁹ Kazinczy, of course, did not know that Zrínyi had also read Bacon's work – tradition sometimes needs to be rediscovered. But this circumstance

²³*Szigeti veszedelem*, I, 1: 2; *Feszületre*, 1: 4; Zrínyi (1958), vol. I. p. 35, p. 393.

²⁴*Az Olvasónak (For the Reader)*; *ibid.*, vol. I. p. 10.

²⁵Tarnai (1959); Debreczeni (2000), pp. 333–335.

²⁶For more on the parallel, see Bene (2021b), pp. 605–615.

²⁷On the impact of the affective, emotional rhetoric of Pseudo-Démétrios on late 18th century Hungarian preachers as a stimulus for aesthetic modernity, see Kecskeméti (2013), pp. 17–18. On Tasso's fragmented way of speaking see Molinari (2007).

²⁸Kazinczy (1890), vol. XIII. pp. 197–198; *vö.* Bene (2021b), pp. 45–46.

²⁹Balogh (2015).



demonstrates that Kazinczy still partly shared Zrínyi's problematic, and that in working it out he also used the same logic as his predecessor. In other words, at the time of Kazinczy's modernisation, Zrínyi's paradigm of modernity was still relevant in Hungarian literature. Of course, certain elements of this paradigm had already been incorporated into the new aesthetic thinking in a modified form. This is particularly true for the theological basis of the concept of the *sublime*. Kazinczy has a famous poem entitled *Zrínyi*, written for Berzsényi, which was woven together from Zrínyi quotations with a brilliant *cento* technique, and which the poet continued to work on for decades after the first version was completed.³⁰ He manages to insert into the poem allusions and quotations from every part of the *Syrena* volume, except for one item: the volume's key piece on the doctrine of grace, the meditative hymn *Feszületre [On a Crucifix]*. Kazinczy shifted the question of national revival from the theological to the literary or political sphere, and repentance in his view is not an aesthetic category. In the aforementioned poem by Kölcsey, entitled *Zrínyi második éneke (Zrínyi's Second Song)*, the poet asks for mercy for his guilty nation in a fictional dialogue. The inspirational model for the text is the dawn prayer of the hero of Szigetvár in Zrínyi's epic poem where Christ, leaning down from the cross, promises him the gift of the grace of martyrdom. In Kölcsey's case, this dialogue is doomed to failure: his "wanderer" does not address his prayer to the Saviour, but to Fate, derived from antiquity. The new Romantic modernity lacks not only "heroism and magnanimity" (*magnanimitas*), but also repentance and grace.

There is a philological *lapsus*, however, which is more telling than any generalisation – although I believe this to be rather a case of pious forgery. In the Zrínyi volume edited by Kazinczy there is a curious conjectural emendation in the second stanza of the poem *Feszületre*. The text of the printed Vienna edition is clear:

Hidd ki most magadbul könyvedet nagy okért,
 Árrasz cataractát szemedbül méltóért;
 Azért, ki körösztfán függött büneidért,
 Az ki Istened volt, megholt *válságodért*.³¹

(Cry your tears now for a great reason,
 For the worthy one shed rivers from thy eyes;
 For him that hung on the cross for thy sins,
 He who was thy God for thy *redemption* died.)

Kazinczy makes only a slight change in the stanza, but by no means an insignificant one. In the last line, the phrase that expresses purpose ("for thy redemption") becomes a causative. The original line reads, "Az ki Istened volt, megholt *vadságodért*"³² ("He who was thy God died for thy *wildness*"). The two Hungarian words are almost the same, but the two concepts are a world apart. It is impossible that Rousseau's Hungarian translator (who even named his own son *Émile* after the philosopher)³³ made a mistake here.

³⁰Important analyses of the poem: Laczházi (2019); Hargittay (2021).

³¹Zrínyi (2015), 530–531.

³²Kazinczy (1817), vol. II. p. 152.

³³Szörényi (2010), pp. 113–114.



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