

The Lyrical Poetry of Sándor Petőfi*

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The lyrics of Petőfi prove the rule of all great lyrical poetry: they encompass three worlds. The poet's personal inner life; the concrete exterior scene in which he lives; and the realm of ideas, the spirit of the age are the elements blended in all lyrical poetry. But, although the blending of these three elements forms the unity of a lyric, one or the other will receive greater emphasis. No matter which poet we consider in the vast spectrum of the Hungarian lyric of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these three factors strike us. Petőfi's great forerunner, Mihály Vörösmarty, as also his great follower, Endre Ady, wrote their poems under the impact of their inner world and the spirit of the age. Thus, their poetry became the powerful expression of the age in which they wrote but, at the same time, was a telling demonstration of the individual humanity, sensitivity and receptivity to the external truths of the great poetic figures. The lyric of Vörösmarty is philosophical; the lyric of Petőfi presents everyday episodes often crystalized into an experience that is deeply moving through its artistic quality and presentation of universal human truth; in Ady, the emotional impact of the external world, seen through the prism of a possibly overly-sensitive soul, becomes a wondrous, lasting experience.

In what does Petőfi's originality lie? Precisely in what numerous insignificant critics of his day objected to: that he sings of the simplicity of his parents' home, of every day cares, of his own honest and exemplary life. They objected to his practice of using scenes of family life, of the life of the village and the *puszta*—seemingly insignificant events—and especially, that his poetry was always based on specific images imprinted on his memory. But Petőfi's individuality, his varied images and metaphors, his love of humanity, his patriotism and love

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of his native country made these poems lyrics. And they are personal lyrics, though his style must be called lyrical realism, for he presents himself as he is, truthfully, with his strengths and weaknesses, ideals and hates. His art lies in his ability to transform, through the magic of poetry, the harmony he creates between his personality and the realistic scenes of his environment.

Petőfi's entire life can be reconstructed from his poetry. We see him as a child, a student, wanderer, soldier, actor and lover. We see him later, a champion of the dominant ideas of the country, as he aligns his own life with the totality of Hungarian existence, proposes, suggests, judges, urges, creates new genres in poetry, writes prose, translates, criticizes, and conducts an extensive correspondence.

It is impossible not to like the personality that emerges from his lyrics, the reflection of a warm and loving person who firmly believes that God created man for happiness. Petőfi wrote, "Until a man has been happy, he cannot die." Who would not wax enthusiastic and be moved by Petőfi's nobility of soul when he cries to God in "Fate, Give me Space": "my every heartbeat is a prayer for the happiness of the world".¹ The more hypocritical the world in which one lives, the more one is struck by Petőfi's sincerity and steadfastness: "If you are a man, be a man; make your ideals your faith; / Profess this, even though your life is the price. / Rather deny your life a hundred times than deny yourself; / Let life itself be lost, if only honour remains."² The poet lived and died accordingly, as we now know, and we see also that "Freedom and Love" was not merely a poetic motto for him, but his creed: "Love and Liberty—These I need: / For Love I'd sacrifice my life, / but for Liberty I sacrifice my Love."³ It is not accidental that Petőfi's translators, both the English and the Germans, saw this brief poem as the expression of his beliefs even before his death. And when he died, exactly as he had foretold it and as he had wished it, he stood before the world as a poet who had knowingly followed his destiny.

Another characteristic of Petőfi's poetry is dedication to the people. "The true poet", he wrote—and Petőfi strove to be a true poet—"is he who drops his heavenly manna on the lips of the folk."⁴ Every line he wrote, he wrote so all could understand it, so even the simplest person could identify himself with the poet's fate. Therefore he idealized the family as every man's mode of life and goal, and to this end presented not only his own life, but also Hungarian domestic scenes in many of his poems. And when, after his marriage he could celebrate his own wife, his own child, his poetry soared.

But we find more than just the poetry of folk life and of the hearth, or his own personal reflections in Petőfi's lyrics. We see a rich and varied sensibility. He was not a good actor, but his instinct was right: he can assume roles masterfully in his poetry. Everyone is surprised when they learn from Petőfi's biographers that he could not tolerate wine and never drank it, since numerous drinking songs seem to suggest the exact opposite. Likewise, his personality was not suited to the flirtatious interchanges of society, although his witty, jesting, occasionally sharp poems suggest something else.

A method of expression that he brought to near perfection is the genre picture. The minor episodes of Hungarian life of the mid-nineteenth century, and its human types, gained lasting representatives on an eternally human plane: the village women, the men, the provincial noblemen, the outlaw, the young lovers, smaller and larger children are all framed in one memorable picture, as for example, the evocation of the peasant room in "Winter Evenings".

Literary histories list in detail the themes of his poems, pointing out their rich variety. But only seldom do they mention that this richness comes from his lyrical realism: the harmony and relationships of Petőfi's human and poetic personality created the poetry we know today as the characteristic Petőfi-lyric.

A prominent place among his works must be given to Petőfi's *patriotic lyrics*. Petőfi's insight into the Hungarian soul and the picture of Hungarians which emerges from his poetry, as well as the role he marked out for the nation, is unique and still valid. To fully understand this aspect of the poet we must know that Petőfi's family had been granted a patent of nobility by Leopold I in 1667, a full century and a half before his birth. Furthermore, Petőfi was aware of this, and when the Diet abolished quit-rents, and so in effect freed the peasantry, he criticized the earlier behaviour of the nobles, but that day wrote in his diary, "I did not say this by way of reproach to the nobility to which I myself belong."⁵ Those who wish to transform Petőfi into a rootless individual do so because it seems to be perhaps more democratic or more romantic. But the facts prove otherwise. His youth was spent in a wholly Hungarian atmosphere. Where else could he have acquired the impressive and charming Hungarian idiom, that unsurpassably melodic, rhythmic Hungarian language, if not in the domain of Hungarian speech, folk poetry and folk song.

This tremendous Hungarian-experience gained a newer, wider sphere when the poet moved to Pest. Let us not forget that his is the Era of Reform; the Turkish wars had been forgotten, but the Hun-

garian soul, too, was almost extinguished under centuries of foreign rule. In a cultured society still affected by the baroque interest in universality, the young man became acquainted with the great representatives of western literature, the genius of Shakespeare, the revolutionary histories of Lamartine, Michelet and Mignet. Following in the footsteps of István Széchenyi, Petőfi becomes a leader among the young intellectuals of the Pilvax Coffee House. Thus, he affirms the duty of the poet to the liberation and leadership of the people in "The Poet of the XIX-th Century" as early as January 1847. Petőfi had been born into a society in which the ideals of the Reform—"the happiness of the majority"—had become both a political and a human goal. Vörösmarty, free of any fear, aided and encouraged the younger poet, and he himself maintained that "a nation's fate appeals to" the poet, and "when we had rescued that from the depths and have raised it as high as possible through the pure gleams shed by ideological battles, then we can say as we meet our ancestors: 'Life, we are grateful for your blessings: this was worthwhile work, this was man's work'."⁶ Naturally Petőfi, the strongest representative of the younger poetic generation, is no longer content to prepare for "ideological battles", for compromises as the decades slip by; he wants comprehensive changes—reforms which indeed the nation was able to achieve through the first responsible ministry of 1848.

We should not be surprised that Petőfi's patriotic, or rather political poetry becomes ever more radical. The Reform-generation only wished for improvements and at first even the young generation of Petőfi only sought that long-overdue reforms be implemented within the old forms, in conjunction with Austria. After all, even beyond the borders, in Austria, too, a new generation was urging progress. When, however, the poetic message was not enough, when the alarms sounded in the "National Ode" on March 15, 1848 were dismissed by the ruling forces of the imperial court, and when, within a few months, the court revoked the reforms that had been sanctioned by the king, the "young Hungary" of Petőfi learned the final lesson: progress and liberty can not be achieved in cooperation with Imperial Austria. Petőfi was a revolutionary from the beginning, yet it was only in the final months of the Hungarian mortal struggle, during the months of the war of independence, that he became, both as a poet and as a politician, uncompromising in demanding radical reforms.

Hungary was not yet ready for comprehensive reform. Thus Petőfi, who in March of 1848 was perhaps the most popular man in the country, had lost so much ground by June that he was defeated in

his bid for a seat in Parliament. The poet of the people was denied by the people. In this bitter mood he wrote the political-philosophical poem, *The Apostle*: the tragedy of the political reformer who comes before his time. New, grand ideas emerge in it, for it contains Petőfi's poetical testament and the program and beliefs of March 1848. Later, when the poet saw that the imperial government continued the policy of "divide et impera" and incited the nationalities against the Hungarians, he wrote "Life or Death", the poem in which he demonstrated convincingly to the nation that it is impossible to turn back on freedom, to undo reforms: one must always go forward because not only the liberty of Hungarians was at stake, but the liberty of all oppressed peoples.

The rest is history. Under Lajos Kossuth a Hungarian army, the national guard, was created. Hungarian officers and soldiers in the Austrian army, as well as the masses of Hungarian citizens, joined this new unit in such force that, augmented by the youth of other lands (Poles, Italians, Austrians), victory was well within its reach. Only with the intervention of the Russian tsar, according to the terms of the Holy Alliance, was the force defeated.

Then did Petőfi become the true tempest of the Revolution. He saw he must become a soldier, and that at his own request he joined the army of Transylvania, serving as adjutant to the Polish colonel Joseph Bem, first as a captain, later as a major. His poems immortalized Bem and inspired the Hungarian troops in the face of the overwhelming Russian army. It was here that death overtook him on July 31st, 1849 during the Battle of Segesvár; here that he was buried—as he himself had wished to be—unknown, in "a mass grave with those who died for thee, sacred Liberty".⁷

Is it possible to compare Petőfi to any other poet? Hardly. Certainly not to any foreign poet, but not even to other Hungarian poets, for his poetry is a mirror of his life and his life was an individual, unique human life. *Petőfi is a poet for all Hungarians*. And, further, in Hungarian terms, *Petőfi is the poet of youth*, the symbol of the regenerating Hungarian nation. For the non-Hungarian who appreciates literature however, *he is the Hungarian poet*. Some of his simplest poems have been translated into forty to fifty languages. If we recall that the poetic output of Petőfi, who died in his twenty-sixth year, is 850 poems, and that this is the product of five or six years, then we can see the power of his creative energy. As the literary historian Frigyes Riedl (who published the first English history of Hungarian literature early in this century) remarked, if Shakespeare or János

Arany had died at twenty-six, we would not even know they had lived. Petőfi's career was like a comet's: what he produced in his brief life is truly a marvel. If we should list the great men of Western Literature chronologically, we must start with Homer; Dante, then Shakespeare and Goethe follow. After that, Petőfi must come. Yet, even if one would include two or three other names, Petőfi must be listed among the ten greatest poets.

There are those who learn Greek in order to read Homer, or English, to enjoy Shakespeare in the original. On the traces of Petőfi's German and English translators, several men have set out to gain Petőfi's poems in the original. My wish, as a Hungarian educator, is that the second and third generation Hungarians should turn to Petőfi not only to learn the language in which he wrote but also that they might become participants in the impressive ethical and human values which give Petőfi's poetry its immortality and its universal value.

NOTES

1. Sándor Petőfi, "Sors, nyiss nekem tért", in *Petőfi Sándor összes költeményei* (Budapest, Magyar Helikon, 1967), p. 449.
2. Petőfi, "Ha férfi vagy, légy férfi", *op. cit.* p. 518.
3. Petőfi, "Szabadság, szerelem", *op. cit.* p. 517.
4. Petőfi, "Arany Jánoshoz", *op. cit.* p. 351.
5. Sándor Petőfi, "Lapok Petőfi Sándor Naplójából, Pest, március 24, 1848", in *Petőfi Sándor összes prózai művei és levelezése* (budapest, Magyar Helikon, 1967), p. 406.
6. Mihály Vörösmarty, "Bondolatok a könyvtárban", in *Vörösmarty Mihály összes versei* (Budapest, Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1957) I, 482.
7. Petőfi, "Egy gondolat bánat engemet", *Összes költeményei*, p. 514.

REVIEW ARTICLES

Hungarians in Transylvania

Andrew Ludányi

Erdély változása: Mitoz és valóság. By Elemér Illyés. Munich: Aurora Könyvek, 1975. Pp. 359. \$12.50.

Elemér Illyés *Erdély változása: Mitoz és valóság* (Transylvania's Transformation: Myth and Reality) is a study that is "recommended reading" for anyone who is interested in contemporary Rumanian nationalism and ethnic minority policies in Eastern Europe. The study deals with post-World War II Transylvania and the fate of its Hungarian inhabitants, thereby filling a major gap in East European studies. However, for the present, it fills this gap only in the Hungarian language.

Perhaps the healthiest feature of *Erdély változása* is that it is a very dispassionate yet simultaneously a very compassionate treatment of a neglected subject which has generated too much passion and too little compassion in years gone by. It provides a balanced and humane perspective in an area where these qualities are generally lacking. Illyés is somehow able to transcend the bitterness and nationality hatreds of the past, to provide a balanced look at this potentially volatile subject. This is an extraordinary achievement in view of the tradition of conflict, the deteriorating nationality relations of recent years and the author's personal links with the scene of action. As a consequence of this clear-headedness and fair-mindedness, both the Hungarians and the Rumanians can obtain a more complete understanding of their respective destinies in Transylvania. Indeed, his study will be difficult to surpass as "the work," "the sourcebook," on Hungarian life in Transylvania from 1944 to 1974.

It should be interjected, at this point, that the Illyés analysis extends to areas beyond the territory of historic Transylvania. While his main focus is on the area detached from Hungary by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, he also considers the fate of Hungarians in other