

ANGOL IRODALOM MAGYARORSZÁGON

1962

382

BOOKS ABROAD

Notes on English Literature in Hungary Today

By Eniko Isabella Molnar

When Russian troops engulfed Hungary in 1945 and the Communist regime was established under their protection, the literary life of the country suffered a seemingly irretrievable relapse. Many of the foremost authors and scholars were forced into exile; those who remained were forced into silence. Literature became the tool of the State used to spread Communism among the masses. "The selection of literary themes is the task of the State," (Vere-mund Toth. *A magyar irodalom története*. Buenos Aires. Kossuth, 1960. P. 592) declared the cultural minister. Not satisfied with limiting the subject matter, the Party also required all authors to adopt the socialist-realistic style. This meant a complete break with the traditions of Hungarian literature and art. However, most Hungarian authors refused to cooperate in this cultural regression. At first they fought only with silence, but gradually they reasserted themselves by using their talents in making true and factual information available to the public. By this time, around 1950, the market seems to have been glutted with propaganda material. However, works of pre-war literary interest began to be published again. But, to avoid the restrictions placed on creative writing, most writers now concentrated on translation and scholarly work. Hungarian interest now turned to English literature in as large a degree as it had formerly to German and French.

Before 1945 all types of English-language publications reached Hungary easily. Many works were translated, some of them by the foremost Hungarian poets. In 1940, for example, one hundred and seventy-eight English books were published—some in translation, some in the original—ranging from thrillers and cheap Westerns to Emily Bonté's *Wuthering Heights* to scientific and technical

Osman,
Oklahoma;
1962

works (*Magyar könyvészet*. Budapest. Országos Széchényi könyvtár. 1942). Between 1945 and 1951, an unproductive period in Hungarian cultural achievements, few good works reached the presses. But the writers were not idle. In 1951 fifty English works—mostly good fiction and literature—were published in translation. Three years later the Hazafias Nepfront (Patriotic Popular Front) called for recognition of loyalty to the people, ability and honesty, and long-silenced authors and scholars now assumed partial direction of cultural activities. Cultural contacts with the West were re-established and Western works began to enter Hungary in greater numbers, rising to one hundred thirteen English imports in 1957. In February of 1961, however, supervision became stricter. The Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a list of criteria that critics must now keep in mind:

(1) certain phenomena of Western literature should not be praised without criticism

(2) the works of Kafka, Hermann Broch, Joyce, Jiménez, Kloss, Michaux, and Thral should not be propagated, nor should these authors be called "representatives of the struggle for the expression of the new reality of the twentieth century"

(3) Hemingway, Arthur Miller, and Dürrenmatt should not be lauded

(4) the clearly decadent authors of the twentieth century should be judged according to the tenets of Marxism

(5) it is forbidden to maintain, "until 1956 world literature was, in effect, shut out of our country" (Cited in "Mitől tartózkodjunk?" in *Nemzetőr*, April 1, 1961, p. 5).

The Party's efforts to force its tenets on the Hungarians, and especially on the Hungarian workers and youth, is evident in every official pronouncement. Yet, its results are negative. Even the Communists realize this, for they now admit that there are areas where caution is needed. Moreover, the study of publications since 1956 shows that at least one of the aims of the revolution—intellectual contact with the West—has been forced into the program of the government. Pressure for greater literary freedom had been building up since the early 1950's, when the third-rate propaganda literature of 1945-1947 gave way to new editions of Hungarian classic and good critical works. In 1954 and 1955 Western literature began to be published again. Not until the year of the revolution, however, did the State take steps to meet fully the demand for Western works. The change in Party policy has enabled a skill

and talented corps to translate and publish English and American works ranging from medieval romances to the latest play of Tennessee Williams. Europa publishers, one of the houses which prints *Kultura's* (the official import agency) acquisitions, has embarked on a long-range project for making world literature more easily available in Hungarian. In addition to several thousand copies of Shakespeare's *Plays*, Shaw's *Plays*, and Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, Europa has launched three series—*Classics of the World*, *Small Library of World Literature*, *Small Library*—in which the following English-language authors have appeared so far: Whitman, Fielding, Hawthorne, Defoe, Mark Twain, Jane Austen, Burns, Chaucer, O'Casey, Steinbeck, Swift, Chesterton, Osborne, Faulkner, Morrison, Wilson, and Davies.

Critiques and reviews provide comment on many of the English works which appear in Hungary. Certain English and American authors have aroused much interest. C. P. Snow's novel series, *Strangers and Brothers*, forms the basis for some conjectures on the author's socio-political views. The theme of Ernest Hemingway's novels forms the basis of a debate between Béla Rémcényi and Lázlo Gyurko which appeared in the June and July (1960) issues of *Nagyvilág*.

An interesting parallel may be found between the reviews on Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford* and Gwyn Thomas's *Comedy of Ancient Desires*. The former describes eighteenth-century "bourgeois" society; the latter, about Welsh mining life, is delivered in the accents of proper Communist propaganda. Yet, *Cranford* receives its due tribute: Mrs. Gaskell is assured place in world literature by this charming picture of a small English city. There is not even implied criticism of the eighteenth-century social hierarchy. Gwyn Thomas's book, on the other hand, is unhesitatingly condemned.

A study of recent Hungarian publications shows that by avoiding politics most writers in reach a certain degree of freedom in theme and expression. This advantage, gained gradually and held precariously, leads to renaissance in translation and scholarly work on world literature, especially on English literature, for which there is an ever-increasing demand. Whether this interest is expression of defiance or resistance to Communism or is purely literary does not seem to concern the writers. They judge literary works according to literary criteria and make every effort to uncover the author's true

motivation, or at least to understand his characters. The same aim guides the numerous skilled translators: to interpret the thought of Chaucer, of Shakespeare, Shaw, Hemingway, or Graham Greene to the Hungarian public. In the last five years, Hungarian literary life has not only regained the ground lost in 1945, but has achieved a new level; it has become current.

Washington, D.C.



©Könyvtar.sk-szeged.hu