

GEORGE BISZTRAY

“LOOK TO THE EAST”: THE CULT OF THE PAGAN PAST IN HUNGARIAN LITERATURE

In September 1996 the International Association of Hungarian Studies held a conference at the University of Rome (“La Sapienza”) about Hungary’s attachment to Western Christianity. In the course of the rich program, hundreds of papers shed light on this crucial aspect of Hungarian history. While the survival of the young country under the reign of chief Géza and his son, King Stephen I, undoubtedly depended on the conversion of the Hungarians, in the sphere of unrealistic speculations, dreams and wishes – that is, a sphere that literature knows well – now and again we have to face the question: what if? Interestingly, a number of alternatives never appear in Hungarian national ideology. Never was it contemplated whether Hungarians should have accepted the Byzantine offer to adopt Eastern Christianity. Nor did Hungarians ponder whether they should have turned Muslim as did the Albanians and Bosnians in the interest of their survival. On the other hand, a handful of people still seem to believe that Hungary could have kept her own pre-Christian faith of which we know so little. The more history puts people to the test, the more they may question the choice of their ancestors.

There is also a logical dimension. Any thesis is valid only if it has an antithesis. Goodness makes no sense without the existence of evil. God’s greatness cannot be grasped without the doubt and negation that Lucifer represents. The opposite of the Christian is the non-Christian. However, continued scrutiny of hypothetical opposites would not lead us much farther. Our axiom is that the Christianization of the country was the first historical event to which subsequent ones can be traced. Such logical maneuvers developed stereotypical (metaphysical) antitheses, as they usually do. The result was the contrapositioning of the pagan and Christian rulers of the Árpád dynasty, of Koppány and Stephen, or, according to Magda Szabó, even the holy king and his father. (This assumption is a literary invention, however.)

No matter what the presently fashionable literary “theories” state, there is a collective consciousness that we can derive from the study of times, cultures, and nations. Literature is a part of this collective consciousness. In this paper I am not going to offer new data, only maybe a new look at well-known phenomena. The following examples will be particularly familiar to those of my contemporaries who received their education in Hungary during the past communist regime. It is a matter of common knowledge that communism was no friend of religion.

Although the atheist fervor was waning somewhat as the decades of Kádárist complacency dragged on, new editions of anthologies and school books did not fail to reprint those pieces of Hungarian literature that could be interpreted to serve the anti-Christian ideology.

Seemingly unrelated to the question of the nation's conversion, and occurring at a much later time, another traumatic recognition affected the nation. For centuries, Hungarians adopted the biblical adage that God punished them for their sins like He had once punished the Jews, His chosen people. As an early Latin poem about the Mongolian invasion indicates, and later the poetry of Tinódi, Bornemiza, Balassi, Zrínyi, and virtually all other contemporary writers states, suffering was the proof that Hungary was "special" and redeemable in God's eyes.

In the later 17th century, a new awareness was dawning, however. Early *kuruc* poetry bore witness to it. Hungary's pivotal role ("a fort defending Christianity") in the cosmic struggle between Good and Evil was questioned. Pain and aimlessness overcame the decimated population. A Christian belief in God's will yielded to self-pity. Lord, how long will you keep punishing us, Hungarians? And, what kind of redemption can we expect?

The answer was Hungary's so-called liberation under the sign of the double-headed eagle and the loss of the last ray of hope represented by Ferenc Rákóczi. Historians of the past centuries have written enough treatises about the hopelessness of the *kuruc* uprising and eulogies on the benevolent Habsburgs who reunited Hungary with the Christian West. Somewhere in the soul of the people (among whom at that time one could not count the masses of newly arrived foreign settlers) the recognition took root, however, that there had to be something wrong with the divine order. If the victory of Christianity also meant a loss of Hungarian pride and independence, gain and loss naturally had to be measured against one another. Since the time of the chroniclers, references to Attila, Árpád, and pagan glory had virtually disappeared from Hungarian literature for several hundred years. In the 18th century, they reappeared in considerable numbers as a literary topos. Random examples can be taken from the poems of Ányos, Baróti Szabó, Pálóczi Horváth, Pázmándi Horváth, Benedek Virág, and so on. With the coming of romanticism, heroes of the pagan past became national symbols with a clear ideological function. References to the justified divine punishment of the Hungarians, such as the one in Kölcsey's "Anthem," became very rare. All this happened primarily in poetry, that is, the literary genre that appeals mostly to emotions. It should not be forgotten, however, that even the great pro-Western rationalist reformer István Széchenyi called the Hungarians "People of the East."

The romantic cultivation of pagan times culminated in the millennial celebrations, then the liberal and radical spirit of the early 20th century pushed it into the background somewhat. After the tribulations of this century and, especially, after the truncation of historic Hungary, this undercurrent resurfaced, although in literature perhaps less distinctly than earlier. Nevertheless, the reinterpretation of old dilemmas gained a recognizably contemporary form even during the Kádár era.

Our historical retrospection is sketchy, to say the least. Scholars who have dwelt on writers and leitmotifs of the past centuries may cite examples that are incompatible with my generalizations. Nevertheless, even sweeping summaries have a certain validity, inasmuch as scholarship would be a warehouse of disconnected facts without generalizations. I am also aware of Tamás Hofer's pioneering work in the field, especially the volume *Hungarians Between "East" and "West"* that he edited and co-wrote¹, to which my presentation is indebted in more ways than one. In order to substantiate my generalizations somewhat and give a literary dimension to the cultural historical exploration, I would like to discuss the phenomenon of 19th- and 20th-century orientalism in Hungarian literature by using a typological frame.

We can speak of two versions of the nostalgic poetic vision of the pre-Christian past: in one of these the religious question appears directly, in the other, indirectly. Usually it appears indirectly.

The conflict between pre-Christian and Christian religion was a typical theme of European Romanticism. Decades before Friedrich Schlegel prophesied a return to mythology in 1800², the cult of national myths had started. In fact, as early as the 16th century, Swedish Baroque historians glorified their pagan past in fantastic tales, tracing their nation's origins to the formidable Biblical giants Gog and Magog – just as medieval Hungarian chroniclers and some 19th- and 20th-century poets did. By inference, any return to national mythologies implied a glorification of pre-Christianity. This is what is meant by the indirect representation of religion. By the dawn of Romanticism, pagan Classicism, which once united the European consciousness, was a worn-out issue: the nostalgic revival of pre-Christianity uncovered national mythologies or, if various peoples of Europe did not have their own mythologies, they created them. It was no different in Central and Eastern Europe.

Returning to Hungarian literature, a direct and biased contraposition of the national tradition and the Catholic clergy appears in relatively few poems, except for the religious polemics of the 16th and 17th centuries. Recently, the first frequently printed poem was probably the late 17th-century "Papvilág Magyarországon" (Papist Rule in Hungary). The somewhat free translation of the title is not misleading, as the poem clearly represents a Protestant attitude³, inasmuch as it does not advocate paganism, only the abolition of foreign clerical power. The logical chain underlying the poem runs like this: foreigners don't care about Hungarian national interests, and Catholicism is a foreign religion. The Protestant preachers who wrote these polemic poems intimated that their religion was more compatible with the national tradition than Catholicism. Centuries later, the deeply Catholic Gyula Juhász's poetic hero Thonuzoba also identified the new God as a German, "a blond stranger." One can also mention in this context "Já-

¹ Budapest: Museum of Ethnography, 1994.

² F. Schlegel, "Gespräch über die Poesie," *Athenaeum* III (1800): 58-128; ref. to pp. 96-103.

³ About "Catholic" and "Protestant" attitudes, cfr. Hofer, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

nos pap országa” (Pastor John’s Country) by János Arany, a much less significant poem than Juhász’s, yet given exalted dimensions after World War II. In typical *kuruc-hajdú* spirit, Arany represents the conversion of Hungarians as a successful German plot to conquer them.

A less polemic extension of the same tradition is the representation of the survival of pagan belief in undercurrents of Hungarian rural life. Standing on the Mound of Tetétlen, in “A tetétleni halmon” (The Mound of Tetétlen), Arany believes, or maybe just states ironically, that he hears the sound of Lehel’s horn when in fact only a swineherd is blowing a horn to round up his animals⁴. Not quite a century later, István Sinka describes in “Anyám balladát táncol,” (My Mother Dances a Ballade) how, as a child, he saw his mother paying homage to her deceased ancestors by dancing according to pagan custom – instead of, as we may conjecture, praying for them in church. The moral (if the event indeed happened) is: Hungary never really turned entirely Christian. Let us remember that Mihály Babits, another devout Catholic, criticized the colloquial reference to “the God of the Hungarians” as an idiom that separated Hungary from Europe⁵. In other words, he too thought that there were still traces of pagan belief in the modern Hungarian mind.

With these random, interesting, but quantitatively unimpressive examples we have just about exhausted those literary references to pre-Christian religion that school books and anthologies kept reprinting during the forty years of communist rule in order to affect the cultural consciousness of the Hungarians. Other manifestations of orientalism can be called predominantly secular. Among these, the philosophical approach provides a transition from the spiritual to the secular sphere.

The only poet who gave a semblance of cultural ideology to his orientalism was Árpád Zempléni (born Imrey). In one period of his literary activity, this conservative third-rate poet wrote a series of poems that tried to provide the widest possible context to the understanding of Hungary’s Eastern ties. But what a cultural ideology he offered! Both in themes and poetic form, he created a hodgepodge of ancient Semitic (Babylonian), Finno-Ugric (Hungarian, Ostyak, Vogul, Cheremis), Altaic (Japanese, Tatar, Kalmuck, Cumanian and other Turkic), and Indo-European (Old Germanic) elements – there is even a poem of “Egypto-Scythian” inspiration included in his collection titled *Turáni dalok*⁶ (Turanic Songs). After he managed to present this vaguely Eastern smorgasbord with a shot of Northern aquavit, there came Zempléni’s grand philosophy: his thesis that the “Aryan” and “Scythian” worlds were involved in a self-annihilating competition which would end with the destruction of both West and East, that is, of Eurasia. In spite of this cosmic pessimism, Zempléni emotionally assigned an

⁴ Tetétlen: according to Anonymous, Árpád’s army rested in this area before the battle with Zalán (Gesta Hungarorum, chapter 38).

⁵ Cfr. his essay “Az frástudók árulása” (1928).

⁶ Budapest: Franklin Társaság, 1910.

Eastern fate to Hungary in his best-known poem, “Keletre, magyar!” (Look to the East, Hungarian!). With a disdain for the decadent West, which is easy to identify as an indication of an inferiority complex and self-pity, the poet advised his compatriots to “look for your friends where the Sun rises, among your kinsmen.” (It is interesting to note that this collection of Zempléni’s poems was published in English and German translation within five years.)

Zempléni’s orientalism was at least as much aesthetically motivated as it was amateurishly “philosophical.” He was infatuated with his eclectically collected thematic and artistic ornaments: Japanese haiku, Ugric incantations, North Germanic alliterations. Occasionally he reads like an early Sándor Weöres, except that Zempléni was a much less talented poet and – maybe as a consequence of this – lacked any sense of irony. Even so, his poems represent an interesting episode in Hungarian literature. And, his activity leads us to the third function of orientalism, the ornamental one.

Pleasing and surprising the reader are among the elementary tasks of literature, and few other devices are as perennially successful as those that create these effects. The representation of splendor and abundance usually pleases the public: many current American TV programs use a rich milieu for a setting. The same splendor and abundance were attributes of the pagan past in the romantic imagination. The lengthy descriptions of Attila’s court, or enumerations of the Hun or Hungarian armies, in Arany’s *Buda halála* (The Death of Buda) and Vörösmarty’s *Zalán futása* (Zalán’s Escape), respectively, assert that the pagan times were flamboyant and dazzling. Above all, they were long ago, in a fairy-tale past.

Besides romantic aestheticism, another artistic function of orientalism was symbolism. In poetry it appeared at the turn of the century and in the early decades of the 20th century. The most obvious and also the most inconsistent utilization of pagan symbols can be found in Endre Ady’s poetry. He is the son of Gog and Magog, a rebellious descendant of Álmos, whose life is threatened by some Iranian Scythians – also, he is the one to whom the burial mound of the Avars opens up its secrets. As we know, in Ady’s case we should not look for any consistent symbolism. He put pagan topoi in the service of his creative individualism at least as lavishly as Zempléni, except that this comparison isn’t quite fair in terms of eminence. Similarly, Ákos Dutka, who was incidentally accused of being an epigone of Ady, turned to pre-Christian metaphors on and off. His love for a girl called Magda appears to him as if it had already happened once, thousands of years before, on the banks of the Meotis⁷. In his most rebellious poem, “A vörös táltos” (The Red Shaman), Dutka describes an agitator among the agricultural workers of the Great Plains as a prophet announcing the return of the Red Shaman who will replace existing religions. Needless to say, this lonely poem also became a showpiece of post-war anthologies.

⁷ Meotis (Maeotis, etc.): old name for the Sea of Azov; according to the Hungarian origin myth, the ancestral princes, Hunor and Magor, settled here with their peoples for several years.

Finally, there is another ideological thesis that carries our survey to the field of speculative (and moralizing) historicism. "Our old glory, where are you lingering in the dark night?" asked Vörösmarty. In history, occasionally, a nation does not get a second chance. Any choice is followed by problems, and an easy way to identify their cause is to reject the original decision in favor of an alternative, which is often a fantasy. If only Attila had not killed his brother Buda, if only Hungarians had not converted to Catholicism. Analyzing history is less important than finding an obvious solution. Fans of the pagan times conveniently forget that in 1000 A.D. Hungary was no longer the victorious power that she had been a century before: she had been increasingly humiliated by the Christian armies, and her survival depended on conversion. Similarly convenient is the silence in pagan eulogies about the fact that for centuries Christian Hungary was one of the richest countries in Europe, and decidedly a power in the area east of Germany and Italy. To anybody blessed with a grain of logic it appears absurd to blame the Turkish invasion or the Trianon treaty on St. Stephen.

Everything considered, orientalism appears in Hungarian literature as a quantitatively modest phenomenon that is nevertheless impossible to ignore. Something still directs our attention to Attila's and Árpád's poetically represented figures and times. The richness of the related mythical topoi offers to both poets and readers several rewarding activities, such as moralizing, aesthetic pleasure, and – above all – dreaming. Also, in a wider intellectual context, a renewed lay as well as scholarly interest in prehistory is alive and well. Taking a comparative perspective, we may ask, how is it that in most Western European countries there is hardly any popular interest in the prehistoric past? Many Germans and Italians may not even know that according to one theory of their origins, their ancestors (in Italy's case the Etruscans) also arrived from Asia.

In a later phase of communist rule, the controversy around pre-Christian and Christian Hungary was utilized to demonstrate more recent political dilemmas. One of the deserved theatrical successes of the Kádár era was Magda Szabó's drama, *Az a szép fényes nap* (That Bonny Shining Sun), about the clash between chief Géza and his son Vajk (better known abroad as St. Stephen I, Hungary's first Christian king). An even greater popular success of different aesthetic appeal was the Szörényi-Bródy musical about *István a király* (King Stephen). I'll not consider here whether one emigrant journalist's interesting interpretation of this play as an apology for János Kádár's coming to power is relevant. The point is, people are still stirred by the dilemmas of belonging: to Europe or Asia, to the West or East. In the depths of their hearts, many Hungarians would like to believe that they can claim among their distant ancestors the same Attila who, according to one recent poll, is still regarded in the West as one of the five most hated historical figures of all times. The controversy is not yet over.

Or, is it? Are not actual historical developments more important than artistic phantasmagorias? After all, Hungary had definitely turned into a Christian country after 1000 A.D., and it has not resigned from Christianity since. We can assume that the constant preoccupation with the pre-Christian roots of Hungarian cul-

ture will fade once Europe fully recognizes Hungary's place on its continent and institutionally accepts the country. Obviously, I am referring to the much-awaited decision of the European Union, which is also expected to bring economic prosperity to Hungary. Like other well-fed, hedonistic countries of the continent, such as Holland, France, Germany and the like, Hungarians won't dream about old glory anymore. Those who live for the present don't care about their ancestors. Who knows, maybe in a few decades Hungary will be as well off as other countries of Europe, and Attila's or Árpád's name will mean as little to Hungarian school children as Hermann (Arminius) means for German, or Vercingetorix for French, school children. If this ever happens, we will be able to say that the surviving memory of the pagan past was eradicated not by Christianity but by materialism – which is, indeed, the most devastating enemy of classical myths while it creates new, much more dehumanizing ones.

OSZK
Országos Széchényi Könyvtár