STUDIES IN MODERN HUNGARIAN LITERATURE.[1]

THE year 1906 was a period when unemployment was very small, people received as much as 6 per cent. interest for their money, book publishing was a most profitable business, public education advanced immensely, more people than ever read papers and books, but it was a period which in all countries was accused of being bourgeois, sleepy and unable to create anything strikingly original.

It happened in those days of calm and simple pleasures in Hungary, where winds were a trifle restless, that a book of verse came out. It was called *New Verse,* and it was written by a man hitherto unknown, named Ady. That year has the reputation of an epoch-making one, because the birth of the new Hungarian Literature is considered to have taken place with the publication of this book.

It is not by chance that the first child of the new Hungarian Literature was a book of poems, because from the earliest days a peculiar lyrical element has dominated the language. It comes from the temperament of the Magyars, and perhaps this is the reason why strictly speaking Hungary hardly ever had a real and typical novelist. Most of the Hungarian writers who write novels, plays, criticisms, essays or short stories are poets by temperament. Some people even go so far as to say that once upon a time there was a certain Hungarian Minister of Finance who was also a lyrical poet by temperament; but this question, I am afraid, lies outside the bounds of Hungarian letters.

Ady was only known to a few people, but this book of verse immediately attracted the attention of the public, which, after having resigned itself to the idea that Hungarian poetry had exhausted itself with Alexander Petöfi, awoke to the fact of a resurrection at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Ady was born in the south-east of Hungary, from a family which was proud of its " seven plum trees." This is a popular Hungarian expression to describe a Blifil Esquire from Fielding. He was a member of that landed gentry which, among all classes, preserved most clearly the old type of the Hungarian mind. But these people of the seven plum trees were the most restless element as well. " During the course of Hungarian history they are always seen among the opposition and in the rank and file of all revolutionary movements. The part of the country he came from was one where before the war the Hungarian population had direct contact with Roumanians, and where the essential restlessness of the race was always stimulated by a continuous current of racial erosion. On the other hand, it makes people interested in foreign habits, forms of life, and points of view. This is a reason for Ady's double mind: the strong feeling of solidarity of the proud Hungarian with his race and his capacity for foreign effects of culture. The cultural aim of Hungarians since the end of the 10th century, when they became Christians, was nothing but a continuous struggle to express the content of the Hungarian mind in the form-language of European civilisation. The results of this effort can be seen more easily in Ady than in anybody else in Hungarian poetry."[2]

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[1] A lecture delivered at King's College, London, on 5 May, 1931.

" He received the first awakening impulse in Paris, but assuredly he could have given back to Paris something utterly different from what he had received. In Hungary some of the critics searched for the effect of these French ' Decadents,' Baudelaire, Verlaine, and others on his poetry. This effect, however, was only that of a stone thrown into acid, which causes the process of crystallisation; the crystals will not be like the stone "; thus remarked a distinguished critic.[3]

His book, *New Verse*, with its modest-immodest title, created a revolution in Hungary, where in those days of gentle manners and an " after working hours " attitude revolutions were regarded as brilliantly interesting and wonderfully unusual institutions. The whole Hungarian public became concerned in the question of his poetry, and, in fact, the wider public started to care for poetry, hitherto a somewhat neglected art during the previous thirty years. He worked wonders, compelling the whole public to divide itself into two classes. He had his supporters and his opponents, like politicians, murderers, actresses, and sometimes even artists.

This book was a complete breakaway from the past and its art, which was regarded as tired, dusty and out of date by one school of thought. Another group, chiefly people beyond two score years and five, looked upon him as a sort of James Joyce. This war is still carried on even now, eleven years after his death. Some people will still have nothing to do with him. They can never forgive him that when so far away from his country, watching her fate and feeling with her sufferings, he began to occupy himself with political questions and introduced his political views even into his poems. He also had to fight against what he thought narrowmindedness in his people, who not only could not see the strange and yet unimagined beauty of his finest poems, but simply failed to understand him at all.

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[2] A. Schöpflin, *Hungarian Literature in the 20th century.*

[3] Michael Babits, *A Study on Hungarian Literature.*

It is necessary to enlarge upon Ady, as it is not likely that his poetry will ever cross the English Channel. He is the least likely of all Hungarian poets to be popular in other countries. Indeed, it is very difficult to compare him with other poets in any literature. He has a strange individuality which imprisons him within the frontiers of Hungary, yet curiously enough he had a faint relationship both with William Morris in his critical attitude, and with D. H. Lawrence as a poet.

Just as Dr. Johnson, with his untidy clothes, gruff manners, and golden heart, or Samuel Pepys, with his frequent chills, his intimacy and his diary, can only be really understood and appreciated by those who were born "in England's green and pleasant land" (or who suffer from the strongest form of Anglomania), so to understand Ady, one must have lived in his age, felt the restlessness, the passionate atmosphere of his times, seen his struggle with life and with love, to realise what he had to suffer on account of Hungary's tragic fate, as well as his own.

The two parties continued their wrangle after the poet's death. The critics were divided into two camps, for and against him. (When I last heard of them, they were still quarrelling.) His cause was championed by his contemporaries of the new literary movement—a little group of young writers, so many Ruskins and Swinburnes. They were grouped around the review called *Nyugat* (*The West*), which for a long time was edited by Ady and Michael Babits, now a celebrated poet, critic and novelist. Desider Kosztolányi, whose novel, *Nero*, has been translated everywhere, Arpad Tóth, and many others were the bodyguard of the review.

In the opposing party were gathered the old-fashioned traditionalists, most of them standing with one foot in the past and unable to grasp the fact that new moods, feelings and themes were the subjects of the new poetry, which could not be expressed in the old terms. The new poetry had need of a modern language, and the fight which was fought for this modern language by the new generation of poets brought about language reform on an extensive scale. The conservatives sorrowed over things of the past, they erected monuments to deceased epochs, fashions, manners and meals in their books and wished them back again. The new poetry—the child of its age—was young, strong, and impulsive; it expressed the crisis of the age, everything which that age expected, yearned for, all its sorrows and joys. The new generation understood this poetry, which put into words the ideas and feelings they all felt without being able to express.

The chief reason why Ady remained so long unappreciated even by the intelligentsia, is that he often puts an extraordinary amount of meaning into one word. He compresses whole sentences into a word and lets the reader guess its solution and secret meaning. Besides he always expresses himself in symbols. In this he may have been influenced by the "Parnassiens" or by Stéphane Mallarmé, without, however, becoming an imitator or even a disciple of the French poet. He was, and remained, a typical Hungarian, perhaps more so than those who accused him of being unpatriotic and of serving party interests.

Another of the *Nyugat* staff who ranks next to Ady and outlived him, is Michael Babits—a thinker expressing himself with subtlety and a poet who never errs on the side of grossness. His writings are those of the cultured æsthete, whose interest ranges in every direction, but he never lectures or assumes the critical attitude of the English highbrow. His art, where forms are concerned, was at first considered mere jugglery, and he was believed to be simply an exponent of form, whereas his natural versatility and sensitiveness drove him to express himself through that strict and yet variegated medium.

The poetry and feelings of Babits are those of the modern artist who suffers and feels alone with his griefs and his impotence to create or act. He has wandered all over the world, knows every literature, has absorbed the refined culture of generations, and has remoulded and transfused all these thousands of diverging impressions in that cauldron of splendid excitement, his poet's soul. Behind every sentence he utters, every word or thought of his, we feel the nervous, contemplative, modern artist.

His interest extends to the past also, which he has thoroughly explored: his knowledge of Greek lyrical poetry it would be hard to equal. His themes, similes, imagery, thoughts even, are often imbued with the spirit of the antique.

Here is the first part of one of his most representative poems—"The Danaids."

> Below, in silent hell—where there is not a spell of breath in doleful hell—amidst the asphodel—where the daffodils do not wave—the willow weeps not o'er a grave—where poppy's petals do not drop when dry—

because down there winds in sound sleep lie—sleep on a daffodil-made bed, sleep soundly, mute, forever dead.

Where lakes, like mirrors made of steel, their motionless expanse reveal, where eyelids drowsy turn with ease because not fanned by wakening breeze, because the wind, which took a rippling, surging course, is dead.[4]

The drama excepted, Babits cultivates every branch of literature. In his novels he treats new problems, opens up new possibilities of the psychological novel, going a step further on the way which was first trodden by Balzac and the author of *The Picture of Dorian Grey*. His criticisms are erudite and yet elegant, showing great penetration and insight into the heart of things. His translations, especially of the *Divina Commedia*, are admirable.

Kosztolányi—his name, thanks to his novel *Nero*, which is translated into German and English, is not unknown to the British public—has something of Babits' mysticism, but this is much more pronounced in Kosztolányi's case. Childhood is one of his favourite subjects, to which he devoted a whole cycle of poems called " The Complaints of a Poor Little Child." He is often assailed by mournful thoughts, tormented by a painful feeling of loneliness and the sadness of the " Kulturmensch " which is so typical of Thomas Mann. He gives voice to the neurasthenia of the modern intellectual in a perfect form, being the most sensitive poet in the literature of our days. He is like an æolian harp which answers to the impressions of the winds of the outside world.

His poems very rarely have a subject which could be transposed into prose; he records quickly vanishing impressions with the sensitiveness of the microphone. He grips the flying moment and the sudden changes of mood of the learned man.

Here is one of his poems :

A FLAG.

Just a stick and some linen,
Yet not stick and linen,
But a flag.

Ever it speaks,
Ever it waves.
Ever it is restless,
Ever in unconsciousness
Above the street
It soars aloft

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[4] Translation by William N. Loew.

Untorn in the sky
And proclaims something
Eagerly.
If men grow used to it and heed it not
If they slumber also
By day and by night,
So that it is wholly wasted away
And stands like a gaunt apostolic orator
On the peak of the roof,
Still, alone,
Wrestling with the calm and the storm,
Fruitlessly, ceaselessly, ever majestically,
It waves,
And speaks.
My soul, be thou too, thou too—
Not stick and linen,
But a flag.[5]

The most characteristic and conspicuous difference between the Hungarian novel of last century and that of the 20th is that while the whole world of the former centres round the village and the countryside, the latter has become enamoured of the town.

In France and Germany the 20th century stands for naturalism in literature, which is the translation into literature of the materialistic school's explanation of life, whereas in Hungary that school gained no effective footing. Instead the Hungarian novelists remained loyal to the realistic school of literature and contributed to the development of the European novel only by a new style.

Life in cities is the chief theme of Molnar. He erected a wonderful and lasting monument to his own youth in the novel *Boys of Pal Street*, which stands unrivalled in modern literature. This book—like *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, *Alice in Wonderland*, or *Tom Sawyer*—was written for children, but has been cried and smiled over by adults, who found in it a faint picture of their youth, like an old photograph, yellow and bent.

In contrast to Molnar stands Sigismund Moricz, who instead of townsfolk, like nearly all the modern Hungarian writers of fiction, introduces village characters and those of the countryside into his novels and plays. He was once claimed as a naturalist, a disciple of Zola, and it is true that some of his characters are drawn in a way that reminds the reader of the naturalism of the generation which followed Zola, but behind it all one feels a true idealism and a deep love of humanity. If Romain Rolland represented the conscience of Europe in the years following the war, then Moricz symbolises the conscience of Hungary, which proclaims itself in his books with tremendous force.

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[5] Translation by Watson Kirkconnell. A selection of Professor Kirkconnell's translations of Hungarian poetry was published in *The Slavonic Review*, Vol. ix, No. 27, pp. 713–724.—Ed.

His best novel is the book called *Earthen Gold*, written in a way as robust as its characters. It is the story of a peasant superman, whose every desire and plan are frustrated by the hopeless stupidity and incredible narrowmindedness of his surroundings. As the author of the *Pot Bouilli* condensed into one volume the whole life of the French bourgeoisie under the Second Empire, so Moricz gives us a complete picture of the Hungarian village, a fairly photographic somewhat cruel one, nearly as cruel as Caradoc Evans's picture of his fellow Welshmen. Yet Moricz's lines are not only inspired by a marvellous insight into humanity, but a love for his characters and a great understanding.

He definitely broke with the earlier tradition of Jókai, the great novelist whose beautiful, but somewhat false pictures of the Hungarian village gained immense popularity in Hungary and abroad. Jókai is responsible for the picture of the Hungarian peasant as it stood in the memory of most Englishmen, wearing a richly-coloured costume, on horseback, with glittering spurs ten inches long, accompanied by innumerable gypsies and with a dash of Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody. This is as false a picture as that of the Englishman still lingering in the imagination of some elderly family solicitors and retired tax-collectors in Hungary, who imagine him as wearing checked trousers and a tropical helmet, and carrying a butterfly net. Moricz tears the veil from lies and frauds unsparingly and gives us folk-lore without the products of any of those shops in Bloomsbury in the neighbourhood of the British Museum, where East European embroidery, wood-carving, and pottery are on sale at moderate prices, and without reminding us of travel posters which inform hard-working English taxpayers that all Hungarian hotels are provided with central heating and constant hot water.

The robust genius of Dezsö Szabó is characterised by a strong individual flavour and brutal outspokenness. He is one of the most passionate of writers. His name first became known at the time of Hungary's mutilation by the Treaty of Trianon, and he found the finest themes for his novels in the feverish convulsions of that broken country trying so desperately to right itself. He himself is always the hero of his novels, but as a background there appears the sad fate of the Hungarian middle class. He shows up the defects and misfortunes of these people in his novel *The Flooded Village*, which can be described as a novel only on account of its genre and title, but which is in reality a sharply drawn sketch of the times, depicted by a restless and despairing spirit, divided against itself and its fellow-men. Superhuman passions are the moving forces in the story which, strictly speaking, has no architecture, but sweeps on round a great central idea.

He has often been attacked on account of his political views; one part of Hungarian society turned against him. His second novel, *Help*, reflects even more political tendencies than the first one. This book gives a most moving and painful picture of a Hungary in ruins. Szabó definitely abandoned the formal contemplative standpoint adopted by the cosmopolitan school of writers and tried to rouse the nation from the lethargy succeeding the great catastrophe.

We find the poet of vanished traditions and the beauties of the past in Gilles Krudy. His novels are the inventory of the embalmed traditions of the so-called second Biedermayer period, which corresponds with the last fifty years of Queen Victoria's reign.

If anyone wants to sip from the very essence of those years of kind words and gentle manners, of side whiskers, gold chains, parasols, snuff, silk waistcoats, orchids *à la* Disraeli and eyeglasses *à la* Joe Chamberlain, which ingredients are so well described in the first volume of the *Forsyte Saga*, he cannot do better than open one of Krudy's books. Indeed, if he wishes to fly from an age which is labelled restless and over-excited, and does not possess the time machine invented some happy years ago by a Londoner called H. G. Wells, he will find Krudy's whimsical, but sincere, writings a harbour of refuge.

The same epoch is described with more artistry by Cecile Tormay in her novel *The Old House*, in which the same ingredients as were used by Krudy are arranged in a different manner. There are moments when this book reminds us of the best writings of Sylvia Warner, Clemence Dane, and Thomas Mann, but, to do Miss Tormay justice, I must reveal the painful truth, that the novel *The Old House* was published long before either Miss Warner or the authoress of *Legend* appeared before the public. ADAM HEGEDÜS.