

MIHÁLY SZEGEDY-MASZÁK

HENRY JAMES IN HUNGARY

To call uneven the Hungarian reception of the works of Henry James would be an understatement. The start was rather promising. *Roderick Hudson* was published in Hungarian translation two years after it appeared in English, and in 1880 *The American* was published in installments in a daily newspaper. It is not easy to explain why it took almost ninety years for a Hungarian publisher to bring out more works by James. Neither the impressionistic essayists of the 1920s and 30s nor the later spokesmen of Marxism could do justice to the achievement of the American-born writer. His more sympathetic interpreters emerged with the rise of structuralist narratology, hermeneutics, reception-oriented research, and deconstruction. With the rapidly growing number of readers familiar with the works in the original, further reinterpretations may be expected. The conclusion is inescapable that the reception of the works of James proves how closely the understanding of literature is related to ideological and cultural trends.

To call uneven the Hungarian reception of the works of Henry James would be an understatement. It is so closely tied to the political and cultural history of the country that it is hardly understandable if the wider context is ignored.

The start was rather promising. *Roderick Hudson* was published in Hungarian translation in 1877,¹ two years after it appeared in English. In 1880 *The American* was published in installments in the daily newspaper *Pesti Hírlap*. In those years Hungary was the most rapidly transforming part of the Habsburg Monarchy. A keen interest was taken in foreign cultures. Enterprising publishers and the growing urban public showed enthusiasm for the literature of North America.

It took almost ninety years for a Hungarian publisher to bring out more works by James. Elemér Hankiss, the son of a Comparative Literature scholar active between the two world wars, at that time working for the most important state publisher that

¹ *Unokatestvérek*. Budapest: Athenaeum.

specialized in foreign literatures, commissioned three translators to make Hungarian versions of three nouvelles: *Daisy Miller*, *The Siege of London*, and *The Aspern Papers*.² Of the three translators two were very young. Hankiss knew that James was hardly known in Hungary and his works were not acceptable to Marxists, so he asked an undergraduate who was known to have strongly bourgeois values to write a postscript. After an insignificant amateurish piece on painting by Kandinsky, published in a school magazine, this was the second essay to appear under my name. James was hardly mentioned by those teaching English and American literature at Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest. To avoid the criticism of those instructors who lectured on nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction, I decided to write my thesis on Virginia Woolf with Miklós Szenczi, whose main field was Elizabethan drama and Romantic poetry. He and Hankiss gave me the first selections of James.

This was before French Structuralism made its influence felt in Hungary, at a time when New Criticism was dismissed as representing reactionary ideology. Robert Weimann's *New Criticism und die Entwicklung bürgerlicher Literaturwissenschaft* (1962) was published in a translation by one of the hard-liner followers of György Lukács.³ The postscript I wrote for the volume containing three nouvelles is impressionistic. It may deserve some attention for two reasons. There is a hint about the self-reflexive aspects of *The Aspern Papers*. The work that is given some kind of an analysis, in the spirit of New Criticism, is *The Turn of the Screw*. The contradiction is undeniable: the most substantial part of the postscript is devoted to a work that was virtually unknown to the Hungarian public. Hankiss realized that I thought the selection was not representative but decided to publish the essay. Four years later *The Turn of the Screw* appeared in Hungarian, followed by *The Portrait of a Lady*, *The Europeans*, and *What Maisie Knew*.⁴

In the 1960s a confidential report was drafted about every Hungarian university student at the end of their final year of studies. When a student applied for some job, this report was sent to the institution that was planning to hire him or her. In my case the report referred to the essay on James as a kind of evidence showing the bourgeois outlook of its author. The Institute of Literary History of the Hungarian Academy, a research institute at war with the universities, employed me on the basis of my essay on James.

During the interview István Sőtér and György Mihály Vajda asked me about this immature piece of writing. His colleagues were involved in an attempt to liberate Hungarian literary studies from the powerful influence of the school of György Lukács. Their goal was to attack the concept of an ahistorical realism formulated by Lukács.

² *London ostroma*. Budapest: Európa, 1965.

³ *Az "új kritika": Az új interpretációs módszerek története és bírálata*. Budapest: Gondolat, 1965.

⁴ *A csavargó forduló egyet*. Budapest: Magyar Helikon, 1969; Bukarest: Kriterion, 1975; *Egy hölgy arcképe*. Budapest: Európa, 1976, 1985; *Európai látogatók*. Budapest: Európa, 1975; *Maisie tudja*. Budapest: Európa, 1978.

Distancing themselves from the view that after the rise of the working class the bourgeoisie was doomed to decadence, the research fellows of the Institute were trying to orient themselves towards non-Marxist trends in literary theory. Since they were not involved in teaching, they were given more freedom than university instructors. Sótér, who was later to become the President of the International Comparative Literature Association, was more than willing to employ someone whose first publication was on a writer dismissed by the dogmatic professors of the university.

While it is relatively easy to understand the Marxist or pseudo-Marxist reservations about the activity of James, it is more difficult to explain the neglect of his works before World War II. In view of the policy of the editors of the first large-scale Hungarian encyclopedia, published in eighteen volumes, not to devote much attention to living authors, the short article published in 1895 is worth quoting:

Henry James. North American writer born in New York, 15 April 1843. The son of the Swedenborgian Henry James Sr. (d. 1882), he spent longer periods in Europe, especially in London. He is one of the most widely read contemporary American authors. Among his works are *Transatlantic Sketches* (1875); *The Europeans* (1878); *Daisy Miller*; *Confidence* (1879); *The Madonna of the Future* (1879); *The Portrait of a Lady* (3 vols. 1881); *Washington Square* (1881); *Tales of Three Cities* (1884), *The Bostonians* (1886); *The Princess Casamassima* (1886); *The Aspern Papers* (1888), etc.⁵

A comparison with the second multi-volume encyclopedia, published two decades later, suggests that after the remarkable start not much progress was made. From the generic definition of the works mentioned one may conclude that the author of the article was not familiar with the output of James:

Henry James, American writer, born 15 April 1843 in New York. He established his reputation with the novel *Roderick Hudson* (1875). His subtle psychological novels made him one of the most outstanding American writers. His patriots called him the Balzac of American literature. His most important novels are *The American* (1877); *The Europeans* (1878); *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881); *The Pupil* (1891); *What Maisie Knew* (1897). Artistically even more valuable are his short stories, among which *The Madonna of the Future* and *Daisy Miller* are the most outstanding.⁶

In 1908 a journal was launched in Hungary that was to play a major role in the formation of an international literary canon. *Nyugat* [West], published until 1941, was largely responsible for the Hungarian readers' awareness of foreign literatures. In view of its central role in the Hungarian culture of the first half of the twentieth century, it is an important fact that no article published in this periodical analyzed any work by James. In contrast to German, French, Italian, or Scandinavian literature, works in English were often discussed by amateurish essayists. Mihály Babits, one of the outstanding poets and critics of *Nyugat* regarded American as a component of

⁵ *A Pallas Nagy Lexikona*. Vol. IX. Budapest: Pallas, 1895, 815.

⁶ *Révai Nagy Lexikona*. Vol. X. Budapest: Révai, 1914, 757.

English literature. James is not even mentioned in his influential outline, *A History of European Literature* (1935). The passage on James in *A History of World Literature*, published in three volumes in 1941, is so general that one may wonder if its author, Antal Szerb (1901–1945), probably the most widely read among the second generation of the essayists of *Nyugat*, was familiar with any work by James:

Henry James (1843–1916) had a profound dislike for America, the first country in which machine came to dominate over man, and the individual was pushed to the margin by a standardized, officially institutionalized average. He spent most of his life in Europe and died as an English citizen. In his novellas he followed the example of Meredith in pursuing psychological and stylistic subtleties. (If an American is subtle, he is much more so than any European, since an intellectual newcomer needs compensation.) His short stories and novels are the characteristic products of Secessionist taste. At the time they were written they had authority, but nowadays readers are less impressed by their excessively reserved tone and too sophisticated pattern.⁷

During the interwar decades the high prestige of *Nyugat* may have been responsible for the neglect of the fiction of James. After World War II Communist ideology was the main reason for the complete silence about the activity of the American-born author. Lukács had a German education, which made him insensitive to other traditions. After 1956 younger essayists made cautious steps towards opening the canon but they focused on contemporary trends. The interpretation of the past became the task of the members of the older generation. Outline histories of various national literatures were commissioned by the state publishers. In 1967 a 434-page history of American literature was published. Written by László Országh, Chair of the English Department of Kossuth Lajos University (Debrecen), it is the work of a linguist who specialized in compiling dictionaries. The text was published only after László Kardos, an authoritative Marxist, Chair of the Department of World Literature in Budapest, and editor-in-chief of *Nagyvilág*, a monthly launched in 1956, had made the necessary corrections. At the beginning of the relevant section, the works of James are described in opposition to “Critical Realism,” a term coined with the idea of distinguishing “progressive” from “reactionary” or “decadent” culture. The philosophy of William James is characterized as based on the idea that truth is always relative. “The truth of an idea depends on the measure of its being useful for reaching a desired goal.”⁸ The implication is that this philosophy can serve as a starting point for an approach to the fiction written by the younger brother.

In the Hungary of the post-1956 decades, and more specifically in the official party documents expressing the views of the Hungarian Socialist Workers’ Party cosmopolitanism was condemned as a serious flaw. Országh never joined the Party, so he was tolerated rather than supported by the political leaders. There is good reason to believe that he was forced to make statements such as the following:

⁷ Antal Szerb: *A világirodalom története*. Budapest: Magvető, 1980, 727–728.

⁸ László Országh: *Az amerikai irodalom története*. Budapest: Gondolat, 1967, 245.

He [Henry James] had gradually become alienated from his homeland and transformed into a rootless cosmopolitan. [...] His topics belong to the world of salons, his characters are the privileged members of the aristocracy and the haute-bourgeoisie, in whose airy world class conflicts cannot be made visible, and the fundamental issues of human existence seem to have no significance.⁹

Having started his career as a great admirer of Western culture before the advent of totalitarianism, Országh was silenced after 1948. In the less dogmatic phase that followed the revolution of 1956, he was obliged to rely on pseudo-Marxist clichés, especially when writing about the late novels, which he described in terms of “formalism” and “aestheticism for its own sake.”¹⁰

In the 1960s the community of Hungarian scholars was divided by the political authorities. Those who represented ideas not supported but tolerated by the Party were employed in research institutes with no teaching opportunities. This distinction led to an unfortunate dichotomy of research and education. The Institute for Literary Studies came to represent views attacked by university instructors. Of course, there were limits to freedom; research fellows had to walk a fine line. In 1974 an interdisciplinary conference was organized by the Institute on the forms of repetition in the arts. The full texts of the presentations were not published until 1980. My own contribution contained an attempt to systematize the forms of repetition in the tales of Henry James, an analysis made in the spirit of Structuralist narratology.¹¹

At the time a group of young scholars employed by the Institute of the Academy drew inspiration from French Structuralism, Aladár Sarbu, one of the younger members of the English Department of Eötvös Loránd University, wrote a full-length book on Henry James and the psychological novel. Born in 1940, he started his career with a book on Socialist Realism in the English novel and later published a work entitled *A Fragment from the Memoirs of a Party Member*.¹² His book on James was published first in a popular version with illustrations, in the Hungarian version of the “Écrivains de toujours” series, and later in the form of a scholarly monograph.¹³ This second version was originally submitted as a dissertation and earned its author what was called in the Soviet system a “candidate’s degree.”

Sarbu’s approach is based on a dichotomy between “bourgeois” and “Marxist literary scholarship.”¹⁴ Apart from the Marxist works of György Lukács, *The Novel and the People* (1937) by Ralph Fox, Arnold Kettle’s *An Introduction to the English Novel* (1951), and a collection of essays by Soviet critics, translated into Hungarian

⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 248.

¹¹ “A művészi ismétlés néhány változata az irodalomban és a zenében,” in Iván Horváth and András Veres, eds.: *Ismétlés a művészetben*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1980, 77–159.

¹² Aladár Sarbu: *Szocialista realista törekvések a modern angol regényben*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1967; *Töredék egy pártmber emlékirataiból*. Budapest: Magvető, 1983.

¹³ Aladár Sarbu: *Henry James világa*. Budapest: Európa, 1979; *Henry James és a lélektani regény*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1981.

¹⁴ Aladár Sarbu: *Henry James és a lélektani regény*, 230.

and co-edited by Sarbu in 1962, supply the basic terms used during the investigation. To what extent are the characters “lifelike,” which among them represents the worldview of the author, and how far do the novels express social criticism, the rottenness of the upper class and reification? Such are the criteria both for the general chapters outlining trends in the history of the novel and in the analysis of specific works. “In contrast to Dickens, George Eliot lacked a community that can provide vital culture, a warmth that can protect.”¹⁵ “Unfortunately, it never occurred to James that Isabel should have played an active role in the ado organized about her; without action she fails to be lifelike.”¹⁶

The background to such observations is supplied by a description of the difference between the American and European bourgeoisie of the late nineteenth century: “While in the New World this class was still a rising and dynamic class, in Europe it reached a phase of decline, having played its role in history.”¹⁷ The result is a moralizing interpretation, as the conclusion of the chapter on *The Golden Bowl* may suggest: “it is not possible to have an imperfect society and lead a respectable life in a vacuum. Since there is no asylum, no one, not even the noblest human beings can remain untouched by the dirt of the world.”¹⁸

It goes without saying that the main point of reference in this book is an ahistorical concept of realism borrowed from the works Lukács wrote during the years spent in the Soviet Union. The career of James is summarized in the following way: “From *The Portrait of a Lady* to *The Tragic Muse* (1890) realism dominated. This period was followed by an experimentation that ended with *The Sacred Fount* (1901). During this second phase realism became confined to style. The great novels of the period of “maturity,” *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), *The Ambassadors* (1903), and *The Golden Bowl* (1904) came to represent a synthesis.”¹⁹ This favourable assessment is later modified by the claim that the historical function of a psychological novelist consists “in creating certain instruments and strategies that even the adherents of a realist method could use on certain occasions.”²⁰

The opposition between realism and experimentation leads to the following characterization of *What Maisie Knew*: “The plot is artificial, the structure absurdly symmetric, the decisive turning-points are laboured. [...] James was obsessed with mere symmetry; an attractive scheme made him keep a distance from the real basis of the novel.”²¹ The meaning of the last words of this thesis is clarified when it is stated that the significance of this novel consists in the presentation of “the moral rottenness of the British upper class.”²² Less ambiguous is the value judgment on *The Sacred Fount*:

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

²² *Ibid.*, 117.

“This novel deserves attention not because of its artistic qualities. [...] *The Sacred Fount* is a bad novel, inspire of its interesting features.”²³

Irrespective of the ideological implications of Sarbu’s monograph, it may be worth observing that he seemed to ignore some historical factors. Not once in the analysis of *The Portrait of a Lady* is it mentioned that this novel has several versions. In his characterization of the narrative discourse of the early James, Sarbu relies on a Hungarian translation of the text published in the New York edition. In 1996, when asked to give an interpretation of this work to be included in a collection called *Twenty-Five Outstanding English Novels*, I pointed out the serious flaws of this translation, insisting that the internal repetitions and rhetorical figures that play a dominant role in the text have no equivalents in the Hungarian version.²⁴ Another example of the failure to recognize the historical nature of literary phenomena is the misrepresentation of the legacy of James. In view of the fact that Virginia Woolf wrote several important essays on James and spoke highly of him in her letters and diaries, the claim that the name of James “occurs but in the form of allusions that show a lack of understanding and even contempt”²⁵ is somewhat surprising.

As has been mentioned, my own interest in James goes back to my undergraduate years. *The Real Thing*, a tale that can be read as an attack on Naturalism, made me aware of James’s complex approach to fictionality and *The Aspern Papers* of the inadequacy of two modes of interpretation: biographical criticism and the Positivist use of written documents. In 1984 I published a paper read at an international conference on *The Figure in the Carpet*.²⁶ Later this essay was discussed by Western scholars as a contribution to the interpretation of this tale.²⁷ For my 1995 book on interpretation I rewrote this essay in Hungarian.²⁸ My latest attempt to discuss *The Figure in the Carpet*, as well as some other texts by James, in the context of the hermeneutic tradition was made in the form of a contribution to an international conference honouring Hans-Georg Gadamer and published in my book on reinterpretation.²⁹ An English version has also appeared in two slightly different forms.³⁰

²³ *Ibid.*, 137, 141.

²⁴ “Henry James: Egy hölgy arcképe,” in Júlia Kada, ed.: *Huszonöt fontos angol regény*. Budapest: Lord – Maecenas, 1996, 124–141.

²⁵ Sarbu: *Henry James és a lélektani regény*, 30–31.

²⁶ “Henry James: European or American?” in Tibor Frank, ed.: *The Origins and Originality of American Culture*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984, 233–245.

²⁷ Christina E. Albers: *The Reader’s Guide to the Short Stories of Henry James*. New York: G.K. Hall and Co., 1997, esp. 235–237.

²⁸ “Minta a szönyegen”: *A műértelmezés esélyei*. Budapest: Balassi, 1995, 139–147.

²⁹ “Henry James és a hermeneutikai hagyomány,” in *Újraértelmezések*. Budapest: Krónika Nova, 2000, 91–100.

³⁰ “Henry James and Reader-Response Criticism (*The Figure in the Carpet*)”, *Neohelicon* 2000, 61–67; Dirk de Geest, Ortwin de Graef, Dirk Delabastita, Koenraad Geldof, Rita Ghesquière, José Lambert, eds.: *Under Construction: Links for the Site of Literary Theory*. Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2000, 181–188.

The conclusion is inescapable that the reception of the works of Henry James was rather insignificant in Hungary. As late as 1998, one of the most influential members of the older generation of Hungarian literary historians, in a favourable review of one of my books, expressed his regret that I overestimated the achievement of Henry James.³¹ Neither the impressionistic critics of the 1920s and 30s nor the later spokesmen of Marxism could do justice to the works of the American-born writer. His most sympathetic readers were attracted to structuralist narratology, hermeneutics, reception-oriented research, and deconstruction. The collapse of the state-sponsored publishing industry may be responsible for the fact that no new translation was published in recent decades. As the last three novels are not available in Hungarian, it is understandable that the general public is still largely unaware of the significance of the activity of the writer who made the transition from nineteenth-century to twentieth-century narrative fiction. With the rapidly growing number of readers familiar with the works of James in the original, a reinterpretation may be expected, an attempt to restructure the Hungarian canon of literature in English.

³¹ G. Béla Németh: *Írók, művek, emberek*. Budapest: Krónika Nova, 1998, 230–234.