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THE RISE AND FALL OF OSSIAN

When I was asked to read a short paper on the reception of Ossian, I found myself in a difficult if not dangerous situation. In an essay published in 1970 with the title *The Possibility of a Structural Approach in Comparative Literature*¹, I expressed strong reservations about research made into the reception of literary works. I gave two reasons for my rather low opinion of one of the most traditional variants of comparative studies. Having just read Karl Erik Rosengren's book on the *Sociological Aspects of the Literary System*,² I came to the conclusion that the reception of literary works should be examined in a large scale, and a systematic analysis of the reading public can be undertaken only by a sociologist. My second argument was connected with the mode of existence of the work of art: I assumed that the *success* of a text did not necessarily involve its *artistic* influence on other texts.

In the last ten years my views have changed a lot, of course, I hope to have arrived at a less simplified notion of the ontology of the work of art and consequently, at a more balanced estimate of different branches of knowledge, I believe that a tolerance of all kinds of literary research is basic for the development of our discipline. Still, I have not given up all my tenets of early youth, much as I may have modified them. I wish to

¹ Szegedy-Maszák, Mihály, A strukturális vizsgálat alkalmazásának lehetősége az összehasonlító irodalomtudományban, in *Helikon* 1970, pp. 238–250.

² Rosengren, Karl Erik, *Sociological Aspects of the Literary System*, Stockholm, 1968.

assert that the theory of reception once so popular among comparatist scholars cannot be sustained. My goal is to prove the hypothesis that the same work may have an enormous success with the public and with second-rate authors, and little or no influence on first-rate writers. Macpherson provides a case in point. I shall draw all my examples from Hungarian literature because I should like to escape from the superficiality of summing up an enormous material on a few pages. In my analysis along the lines suggested I have drawn upon two positivist studies: an essay on Ossian in Hungary published in 1901 and a book which saw the press some fifteen years later. The author of the latter was convinced that he shed light on the influence of English literature up to the beginning of the career of Széchenyi, but he spoke in fact only of the reception of English books. Much as I differ from these earlier studies in my thesis and approach, I am heavily indebted to both, in spite of the fact that I corrected a few mistakes and supplemented the material to a considerable extent.

How far has the cult of Ossian influenced the development of Hungarian poetry? To answer that question I shall examine interpretations, stylistic influence, and translations. The three sections of my paper will interpenetrate, but I hope that such a procedure is admissible in this type of presentation.

1. INTERPRETATIONS

At the end of the 18th century most Hungarian writers could hardly read English texts in the original. György Bessenyei (1746–1811) translated *Essay on Man* from French, Macpherson was known chiefly through the German translation of Johann Nepomuk Cosmus Michael Denis (1729–1800).³ Before Széchenyi only second-rate writers had a sound knowledge of

³ Denis, Johann Nepomuk Cosmus Michael, *Die Gedichte Ossians, eines alter keltischen Dichters, aus dem Englischen übersetzt*, Wien 1768–69, 3 Bde.

the English language. Ferenc Verseghy (1757–1822), one of the Hungarian Jacobins, translator of *La Marseillaise*, learnt it in his almost nine-year-long imprisonment in Kufstein. The reference made to Ossian in one of his longer poems⁴ is no sufficient ground, however, for assuming that he may have read Macpherson in English.

Verseghy was at least a stillful verifier. The same cannot be said of Gábor Döbrentei (1785–1851), whose title to fame is rather as an organizer of literary life in Transylvania. The first systematic historian of Hungarian literature, Ferenc Toldy maintained that Döbrentei learnt English in Leipzig in 1806 because the poems of Ossian impressed him so much.⁵ The real issue is not whether Döbrentei was an entirely insignificant poet or not – undoubtedly he was one –, but rather to emphasize the superficiality of his culture. Suffice it to mention that in one of his letters he mixed up the works of Gray and Goldsmith.⁶ It seems not far-fetched to say that only major writers influenced the evolution of the diction and world picture of Hungarian literature at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th-century. Pope's interpretation of the great chain of being convinced Bessenyei, the leading writer of the first generation of the Hungarian Enlightenment that the optimism inherent in certain French interpretations of history was untenable, the use of symbols in *The Rape of the Lock* urged Csokonai to move away from allegorical writing, the ambiguity of Rousseau's conception of the relationship between the self and the outside world inspired the same Hungarian poet when he composed his ode *To Solitude*. Only minor artists took an interest in the Ossianic texts.

In Hungary *Fingal* and *Temora* were not hailed as masterpieces. Tellingly enough, Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838), the best

⁴ Rikóti, Mátyás, Pest, 1804.

⁵ Döbrentei, Gábor, *A magyar költészet kézi-könyve* ('A Handbook of the Hungarian Poetry'), Budapest, 1876, III. 259.

⁶ *Kazinczy Ferenc levelezése* ('The Correspondance of F. Kazinczy'), Budapest, 1890–1911, X. 135.

poet-critic of the cult of sensibility, rejected the Ossianic poems not on account of their inauthenticity, but because of the lack of linguistic power manifest in them. This view was later echoed by János Arany (1817–1882), who was a grammar-school teacher in the 1850's. In the text which he wrote for himself and used as a manual in teaching Hungarian literature, he devoted some attention to the influence exerted by Macpherson on Hungarian letters.⁷ Kölcsey found Macpherson monotonous and therefore “boring”,⁸ Arany labelled his language “watery” and “turgid”. What is more, the latter poet made a point of regarding Ossian as a prose writer.

His opinion is entirely justified if we examine the role played by Ossian in Hungarian literature. From a historical perspective we can safely remark that Ossian strengthened the influence of Rousseau and Gessner by liberating Hungarian writers from the ties of the Neoclassical hierarchy of genres. Macpherson's example confirmed their new belief according to which the lyric could be combined with the epic, and poetry did not necessarily ask for verse. Bessenyei and his friends often started a letter in prose and continued to develop its motives in verse or vice versa, Pál Ányos (1756–1784) composed lyric pieces in prose, and Mihály Csokonai Vitéz (1773–1805) sometimes experimented with translating his own verse into prose – as in a letter sent to György Festetics, the uncle of Széchenyi, which is a transcription of the ode mentioned earlier and composed in 1798. Ossian certainly helped these writers in their experiments, but they were indebted far more to Rousseau: they took inspiration mainly from him when speculating widely about the nature of poetry and introducing new resources into lyric composition.

⁷ A magyar irodalom története rövid kivonatban ('A Brief History of the Hungarian Literature') in *Arany János összes Művei X*, Budapest, 1962, p. 513.

⁸ *Kölcsey Ferenc Minden Munkái* ('The Complete Works of F. Kölcsey'), X., Budapest, 1886–1887, p. 44.

In my view there is a slender justification for the hypothesis that the cult of Ossian may have had a liberating effect even on Hungarian prosody. The fact that for a while no one could be certain about the regularities of Macpherson's texts undoubtedly inspired poets to translate them as freely as possible. János Batsányi (1763–1845), for example, started his translation in prose, later changed for hexameter, and finally, chose unrhymed vers libéré.

2. STYLISTIC INFLUENCE

The poets who referred to Ossian in their own works cannot be regarded as insignificant. The poems containing these allusions, however, are of lesser importance. In 1791 Dávid Baróti Szabó (1739–1819) and Benedek Virág (1754–1830), in 1801 Csokonai, in 1807 Sándor Kisfaludy (1772–1844) made reference to Ossian.⁹ Three of the Hungarian poems are occasional pieces, and it lies beyond discussions that the name of Ossian is mentioned in all the four texts in a cursory manner. Macpherson's work provided a safety value for Hungarian intellectuals' dissatisfaction with the present of their nation. It goes without saying that Ossian was no source of aesthetic enjoyment but served as a starting point for meditations on the decadence of the Hungarian nation and the function of a poet fully aware of that decline.

John Bowring, who in 1830 published a collection of Hungarian poems, spoke of the stylistic influence of Macpherson only in the work of Döbrentei, calling one of his pieces (*Kenyérmezei diadal*) "a sort" of Ossianic composition¹⁰. It was through Döbrentei that Sándor Aranyosrákosi Székely got to know Ossian. The point is not that both these versifiers wrote in so

⁹ *Örvendező vers tekintetes nemes Szabolts vármegye öröm ünnepére; Baróti Szabó Dávidhoz; Tisztelő versezet; A boldog szerelem, VI. ének.*

¹⁰ Poetry of the Magyars, London, 1830, LXIV.

stilted an idiom that today even their historical function can be questioned, it is rather that Aranyosrákosi Székely tried to write an epic on the Hungarian conquest of the Danube basin on the Ossianic model. The result was an amorphous work lacking structure as much as *Fingal* or *Temora*. Having read the poem, Mihály Vörösmarty (1800–1855) decided to push aside the Ossianic model. In composing *The Fall of Zalán* (1825) he invented a new structural principle. Turning the leader of the defeated enemy of the Hungarian conquerors into the hero of his story, he outraged some of his contemporaries, and no wonder, since it was a direct assault on the convention inherited from Macpherson: the speech situation of an elegiac lament on the decline of the nation. Discarding the framework of national history, he composed a vision of universal death foreshadowing those of his later works in which he treated being as a transition between two phases of nothingness.

Commentators who couple Ossian and *The Fall of Zalán*, the first longer poem of Vörösmarty, do so with scant justification, and it is significant that those who begin with this error almost invariably end by committing the far greater error of contrasting the earlier with the later Vörösmarty. It is true that the Hungarian poet's originality is at its least radical in the first half of the 1820's, but it is fully evident even in the works written after 1820. A moment's comparison of Ossian and *The Fall of Zalán* will show how little the two poets have in common. It is true — and somewhat surprising — that Vörösmarty, who is by far the more original of the two, has taken a motivic hint or two from Macpherson; but in regard to the specific character of metaphoric invention, syntactical elaboration, and cosmic world view, the work of these two poets has nothing in common. And their ultimate value is equally dissimilar.

In Macpherson's texts elegiac descriptions set the tone of the poem and these alternated with conventional dialogues and maxims. Of these three constituents Vörösmarty took the first as a basis, tried to diminish the role of the second as much as possible, and altogether dismissed the third.

Vörösmarty's reasons for the rejection of Ossian after he had finished *Zalán* were different from those of Arany. The later poet preferred those of Macpherson's contemporaries — Burns or Crabbe, for instance — whose craftsmanship in their best works was above reproach, whose imagination, though limited, was personal in character and precise in application. Being a maker, rather than a seer, Arany felt that Macpherson's artistic incompleteness was revealed in the tendency to seek an easy emotional response by means of an accepted signal rather than by formulating a poetic idea in which both substance and expressivity are felt a fresh. Arany blamed Ossian for unevenness; Vörösmarty, who was concerned not with purifying diction but with extending the semantic field of poetry, missed innovation in him. Vörösmarty's attitude to Macpherson can be compared to that of Wordsworth. Like Wordsworth in his great creative period, Vörösmarty in the first half of his career was the very type of the versatile Romantic, and like the English poet he would occasionally write poetry of abysmal quality. There is nothing in the verse of Cowper or Csokonai that is as bad as the worst of Vörösmarty. But these disasters are the result of taking risks that would be inconceivable to a lesser artist. A Romantic of this kind does not know the meaning of discretion; he thrives on hazard, and though his inspiration will sometimes succumb, it will more often emerge, triumphantly justifying every perilous step it has taken.

It is true that after completing *Zalán* Vörösmarty had to face an *impasse*. Only with great risk could he continue to rely so heavily upon his phonemically sensitive ear for an elegiac modality. Although the novelty of his metaphoric and syntactic explorations amounted to a revolution of diction, it was evident that, without reorientation, he was likely to find it difficult to avoid repeating himself and indulge in a sensuousness of tone somewhat reminiscent of Ossian. It was inconceivable that, as things stood, he could tackle a large form. Vörösmarty now gave his full attention to what he entirely missed in Ossian and what we can most aptly call a sense of tragic irony in history, inter-

preted in cosmic terms. His dismissal of Macpherson as worthless after having composed *Zalán* helped him completely transcend the limitations which were threatening him. He may have had several reasons for rejecting Macpherson and turning to Shakespeare for inspiration: Ossian's metaphors were dead and explicit, while he tried to create new metaphors whose tenor was neither mentioned in the text nor known from tradition; Ossian's monotony resulted from a lack of syntactic variation, whereas Vörösmarty aimed at extreme dislocation, elaboration, or fragmentation; and finally, the Hungarian poet lost interest in the surface effect of tone and strove for emotional complexity and intellectual depth of meaning. The new departure first became apparent in *The Valley of Faeries* (1826) and *An Island in the South* (1827). Vörösmarty's researches into the relationship of the individual and history led him closer and closer to a position from which he was able to regard myth as a predominant factor in the structure of the poetic vision.

Arany missed intellectual control, purity of diction, and irony in Macpherson and criticized him because his texts were devoid of logical syntax and the depiction of scenes from provincial life, qualities which the Hungarian poet valued highly in 18th-century English verse. Vörösmarty had taken a different view: he found Macpherson's imagination too limited, his imaginary landscapes too prosaic, his cult of dreams and the supernatural too conventional, his metaphors too prosaic. The conclusion seems inescapable that Ossian had no major part in the evolution of Hungarian poetry.

3. TRANSLATIONS

One question remains to be answered: we must briefly examine the Hungarian translations of Ossian and decide whether our thesis should not be abandoned in the face of apparent counterevidence.

It is characteristic of the Hungarian "time-lag" that in the first half of the 19th century the achievements of Hölderlin, No-

valis, Wordsworth, and Coleridge had not caused the slightest ripple on the mill-pond of literary life. This time-lag, however, was not due to conservatism but to lack of information, for Dániel Berzsenyi (1776–1836) and, above all, Vörösmarty brought about a revolution in poetic diction and world picture in many ways similar to that of their Western predecessors. There is no reason to assign any place to Macpherson's impact after Berzsenyi came to maturity about 1800. In the late 18th century, however, reading Ossian may have contributed to the slowly emerging reaction against Neoclassicism. The cult of Primitivism produced a rather vague conception of folk literature, covering materials as diverse as the poems of Homer and Ossian, the Bible or the ballads. Folk literature interpreted in this unhistorical way was considered superior to Classicism. His letter written to Kazinczy on 25 November 1788 clearly show that this cult of Primitivism inspired Sándor Báróczi (1735–1809) to plan a translation of Ossian.¹¹ I should like to mention in passing that Báróczi was the only writer belonging to the Francophile literate members of Maria Theresa's Hungarian body-guard whose artistic inaptitude was quite obvious: his collected works comprise nothing but translations. János Batsányi who published the first translation of Macpherson in a literary review called *Kassai Museum* in 1788 has a far more serious claim to consideration. An ardent Jacobin, he was imprisoned in Kufstein, and later, under the French rule, became an active politician and supporter of Napoleon. His books in the Hungarian National Library show that he wished to translate all the Ossianic poems, collected a number of German editions, and in 1806 consulted James Macdonald as to the original text. Batsányi deserves notice rather for his intransigence in politics than for his artistic integrity. After a brief period of rhetorically effective didactic verse writing, a falling off of powers characterizes his work. His unfinished Ossian is partly from this later period, and clearly shows the ideological character of

¹¹ *Kazinczy Ferenc levelezése*, I. 239.

Batsányi's interest in the Scottish writer. The bard's lament on the decline of his nation is a mere pretext for Batsányi to scold Hungarians for their passivity.

It would be concreted by all literary historians that most, if not all Hungarian translators were versifiers whose works did not come up to the average level of occasional writing. Among them Gedeon Ráday (1713–92)¹² is known chiefly for his combination of classical metre and accentual versification, a device which he used in didactic epistles. The others were even less significant from a historical, not to say an aesthetic point of view. From Károly Farkas to János Horváth (1769–1835)¹³ they belonged to those versifiers who are not even mentioned in literary histories. An art moded Neoclassical diction, the constant use of dead or explained metaphors, maxims, epigrammatic formulae, and a discussive-argumentative speech situation: these are the main features of their works. They hailed Macpherson as a fellow writer whose taste was similar to theirs.

The contrast is striking if we look into the *journal intime* written in German by István Széchenyi (1791–1860), a great innovator in Hungarian prose. The most widely read man in 19th-century Hungary, in his journal he made interesting comments on writers as diverse as Plato, Thucydides, Anacreon, Polybius, Cicero, Horace, Dante, Machiavelli, Tasso, Montaigne, Shakespeare, La Bruyère, Molière, Racine, Bossuet, Otway, Le Sage, Lord Chesterfield, Voltaire, Casanova, Hume, Goldsmith, Rousseau, Gibbon, Fanny Burney, Goethe, Schiller, Laclos, Scott, Chateaubriand, Byron, Mary Shelley, Alfieri, Disraeli, Hugo, or Lamartine. About Macpherson he did not care a couple of straws. The reason for this dismissal is clear enough: unlike all his contemporaries, Széchenyi always read English literature in the original, and having compared Macpherson to other writers, he relegated him to a lower rank, because his language did not impress him at all. When Gábor Fábíán (1795–

¹² *Orpheus*, 1970 I.

¹³ *Mulatságok* ('Entertainments'), Buda, 1805; *Szépliteraturai Ajándék* ('A Literary Present'), 1824, pp. 61–62.

1877) sent him what is by far the best Hungarian translation of Ossian, he made no remark, because he thought the English work was not worth translating at all.

The first larger selection from Ossian was not published until 1815. The Hungarian text was based on three German versions: those of Rhode, Denis, and Ahlwardt. The translator was Ferenc Kazinczy (1759–1831), one of the most controversial figures in Hungarian literature. His role as a splendid organizer of literary life cannot be underestimated. As a prose writer he is remembered chiefly for *The Diary of my Imprisonment*, written in 1828, in which he commemorated his years spent in Kufstein. As a poet, he was one of the most conservative of his age. His authority hampered the artistic development of several of his contemporaries, from Baróti Szabó to Berzsenyi. His translation of Ossian can be cited as proof of his waning powers. By 1815 a new generation was emerging. Kazinczy was convinced that for the time being Hungarian poets must translate, instead of trying to compose original works. His Ossian was taken as an epitome of old-fashioned aesthetics. It urged Kölcsey to move away from the tenets of his master.

Those who tried their hand at hexameter, certainly read Macpherson in the translation of Denis, others who made desperate attempts to reconstruct Ossian's original prosody took the lead of Ahlwardt. The result could be only more or less independent of the English or German text, because of the obvious difference between the languages. It is a well-known fact that classical metre can be realized only in two modern European languages: Finnish and Hungarian. Thus, the hexameters in Vörösmarty's *Zalán* have nothing in common with the Ossian of Denis, though its example could have incited the Hungarian poet to use it. If we look into the only complete Hungarian Ossian, published by Gábor Fábíán in 1833, we cannot help but conclude that it shows the influence not so much of Macpherson as of Vörösmarty.

Fábíán, who was a close friend of Vörösmarty and artist of some talent, made use of Ahlwardt's version and became con-

vinced that Ossian must have had a free prosody of his own. This belief led him to the conclusion that he, too, must create a free system. Paradoxical as it may seem to be, the fact of the matter is that the best Hungarian translation of Macpherson is the least dependent on the original.

The explanation is not altogether difficult. Kazinczy translated Macpherson while believing that language was universal, Fábíán proceeded on the assumption of the Romantic version of language: in his view thought was a product of language, and each language had a semantics of its own. The old debate between innate ideas versus linguistic relativism, a generative and a conventional approach to language can be observed in the Hungarian reception of Ossian. Implicit in Fábíán's translation was the premise that Descartes, Leibniz, or even the authors of the *Port-Royal* grammar were wrong: no universal grammar could be re-constructed, for sign systems were diverse, historically determined conventions, each with a unique tradition and logic of its own. Széchenyi, a keen observer of local customs, and Vörösmarty, who was not only a poet but also a grammarian, concurred with Herder in maintaining that language did not express meaning but created it. Fábíán shared the opinion of the two greatest Hungarian Romantics, and like them, was fully aware of the ideological and even political implications of his belief. The tacit acknowledgement of unconditional historical relativism cried for a universal tolerance. Since there was no ideal language, all national cultures were of equal stature. Fábíán was a liberal, and his world view was manifest in his activity as a translator.

The Hungarian Neoclassicists valued the universal in poetry and hailed Ossian as an epitome of it, the Romantics sought for the particular, the concrete, even the local, and either missed it in Macpherson (as Kölcsey or Széchenyi) or payed no attention to his texts and concentrated on recreation. Fábíán followed the latter path. In the last analysis, it must be conceded that the cult of Ossian did contribute to the evolution of Hungarian Romanticism. The fact that the translator had to take it on trust that

there had been an original text of Ossian not available entitled him to freedom in his work as translator.

Petőfi, Arany, and others read Fábíán's so-called translation as Hungarian poetry. Provided we made an anthology of 19th-century Hungarian verse, we should include Fábíán as a minor-craftsman who made his contribution to the idiom of Hungarian Romanticism. The conclusion seems inescapable that once we have crossed into the realm of poetry, the inheritance of Ossian tends to lose its significance. The example of Hungarian poetry, at least, seems to prove that hypothesis. Edgar Varèse, the French-born composer once proclaimed that "chaque anneau de la chaîne de la tradition a été forgé par un révolutionnaire". Macpherson was far from being an innovator in literature, he was not even a minor artist. Two English writers of the 18th-century: Sterne and Blake had a decisive influence on the evolution of Hungarian literature at some point. The ballads, Pope, Thomson, Gray, and even Young played some part in the literary apprenticeship of Csokonai. Ossian's name became a slogan with lesser writers. No major poet took him seriously. His cult proved to be superficial, it did not produce any lasting effect on the changing idiom of Hungarian poetry.

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My intent was to take into consideration all signs of the cult of Ossian in Hungary up to 1833. In the second half of the 19th-century a few other translations and essays appeared. I have disregarded them for two reasons:

1. they do not concern the period we have in mind at the present *colloque*;
2. they had no bearing whatsoever on the Hungarian literature of the later 19th-century.

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Remarques

La conférence de M. Szegedy-Maszák sur la réception d'Ossian suscite avant tout la question de savoir si la découverte des documents d'Ossian a eu quelque influence sur la littérature hongroise de l'époque. La réponse négative amène des considérations sur la distinction à faire entre l'influence d'Ossian (à partir de la traduction) sur le langage (elle ne tardera pas à survenir) et sur les thèmes (elle n'apparaîtra que plus tard). Quant aux thèmes, Ossian et Young étaient souvent confondus, les deux exerçant une influence qui allait dans la même direction. M. Szegedy-Maszák rappelle aussi que les poèmes hongrois de l'époque présentent quatre systèmes d'entité: gréco-latin (non accentué), système national (accentué), prose libre et prose soumise à des règles et à une systématisation (*szabad próza*). Étant donné que la question du « vers libéré » avait déjà été abordée à la réunion du matin du même jour, la discussion s'engage autour des problèmes de la traduction dans un mètre différenciant de l'original. Mme Jechova illustre des problèmes similaires par des exemples tchèques et polonais, elle aborde les définitions de la prose cadencée, poétique et rimée, en précisant que la prose biblique était une prose rythmée. En conclusion on a pu constater que les traductions d'Ossian ont soulevé dans nombre de littératures d'Europe des problèmes importants d'ordre linguistique.