

First Publication

1 Farkas, Gyula: Romános-romántos-romantikusk. In: *Minerva* (1929/4-6), p. 174.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 174f.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 188.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

20th century studies in Hungarian romanticism keep returning to a dilemma that may be of some concern for anyone who wants to take the floor. While historians of literature feel compelled to highlight the peculiarities of the Hungarian tradition, such a demonstration is still bound to start out from a preliminary investigation into the various currents of romanticism as a wider European movement, and it is only after such an analysis that historians feel authorized to specify Hungarian developments in contradistinction to other national traditions. This procedure often ends up wrestling with some sort of a paradox, when the historian recognizes that, unless the word ›romantic‹ be dropped or its meaning radically changed (to the point of idiosyncrasy), the singularity of the Hungarian tradition is doomed to be invaded from the start by the very conceptual framework of the investigation itself.

A telling case in point could be Gyula Farkas' remarkable study on the Hungarian history of the term ›romantic‹. Written in 1929, the essay bears the marks of a time of growing political turbulence, as the argument is formulated in a slightly paranoid tone: »The development of Hungarian literature should not be dressed into the strait-jacket of foreign conceptual systems, but [...] a new conceptual system should be provided for its peculiar laws.«¹ Yet, behind the apparently xenophobic pattern of such formulations, it is not difficult to recognize the lucid and indeed genuine scholarly attempt at historical clarification and critical overview. The following passage testifies to the complexity of Farkas' stance:

The turn of the 18th century, as well as the first half of the 19th, marks a decisive period in the development of our literature, or more precisely, it marks the very period of its birth. Our having been unable to reach a fuller understanding of this era (a full understanding will hardly ever be possible) is mainly due to the burden of these foreign theories that, during the last hundred years (that is, since the time we have come to a literary self-consciousness), weighs upon all our literary-theoretical speculations. The most dangerous of those theories is that of romanticism, because of the ambiguity of the concept. The only way we can truly understand the age of Vörösmarty is by liberating our view from the suggestive influence of this concept, that is, by examining independently the laws of development, and, if having completed our enquiries we should still be in need of the term, by providing a properly Hungarian interpretation of it.²¹

There are four points to be made concerning this passage. Firstly, the argument is based on a strict opposition of what is »foreign« to what is »properly Hungarian«. And indeed, throughout the essay a binarism of this sort prevails. The antithesis between foreign traits and properly Hungarian features is reformulated in terms of the difference between theory and practice, criticism and poetry, concept and content, general and particular etc., where the first element is always something to be dreaded, and consequently, to be domesticated by subordinating it to the other term. Thus, when later in the essay Mihály Vörösmarty is singled out as the singular personification of Hungarian romanticism, we learn that the primary indication of his poetic genius is his lack of interest in theoretical speculations: »From him no theory can be expected, since he created the poetic practice, upon which the theories of others are built.«³ Poetic practice has to function as a solid base for the national edifice (or one might even say »superstructure«) of literary theory, and Farkas is soon quoting the major 19th century critic and historian Ferenc Toldy, whose *Handbuch der ungarischen Poesie* (1828) celebrates Vörösmarty precisely for the same reasons: »Homerische Form, echtungarisches Weltleben, Romantik und orientalische Mythen sind in Vörösmartys Gedichten zu einem ganz eigentümlichen Ganzen innigst verschwistert.«⁴ What is here called »echtungarisches Weltleben« is precisely that empirical content, that material or *Stoff*, which poetry is supposed to provide for literary criticism. As Farkas himself will point out a few pages later, the true historian has to avoid »the props of foreign views and theories« or has to »fill the foreign concept with national content.«⁵ As a second point, I would quickly add that »foreign« in this context primarily means »German« (and to a lesser extent »French«), for Farkas establishes a tripartite temporal scheme, in which the ephemeral but genuine romanticism of Vörösmarty (that is, Hungarian romanticism proper, roughly the 1830s) is, on the one hand, preceded by a period of intense German influence, and on the other, it is very soon displaced by politically oriented trends coming primarily from France. My third point is that the »foreign theory« most strongly suspected is nothing else than German *roman-*

6 Ibid., p. 175.

7 Cf. Varga, Pál: Rohonyi Zoltán: »Úgy állj meg itt, puszta!«. In: Irodalomtörténeti Közlemények 103, (1999/1-2), p. 222.

8 Ibid., p. 222.

9 Ibid., p. 227.

10 Ibid., p. 227.

11 S. Varga, Pál: ... a kozmopolitizmusnak szükségképpen patriotizmusnak kell lennie.... In: Takáts, József (Hg.): Vörösmarty és a romantika. Pécs, Budapest: Művészetek Háza-Országos Színháztörténeti Múzeum és Intézet 2000, p. 162.

12 Ibid., p. 165.

13 Ibid., p. 170.

tic theory («the most dangerous» of theories), in a broad sense, say, from Herder to Hegel, but of course having its pitch in the »literary theory« of the Jena romantics. Fourthly (and perhaps most importantly), the argument is organized along metaphors derived precisely from German romantic theory. When Farkas wants to delineate the national tradition from foreign developments, as soon as he speaks of the history of Hungarian literature as an organic process of birth and development, when he understands birth as an event of a nation's coming to consciousness, of its becoming self-conscious, or when he stresses the infinitely approximating movement of understanding, at such moments it is difficult, if not outright impossible, not to think of similar formulations by the above mentioned authors of German criticism and philosophy. And the project of the essay is entirely implicated in this German heritage, as is clear from the assertion that »[t]he Hungarian history of the word romantic is a chapter in the development of a literary self-consciousness.«⁶ So for us the real interest of the passage (and of the whole of Farkas' analysis) might lie with its ambivalent relation to a (German) romantic heritage, which, however much resisted, keeps haunting the seemingly *anti-* or at least *postromantic* discourse of its posterity. Opposing romanticism in romantic terms is what one could call the postromantic predicament.

Much has been done in the field of romantic studies since Farkas' analysis. With the addition and correction of a vast number of nuances, our picture of Hungarian romanticism seems to have become more and more reliable, even if one acknowledges that a »full understanding« will never be possible. But patterns of argumentation are more resistant to change than philological facts. And indeed, if one takes a glimpse of contemporary criticism, certain aspects of the postromantic predicament still seem to be very much with us. One recent example will suffice. The tension between »foreign« and »properly Hungarian« conceptual systems seems to inform the thinking of such an outstanding literary historian as Pál S. Varga, a critic of admirable erudition and tenacious attentiveness, who has even made remarkable efforts to find a way out of this »fearful symmetry«. The suspicion towards inauthentic frameworks of interpretation clearly appears in a lucid book review, where his main point has to do precisely with the danger inherent in the uncritical application of foreign theories to texts of Hungarian romanticism. A statement like the following clearly displays his concern: »however necessary it seems to translate into our own language what we have understood from readings of an other literature and from a scientific discourse speaking an other language, one must still be careful in taking over particular concepts.«⁷ Instead of using far-fetched conceptual frameworks, he insists that »we should develop our theoretical systems first and foremost by »interrogating our own materials«.«⁸ S. Varga is fully aware that a similar tension can be located within the German tradition itself, between Kant and Herder, where it appears as a tension between cosmopolitanism and patriotism. What he rightly calls »the dual character of romanticism« is itself a reference to the fact that »the (Herderian) national-historical and the (Kantian) a priori establishment of the aesthetic are mutually exclusive«.⁹

Now, things become more interesting when this same historian makes a move in the direction of a potential balance. The figure of the poet Ferenc Kölcsey becomes exemplary, because of his recognition of the interdependence of the above standpoints. What Kölcsey is doing is, for S. Varga, »not the correction of some dated provincialism by a modern cosmopolitanism, but the correction of the latter by a (Herderian) – territorial – anthropology.«¹⁰ But whereas this formulation still appears to take a stand on one of the two sides (namely, that of Herder), a recent essay, in which S. Varga returns to the question of the relationship between (Kantian) cosmopolitanism and (Herderian) patriotism, seems to provide a more generous solution, this time by way of Fichte. In the latter essay, Vörösmarty joins Kölcsey in sharing the Fichtean insight, formulated in *Der Patriotismus und sein Gegenteil* (1807), that »any cosmopolitanism must necessarily be a patriotism.«¹¹ S. Varga quotes Vörösmarty («the individual must be a patriot, but the nation as a whole must be cosmopolitan») and then affirms that Vörösmarty stresses »the duty of the *individual* to contribute, indirectly, through the elevation of the nation, to the elevation of mankind.«¹² Lest anyone should call this an easy way out, the historian emphatically points to the radical aspects of the Fichtean notion.: »This is no quietistic equilibrium, no »opium«; the speaker of the poem [Vörösmarty's *Thoughts in the Library*] only draws the conclusions of his own dualistic anthropology. [...] And it is here that we have come back to Fichte: this speaker knows that the things we have done, according to our capacities, for that portion of mankind which is the closest to us, were cosmopolitan deeds.«¹³ This is all clear and well-formulated. Yet, one might feel tempted to read the above negations («This is no quietistic equilibrium, no »opium«») as instances of *Verneinung* in the Freudian sense, especially in the light of S. Varga's own pas-



14 Cf. letter XII, 11.07.1847, in: Úti levelek Kerényi Frigyeshez. In: Petőfi, Sándor: Összes művei V. Budapest: Akadémiai 1956, p. 65.

sing remark, earlier in the essay, that Fichte's argument might be closely related to his conception of the messianic role of the German nation, which he put forward just a year earlier in his *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1806). With this reference, we are indeed back to Farkas. For one must not forget that at the time when he wrote his essay on the Hungarian history of the term *romantic*, Fichte's conception was surely beginning to gain purchase in the darkest corners of the political scene.

In what follows, I would like to present another, not necessarily better or easier, but certainly less frequent way to formulate the predicament exemplified above by romantic philology. It seems that romantic texts are themselves seriously concerned with questions of »philology«, but they do so in such unusual ways that philologists tend to miss this aspect of their operation. An exemplary case would be the work of Sándor Petőfi. His emergence on the scene of Hungarian poetry in the 1840s marked the advent of a critical phase, of a critique of romanticism, in which depoliticized, self-centered forms of literature no longer seemed to be tenable. This is a time that sees an increasing cult of French (and English) contemporaries, whereas the adjective »German« becomes something of a curse in many respects. Being disappointed from the much too often melancholic tone of romanticism, this new trend advocates a practice of poetic activism, that is, an intense involvement in social and political issues.

Gábor Kazinczy, the leading figure of the so-called »movement literature«, who had the ambition to establish the Hungarian version for *Junges Deutschland*, served as an ideal for many of his contemporaries, including Petőfi himself. In a letter that dates from the summer of 1847, Petőfi praises Kazinczy's unsurpassable rhetorical cunning: »He is a real prodigy of nature in the field of oratory [...]. Spontaneous oratory has reached its pitch in him. There may be others similar to, but no one better than, him.«¹⁴ One could easily read this eulogy as an apt paraphrase of the perfect orator, whom Cicero claimed to be able to hide his manipulative art behind the illusion of spontaneity. A few months later Petőfi even wrote an epistle to Kazinczy (*Kazinczy Gáborhoz*), in which the figure of Kazinczy appears in a specular relation to the speaker of the poem, the implication being that the two of them can create a genuine poetico-political platform precisely because of the intimate affinity of their habits and ideas. So a large part of the poem is set in the first person plural, and whatever is being said about Kazinczy is to be transposed on the figure of the speaker, that is, on Petőfi himself. In the poem, Kazinczy's rhetorical art appears as the only way through which truth as a weapon can present its power:

... az igazság a mi fegyverünk.
S nem volna messze már a diadal,
Ha minden harcos olyan volna, mint, te,
Szavával olyan fél-mindenható!
Föl, föl barátom, hangoztasd szavad,
Áraszd ki lelked e lángözönét,
Hogy föllobbantsd a rokon szíveket,
S hogy szétégesd az ellenség hadát!
(*Kazinczy Gáborhoz*, 24-31.)

... truth is our weapon.
And triumph would not be far away,
If all warriors were, as you are,
half-omnipotent by their words!
Rise, rise my friend, speak out loud,
Let your flaming soul emanate,
Setting all kindred hearts on fire
And burning up the troops of the enemy!
(Transl. GF)

The intimate economy between self and other, addresser and addressee, is openly stated from the very start of the poem, where both appear as »soldiers of the century«. This kinship is then extended to the almost supernatural dimensions of rhetorical power, when in the passage just quoted the speaker attributes to Kazinczy the high standing of a »half-omnipotent« orator, whose words prove to be effectual enough to eliminate the enemy in a fatal combustion. Such is the apostolic zeal that sets the terms of the poem.



15 de Man, Paul: *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. New York: Columbia UP 1984, p. 75f.

16 Menke, Bettine: *Prosopopöia*. München: Fink 2000, p. 218.

17 Hegel, G. W. F.: *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1986, p. 462.

The specular economy of Petőfi's epistle can be clarified, if we return once again to the passage quoted earlier from a letter in the same year. It is time to quote Petőfi's eulogy in its entirety. This is what he says of Kazinczy: »He is a real prodigy of nature in the field of oratory; a new statue of Memnon, from which an everlasting dawn ceaselessly lures the most sublime notes. Spontaneous oratory has reached its pitch in him. There may be others similar to, but no one better than, him.« As I have noted earlier, the passage celebrates Kazinczy for the Ciceronian perfection of his rhetorical capacities. The oration of such an orator can be called sublime (in the Longinian sense) because of its apparent spontaneity, that is, because of the self-concealment of its figures. But what does all this have to do with the figure of Memnon, one might ask. The colossal statue in Egypt traditionally held to be the statue of Memnon was badly damaged by an earthquake, and later it was said to produce charming notes during sunrise, when the first rays of dawn (in fact, Memnon's mother, Eos) reached the huge mass of stone. Memnon was said to return his mother's greetings. The circularity of this give-and-take is itself an explanation, why Petőfi speaks of an »everlasting dawn«. The dawn, a highly packed figure in the vocabulary of Petőfi (as in that of many other romantics as well), is not simply the dawn of a new day but always the dawn of a new epoch, of radical change, and of revolution even. So its emergence brings with itself the atmosphere of an apocalypse. Yet this apocalyptic moment is being ceaselessly postponed, which turns the sunrise into the promise of a future never to come.

The same scene appears a couple of years earlier in another poem (*Batthyányi és Károlyi grófnék*, 1844), whose addressees are in many respects similar to Kazinczy's figure. The closing stanza of the poem marks the significant shift to a vocative mode:

Ragyogjatok ti ébredő hazámban
Hajnalsugárral, testvércsillagok!
Sugáritokra, Memnon szobraképen,
A nemzetáldás zengedezni fog.
(*Batthyányi és Károlyi grófnék*, 29-32.)

Shine with the light of dawn,
You twin stars, in my waking land!
With your rays, the nation's bliss,
Like Memnon's statue, will reverberate.
(Transl. GF)

Whereas Kazinczy was allegorized in the figure of Memnon, these equally sublime addressees (the two countesses, who are potential mother-figures) take the role of Memnon's mother Eos, the goddess of dawn, and doing so in fact put on the stage Petőfi himself, who must have acted out, however implicitly, the very same role in his epistle to Kazinczy. The dominant figure of this role is the figure called prosopopoeia: »the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the possibility of the latter's reply, and confers upon it the power of speech«. ¹⁵ When in the epistle Petőfi addresses himself to Kazinczy (as to the statue of Memnon), he actually personifies the frozen stone into a living human being capable of understanding and of speech. This gesture of apostrophe is not necessarily vocal, it can also be accomplished by a glimpse, as the solar eyes of dawn testify. Indeed, Petőfi's confrontation with the figure of Kazinczy (allegorized in the mythological encounter of the goddess of dawn and the statue of Memnon) is nothing else than a mute scene of *reading*, in which the mind adverts to, and thereby sees and hears something intelligible in, the senseless and disfigured stone of the statue.

Prosopopoeia is what Novalis (reformulating Hemsterhuis) called »the spirit of poetry«: »Der Geist der Poesie ist das Morgenlicht, was die Statue des Memnon tönen macht.« In a colossal book, Bettine Menke has recently argued that the image of Memnon plays a paradigmatic role in German romanticism, since it functions as the major figure (or rather, the major prop) for romantic poetry's self-establishment or *Selbstbegründung*. »Geschichte und Bild des Memnon werden in der deutschen Romantik als der emblematische Fall der Frage nach der Möglichkeit der poetischen Rede und nach der Instanz, aus der sie sich begründet, ausgebildet.« ¹⁶ Rather than being a possibility taken for granted, poetic self-establishment is first of all a question, as Menke emphatically affirms. It is still a question for Petőfi, even though the political overtones of his poems do not make it easy to read them as persistent interrogations. But there are minute signs that may be of some importance to us. One such element is his insistence that the rays of dawn do not simply evoke or elicit the tones of Memnon, but that the morning light »lures«, or as Hegel



18 Kant, Immanuel: Die Kritik der Urteilkraft. Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp 1974, p. 180 u. p. 236.

says in his *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, it *herauslockt* them.¹⁷ All this is not very far from what Kant in the *Kritik der Urteilkraft* called »subreption« (*Subreption*) at one point, and »cheat« (*Betrug*) at another.¹⁸ The self-establishment of romantic poetry via prosopopoeia is itself based on a lure or a cheat, which lends it a hallucinatory character, a simulacrity. If the first and ultimate effort of romantic poetry is to ground itself by presenting itself as a mere reading, a repetition or a translation, a trace (*Spur*) or an echo (*Nachklang*) of some preexistent text or voice (as it is the case with Clemens Brentano's *Nachklänge Beethovens Musik* but also, indirectly, with any project that tries to detect the »traces« of romanticism), then it has to make a continuous attempt to dissimulate its own deceitful and hallucinatory prosopopoetic gestures of textualization or vocalization.

If one takes Petőfi's apostolic endeavour and his related celebration of apostolic figures like that of Kazinczy as a critical move that tries to by-pass all that romanticism (and primarily German romanticism) stands for, then his tropological debt towards this same tradition can indicate the ambivalence of his ambition. For how could one successfully criticize romanticism, if all the critical means at hand are themselves bits of romantic tropology? And how could we ever delineate what is our own, if the very wish to do so is already an indication of the presence of »foreign theories« in our heads? If the figure of prosopopoeia is at all significant for romantic studies, it surely signals that whenever we are engaged in reading romanticism, we are engaged in reading romanticism *reading*. Which is another way to say that philologists *of* romanticism, whether they know it or not, are, in a sense, engaged in reading romanticism *as* a philological enterprise. And this is so not only in the case of Petőfi, or in the case of poetry or even of literature. One only needs to open a book like that of Julius Payer, relating *Die österreichisch-ungarische Nordpol-Expedition* (1876), to recognize that even in the most barren regions, in the world of frost, where no books are around, the solar eyes of dawn (the reading eyes of the romantics) see but the »kalte Memnons-Säulen des Eises.«

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