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## HUMANISM AND RENAISSANCE IN THE HUNGARIAN LITERATURE

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The period of the Renaissance in the history of the Hungarian literature is of primary importance. It was the age when the Hungarian cultural and literary life became more involved in the circulation of the European culture. This period produced the first great poets in Hungarian literature, and it witnessed the victory of the national language against the use of Latin. At the same time this age was one of the most turbulent periods in Hungarian history, when the Hungarian nation began her life-and-death struggle with the Turkish conquerors. The Hungarian people resisted successfully for a while, and the second half of the 15th century, the period of Matthias Corvinus's reign, became one of the most glorious chapters in Hungarian history. However, in the battle of Mohács in the year 1526 the country suffered a fatal defeat. The till then enormous Hungarian state collapsed and the country was divided into three parts. In the course of the following decades the Turks occupied the middle parts of the country with the capital; the North-Western part was forced under the protection of the Habsburgs; and in the Eastern part, within the shadow of the Turkish power, the Transylvanian principality came into being. The country, divided into three parts, became a permanent battlefield, and this resulted in an enormous loss of human lives and material wealth. So the Hungarian Renaissance coincides partly with the most brilliant, partly with the most tragic chapter of the country's history; it can distinctly be divided into two parts. Nevertheless the literature of Humanism and Renaissance constitutes an organic continuity in Hungary, and this literature plays an important role in the fact that the Hungarian culture could survive and develop despite the great historical catastrophe.

The beginning of Humanism and the Renaissance goes back as far as the middle of the 15th century. This is a rather early date, since apart from its birthplace, Italy, in other European countries we count the early days of the Renaissance only from the end of the century. It is due to special political and historical circumstances that Humanism could throw out roots in Hungary so early. The spread of the movement was stimulated by the fact that Hungary's capital, Buda, was at the same time the residence of the Holy Roman Empire for several decades, because the king of Hungary Sigismund succeeded to the throne of the Empire between 1410 and 1437. A number of famous representatives of the early Italian Renaissance turned up in

diplomatic mission at the court of Sigismund in Buda, some of them even settled down there, and they dedicated their books to the king. No wonder that by the middle of the century some Hungarians, having got acquainted with the elements of the new culture, became its followers and even propagators as writers. This was necessary, because in the 15th century the burden of the defence of Christian Europe against the Turks weighed upon the Hungarian kingdom, thus it got into the centre of interest of European diplomacy, particularly into that of the papal court, which organized crusades against the Turks. The manner, the language and the way of arguing was already dictated by the Italian humanists, and the permanent intercourse with them demanded from the diplomats and the leading administration of the Hungarian king the knowledge and the use of the humanist style and rhetoric.

It is not by chance that the first Hungarian humanist writer, János Vitéz (1408-1472), bishop of Várad and later archbishop of Esztergom, was chancellor of the country for a long time. From the mid 1440s Vitéz composed his political and diplomatic letters and orations by applying the rules of humanist rhetoric and following the examples of classical Roman authors. He was aware not only of the political importance of his letters but of their literary value as well, since when completing them with a literary preface in 1451, he had linguistic, philological and historical notes attached to the text of his epistles. His ecclesiastical courts in Várad and Esztergom were the first centres of the Renaissance in Hungary, where he organized humanist symposia, collected a famous library from the works of antique authors, and employed excellent Italian Renaissance artists. His greatest achievement was to send several young Hungarians to humanist schools and universities in Italy, thus making possible the upbringing of a whole generation of humanist writers.

His most remarkable protégé was his nephew, whose humanist name was Janus Pannonius (1434-1472). During his stay in Italy for eleven years this young genius became well versed in Greek and Latin literature and was a celebrated poet in Latin who could boast of the privileged friendship of the greatest contemporary Italian humanists (Guarino Veronese, Enea Silvio Piccolomini, Marsilio Ficino, etc.). With Janus Pannonius the first important poet of Hungarian literature entered the literary scene, even though all his poems were written in Humanist Latin, since in this period Latin represented the literature of high quality in Hungary as well. In Latin, however, he regarded himself as Pannonia's poet, and according to his famous epigram (Laus Pannoniae) he considered it his greatest merit to have brought over the

Muses to the land of the river Danube, and this meant that he was the first poet on Hungarian soil. His early poems, particularly those written during his stay in Italy, followed the genres and themes of Italian humanism: he wrote first of all epigrams, elegies and panegyric poems. Among his early works especially his epigrams reached a high level, and he was regarded both by his contemporaries and by posterity as one of the most virtuoso epigram writers. He had a specially good command of epigrams with satiric and erotic themes, in which he defied the "barbarian" medieval culture, the ecclesiastical abuses and the hypocritical morality. But he became a really great poet when returning to his homeland, where instead of the educated Italian urban environment, instead of an audience who understood and celebrated his poetry, he had to cope with a society of a backward, undeveloped and barbarian country, to use the term of the humanists. In 1458 only a minor group represented the new culture in Hungary, and he was compelled to be engaged with public duties rather than with writing poetry. In vain did he become one of the leading politicians of the country as bishop of Pécs and vice-chancellor at the side of his uncle, he still had to suffer the difficulties of a talent who is ahead of his time. He wrote less poetry, but his verses deepened in personal lyricism. They were more and more stripped of the patterns of humanist rhetoric and they gave room for the expression of a personal pain of high artistic quality. His elegies cover the following topics: the depressing feeling of being isolated as a poet, his mourning over the death of his mother, the sufferings from his early mortal illness, and the bad omens of the Turkish threat to the country.

The life of Janus Pannonius coincided with the reign of the greatest Hungarian ruler, Matthias Corvinus (1458-1490). The great tragedy of his life was due to the fact that he had died by the time when King Matthias, after strengthening his power, created one of the most brilliant centres of renaissance culture at his court, chronologically the first one beyond the borders of Italy. What Janus Pannonius had so painfully missed around the 1460s came true in the 1480s: the royal court in Buda became the meeting-place of humanists, poets, artists and scholars. The King's generosity of patronage was enjoyed beside the Hungarians by Croats, Bohemians, Poles, Germans and a great number of Italians. Matthias was an adherent of the neoplatonism of Florence, and he founded one of the most splendid libraries of those days, the Bibliotheca Corviniana, which with its collection of the authors of classical antiquity surpassed by far all the contemporary libraries, apart from that of the Vatican. At his court historiography

prospered too: the Hungarian János Thuróczy, the Italians Galeotto Marzio and Antonio Bonfini supplied the chronicles of the king's deeds, military successes and cultural efforts. (Not only did the king successfully defend the country against the Turks, but he also occupied and annexed to Hungary a part of Bohemia, Silesia and a part of Austria together with Vienna.)

Matthias Corvinus began his rule as the king of a medieval country, and in the year of his death in 1490 the renaissance culture was deeply rooted in his country. Throughout the country aristocratic and ecclesiastical courts gradually became new centres of Humanism; in the cities schools were founded that spread humanist culture, an increasing number of Hungarians visited the universities of foreign countries. However true it is that this flourishing country totally collapsed within a few decades, the moral and the cultural value of the tradition of the first period of Hungarian Humanism and the Renaissance in a country divided into three parts is inestimable. After the catastrophe of the fatal battle of Mohács, it was the memory of the age of Matthias that kept alive the conscience of the previously united and flourishing Hungary. Though a part of the Hungarian humanists of the 16th century were compelled to settle down abroad either temporarily or forever, they did not cease to care about the values of the Hungarian Humanism of the Matthias age. For example Miklós Oláh (1493-1568), who had begun his career at the court of Louis II, dead in the Mohács battle, composed in Brussels the geographic, ethnographic and cultural description of his country before the catastrophe, with the title Hungaria. Others provided for the printing of the literary works of the Hungarian humanists or for re-editions of the scattered works of the Matthias period. The poems of Janus Pannonius were published successively together with some parts of Bonfini's Hungarian history and other humanist writings. Those who arranged these writings under print did not miss to call attention to the national aspects, namely, that in the decades of desolation and decay by editing the works of their predecessors they wanted to prove the merits of Hungarian culture. János Zsámboky (1531-1584), with his humanist name Johannes Sambucus, spent most of his life in Vienna and in the second half of the 16th century published the works of the humanists of the Matthias period in editions far better than all the former ones as far as completeness and quality is concerned. Thus he provided a firm ground for the literary culture of the age. In the decades following the catastrophe of Mohács the Hungarian humanists tried to follow and continue the tradition initiated by Janus Pannonius and the historians of the Matthias period in their Latin works, so that

the Hungarian literature written in Latin shows an organic continuity up to the end of the 16th century. Outstanding humanist works were written especially in historiography. The works of Ferenc Forgách (1535?-1577), Miklós Istvánffy (1538-1615) and István Szamosközy (1565?-1612) are worth mentioning. They depicted the tragic events of 16th century Hungary in an extraordinarily suggestive and artistically excellent composition. There were several talented humanist poets writing in Latin, but none of them could reach the greatness of their predecessor Janus Pannonius. The explanation of this could be that by this time most of the poets had already changed from Latin to the vernacular language and the true artistic talents were already writing in Hungarian. The literary use of Hungarian enriched the Hungarian literature in spite of all the historical afflictions. The cult of the great national king Matthias and the literary and cultural flourishing around him was accompanied by the interest in the national language, the defence and the development of Hungarian in the years following the historical catastrophe.

It is well known that the origins of the literature in Hungarian goes back as far as the 12th century, but literacy and literature in Hungarian remained only a modest companion or ancillary of Latin up to the 16th century. The texts that have survived from the time before the 16th century were mainly translations from Latin for clerical purposes, few of them were original works. From the point of view of the history of language, in terms of the development and the refinement of the Hungarian language, their value is inestimable, as literary works of art however they are far below the contemporary Latin literature in Hungary. Regarding the literary level, the works of Janus Pannonius cannot be compared with contemporary Hungarian texts. Nevertheless it is much to the credit of the humanists that they discovered the Hungarian language both from a literary and a scholarly point of view.

Two of the pioneers deserve particular attention. The first one is Gábor Pesthi, who made his name famous by saving a codex containing the epigrams of Janus Pannonius, which he carried to Vienna when the Turks destroyed the famous Corvina library during the first invasion of the capital in 1526. However, the young man who had saved the great humanists' work felt that his task was to improve his own national language, so he rendered two books into brilliant Hungarian. The first translation contained the four gospels and the second one of the tales of Aesop. In both cases he benefited from his studies in the humanities and philology, and he managed to create in the

not yet polished Hungarian language a literary style which nearly approached the refinements of the style of the Latin humanists. In the introduction to his translation of Aesop of 1536 he explicitly announced the program of the improvement of the Hungarian language. He emphasized that all the educated nations strived for the perfection of their language, and that was mainly realized by translating Latin masterpieces into the vernacular. Therefore the Hungarians had to translate the works of art of Latin literature into Hungarian, thus proving the maturity of their mother-tongue and its capability for transmitting sciences.

One of Pesthi's contemporaries, János Sylvester, went even further: he frankly considered the Hungarian language of equal rank with the sacred languages (Latin, Greek and Hebrew), a treasure that had been left hidden by the Hungarians till then, though they could have been proud of it before the whole world. The reason for this exaggerated national pride was that Sylvester thought of some particular features of the Hungarian language. Similarly to Pesthi he began working on the translation of the Bible, and he started with translating the whole New Testament on the basis of the critical edition of Erasmus. This meant to work with the method and in the spirit of humanist philology: he wished to provide an accurate and a faultless interpretation. This work inspired him to find out the laws of the Hungarian language, and therefore he compared the grammars of Latin and Hungarian. His labour resulted in the edition of the first Hungarian grammar, Grammatica Hungaro-Latina, in 1539. In this book he is almost enthusiastic to point out that the Hungarian language happens to have grammatical rules, similarly to the sacred languages, it can even boast of some particular qualities, e.g. the possessive suffix, which is lacking in the other languages. The Hungarian language is superior to Latin, for the latter does not know the article, while Hungarian, similarly to Greek, possesses even that. While successfully translating the New Testament, Sylvester came to understand several aspects of the Hungarian language: he understood that the Hungarian language was suitable for the application of the antique meter; therefore he wrote some summaries in distichs as introduction to the books of the Bible. On the other hand he pointed out in his commentary that the picturesque, metaphoric discourse of the Bible would be comprehensible for the Hungarian readers, because the Hungarian love songs had similar metaphoric expressions. With this remark Sylvester is among the first critics of poetry in the Hungarian language.

The humanists were beginning to discern one of the most important national values in their mother-tongue in the years following the historical catastrophe. It was a value that could not be destroyed by either war or desolation, it was a value a nation had to cling to. This national aspect was soon completed by another one, namely by that of the Reformation, a movement swiftly gaining ground in Hungary too. In every country Reformation promoted the use of the mother-tongue, it accelerated the victory of the vernacular over Latin. This role of the Reformation was gradually unfolding in Hungary and in the Hungarian literature. In Hungary the Reformation did not take place from above by a state decree as it did in England or in Sweden, but it was a result of a social and national movement from below. The success of the Reformation in Hungary was partly due to the fact that the reformers accused the Catholic or, to use their own term, the popish church of being responsible for the catastrophe of the country. The Turkish victory over the Hungarian people was a punishment from God motivated by the vices of the Catholic clergy, and the Hungarians could escape the adversity only if they converted, leaving the Catholic faith or "idolatry" behind and adhering to the principles of the Reformation. This argument was so effective that it resulted in the conversion of the majority of the country to Protestantism within two or three decades. In addition, within the movement itself more and more innovations followed each other: after the spread of the Lutheran Reformation the adherents of the Helvetian doctrines gained ground, and at last remarkable success was reached by various heretic trends, especially by the antitrinitarians. Thus religious agitation and debate prevailed throughout the country, not only between Catholics and Protestants but even within the camp of the latter. Naturally, the rich literary product could only be Hungarian, for the opposing sides did not wish to win and educate the scholarly intellectual élite but aimed at convincing the common people. So the Hungarian Reformation resulted in the first really great flourishing of literature written in Hungarian, while resting on the humanists' estimate of the value of the Hungarian language that it proved to be suitable for literature.

The literary product of the Hungarian Reformation was very prolific and colourful and gave an impetus to a new development in almost every literary genre. Not only theological treatises, sermons and pamphlets are attributed to the names of the writers of the Reformation, but lyrical and narrative poems, dramas and prosaic narrations as well. Poetic genres were particularly in fashion, and they filtered into the great number of illiterate



masses via church hymns, and so they were particularly suitable for propagating the doctrines of Reformation. For the purpose of conducting church service in the vernacular a great number of medieval hymns, the chants of Luther and those of other protestant authors as well as biblical psalms were adopted. The majority of these songs can be considered rather as loose paraphrases than as translations, since they were permeated by many contemporary political, social, satirical and subjective elements. They usually abound in didactic elements at the expense of lyrical and formal refinement; sometimes sermons were composed in verse and spread by hymn-singing. The lyrical and didactic features were often mingled with the machinery of epic poetry and the biblical stories, particularly those of the Old Testament were very often adopted into poetry. The reformers also made use of the stage for spreading their doctrines; the beginning of the drama written in Hungarian is much to the credit of the reformers. Though the didactic plays were rather schematic with the debate of the true and the false doctrines in the centre, in certain details however successful scenes and dialogues were written, and in the case of negative characters some caricatures as well.

This propaganda literature in the Hungarian language did not, of course, follow the examples of the humanist literature of high intellectual quality that had imitated the classical pattern. Obviously, unlike the latter, they aimed at addressing the great masses rather than the narrow élite. However, among their authors we can find plenty of scholars of humanist education who had visited Italian, German or Polish universities, and they did not pursue this popular literature in want of a proper literary culture but rather in their fervent enthusiasm for the cause of Reformation. But this refers only to the beginnings. From the 1550s the Hungarian writers of the Reformation strived more and more to satisfy higher literary demands, or, to express it more accurately, the religious and social doctrines were propagated within the frames of the humanist and renaissance literature. Péter Bornemisza (1535-1584), one of the most prolific writers, the author of six bulky volumes of sermons, for example, was also the author of the first Hungarian Renaissance tragedy. In his drama Magyar Elektra (Hungarian Electra), written in 1558, he adopted the tragedy of Sophocles into the context of the moral doctrine of the Reformation and of Hungarian social conditions. His contemporary Gáspár Heltai (dead in 1574), a former Catholic priest who became first Lutheran, then Calvinist and then an antitrinitarian pastor, wrote several collections of narrative

stories imitating German examples, and thus he became the creator of the Hungarian short story. Though he aimed at correcting the manners by his fables and short stories, the autonomous, authorial and literary style became so dominant that he often became free from any moralizing ornaments, and some of the stories that came from his pen were genuine scabrous renaissance short stories. Bornemisza, Heltai and their contemporaries could successfully create a synthesis of the aspects of humanism and reformation, and so they presented of fairly different program from that of Gábor Pesthi, the excellent humanist translator some decades earlier. As we have seen, the latter wished to improve the Hungarian language and literature by a more and more authentic translation of the classical authors. The new generation also tried to follow foreign literary conventions, but they wished to transform them in an original way by recreating them according to the Hungarian conditions, similarly to men of letters of contemporary Europe. This process in the Hungarian literature culminated and the result was manifested in verse epic and lyrical poetry. The first propagandists of the Reformation adopted mainly biblical stories into narrative poetry. Beyond the religious and moral ends these poems also contain secular renaissance elements, the authors seem to linger willingly on the description of the beauty of Judith of the Bible or that of the bathing Susanna. Sometimes elements of short stories colour the narration, as e.g. in the work of Pál Baranyai on the prodigal son (1545). Narrative songs with historical subjects in a distinctly secular form appear quite early as well. Some Turkish battles are versified (the most outstanding representative of this topic is Sebestyén Tinódi, who died in 1556), and themes are taken from classical antiquity or the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Obviously the moral doctrine did not perish and the subject of love was also introduced for moral ends. Yet meanwhile the poets achieved such skill in representing love that later the ultimate morality was reduced to a compulsory moral sentence added to the end of the poem. Thus several of Boccaccio's short stories were adopted into Hungarian poetry together with several antique stories of adventure and love. The most famous and successful one was the adoption of the love story of Eurialus and Lucretia written by Enea Silvio Piccolomini, the future Pope Pius II. This frivolous humanist short story was adopted by an unknown Hungarian author, thus proving that the Hungarian poetic language was mature enough to represent spiritual processes. It abounds in the phraseology of love and it can reach a particularly high level in describing the beauty of a woman.

It is not at random that I emphasize these aspects, for in the Renaissance it was the topic of womanly beauty and that of love through which national literatures could reach a high artistic level. The most important trend and tendency of renaissance poetry was Petrarchism. Petrarc, with his love-sonnets, became the great ideal of renaissance poetics in the national language. It is well known that the topic of love became a central issue in Italian and French literature to such an extent that when a cardinal aspired to poetic distinction he could gain success only by writing love poetry, as is seen in the case of the greatest figure of Italian Petrarchism, Pietro Bembo. In some countries Reformation with its deep piety and strict morality prevented the evolvement of love poetry and thus retarded the development of the literature of the country, as with the Germans, where the boom of secular literary genres did not come until the 17th century, in the Baroque age. In Hungarian literature the antecedents of the 15th century, the tradition and the cult of the Matthias period and that of Janus Pannonius was so deeply rooted that the Reformation only delayed temporarily but did not stop the development of renaissance literature. On the contrary, by making the Hungarian language dominant in literary life it even promoted to a great extent the process by which the Hungarian renaissance literature reached its peak in the last decades of the 16th century and reached maturity not only in the international Latin but in Hungarian as well.

This peak was reached, besides narrative love poetry, particularly in lyrical poetry, namely in the poetic oeuvre of the greatest Hungarian poet of the century, Bálint Balassi (1554-1594). He came from one of the great protestant aristocratic families of the country, his father participated in the battles against the Turks, and he spent his childhood near the battlefield in military surroundings. Péter Bornemisza, the author of Magyar Elektra, was the court chaplain in his father's house for a while and was the young Balassi's first instructor, teaching him simultaneously the elements of religious piety and of humanist culture. He continued his studies in Nürnberg and probably in Padua. The quiet beginning of his career, however, was followed by an extraordinarily stormy destiny. His father fell into the captivity of the Habsburg ruler for political reasons, he lost a great part of his fortune, and after the death of his father his relatives stripped him of almost everything. From that time on his life became a series of never ending ups and downs. He had the opportunity of enjoying the favour of the Prince of Transylvanian and later of the King

of Poland, sometimes he was a soldier and fought against the Turks as a great warrior, but sometimes he had to live by dealing with horses. Meanwhile he quarrelled with everybody including the state, his relatives and his neighbours, report upon report succeeded one another against him, and subsequently he lost his trials. Only in love, with women could he find real success, but ideal happiness remained unattainable for him.

This typical renaissance individual, who acquired a unique culture and learned several languages, is at the same time the first classical poet in the Hungarian language. The main motif of his poems is love, and it was he who created the Hungarian version of Petrarchism on a high level. He wrote not only individual masterpieces but following the examples of Petrarch and other great love poets of the European Renaissance he composed them in larger, cyclic unities. In his poetry love is the frame of all that is good, beautiful and ideal, it is inseparable from the idea of freedom and the claim for moral nobility and human fulfilment. Like renaissance poets in general, he was also influenced by neoplatonic philosophy, according to which the person of the woman and the love of the poet would reach ideal heights. Following his predecessors his poetry also adopts the fashionable contemporary love philosophy and its phraseology and the usual metaphors of Petrarchism, but with him they are always broken through by his experiences of reality and life. While the contemporary poets enjoyed more peaceful and advanced surroundings of prosperity and quiet palaces, Balassi lived the life of the soldier and that of the exile. He composed his poetry either while wandering around the Carpathian or while fighting on the great Hungarian plain. We can even read in some of his references that they were put down after his getting off his horse between two battles, so it is easy to understand that the notion of love is permanently associated with the experiences of the uninhabited nature and with the joys of the life of gallantry. The latter topic is the subject of a distinct part of his poetry, where he raised an eternal monument to the memory of the warriors fighting for the country. Besides the poetry of love and that of gallantry, God is the third subject of his poems. However, his religious poetry has nothing to do with religious propaganda, nor are they composed for church singing, but they contain the most personal confessions of the poet. Sometimes praying to God, sometimes accusing him or even arguing, he relates his thoughts and feelings concerning the most important questions of human existence. These poems are akin to the kind of poetry that was to be so popular with the so-called "metaphysical" poets of England in the coming decades.

Balassi's poetry is characterized by its extraordinary richness of forms. While earlier Hungarian poetry was closely attached to the tune, for him the text became autonomous and the song poetry was replaced by text poetry. This process is completed by the development of rhyme, the creation of new poetical forms and the growth of poetic image. On the whole this meant the birth of a poetry that proved the triumph of the *lingua vulgaris*, the Hungarian language, in its competition with Latin.

Balassi was well aware of the importance of his poetry, similarly to Janus Pannonius, who had boasted of being the first true poet in Hungary a hundred and fifty years before. Balassi also knew and did not conceal that he was the first true poet in the Hungarian language. He was surrounded by poets and learned men of letters who began to organize a circle, and the literature of the national language was on the way to become an institution and was lining up with the more developed literatures of western Europe. His most outstanding poet friend and disciple was János Rimay (ca 1570-1631), who depicted both critically and theoretically the growth of Hungarian poetry into maturity. In his essays on Balassi he compares his master to the best poets of antiquity and of Humanism. He considers Balassi's work as a proof that the Hungarian language, leaving its barbarian state behind, had joined the civilized and learned languages which were able to convey aesthetic values.

The Renaissance period in the development of Hungarian literature became one of its most remarkable periods. It meant some compensation for the decay, the split and the great loss of the country. But it was not only a compensation but a source of energy as well: it helped the Hungarian people to survive through the difficult times. Since then literature has been an important medium of the national existence and a safeguard of the survival of the country up to now.

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