

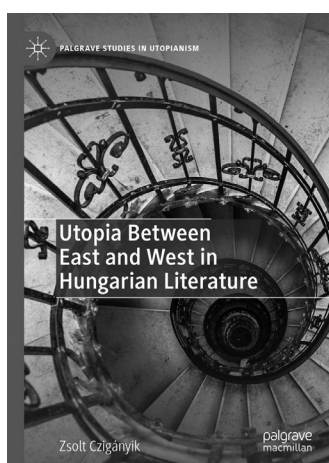


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Hungarian Utopias: A Landmark History

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*Utopia Between East and West in Hungarian
Literature*

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It is a well-known fact that any literary work not written in English risks today being ignored in any survey on a particular genre or subgenre, regardless of the originality and inner intellectual and aesthetic strengths of the non-Anglophone works and literary traditions considered. Moreover, since so few works written in languages other than English are translated into this language (less than 5% of its whole yearly publishing output!), that risk tends to become a certainty due to the utter ignorance of anything that is now being written, or that has been written, in the larger world out of the Anglosphere. We can still rely on the scholarly translations made in the non-distant past when no self-respecting scholars, as well as educated readers, could satisfy themselves with reading just English, and when the command of

French, German and/or other European major languages—and even of other languages such as the Asian ones learnt and translated by the now academically infamous ‘Orientalists’—was a mark of the cultivated person. The so-called French philosophers, the *maîtres-à-penser* and founding parents of Postmodernism from its beginning to its current woke developments, were probably read in their French original, whereas it is difficult to find nowadays in scholarly essays written in English (and even in other languages!) any quotation from them not stemming from English translations of their works, although these translations are often of doubtful value, given the confusing and laboured writing of most of those French philosophers...

Current knowledge and understanding of non-Anglophone literary cultures and traditions seems now to be defective at best. Consequently, distorted views of the past and present of civilisations expressing themselves in other languages than English are the unavoidable result of a combination of ignorance and of unchecked biases stemming from the particular cultural history and national traditions of Anglophone countries. Those views become quickly received, mainstream truths worldwide in a context in which English is virtually the only language globally understood by scholars. If more solid evidence in any national language refutes those ‘truths’ concocted by Anglophone academics and media, all the worse for that evidence: it will remain unknown and unoperative.

Since there are no signs that this situation can be reverted in the near future, it is the task of national researchers, at least in the field of literary studies where the language itself is of paramount importance, to counter bias and ignorance by presenting their own literature in English, albeit on the basis of a first-hand, deep

knowledge of the relevant tradition and cultural milieu. However, this is a risky endeavour. If they deviate too much from widely held views in the global academia, their arguments can be seen as too unorthodox to be taken into account, as Spanish-speaking historians adverse to the black legend regarding the alleged genocide of pre-Hispanic nations in the Americas usually encounter when they provide hard proof substantiating their historical argumentation. Other linguistic nations considered relatively minor in the course of history from a geopolitical perspective, such as the Central Europeans ones, fare better in this respect, but they can still be subjected to some historical and cultural misrepresentation. Hungary, whose national language is little known out of its area, could be a good example of this sad reality.

Due to the occupation by Soviet troops following World War II, Hungary became a part of the so-called ‘Eastern Bloc.’ Therefore, a country that had consistently been Western in European terms, being mostly Roman Catholic and having contributed to Western European fine arts, architecture and literature for most of its history, despite enduring a purely political Ottoman occupation for a couple of centuries, became as ‘Eastern’ as Russia, the main cultural nation of the occupying Soviet Union. Following the fall of European Communism, Hungary officially regained its position as a Central European state, but it seems not to have really embraced it, at least if we are to judge from the title of an otherwise masterful book in English greatly contributing to utopian studies, and also to studies on speculative and science fiction, thanks to its thorough presentation of utopian literature written in Hungarian along the centuries, from its origins in the 16th century. Its author, Zsolt Czigányik, who is a renowned specialist in utopian literature, has

titled his history *Utopia between East and West in Hungarian Literature*, East and West being there cultural, rather than merely geographic concepts. The West would be Western Europe, whereas the East is an enlarged Asia that would encompass the Eastern European lands where Orthodox Christianity of Byzantine origin is prevalent, leaving Central Europe, this to say, the nations placed between German and Russian lands, as a kind of “transitory area between Western Europe and the real East, that is Asia” (5). This transition area, also called *borderlands* by the author, underpins his “concept of liminality” as an instrument to understand Hungarian culture, including its utopian literature. According to this book, “permanent liminality is a general state of affairs in Central Europe”, because their societies are in a “state of constant change,” in particular “from structures of totalitarian/controlled societies and democracy, between Eastern and Western patterns of building society” (10). However, if liminality depends on constant political change from authoritarian to liberal rule, and the opposite movement from democracy to dictatorship, it would seem that the whole continent of Europe should be considered a liminal domain between “the Occident and the Orient” (10) even in modern times following the French Revolution. Western European cultural superpowers such as France and Germany had all kinds of authoritarian and democratic regimes along the 19th and 20th centuries, thus being in a “state of constant change” both politically and culturally in a very similar manner to Hungary within the framework of the later empire of the Habsburgs, as well as an independent country. Its literature, including its utopias, bears few traces of a liminality that would be essentially different from German ‘liminality’ in its context, having

followed very similar cultural trends, including in their emphasis on ethnic nationalism.

On the other hand, if we are to keep the implied political opposition between East and West, we would be forced to consider that the British Monarchy as the only ‘Western’ nation of Europe, the only long-lasting democracy in that continent. Adding the United States and the British former dominions overseas, it is then implied that the West is only the main, dominant part of the Anglosphere. All the others are really Eastern, not really civilised: all liminal. This corollary is certainly not fully shared by the author, who adopts a more nuanced approach and who quotes several historians of culture, even from Hungary, for that matter. However, it suggests how our (European) worldview is currently shaped by the Anglophone perspective, either subconsciously or as a strategy to facilitate the reception of the book among Anglophone readers who might, subconsciously or not, share the view of that divide and the connotated values coming with it. Writing in English on a Hungarian topic, or on any other international topic can hardly escape a certain amount of cultural Anglocentrism, but this is probably a custom duty that must be paid if one wishes to be globally heard.

After having thus paid this duty in the first pages of the introduction to the book, Czigányik leaves the matter as it stands and undertakes the more rewarding task of laying the theoretical foundations for his history. Utopias have been widely discussed. The author succeeds in summarising in a very pleasant and clear manner the main terms and conclusions of that discussion. First of all, utopias are not usually considered a literary genre, but also a political concept, both in theory and in practice. This double meaning generates ambiguity. In utopia, “the border between fact and fiction is

by no means clear-cut and obvious”: it belongs to the realm of fiction, but has “a very strong link to social reality” (16). In fact, social sciences have often analysed utopian works of literature using their own epistemological tools, and this fact cannot be overlooked if a cultural approach is adopted. However, it could be argued that political utopianism is the result of a conceptual and historical abuse of the term ‘utopia.’ The ‘utopian’ section of Thomas Morus’ *Utopia* was pure fiction, a secondary world “isolated from the actual historical context” (22). Therefore, it has mostly a literary sense, and this sense is underpinned by irony, precisely one of the most literary tropes. Utopia was firstly and primarily fictional, and its study as literature does not need, therefore, to be explained or justified. On the contrary, it should be for political theorists to explain why they use works of imagination as a basis for their analyses and even as blueprints to be put into practice on our primary world. By downplaying the fictional nature of utopia, they forget the essential ambiguity of meaning of any work of literary art. Since Czigányik is above all a literary scholar, he rightly signals this sort of ambiguity in utopias, in particular with regard to authorial intention.

Since Morus, the distinction between positive (e)utopia and its negative counterpart, the dystopia, is very hard to define; literary ambiguity usually prevents it, especially in the few utopias and the many dystopias that we still read due to their being primarily successful as ‘literature.’ Satire, the putative parent of dystopia is, at any case, more easily digestible than the thinly fictionalised presentations of a particular ideology that often mar utopias as pleasurable reading matter. However, utopia is perhaps the more ‘political’ of fictional genres, and Czigányik’s approach does justice to this fact. This is especially clear in the introduction, where a more extensive use of

narratology, in the manner of Corin Braga’s *Pour une morphologie du genre utopique* (2018), would have been welcome to escape ‘authorial intention’ for good. Fortunately, the thorough literary discussion of significant Hungarian utopian works returns politics to its due ancillary position.

After an illuminating chapter titled “The circulation of Utopian Ideals in Hungary” that offers a clear and useful “overview of Hungarian Utopian literature,” as well as a complete history of Morus’ *Utopia* in the Hungarian lands, every following chapter is devoted to a single author (all of them men) and his utopian work(s) until the end of World War II, thus securing the right historical distance so well adapted to the dispassionate perspective embraced by Czigányik. All of them could serve, indeed, as models for deep, sensible, extensive and diverse literary hermeneutics. The historical and political context of each work is also explained in a comprehensive and convincing way, helping international readers to be better familiarised with Hungarian culture, its circumstances and its often unsuspected richness. Despite a relative neglect by Hungarian literary historians, according to the author, his survey brilliantly proves that such neglect is undeserved, especially if we consider that utopian fiction seems to be an important feature of Hungarian literature, at least from the 19th century onwards. After a typical work of the late Enlightenment, György Bessenyei’s *Tariménes Utazása* (*The Voyage of Tarimenes*, 1804), utopian fiction appears as a part of one of the most canonical works of that literature, Imre Madách’s drama *Az ember tragédiája* (*The Tragedy of Man*, 1861). This is a “complex allegory of mankind’s history” (95) from the mythical times of Adam and Eve to a far future where mankind is due to perish in during an entropic ice age. One of the scenes

is set in a future phalanstery organised along nightmarish scientific lines turning it in one of the first fictional examples of full-fledged totalitarian state. This dystopia is relativized by the dialectic succession of different social and political forms of organisation in history. Readers can enjoy this masterpiece in several languages, including English. This is not the case, unfortunately, of a further example of combination of utopia and science fictional anticipation. *A jövő század regénye* (The Novel of the Coming Century, 1872-1874) is a monumental narrative by another Hungarian canonical writer, the productive novelist Mór Jókai. The book is a nationalist fantasy on the foundation of a technological utopia following a future invasion of Austro-Hungarian lands by a totalitarian state successor to the Tsarist empire and inspired by contemporary Russian political nihilism. Thus, utopian and dystopian perspectives are confronted both theoretically and in practice within the novel, with the utopian drive winning the day in the end.

Jókai's trust in technology, namely in aviation applied to war, as harbinger of peace makes of the book a rare example of "utopia proper" in Hungarian literature. Later authors were not as optimistic, or naive. Mihály Babits, a further canonical writer and one of the leading intellectuals of interwar Hungary, corrected Jókai's vision by presenting in his novel *Elza pilóta vagy a tökéletes társadalom* (Pilot Elza or the Perfect Society, 1933), a future society where aerial bombings are common in a context of total warfare. The novel's subtitle is intended to be ironic: total war brings about total state control. Freedom in the private sphere is more or less preserved; sexual promiscuity and homosexuality are common. However, this freedom is allowed, among others, because partners die so often and fast that any meaningful relationship is excluded, and it

cannot be opposed to the State as it is in George Orwell's famous dystopia *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Totalitarianism is the undisputed norm in Babits' novel, whatever individual suffering it entails. However, Babits' narrative can be read using the same hermeneutic tools than other contemporary European dystopias from that golden age of totalitarianism.

Horrific societies are also portrayed in a series of Hungarian narratives that, taken together, perhaps constitute the main corpus of Gulliverian worldwide from a literary point of view. Sequels to *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift have been many until our very own times, but few can rival the ones written by two Hungarian authors in the first half of the 20th century. The first two of those Hungarian sequels are, respectively, *Farecido* (1916) and *Capillaria* (1921), both translated into English. The former is written as it were Gulliver's fifth travel, that this time brings him to a land where machines rule, while organic life is considered "unnatural and incapable of the happy and harmonious existence of the inorganic intellect" (162). Humans are the disease of existence if compared to the machines, which are peaceful and thrive for mental perfection as opposed of a predatory species such as humankind is, according to this story. Swiftian irony prevents, however, to consider its anthropology as purely pessimistic. The same can be said of Gulliver's sixth voyage to Capillaria, an underwater civilisation of beings whose society is divided by sexes, the females being larger and more powerful than the males, whom they use as sources of pleasure, both sexual and culinary (they eat them). Women devote their life to sensual pleasures, whereas males are satirised for their undertaking meaningless tasks not unlike contemporary men in Hungary and the world. Both works deny their apparent misanthropy and misogyny precisely through

their “complex thesis–antithesis game”, which is also a “complex game of irony” so radical as to remain unequalled in his own and later times, although his sort of gulliveriana was later cultivated almost as brilliantly by Sándor Szathmári in *Kazohinia* (1942). This novel, which can be read in English translation as well, shows two very different kinds of society co-existing in the land of Kazohinia. The first and main one, that of the Behins, seems a technological paradise, where all material needs of the inhabitants are satisfied, but there is a total uniformity of habits and looks, while arts and entertainment are virtually unknown, as is any emotional interaction among people; rules are not enforced from above, because they are internalised by the population. On the other hand, the second group of Kazohinians, the Hins, are governed by “crazy rituals and irrational concepts” (207). Their anarchism ends up by being as destructive of the individual as the collective totalitarianism that has become “second nature” among the Behins (p. 31). Szathmári, however, does not target a particular ideology or political practice. His approach, as Karinthy’s was, is primarily anthropological or even philosophical. In both writers, as well as in Madách, Babits and other great Hungarian authors of utopian fiction, human civilisation can take an exhilarating or, more often and likely, a terrifying turn depending on the passions of the mind that end up by prevailing in the future or alternate societies so imaginatively described by them. Rather than warnings against the dangers of concrete political ideologies and practices, rather than endorsements of them, Hungarian literary utopianism seems to invite us to reflect on our essential shortcomings as human beings

in any time and place. It is, therefore, starkly universal, even when it focuses on Hungary, as it happens in Bessenyei’s and Jókai’s works. It is a literature that eschews the topical interest that limits the appeal of utopian literature in more politicised contexts, such as it is often the case in Britain and America. Ideology pervades even masterpieces such as those by George Orwell or Margaret Atwood, who were written as political weapons.

Hungarian utopian writers can also “contribute to avoiding a dystopian future” (p244), which is one of the main uses of utopian fiction according to Czigányik, but they do not usually put particular labels on that dystopian future. Their concern is human nature understood as a dialectic combination of thesis and antithesis, evil and good, to be considered in all its diversity. This is perhaps why Hungarian utopias are usually ambiguous and, therefore, deeply literary in the best sense of the term. It was to be expected given the fact that most of their authors are modern classics. Hungarian utopianism had the luck to have attracted some of the best Hungarian writers. Now it would be desirable that this scholarly superb contribution of Czigányik’s book to the understanding of utopia as “a complex literary genre in the richness of various national traditions” (244) would be supplemented by translations into English and other languages of the discussed works still demanding the command of the Hungarian language in order to be enjoyed. If it failed to spark the interest of translators and foreign publishers, let us hope at least that it will be rivalled by further literary historians of those “various national traditions,” for whom this book should serve as a model for sound literary scholarship.