

Hungarian Perspectives on the Western Canon

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Post-Comparative Readings

Edited by

László Bengi, Ernő Kulcsár Szabó,
Gábor Mezei, Gábor Tamás Molnár
and Pál Kelemen

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PREFACE

This volume serves the purpose of introducing important authors and works of Hungarian literature to an international reading public. In order to fulfill this goal, the editors have invited scholars to write papers in which Hungarian works are interpreted vis-à-vis important works of the Western literary tradition. This gesture simultaneously asserts and challenges the concept of “the Western canon.” Our intention has been to re-examine and challenge the distinction between “major” and “minor” literatures. For practical reasons, we thought it best to present the Hungarian authors and works by linking them to authors and works presumably better known to our target audience. On the other hand, we hoped to make the impression that reading presumably marginal works may also highlight unexpected or previously unknown components of the literary tradition. If this is so, it is because the marginal or the minor has the potential of inhabiting spaces within the canon that would otherwise remain blank or imperceptible. Our insistence on reading the Western literary tradition *through* the lens of Hungarian literature comes from our conviction that the reversal, albeit temporary reversal, of the major/minor or central/marginal polarities can be illuminating.

With our collection, we hope to enter a space in which issues of international or supranational literary communication have been hotly contested. Debates about world literature, translatability and untranslatability, national literatures and area studies have once again come to dominate the international journals of literary studies. Our collection presents a limited, but for that very reason, relatively well-defined account of this complex set of problems. Some of the articles in this volume speak to the continuous existence and afterlife (*Überleben* in Walter Benjamin's sense) of the Classical tradition in modern Hungarian literature. Others discuss issues of contemporaneity between historical developments in the West and those in Hungarian literature, while still others touch upon the translation of Western European works or the adoption of Western literary or cultural models in a local context. Modern Hungarian literature is certainly unimaginable without integration into international networks, and thus the two-way comparisons between individual authors and works often uncover existing pathways of translation, adoption or other forms of reception.

Our aim, however, has never been to revive the reception studies of

classical Comparative Literature but rather to read texts as illuminating one another. This book is also not intended to serve as a substitute for a systematic work of literary history but rather a series of case studies. We no longer hold traditional comparative methods, based on verifiable mediations or transactions between national philologies and national literary narratives, to be the exclusive standard of interpretation; readings can concentrate on common surfaces and textual events instead. This is meant by “postcomparatist perspective,” a term to indicate that the grounds or conditions of a comparative reading never precede the reading itself, can never be located outside of the space that the reading charts.

The limits of translatability have also been tested by some of the Hungarian works discussed. Since our contributors were given freedom in selecting the authors they wished to discuss, the Hungarian examples quoted in the papers did not always come from the growing body of Hungarian literature already translated to English. Selected texts and passages needed translating, which proved a challenging task, especially in the case of avant-garde poetry.

The selection of examples reflects the individual choices of the authors. Efforts have been made to include the most internationally recognized contemporary Hungarian novelists in the selection, and though the volume ultimately does not include papers on the works of Imre Kertész and László Krasznahorkai (winners of the 2002 Nobel Prize in Literature and the 2015 Man Booker International Prize, respectively), contemporary literature is represented by the works of Péter Nádas and Péter Esterházy, along with well-known poets and playwrights.

The Editors