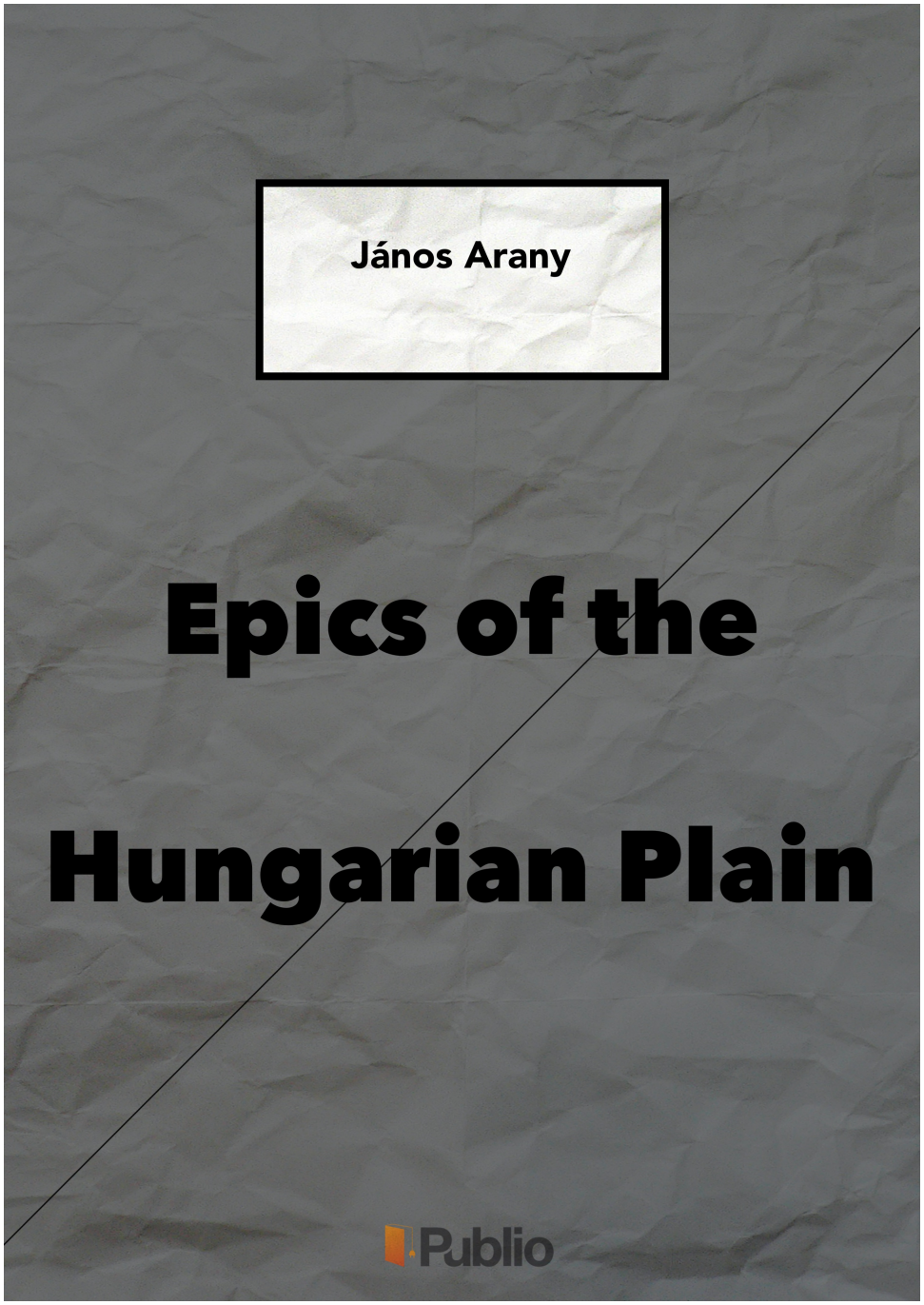
János Arany
Epics of the
Hungarian Plain
Publio

EPICS OF THE HUNGARIAN PLAIN

JÁNOS ARANY

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PROEMThe Miraculous Hind

The shadows are long
on the pale and sapphire hills
of Potowatomi.
The cicadas are keening
on the high wind in the oaks.

I wait for
the white sleepwalker of the sky
deer eyes,
I detect them
in the dark tall grasses of night.
Two sleepwalkers we.

The shadows are long
on the pale and sapphire hills.

I followed her one night
fleeing into the Field of Burrs
a prairie people
transplanted into the sky.
And ever since a burr sticks
on my centaur back.
I cannot be in peace…

the cicadas are keening
on the high wind in the oaks.

Nyerges

PREFACE

I intend this work as a reassessment of Hungarian epics and their place among the basic stories of the world. Thus far they have been seen from the viewpoint of the literary historian, baroque and romantic influences, and this interpretative emptiness has played into the hands of a benign neglect for ancient and elementary traditions. The Introduction and the transformation into English of four of János Arany's epics provide the insights of cultural change and patterning as the basis of a new approach to the centuries-old background and history of the Hungarian epic.

Here we see Hungarian poetry in its uniqueness. While the traditions and ideologies of industrial classes everywhere meet mounting problems, Arany's viability is living proof that the people who produced him shall have a real voice in determining the conditions of their industrial future. Arany's significance rests in his sane involvement with life as he tells the story of the peasant evolution.

For kindly assistance in obtaining illustrative materials, I wish to thank the Petőfi Literary Museum, including all illustrations not here otherwise identified, the Hungarian National Museum (7-flanged club), the National Széchényi Library (King Louis the Great from the Illuminated Chronicle), National Gallery in Budapest ("Sword of God" by Béla Iványi Grünwald), and the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (Attila's or Charlemagne's sword).

Anton N. Nyerges

INTRODUCTION: AN EPIC JOURNEY

The three major epic poets of Hungary - Zrínyi, Vörösmarty, and Arany - based their works on written sources, medieval chronicles, and history. Zrínyi and Arany, in addition, had access to oral traditions by virtue of their family background and the environment in which they lived. All three were highly conscious of performing a task to preserve a glorious past and shape a new future, and they used their materials consciously to this end.

This palimpsest of oral tradition, chronicles, written history, and philosophical interpretation was used by all three with an artistry that augurs for the survival of these works as living literature. Their survival is further secured by the fundamental significance of all these epics in their search for new syntheses of Hungarian civilization. This is what the Hungarian epic is - a continuum, an experience. Its actual composition began only 300 years ago; like the Persians, the Hungarians did not turn to epic (or lyric) composition until the very existence of the territorial state was threatened. But its materials extend into the matriarchal and pastoral past of the people; it is probably still being composed. There is no "steady, old Väinämöinen" in the Hungarian epic - only immigrants in space and time.

It may seem strange to include Miklós Zrínyi (1620-1664) - this remarkable aristocrat, strategist, statesman, soldier, political scientist, baroque poet, and product of a Counter-Reformation education - among space-time immigrants. But that he was. His home and lands were situated on the farthest frontiers (végvárok - border fortresses) of the Hungarian Kingdom, where Moslem Turks and Christian Europeans had faced each other across an indeterminate frontier for over a century. His great-grandfather (also Miklós Zrínyi) had defended the border fortress of Sziget in 1566 until he perished along with the last man rather than give in. This courageous defiance resulted in large losses to the enemy and indirectly the death of the great Sultan Soleiman II, and thus it was a long time before the Turks were able to mount another large-scale offensive. It was an event of world, or continental, importance; and Miklós Zrínyi, the poet, selected it as the subject for his epic, *The Peril at Sziget.* He wrote it as a young man in 1645-1646 and with it laid out his program for the expulsion of the Turks, the deliverance of Europe, and the restoration of dismembered Hungary as a unified state on the absolutist lines of the Renaissance King Matthias Corvinus.

Only a man of the limes could have had so daring a vision, especially when the only Hungarian hope seemed to be the Hapsburgs. But Zrínyi acted with realism. Politically, he became increasingly disenchanted with the Hapsburgs - who were primarily concerned with

the peril from Paris - and looked about for an international answer and a social one, for he hoped to bring the serfs into the liberation army (after his death both happened); intellectually, he followed up his epic with political and military treatises and publicistic articles that are among the masterpieces of European prose; and militarily, he organized an army as Ban of Croatia and also took over command of the central troops with impressive results whenever Vienna was under a particular Moslem threat. Europe watched the developments with deep anxiety and bated breath.

The Turks were still in much of Hungary when Zrínyi was killed on a boar hunt. But his commitment to the Hungarian language (he could have chosen Latin or possibly Croatian) and to a unified Hungary was a critical development in the history of the country - not only in the sense of its ultimate survival but also in the development of a frontier personality as part of the national character. This is the epic journey that Zrínyi started.

In structure and composition, *The Peril at Sziget* is a synthesis of the European epic. Zrínyi drew on all available models, ancient and medieval, for ideas; the mythology, essential to the epic tradition, he took from Christianity, the ancient classics, and folk materials. In addition to family archives and oral tradition, he made important use of published Hungarian sources - historical lays by Sebestyén Tinódi (c. 1505-1556) and others, and the monumental history of the Turkish wars by Miklós Istvánffy (1538-1615), who first linked the story of isolated border fortresses resisting the Turks to the idea of a coherent epic. He knew and used a heroic poem “Siege of Sziget” written about 1570 in Croatian by Brno Krnarutic. There was no question of imitation in all this, but a demonstration of Hungary’s unity with Europe as a people with its own unique experience.

János Arany fittingly saw a “wild majesty” as characteristic of Zrínyi’s poetry. Stylistically, however, Zrínyi’s deliverance of narrative poetry to rhyme (aaaa!) may have left the spirit in thraldom, with reformers ever since disparaged as un-Hungarian. (While most Hungarian rhyme is actually assonance, a language like English is expected to translate Hungarian poetry with “real” rhyme, not assonance. The penalty, otherwise, is the un-Hungarian charge. On the other hand, the best known Hungarian translation of the Kalevala is in rhymed couplets!) In metrics, however. Zrínyi undertook the subjective liberation of the spirit by departing rather frequently from the “mandatory” 6/6 division of the 12-syllable line which he employed. This led to a century and half of polemics as to the nature of Zrínyi’s true intent with these “aberrations”, or of possibly his “mistakes”.

Looking back over more than 300 years, there is something unbelievable about Zrínyi. Unanswered is the question of what kind of synthesis is possible between Zrínyi’s era and the industrial (post-industrial) world. The 19th century writer Kálmán Mikszáth saw the problem in his novel *New Zrínyi Epic* (Új Zrínyiász), where the hero of Sziget rises from his grave to find himself in the 19th century business and industrial environment of Budapest.

He is adaptable, becomes a bank director, but remains alien to a world where wealth and politics are the new forces. A better understanding of this synthesis may well be the central problem facing the Hungarian intellectual tradition. Parallels exist elsewhere. It is almost conceivable that Winston Churchill could have won the Nobel Prize for an epic in heroic couplets. It is almost conceivable that the 20th century White House really could have been identified with Camelot. But neither actually happened.

After Zrínyi, the epic remained quiescent in Hungary until the 19th century. But throughout the latter 17th and early 18th centuries, when the independence struggle shifted from against the Turks to the Hapsburgs, there was so much activity in the field of popular poetry (circulated in manuscript form) with political objectives that a return to the epic form and an attempt at a new synthesis was inevitable. This popular poetry is known as *kuruc* poetry (*kuruc* being the name of the anti-Hapsburg fighters, mostly unemployed soldiers from the border fortresses and fugitive serfs eager to acquire free peasant status). They deal with the savage joys of camp life, the miseries of outlaws, and battles lost and won. Some are among the finest creations of Hungarian poetry. Gradually, the border fortress tradition merged into the fugitive or underground (bujdosó) tradition, and became as such an integral part of Hungarian resistance.

Some of the songs deal with Ferenc Rákóczi, leader of the anti-Hapsburg war from 1703-1711. It could have been expected that Rákóczi might become the central figure in the new Hungarian epic. But a number of factors militated against this. Rákóczi himself became an exile (bujdosó) and it would have been difficult to find a link between the underground and epic traditions. In the 19th century, the cultural offensive drew abreast once more of the tradition of last-ditch resistance, and a fortress concept reappeared increasingly in the field of ideas and creativity.

One hundred and eighty years after Zrínyi's *Peril at Sziget,* Vörösmarty (1800-1855) wrote a new epic of the Hungarian experience in *The Flight of Zalán* (Zalán futása). An earlier work of his, a play entitled *A bujdosók,* had dealt with a popular theme of the underground; but with his epic Vörösmarty turned the willing eyes of his countrymen from underground, even border fortresses, to the glorious period of the Conquest when the tribes of demigods headed by Árpád put the Bulgarian King Zalán* to flight and conquered the Danubian basin for the Hungarian nation. He was stimulated to complete the work by the reception accorded to Gergely Czuczor's *Battle of Augsburg* (Augsburgi ütközet), a romantic epic in hexameters which appeared in 1824 on the Hungarian victory over the Germans in 910 A. D.

Like Zrínyi's epic, *The Flight of Zalán* was intended to have a universal significance - the Hungarian struggle against the Hapsburgs was a part of the struggle of peoples around the world against tyranny and despotism - like the Greeks, for example, who were still fighting

for independence from Turkey as the Hungarians had, in the 16th and 17th centuries. But by the early 19th century Hungary had regained at least some of the national unification Zrínyi had called for. Now what was needed, Vörösmarty believed, was to stimulate "an impotent age" with confidence in the Hungarian heritage, which was far older than the history of the Hapsburgs. And too, the Hungarian heritage was based not on absolutism (here he departs from Zrínyi) but the communion of free and equal men with roots in the people's deepest past. Vörösmarty's epic was a synthesis for which the spirit and ideas of the French Revolution provided the framework. It was basically a Fortress Hungary continuation of the old border fortress concept.

For his source material, Vörösmarty went to the oldest surviving text on Hungarian ev ents before the time of King Stephen - the Chronicles of Anonymous dating from the early 13th century. Earlier chronicles, going back to 1060 A. D., were lost except insofar as they survived in extant texts. The Chronicles start with the origin legends, proceed to the election of Prince Álmos to lead the Seven Tribes into the Danubian basin, tell of the wandering to the new home, and describe the gradual conquest of the land under Árpád. They preserve some of the oldest oral traditions of the Hungarians although the chronicler condemned the "untrue stories of the peasants; and the silly talk of the joculators" (igricek).

Vörösmarty wrote in the classic hexameter and became its undisputed master in the Hungarian language. While the hexameter was familiar earlier, Vörösmarty's use of it made it an "indigenous" form, which has been used by Hungarian poets down to modern times. Vörösmarty's sensuous music has intoxicated generations of Hungarians, including Sándor Petőfi, who sang "…where the stately Danube flows like an epic of Vörösmarty." The change in 180 years from Zrínyi's "four-cornered" or border fortress stanza to the elegant hexameter was not accidental and revealed much about the developing national character.

When Petőfi was killed by Cossacks on July 31, 1849 at Ispánkút, it was actually in one person the death of the old fortress concept and the rebirth of an even more ancient one in new form - the individual among new ideas and environments of his own creation. "I hear the song of a lark again" Petőfi wrote during a lull in battle, in the most telling recognition of his dual role.

With János Arany, the setting of the Hungarian epic was transferred to the Great Plain, where it received its most characteristic form and content. János Arany (1817-1882) wrote his first epic, *Toldi,* in 1846, only 21 years after Vörösmarty's *The Flight of Zalán.* He also wrote three more epics completing the last one, which was begun years earlier, in 1879. Thus their composition spans the 1848-1849 War of Independence, which Hungary lost to imperial Austria and Russia. It is difficult to imagine a less favorable period than 1849-1867 for epic composition, given the time perspective, appreciation of the heroic, and feel for universal significance that it demands. But the four epics are marked by a unity among

themselves and a logical continuity in respect to the epics of Zrínyi and Vörösmarty. Arany has frequently been called the most Magyar of Hungary's poets. If this is so, it is due to his calm historical and cultural perspective in the face of desperate calamity. This is not to say he did not know periods of bitterness and disillusionment, especially evident in *The Gypsies of Nagyida* (A nagyidai cigányok, about a rebellion doomed to failure, written in satire on the abortive 1848-1849 Revolution). But it was an epic outlook that characterized Arany's creative life.

The internal unity of Arany's four epics is found in the personalities of the heroes - Toldi and Buda/Attila. The former is representative of the strengths and weaknesses of the Hungarian people; the latter of the character of leadership which emerges from the Hungarian personality and society. Their historical continuity - the link to Zrínyi and Vörösmarty - is found in the reassurance they provide for the national future. Like other great epic poets, Arany dealt with the past but with direct relevance to the present. However, where Zrínyi anchored his work in a stylized border fortress personality and Vörösmarty in a collective of heroes, Arany turned dynamically to the theme of character development. He thus put the Hungarian epic on the psychological and dramatic plane, and thereby advanced this narrative form to where it may never have been before in a national setting. The Toldi Trilogy deals with the prowess of the Magyar character and its continuing promise, provided it is tempered with discipline and control. In the Buda/Attila epic, too, the explicit struggle is with an internal flaw in Attila's character. But Buda's deterioration and demise is the real tragedy (as Arany rightfully indicates with the title) - and the failure of his people to grasp a concept of society whose time had neared. This is made evident in the First Canto when Buda addresses the assembly of chiefs and uses commercial metaphors almost as much as military to an uncomprehending audience. Buda's weaknesses are less his than those of his people; and the same may be said of Attila's strength and flaw. Arany outlined and started to draft two more epics on the story of Attila's descendants, wherein he undoubtedly would have continued to treat the psychological problems of leadership.

The foregoing "didactic" material emerges without intrusion on the grand flow of events. On the surface of the four works, there is the brilliance we are accustomed to in the best epic poetry - the movements of vast armies, the throne, journeys to distant places, and mythology. By contrast, there are lonely scenes on the puszta; women in the bedroom, household, convent, and on the hunt; mother-son relationship; and more of humor (especially from Bence, Toldi's servant) than is usual in epics. Like no one else, Arany expresses virtually everything known about traditional Hungary and its values. Herein lies the "world significance" of his epics. There is no trace of Zrínyi's deliverance of Europe, hardly of Vörösmarty's link with the world forces against oppression. "The ancient house… need not gaze on a wide country and the world. Let it look inward like a truly wise man on itself" (*Toldi's Love*). The Prague adventure and the Naples military campaigns described in *Toldi's Love* have dynastic but little national significance as compared to the defense of Sziget and the Conquest. The continued unfolding of the heritage itself is the thing of vastest importance.

Arany's non-Hungarian sources for his Hun epic, *Death of Buda*, were Ammianus Marcellinus' *Rerum Getarum Libri XXXI*; Jordanes' *De Getarum origine actibusque*; Amédée Thierry's *Histoire d'Attila*; Priscus Rhetor's *Excerpta de legationibus*; and the Nibelungenli ed. As his major Hungarian source, Arany made extensive use of the medieval chronicles of Simon Kézai dating from the latter part of the 13th century. Kézai used an earlier 13th century chronicle as his source, but added a story on the common origin of the Huns and Magyars. Although earlier writers, Hungarian and non-Hungarian, had raised the question of the common origin of these two people, it was Kézai who first developed it into a full-blown thesis.

The myth of a common Hun and Hungarian destiny rests on three legends - the Miraculous Hind, the Sword of God, and the Turul.

Simon Kézai's Chronicle tells the story of the Miraculous Hind as follows: Hunor and Magyar were Ménrót's (Nimrod's) first-born sons. Leaving their father, they dwelt in separate tents. But it happened one day as they hunted on the puszta that a hind suddenly appeared and, as they pursued, she escaped into the moors of the Meot (Azov). She disappeared completely, and they searched for long but without success. As they wandered over the moors, they found it suitable for grazing. They returned home and with the consent of their father migrated with all their animals to the Meot. The province neighbors on the home of the Persians, and is surrounded by a sea on all sides except for a very narrow ford; there are no rivers, but still an abundance of grass, trees, fish, fowl and game. Exit and entry are very difficult; once settled, they did not leave for five years. In the sixth year they wandered out and accidentally came on the wives and children of Belár's sons, who had left them unguarded. They kidnapped and bore them off, with their belongings, into the moors. As it happened, the two daughters of Dúl, King of the Alans, were among the children. Hunor took one to wife, Magyar the other. It came to pass, however, after living for long on the moors, they grew into a great nation so that this land was neither able to nourish nor hold them all.

The Sword of God is a widespread motif in the legends of nomad-warrior (Scythian) peoples. The legend of its discovery through a heifer and lowborn young herdsman is recorded in Priscus Rhetor. According to a Hungarian version, a saber now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna is the Sword of God, which belonged to Árpád or Álmos at the time of the Conquest of the Carpathian Basin and was passed in the middle of the 11th century as a gift to a Bavarian prince. In the German story, this weapon was presented by Harun al-Rashid to Charlemagne, and it became known thereafter as the imperial coronation sword.

According to Kézai, Turul, the totemistic falcon of the Huns was on Attila's coat of arms. Anonymous (earliest Hungarian chronicler) relates that Álmos' mother (Emes, daughter of Onedbelia and wife of the Scythian leader Ügyek) dreamt the Turul descended on her, and she conceived (819 A.D.) In her vision, a well sprang and glorious kings flowed from her womb who thrive, however, in another land. Both Attila and Ügyek (father of Álmos and forbear of the Árpád dynasty) are reckoned as descendants of Magog.

The question of the truth and untruth of these legends (and modern evidence, as might be expected, has pointed out their untruth) could hardly have occupied Arany very much. He must have been well aware that epic poets frequently write of other peoples with a later significance for their own - the Beowulf poet, for instance. Arany accepted Kézai's thesis, poetically, and used it. To raise esthetic, literary or cultural objections would raise similar doubts about the merits of a good part of the world's cultural and religious heritage. It only need be admitted (and Arany undoubtedly would have freely done so, to judge by the evidence of his letters) that Buda is even more of a book epic than Beowulf. But it may be less so than many others.

That Arany transmuted a "Hun legend" into a Hungarian epic is most profoundly true in his dramatic handling of the events, the age-old concern of great Hungarian writers with the relationship of the governors and the governed, and with the processes of political and soc ial stability and change. But it is most spectacularly evident in Arany's use of the theme of horses and riding, which brings both the Huns and the Hungarians under one cultural horizon. Children ride on "hobbyhorses of reed"; Ildikó's "luxurious litter" swings between horses as she lolls on silken pillows; spell-struck horsemen pursue a lovely doe; beautiful women mount their steeds at dawn for the hunt; the greatest Rider of all, the War God, drives his chariot at night while all the world is asleep; a lonely pair of couriers thread their way reluctantly to Attila through the mazes of the Tisza; Detre, the loner, rides at midnight and comes on a secret; Buda's bribed followers frequent his court "arriving at the hub or leaving for the rim" like spokes; and a horseman disturbs the ants that are "firecrawling" in the veins of the amorous queen. This is Hungarian poetry in its uniqueness and greatness. It should be noted that a generation or so later Endre Ady used this same theme of horse, rider and vehicle with an effect that is one of the marks of his genius. Moreover, he carried farther than anyone, including Arany, the demonization of Hungarian history.

Steeped as his artistry was in the past, Arany takes the epic journey into its consciously modern phase. But since Arany the world has shrunk and the mind has expanded in a change vastly greater than from Zrínyi to Arany. How will the national traditions, epic or lyric, fit into the new conditions? One can hardly expect a great poetry to develop any more within a traditionally national framework.

Two internationally known writers - Paul Ignotus and György Lukács - have projected the

Hungarian epic to contemporary times. Ignotus says that it is “impossible for anyone without a fair knowledge of the Hungarian language to appreciate [Arany’s magic] because of his subtle and complicated use of syntax, rhythm, and shades of meaning.” This is in accord, in the stylistic sense, with the views of the traditionalists, still anchored to the four-cornered past, who point to Arany’s exploitation of the rhyme-rich language as evidence of his inimitability. They are prone to believe Arany saw the plains with “God’s eye” and expressed what he saw in unique language. A famous Finnish linguist was reportedly dissuaded from attempting a translation of *Toldi* after being convinced by an enthusiast that it was impossible to translate the very first line. The linguist turned his talents to the more conventional poetry about knights and tournaments which is found in *Toldi’s Love.* This diversion of talent may have resulted in a disservice to European civilization. Long and endlessly repeated, the myth of stylistic and cultural untranslatability, although perhaps not shattered, is being made doubtful by the broadening availability of study materials and resources in languages other than Hungarian. Ignotus half condemns Vörösmarty’s epic with its heroes in leopard-skin as “silly” and of no further consequence to modern Hungarian development except for the verbal music. With the “silly” charge, he closes the circle with the chronicler who condemned the silly talk of the joculators.

Lukács makes out the political and social change of course in 1945 as the beginning of the actual realization of Toldi in the lives of the Hungarian people, but he regarded the pre-1945 history of Hungary as generally unsuitable for the development of a literature which could gain international recognition. Lukács is expressing a dogmatic point of view. Arany’s greatness rests ultimately on the fact that he maintained his artistic integrity despite the vast contradictions of his lifetime, and that he mastered his role in a way that makes him the true symbol of modern Hungary’s cultural flexibility and coherence, a truly remarkable achievement for anyone, especially since the contradictions of his lifetime included the spread of the industrial revolution and the retention of a peasant rather than the acquisition of a middle class national outlook.

For all that, Lukács may be right - if the Hungarian spirit can continue to be confined in fortresses, and a longstanding seclusionism might augur this. But in a fact of life as significant as the transition of political power from one social group in Hungary to another (pre-1840’s, post-1840’s, and post-1949) the 20th century has seen innovativeness moving also to Hungarians living abroad (Ady, Bartók, and many creative scientists). It could be a mistake now to continue thinking in terms of old limitations. The new situation may not yet be fully understood either inside or outside political Hungary, and even in the limited field of the epic the interplay of cultural flexibility and coherence has scarcely been probed. The Hungarian epic has been seen, if at all, from the viewpoint of the literary historian, baroque and romantic influences on an innovativeness and coherence that supposedly never was. It is an emptiness of criticism that plays into the hands of benign neglect and cries out to be filled by a generation that is free of dogma and understands the processes of cultural change and patterning.

DEATH OF BUDA

A Hun Legend

First Canto

BUDA SHARES THE THRONE WITH HIS BROTHER

The leaves are falling from the old tree of time in layer on layer on the land below. I walked the fallen leaves and paused in thought. I found this written on an ancient leaf.

Bendeguz was buried in Keveház, and also Rof, the brother of Buda. And now Buda, middle son of three, ruled over all his father’s realm.

On the lowland between the Tisza and the Danube by the Zagyva river, Buda’s tent darts from a low hill to the azure sky. This was the city, this was Buda’s royal house, his palace tent of wooden art.

This city is not confined by massive walls, or put together of motionless stones. It serves not as a haven of the weak but a nest from where power swoops.

You would believe it an elfin palace that a breeze

might puff away. The tent-poles sprout from the ground, as it were, high like a tower and showy - the flower of the Puszta.

From there, Buda guards his flock in peace and mildly rules the strong nation of Huns. Like a father, he provides honest laws for all. He shares in the happy feasts and makes his offerings to God.

One day he summoned his chieftains all, to counsel and sacrifice called them. The great, the wise ones sat row on row in the tent with walls of embroidered gold.

Prince Attila his younger brother came, and the aging warriors of their father Bendeguz - old Szilárd, Bulcsu, Torda the ancient táltos, the cooper Szömöre, and Álmos the judge.

The alien Detre lurks in the rear, and does not sit on a high divan as a villein. He has presence but is submissive, and a smile of deference masks his face.

When all were gathered and many more, fathers of Hunnish tribes and heads of legions, each shining forehead fixed itself on Buda, who greeted the chieftains with these words -

“Give homage to our ancient God, who rides on his war chariot above the clouds. He visits arrows of fire on the wicked; but the good he rewards with two full hands.

“Where can a man turn for counsel, above all if he sits by himself on the throne?... Cares and troubles

lash his soul, he bends in the wind like a tree on the mountain top.

“Who dares say, ‘I shall do this, and it will be good, bring repute to my land and myself? We let fly our arrow - a lesson from everyday life -, the wind blows and it never hits the mark.

“Action is a vicious horse, lets the master mount and his mouth be guided by the bit. But he shies at every trifle, rushes into fire and flood, and pitches his rider off at last.

“One rule I know in man’s affairs which may lead most likely to success - wise and sober moderation. This is the river bank which checks the torrent of our deeds.

“When a merchant’s wares are swinging on the scale, truth sits at the rod’s middle. A judge calms the parties with moderation, softens the blow as he confides.

“Rightness is there and peace rests there between the hovering balance of weight and counterweight. When rivers meet, they roar in mingling - and then flow silently on.

“My kind of man, as guest, does not exceed moderation in food and drink. Whatever does no harm, he does; whatever is excess, he avoids. In respectable old age, he will be the father of his nation.

“I have long been under such commandment - the word of God - not only now but ever and before, to divide my kingly realm in two. And now this charge of old

has fallen due.

“Why partake of the bountiful feast with single mouth?
Why deny one who is of my blood? Judging as a judge
and measuring as a merchant, I would fear to give a
judgment like that.

“The Empire of the Huns will not be reduced if power
is split at the summit. A forked tree is a spreading
tree, though one trunk may grow to greater height.

“I shall pour out the fullness of my power today and
greet my brother as a king. Like this, the kindred
waters of two streams flow equal. Two weights are
enough to hold the balance true.

“I do not think glory will fade if I light one torch
with another. In a partition by kinsmen, flame
does not die from flame. In truth, they shine with
a fuller light.

“I can lead the multitude in peace. You, like a
leashed war horse, will spring at the call to arms.
You, my brother, be the sword, and I the scepter,
May God now crown good deeds with good.”

So saying, Buda rose and from his waist handed the
heroic sword to Attila. All approved his wise words,
his deed because they loved his younger brother more.

Buda, Attila, and the council orders went to the
sacrifice and the swearing with blood. A high altar
stood heaped up in the courtyard, the sacred sword
fixed at the very top.

With solemn words, the gray-headed Torda took down the sword and opened a vein in Buda’s arm. Then he turned the bright blade on Attila, whose blood too poured into the judge’s basin.

Then they led out a pure white stallion - spotless, unbroken by a bridle and untouched by a rein - led him on a halter from the stall where the sacred animals of the altar were fed.

The old priest held the sword awkwardly like a knife and stabbed where the breast swells. As he pulled out the blade, the blood spurted. A purple ribbon stained the white breast.

The horse collapsed. The garabonc priests - like a crowd of vultures hacking up a new carcass - strip off the hide, cut out the entrails and place them on the altar for the seers.

But neither táltos nor other watchers of the signs foresaw God’s truth - foresaw this day would sire the days of blood for generations to weep and mourn.

The judge joyfully lighted the pyre, and the flame stretched its tongue flickering into the heavens. A high song of praise sounded from the circling hosts, and mighty horns replied with a volley.

Szömöre filled his vessel with pure wine, and gave first to Buda. Silence held the tongues of all the heroes, and then with cup raised high spoke he -

“Hear my prayer, Lord of War, whose name is ISHTEN. Be true to me as this my oath is true, never to denounce this solemn oath, never make war on my

brother Attila.”

He poured wine from the full vessel on the altar, and waving the cup a bit saluted his fellow king. He sipped a little. His brother took the great eternal oath like this -

“Hear, too, my prayer, Lord of War, O Ishten, Do not help me ever if I reject this solemn oath and make war on good Buda my brother.”

He drank to this, and then he rose up and dashed all the wine remaining on the altar. The hissing embers smoked, terribly angry flames snaked out.

Old Torda was startled. But the others turned their minds elsewhere, to the merry toasts. They drank and feasted until midnight, happy that Buda and his brother made this partition.

Second Canto

DETRE’S ADVICE

Next day, the spring morning of the season awoke reeling on the good Hun warriors. Outside, the radiance and happiness of earth and heaven shone. Inside, the light of the mind struggled with fog.

Outside, the golden sun is splashing like a peacock proudly fanning his tail. Wavy white clouds, the swans of the sky, float on a mirror of heavenly blue.

The horizon is pure as glass, and nowhere blocks
the eye. A tiny breeze laves it with cool currents,
here and there a silvery insect flitters.

Buda sees all this from the eaves of his tent,
sees it as through a cloud or billowing dust -
the golden day a faded yellow and God’s glorious
world absurd.

Inside, a new worry flogs and plagues his mind, a
grim soberness slithers coldly across it. What he
did afflicts him, and what he left undone regrets.
Whatever he does, it seems, is misdone.

And now comes the warrior Detre of Bern, as was his
morning custom, to greet his lord. Detre saw the heavy
mood, the ashen face, and aptly inquired about his
health.

And after that he begins, weaving phrase to phrase -
“Wisdom grows on an old man’s tongue, but who matches
this with deeds for all his days, him shall I call
a great wise man.

“Yesterday you counseled moderation in food and drink,
and without complaint. But today your brain regrets.
You gnash your teeth, knowing if you told anyone,
he would pity you with a smile.

“I beg your royal person take not my frank words
ill. Your faithful vassal I am, as I was your
father’s. Three generations of Huns have seen me
now.

“At the great battle of Keveház by the waters of the

Tárnok, and later at Cezumor, we were overwhelmed with a flood of arrows and spears, and I became a prisoner of war by Bendeguz your father.

“Since then I have served you. I confess I once hated to hear the name of Hun. Fire and water are not such sworn enemies as were Hun and Goth.

“At first, we carried the main battle at Tárnok, flinging many dark Hun faces into the valley. Good Keve was no more, or Kadosa, or Béla; but the Saxon Detre’s blade still flashed.

“At Cezumor, we battled anew. Bendeguz swooped down from the misty heights of Hunbérc. His arrow is still in my brow implanted - and ever since my name’s Detre the Iron Brow.

“I fought your father until my strength faded, my blood ebbed, and my muscles snapped. At last he held out his hand, he of the iron grip, and I was well pleased by the honorable offer.

“He did not send me into slavery as a prisoner of war or undersell my people among the Huns - in his court he took me with a princely rank to serve him well with counsel and sword.

“And the homeless people, the free and ancient Goths, still survive, and are happy. They live and multiply in peace under your wing. They are not broken under the yoke and they are all right, poor people.

“Shall I not repay so many good deeds with good as long as I can, with strength; as I breathe, with words? Bendeguz often, and also Rof, would

seek old Detre’s counsel and were never sorry.

“Now I tell you (do not take it ill) that your new wisdom made a foolish start; for sober as your words appeared, your yesterday’s deed was mad.

“The rod of your speech swung on balance, but what you did was foolish and rash. You shot your arrow in haste and blindness. You mounted your charge - take care now it does not throw you off.

“What manner of counsel is this? Whoever heard of such a thing! One empire with two heads? Can you let one rein drop from your hand? Never such counsel from sober mind!

“Do we put two saddles on a single horse? Can two riders sit astride one saddle? One sheath is not enough for two knives, is it! What manner of brain ever thought this up?

“God gave man limbs by pairs, but only one head to rule the body. One crane leads the flock at the tip of the wedge. The hive swarms with one queen bee.

“This is the way of the world. But you who are wiser twisted the regular order of things - for you, books are a lie, and the annals of time are vain.

“Hunor, your ancestor, did not divide his power. Did Bor, his son, ever make a partition like this? After him, Keve, Kajár, Béla, wise Keled, and Dána all sat on One throne.

“Thus Apos, Zombor, and all your stock, are praised

in song on your people’s lips. Thus Bendeguz and Rof, whom you followed, ruled alone the Empire of the Huns.

“But you, more wise than they (think of it backwards), yesterday divided your royal person in two. Unlucky man! Great harm will come of this - your brother is flesh and blood - you the shadow.

“I do not blame your brother; he loves you, but is fierce and restless like a wild steed - he can be mastered if you hold the halter bravely. But if your hand is weak, he will plunge - and you had it.

“You rejoice this partition comes from brotherly love. No! it springs from silly weakness. This is what the sailor does (they say) in a foul storm calming with his esteemed cattle the waves.

“You weakened the fullness of your might, to redeem a half at half the price. Unhappy man! There is no place for a half-and-half partition here. When the powerful sun rises, the moon fades.

“May God deny me to see the end, for blood will be this bargain’s price, a great deal of blood. I hope you do not learn at your expense; but if a sacrifice is needed, you will be the lamb.

“My old age keeps me for sorrow alone, my powers are loosely stretched like a wet string on the bow. Like a cricket on the puszta, my thin voice trembles. I cannot save what is doomed to die.”

This is how the princely Detre closed his speech. Buda could not find a proper reply for long. As when an eagle swoops into another’s eyrie, the wings of

fright flapped wildly in his heart.

At last he spoke in a hollow voice, faltering in two directions - “What shall I do?... Your counsel - he said - is late, too much for grief, too little for action.” Now wise Detre of Bern bent nearer.

“Guard against Attila’s fame,” he said. “Buda falls as Attila builds. And the song which spreads his name on flying wings will be your dirge.

“Guard against his seeing your heart’s weakness. Fear is the fountain where arrogance drinks, whips up its thirst, and nurses a grudge until dauntless cunning breaks its horns.

“Both of you rule - he as much as you. Make sure from the start that he does not become more. The banks contain the river to a level, but let it rise a finger’s breadth and the floods burst.

“Two may fight equally at first; but when one goes under, he will hardly come out on top again. If a stone starts to roll downhill, it will not stop until it hits the bottom.

“Right off be watchful he does not crowd you off the common throne. It will be bitter slipping from the narrow edge, grasping to keep from falling to the ground.

“Out of brotherly love and softness, do not yield what is yours. When one horn of the bow is loose, the other, though stubborn, kicks to the side.

“I do not say your brother means evil, but he will be
too much for you if he finds you weak. He is carried
by his own will and a running tide - like a galley
catching the wind.

“I have said enough. Accept my counsel. I go lest
Attila see me here. I love him, too, but I fear
for Buda because I have lived the life of far-
seeing age.”

With these words the old hero turned to his tasks,
leaving Buda’s soul to toss alone, and toss it did
like a bark on the waves as he revolved Detre’s words
from beginning to end.

Third Canto

THE COUNSEL MEETS REVERSE

Attila fleets the time at Buda’s camp, where pastimes
and true affection hold him. He lives in one of Buda’s
finest palaces, hardly preparing to depart for home.

He takes his pointed dagger, a golden dirk, and indites
a letter, an appealing one, on a soft rosewood slip.
He writes with love and sends with love. Love’s desire
gives it birth.

He writes to Ildikó, mother of Aladár and first among
his women, bidding his consort in courtly raiment to
come quickly and pass the time in pleasure at Buda’s
court.

Buda’s wife, Gyöngyvér, urges her, he adds, to come
and show Aladár, her first-born son. His own heart
languishes for his absent child and the flames of
love deprived.

Spring is reborn in garments of green and greets a
world that is all happiness. Attila’s season is
revolving too - his spring a-flowering, his blood
and milk overflowing.

To a joyous toast he is summoning, writes he, the
Hun nation, first to the hunt and then the feast,
where he awaits his dear wife with love’s desire.

Attila now appears before the open door of the tent,
and the hero Detre’s glad to find him in this humor;
bent and gaunt himself, his body hardly bears a sword,
but his words he spins with a subtle mind.

“How happy is the man,” he said, “who is well served
by health and the dark red ripeness of the male, and
who knows he will father many sons. A good outlook on
life never leaves a man like him.

“But an old man is only a thorn on the branch, seeing
he is not wanted on this earth. He grumbles here and
there, rustling like a dry weed. I am a guest, he
feels, no one detains.

“They are tired here of me, too. I feel they are
waving me on. I would gladly become a guest at Odin’s,
eat the meat of his game, help drink his mead, and
joust rejuvenated before his house.

“But the Norns may have forgotten me, no one else of
my age is alive. My sons have died before me in

battle, and my dear grandsons, who fell in the wars with Bendeguz.

“They are gone, strewn here and there, and I myself have passed to childhood’s second round. Like an infant in his cradle, I helplessly watch the world above flow by.

“My arms are old; but see I can and well enough - the many things that were and the little of change, for nothing in my eyes is ever new in this world, nothing I cannot show a model for.

“I have seen the sun, moon and tent of the eternal sky are the same as yesterday, and also the hazy Mátra. But man’s works never endure, his artifacts perish, and he himself is mortal.

“I have seen the vanity of human things, the quick ascent and rapid fall of many, the death of kings, the doom of empires conceived in glory and ended in cruel defeat.

“I have seen the troubled unraveling of a golden peace as we raised our cups in a toast. And then out sword! Fix lance!... The people’s right hand which gives the pledge is running with blood.

“I have seen truth transformed to lies and noble pearls to pebbles, mead to vinegar, felicity to sadness, and fearless faith to crying mistrust.