

The “Re-Tuning” of János Arany’s Life and Work in the Popular Education of the 1950s

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ABSTRACT

In 1948, in the year it came to power, the Hungarian Communist Party began building its legitimacy, using the occasion of the centenary, by appropriating the legacy of the Revolution of 1848. The need for a revolutionary transformation of culture heralded the advent of the scientific materialist worldview. The popular education system, created as a channel of the cultural revolution, conveyed the findings of the various branches of science and arts, combined with the rhetoric of political propaganda, to the “working people.” Revolutionism, which the Marxist view of history elevated to prominence, soon gained ground in the interpretation of Hungarian literary history via the compilation of “progressive literary traditions.” Public educators’ literary presentations in villages and cities, as well as articles and cheap publications produced in large quantities all served to promote this central principle.

The author examines the representation and interpretation of János Arany’s life and work in various textual and visual popular education products. Certain junctures and directions in Arany’s life, used as guidelines of the presentations, were highlighted in the image of Arany mediated by filmstrips and newspaper articles to make him one of the “poets of freedom.” Publications intended for the cultural and political education of “working people” set out the way in which to relate to the poet and the framework for interpreting his writings. Through the Arany poems that popular educators employed in scientific education, the author points out the way in which textual and visual representations became carriers of added content in a given context and a possible means of the “rural class struggle.”

KEYWORDS

János Arany, socialism, popular education, cultural revolution, political propaganda

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1948 marks a turning point in the history of Eastern European states that entered the Soviet sphere after World War II: the era of short-lived democratic experiment(s) that started in 1945 came to an end with the local communist parties coming to power (KENEZ 2006:160–183). In Hungary, the Hungarian Working Peoples' Party – formed by merging the Hungarian Communist Party with the Social Democratic Party – became the sole holder of power in June of the year that lives on in history as “pivotal.” However, in addition to gaining control, the one-party government established under the leadership of Mátyás Rákosi¹ also needed to establish the legitimacy of the regime. The centenary of the 1848–49 Hungarian Revolution and anti-Habsburg War of Independence provided a good opportunity for this, as the appropriation of the anniversary ensured an opportunity for the political representation of the new regime and its representatives (GERÓ 1998:17).² The party sought to shape the “scenario” of the centenary according to its own objectives: in addition to celebrations across the country, regular radio broadcasts, press articles, and commemorations, it also conveyed a strong message to the public about reinforcing the foundations of a nascent socialism.³

For 1848–49 to serve as a reference for the communist regime, the framework for the interpretation of the Revolution and War of Independence needed to be defined and made exclusive. The guidelines for celebrating the centenary and approaching the historical event were developed by the Communist Party's dominant figure and ideologue József Révai,⁴ the editor-in-chief of the party's daily newspaper, *Szabad Nép* [Free People] (GYARMATI 1998:100–102). The appropriation of the interpretation and memory of the historical event served primarily the purpose of setting a precedent for the communist regime and showing its continuity. The regime was defined as the implementer of the aspirations of the Revolution and War of Independence, making its legitimacy indubitable. The anniversary thus became a means of reinterpreting the past while laying the foundations for the axiom of genetic coherence between 1848 and 49 and the communist takeover.

“By celebrating the centenary of the 1848 Revolution and War of Independence, we aim to achieve a dual goal. In the consciousness of the Hungarian people reborn in democracy, we recall the events that took place 100 years ago, highlighting the unadulterated essence and true image thereof. At the same time, we also want to point out that today's Hungarian democracy is,

¹Mátyás Rákosi (1892–1971): General Secretary of the Hungarian Communist Party (1945–48), General Secretary of the Hungarian Working People's Party (1948–1953), First Secretary of the same party (1953–1956) (VÁRDY 1997d; MARRÓ 2004, V:599–604). The era of the Stalinist exercise of power associated with his name entered Hungarian historiography as the Rákosi regime or Rákosi dictatorship (VÁRDY 1997e; ROMSICS 1999:265–300; GYARMATI 2005:570–587).

²As Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' idea, the key concept of linking communist takeover and (violent) revolution was formulated in the concluding paragraph of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) as the only possible means. “The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communist revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win” (MARX – ENGELS 2002:258).

³On the significance of the 1848–49 Revolution and War of Independence in Hungarian history, see GERGELY 1999:169–173.

⁴József Révai (1898–1959): politician, in Soviet emigration between the two world wars, member of a small circle of politicians in a leadership position in the Hungarian Communist Party (called the Hungarian Working People's Party in 1948–1956) after the Second World War. Between 1945 and 1950, editor-in-chief of the party's central organ, *Szabad Nép* [Free People]. As Minister of Popular Culture, he directed cultural life between 1949 and 1953 (VÁRDY 1997f; MARRÓ 2004, V:714–716).



in fact, but the culmination and fulfillment of the ideas raised in 1848 that were never accomplished perfectly and definitively” (*A centenárium* 1948:8).

The ideology built around the centenary extended the circle of the successors of the Revolution and War of Independence to the “working people” and their leaders, while it excluded political and public actors and social groups considered enemies (cf. *GYARMATI* 1998:99–100). Of the historical figures, the ideology raised Lajos Kossuth,⁵ Sándor Petőfi,⁶ and Mihály Táncsics⁷ as role models. Their portraits became indispensable accessories of the mass events of the centenary ceremonies, thereby visually becoming the “faces” of 1848–49. Lajos Kossuth became a symbol of the defense of national independence, while Petőfi became a symbol of the battle against tyranny, and Táncsics took his place in the triumvirate as an advocate of the peasantry. The leading politicians of the Communist Party conceived of themselves and wanted to be seen in relation to these prominent historical figures—as the custodians of the “legacy of Kossuth, Petőfi, and Táncsics” (cf. *RÉVAI* 1948).⁸

To make the 1848–49 Revolution and War of Independence a point of reference, it was necessary not only to reinterpret the given historical events but also to reassess the past one hundred years. Politicians, poets, writers, and scholars of the 1848 to 1948 period were weighed according to how they assisted or hindered the implementation of the revolutionary ideas initiated in 1848 and, according to ideology, fulfilled by 1948. The rewriting of the past as compared to 1848 meant that fundamentally new canons had to be written. The collection of “progressive traditions” resulted in anthologies and collections of essays that were timed to be published, with great press coverage, during the centenary.⁹

⁵Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894): statesman, one of the leading figures of the Hungarian Reform Era and the 1848–49 Revolution and War of Independence. From March 1848, member of the first responsible government of Hungary (as Minister of Finance), later, from its resignation (October 1848) until the defeat of the War of Independence (August 1849), holder of executive power as chairman of the National Defense Council (*VÁRDY* 1997a; *MARKÓ* 2002, III:1107–1108).

⁶Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849): poet, defining figure of literary romanticism and folklorism. Despite his untimely death, he is one of the most influential poets in the history of Hungarian literature. For more on his life, see *VÁRDY* 1997c; *MARKÓ* 2004, V:305–311; on Sándor Petőfi’s place in the history of Hungarian literature, see *CZIGÁNY* 1984:179–197; *MARGÓCSY* 1999. On the origin of literary folklorism, see *T. ERDÉLYI* 1999.

⁷Mihály Táncsics (1799–1884): politician, writer, publicist, prominent figure in the political and public life of the Reform Era (*MARKÓ* 2007, VI:606–608). Communist rhetoric was especially fond of him because, being a descendant of serf peasants, he could be represented as an advocate of the “oppressed classes.”

⁸It should be noted, however, that the first “historical pantheon” of the 1848–49 Revolution and War of Independence emerged concurrently with the historical events. The mythological topoi, centered mainly around the figure of Lajos Kossuth, have been mediated and popularized since 1848 by contemporary literary works and fine art representations (*SZILÁGYI* 2007:128–129). The Kossuth Song, which the press dubbed in 1848 as Kossuth’s recruitment song, gained nationwide popularity and became an expression of resistance to the Habsburg Empire (*LANDGRAF* 2014:35).

⁹e.g., *SZENDRŐ* 1948; *LUKÁCSI – PATAI – SZABÓ* 1948. In the discipline of ethnography, a national collection of “the folk traditions of 1848” commenced on the occasion of the centenary (*DÉGH* 1952; *TOMPOS* 2018). Collectors paid special attention to the memory of the emblematic players of the Revolution and War of Independence, which resulted in the collection of a significant amount of folk art material centered around the figure of Lajos Kossuth, for example. See *LANDGRAF* 2014 for more information.



CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND POPULAR EDUCATION

In addition to control over the political and economic system, by declaring a cultural revolution, the authorities expressed their interest in disseminating a materialist ideology and developing a socialist culture that would become dominant. The cultural revolution, which sought to replace the old “bourgeois” culture with the new socialist culture, followed the Soviet pattern, in Hungary as well as in the other socialist states (KIM 1961:738).¹⁰ Mátyás Rákosi, General Secretary of the Communist Party, defined the significance of the cultural revolution by declaring that there was much greater “underdevelopment” in the field of culture than in the economic and political functioning of the system. His declaration was included in all subsequent propaganda texts with almost no changes, becoming the indisputable source of interference by political authorities. However, this deficit was not simply lagging behind: in their reasoning, cultural underdevelopment was proffered as the legacy of capitalism (Köszöntjük 1949). As Minister of Popular Culture, József Révai defined the transformation of culture as a necessity and following the Soviet model as self-evident: “the great economic and political achievements of our people’s democracy, our working class coming to power, the consolidation of the leading role of our Party are all taking place in our country by following the example of the socialist culture of the Soviet Union. (. . .) In building our socialist culture, just as in building our socialist economy and our state, our model is the great Soviet Union” (RÉVAI 1950a:2).

The institutional system of popular education was built on the ideological foundation of the cultural revolution.¹¹ Popular education, which laid claims to extracurricular education and culture, got its start in socialist Hungary through Act XV/1949, which established the Ministry of Popular Culture. In the 1950s, the institutional system of popular education included a network of libraries and cultural centers, managed extensive outreach activities, played a significant role in book publishing, and published specialized periodicals.¹² The new, socialist culture saw itself as originating from the people, built on the principle of ‘by the people and for the people.’ As József Révai said: “Socialist culture is popular culture, in literature, fine arts, and music alike. Socialist culture is oriented towards the people, creating for the people, and in its content and form, it is based on the tastes, language, everyday life, and great historical aspirations of the people” (RÉVAI 1950a:1; cf. KIM 1961:739). Urban and rural popular education endeavors were given a public forum in the specialized periodicals of the Ministry of Popular Culture – *Népművelési Híradó* [Popular Education News] (1949–1953), *Művelt Nép* [Literate People] (1950–1956), and *Népművelés* [Popular Education] (1954–1956) – providing guidelines for popular education professionals. *Népművelési Híradó* [Popular Education News] was launched in November 1949 with the following introduction: “No area of culture must be neutral, including literature and art. It must be militant, partisan, it must support the fight of our people, it must teach our people devotion, work, fight, new patriotism” (Köszöntjük 1949).

¹⁰On the role of the cultural Revolution in the history of the Soviet Union, see FITZPATRICK 1974; KING 2014.

¹¹The antecedents of the institutional system of popular education in Hungary date back to the turn of the 20th century. See Az Urania 2018.

¹²The institutional system of popular education provided an umbrella for a network of cultural centers, cinemas, and libraries at the national level. Versatile activities were grouped around the above-mentioned sites, e.g., cultural centers provided space for educational presentations and specialty clubs, but they also served as venues for celebrations and cultural competitions (HALÁSZ 2013:16, 29–30).



POPULARIZING PROGRESSIVE LITERARY TRADITIONS: LITERARY EDUCATION

The main organizing principle of the literary canon, compiled in the Marxist-Leninist spirit, was to show the continuity of revolutionary traditions in our literary history. József Révai, as Minister of Popular Culture, and Márton Horváth,¹³ responsible for the party's agitation and propaganda activities, had a decisive influence on the selection process. Their collection of literary studies was published just in time for the 1950 Book Days, accompanied by wide press coverage (RÉVAI 1950b; HORVÁTH 1950a).¹⁴ The mainstream of the legacy acceptable by socialism included authors seen as expressing the “needs for the creation of a new society” and whose writings provided a “sharp and consistent critique of counter-revolutionary oppression” (HORVÁTH 1950a:7). According to the official guideline, Sándor Petőfi, Endre Ady, and Attila József – representatives of revolutionary traditions – became the mainstream poets of the new literary canon, followed by Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Mihály Vörösmarty, and János Arany (CZIGÁNY 1990:52–54). Petőfi, most unquestionably linked with the revolutionary spirit, became a true icon, or as Márton Horváth put it, a “standard”.¹⁵ These standard literary works were published in an anthology under the title *Hét évszázad magyar versei* [Hungarian Poems of Seven Centuries] (KLANICZAY et al. 1951), and in 1952, a monograph with an accompanying collection of texts was also published, both of which sought to reveal the “anti-clerical traditions of Hungarian literature” in Hungarian literary history (PÁNDI 1952a, 1952b).

Other means of disseminating partisan interpretations of literature were literary presentations held in various cities and villages. Dissemination activities started up immediately after the Second World War, but with the expansion of communist influence, this type of dissemination began to serve explicitly political purposes. From 1946, the primary instrument of rural popular education was a series of presentations called Free Land Winter Evenings (Szabad Föld Téli Esték, hereinafter: SzFTE). Within the framework of the SzFTE movement, educational presentations on current political issues and topics from various disciplines and branches of art were held in villages on Saturdays in winter. These educational presentations were sometimes enhanced with brief performances: short drama scenes, poetry recitals, song and dance productions. Rural popular education was particularly pronounced in the party's cultural propaganda, which presumed a fundamental ideological “backwardness” about rural society as opposed to the urban population. The fact that,

¹³Márton Horváth (1906–1987): politician and journalist, member of the Hungarian Communist Party, later of the Hungarian Working People's Party; 1945–1950 and 1954–1956, editor-in-chief of *Szabad Nép* [Free People], the central organ of the Communist Party; 1950–1954, head of the agitation and propaganda department of the party's Central Command; along with József Révai, one of the influencers of the cultural policy of the Rákosi dictatorship (MARKÓ 2002, III:380).

¹⁴The so-called book days and book weeks played a significant role in the promotion and distribution of publications produced in the spirit of the new literary, scientific, and educational canons. On the occasion of the event, the products of individual publishers and bookstores showed up in several rural cities, and even in some villages and factories. Similar events have been held in Hungary regularly since the late 1920s, so this method of book distribution itself is not a development of the socialist period (HALÁSZ 2013:141–162).

¹⁵With the help of József Révai, Márton Horváth built the cultural policy primarily around Petőfi's legacy. Horváth's speech on the centenary of Petőfi's death bore the title *Our Standard: Petőfi* (HORVÁTH 1950b:185–208). József Révai on Petőfi: RÉVAI 1950c, 1950d, 1950e. On the socialist transformation of the Petőfi cult in the early 1950s, see MARGÓCSY 2008:77–178. <https://secureservercdn.net/160.153.138.177/oky.839.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/banner-1.jpg>.



according to the party line, the influence of the Church was much more prevalent in village communities played a significant role in this (HALÁSZ 2013:27). From 1947, SzFTE Books and Booklets, published weekly as part of the Free Land series, contained program materials and a short synopsis of political, scientific, historical, literary, or agricultural topics (ISPÁN 2017:330). The guides accompanying each topic were intended specifically for SzFTE speakers and included the information that needed to be conveyed about the specific topic, additional recommended literature for the speakers to consult, and instructions on the purposes and accentuations of the presentation. From 1953, the Society for the Dissemination of Social and Natural Science (Társadalmi és Természettudományos Ismeretterjesztő Társulat, hereinafter TTIT), also established on the Soviet model, was responsible for ensuring the professionalism of the dissemination (HALÁSZ 2013:35; cf. STRAUB F. 1953; BALÁZS – VINCZE 1956). Filmstrip (diafilm) was a frequently used visual aid in rural outreach. In the 1950s, *Beszélő képek* [Talking Images], produced by the Ministry of Religion and Public Education and later the Ministry of Popular Education, was a typical filmstrip series, first with a stand-alone script, and from 1953 onward with the visuals and script merged (HALÁSZ 2013:36–38).

Inclusion in political events and festivities confirmed the place of authors and their writings in the newly created canon of socialist literature. Various institutions and societies (e.g., the National Council of Trade Unions, the Ministry of Popular Culture, the Hungarian–Soviet Society, the Union of Hungarian Youth) produced program booklets for these occasions. The programs of the festivities regularly included the performance of Soviet and Hungarian authors’ poems which the program producers thought would reinforce the message that was to be conveyed to the public. There was an increased interest in the work of prominent writers and poets on the occasion of the anniversary of their birth or death.

THE OEUVRE OF JÁNOS ARANY AS A PROGRESSIVE LITERARY TRADITION¹⁶

Popular education texts were modeled on a centrally defined ideal for the purposes of demonstrating the official guidelines—they cannot be assessed as individual professional accomplishments. I consider the texts I use to examine the mechanism of “re-tuning” as sets that, using the concept of Genette, exist as hypertexts of each other, that is, they were created from an earlier text or from each other as a result of an operation (GENETTE 1997:5–10). This principle of interpretation helps me focus solely on the process of the textual function of political propaganda, keeping me from the slippery slope of the issue of authorial stance.

As far as János Arany is concerned, the publications in service of the education and political instruction of the “working people” also designated the ways of engagement with the poet, the framework of the interpretation of his writings.¹⁷ For the 1950 Book Day, an anthology of the

¹⁶János Arany (1817–1882) Hungarian poet, translator and editor, emblematic figure of literary folklorism. His rich oeuvre covering a relatively long period is composed of narrative poems, lyrical pieces, and ballads. Arany had a fundamental effect on the literary life of his age as well as on Hungarian national culture and institutional education to the present. For a short summary of János Arany’s oeuvre in English, see CZIGÁNY 1984:199–207.

¹⁷It is not the intention of this study to analyze the proclamations of literary historians and politicians that set the tone for official literary interpretation but fall outside the field of popular education, nor to make a coherent comparison with the texts used in popular education, as these are addressed in detail by István Margócsy’s work (MARGÓCSY 2007:153–154).



poet's poems was published specifically for promotional purposes (ARANY 1950).¹⁸ The *Preface*, which lists no author, outlined the key elements of a new approach to Arany. Additional sources used in my research were the articles related to the poet in the press products of popular education, such as *Népművelési Híradó* [Popular Education News], *Művelt Nép* [Literate People], and *Népművelés* [Popular Education]. The texts of the 1952 volume are especially of interest to us, since János Arany's oeuvre received increased attention on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of his death. The guidelines of literary educational presentations that had a direct impact on the target audience of popular education required the interpretation of the authors' biography and writings. Two guidelines were created for the presentation on the career of János Arany, both authored by Károly Horváth: one intended for SzFTE speakers and the other for TTIT speakers (1951, 1954).¹⁹ For my analysis, I also used the script of the relevant parts of the *Beszélő képek* [Talking Images] series of filmstrips used as visual aids in the educational presentations (VIHAR 1951).

The preface to *Arany János válogatott költeményei* [The Selected Poems of János Arany], published for the 1950 Book Days, announced the need for a new Arany image, citing the incorrect interpretation of the interwar period, which "(...) wanted the truly progressive, somewhat revolutionary parts of János Arany's oeuvre to fade into oblivion" ([SOMLYÓ] 1950:1). From the Marxist-Leninist point of view, the assessment of the poet's career must be based on Arany's relationship to the Revolution and War of Independence: this became the main organizing principle of his biography. His involvement in 1848–49 was elevated to a singular experience that defined his entire oeuvre—only in relation to this have all preceding and subsequent phases of his career become important or negligible, perhaps even to be glossed over. It seems that Arany's inclusion in the canon was for the most part about the evidence of his revolutionism: "Arany's involvement in the War of Independence and his critique of feudal capitalist Hungarian society has merited that his work, which is so full of splendor and artistic value, should be known, critiqued, and loved by the workers appropriating (!) the classical literary traditions" (HORLAI 1950:19). Not only is the start of the poet's trajectory interpreted as a historical precursor to the revolution, the entirety of the three decades of Arany's post-war life and career is represented by the sources as a direct consequence of the fall of the War of Independence. The preface to the collection of poems published for the 1950 Book Days adds the following comment to Arany's post-war poetry: "The fall of the glorious War of Independence provides an explanation, a reason, a truly deep content for his entire later poetry, his somber seclusion (!), his turn to the grandeur of the Hungarian past, his pessimism" ([SOMLYÓ] 1950:2).

Arany's friendship with Sándor Petőfi was interpreted as conclusive evidence of his revolutionism. Because of the strong connection of his oeuvre to the events of 1948–49 and his untimely death linked to one of the battles of the War of Independence, Petőfi was already seen by his contemporaries as the poet of the Revolution and War of Independence. Trying to condense Arany's person and work into one sentence, the first thought of an article published in 1952 in *Művelt Nép* [Literate People] on the 70th anniversary of Arany's death was the following: "János

¹⁸Other Arany editions from the early 1950s: ARANY 1952, 1953a, 1953b, 1953c, 1955a, 1955b, 1955c. The critical edition of Arany's writings began in 1951 under the direction of Géza Voinovich (BISZTRAY 1959:37–42). Volumes published in the 1950s: AJÖM 1951a, I; 1951b, II; 1952a, III; 1952b, VI; 1953a, IV; 1953b, V.

¹⁹Károly Horváth (1909–1995): literary historian, with a primary research interest in the comparative study of 19th-century literary history and European romantic literature (MARRÓ 2002, III:378).



Arany, a great peer and friend of Petőfi, died seventy years ago” (KELEMEN 1952). This definition defines the poet entirely by reference to someone else – Petőfi – and not on the basis of his own merits. It allowed for Arany’s entire career to be rewritten from a point of view in which almost every stage of his life and creative work had been shaped by Petőfi’s influence or Petőfi’s memory. The article in *Művelt Nép* [Literate People] quoted above presents the period between 1846 and 1848–49 as follows: “Petőfi’s example as a poet and his boldness also released his own forces. And they released them in two directions: political and poetic. (...) His career as a poet was most prolific during his friendship with Petőfi” (KELEMEN 1952). The fall of the Revolution and War of Independence and Petőfi’s death divides Arany’s life into two periods: “Arany was following in Petőfi’s footsteps when, through his actions and poetry, he stood by the cause of the rise of the people and the liberation of the nation, and he was faithfully preserving Petőfi’s legacy when, after 1849, he sang of the moral righteousness of the oppressed and the coming victory of the people” (HORVÁTH 1954:38). The premise of the Petőfi-effect has been present in literary history since the late 19th century; the socialist expectation prevalent in popular education texts, however, not only compares Arany to Petőfi to the extent of a few “features,” it portrays him completely as a product of his influence: Arany’s greatest virtues, which make him worthy of inclusion in the lineup of “progressive literary traditions,” are in fact all Petőfi’s merits.²⁰

For authors to be included in the socialist literary canon, it was a fundamental requirement that the trend of socialist realism be evident in their work. Socialist realism, the framework of which was developed by Soviet cultural politician Zhdanov,²¹ became the dominant method of literary criticism in Hungary in the 1950s (KING 2014:546–549). In comparison to the 19th-century literary and artistic style called realism, which focused on realistic and characteristic features, a socialist realist author attained the reflection of reality through social criticism and a commitment to the socialist social order (CZIGÁNY 1990:54–55).²² The theory that would canonize Arany’s oeuvre – according to which his writings realistically mirror peasant life and his poetry reflects the aspirations of the peasantry – also turns up in popular education texts.²³ Inasmuch as, according to the official ideology, the

²⁰The double canonization and interdependent representation of the figures of Arany and Petőfi are the result of literary cult-making, the genesis of which can be traced back to the eulogies that were created upon Arany’s death in 1882 (MARGÓCSY 2007:139–141). At the same time, in the assessment of their friendship, opinions on the primacy of Petőfi versus Arany varied based on one’s ideology and literary criticism approach. The socialist literary canon tried to magnify and make exclusive the position declaring Petőfi’s primacy. The shift in emphasis was quite extreme according to the interpretation in force in the 1950s (MARGÓCSY 2007:153–154). The rules of socialist “roles” were also adopted in the popular education texts.

²¹Andrei Aleksandrovich Zhdanov (1896–1948): communist cultural politician and member of the most influential political group organized around Stalin. After World War II, as a member of Politburo (The Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party), he played a leading role in defining and putting into practice Soviet cultural policies. The latter was served by the endeavors of the international organization Cominform (Communist Information Bureau), established in 1947 under his supervision (ROBERTS 2001).

²²On the interpretive traditions of the concept of realism and the emergence of the trend in the history of European and Hungarian literature, see SZEGEDY-MASZÁK 1999.

²³The texts used in popular education emphasized the poet’s peasant origins, while the gentry origins of the Arany family were mostly glossed over. In the 1951 script of the *Beszélő képek* [Talking Images] filmstrip series, for example, while discussing Arany’s biography, the poet’s father is portrayed as a “peasant buckling under the burden of serfdom,” with not a mention of the noble past of the family (VIHAR 1951:1).



implementer of socialist realism in poetry was Sándor Petőfi, the emphasis on Arany's realism ultimately further reinforced his association with Petőfi. Károly Horváth's 1954 guideline states: "Arany is a realist poet who created types into which he condensed fundamental contemporary social trends (. . .)" (HORVÁTH 1954:38). The class-warrior interpretation of the narrative poem *Toldi*²⁴ is well known in literary history (SZILÁGYI 2017:75). The interpretation was based on a theorem developed by György Lukács,²⁵ a Marxist philosopher, on the centenary of the birth of the work, according to which *Toldi* is in fact the story of the rise of the peasantry (LUKÁCS 1947:492). In the texts used in popular and political education, the hero is that of Lukács's interpretation, who becomes important not for his individual accomplishments but as a type. "This is how Miklós Toldi becomes a folk epic hero, as György Lukács has shown. His destiny epitomizes the destiny of an entire class, the upward mobility of the peasantry, his individual goals and life inextricably linked with the goals, aspirations, and life of the community" (HORVÁTH 1954:43).

THE POEMS OF JÁNOS ARANY IN SERVICE OF SCIENTIFIC MATERIALIST IDEOLOGY

Making the new socialist culture exclusive also entailed the abolition of the culture of the pre-socialist period (KIM 1961:739). In addition to improving the literacy of the general population, popular science education established in socialist countries on the Soviet model was also responsible for disseminating the ideology of scientific materialism (cf. HALÁSZ 2013:23–26; ISPÁN 2017:328, 339). The need for ideological education was based on the premise that the capitalist ruling classes deliberately kept the subjugated classes in ignorance in order to preserve their power. The masses were mainly kept from acquiring scientific knowledge: "(. . .) the general Hungarian population was blocked by the former ruling class from the opportunity to learn about natural sciences. They kept the Hungarian working people in intellectual darkness with the help of old-fashioned fairy tales and false doctrines. These conditions hinder our further development" (TANNER 1949). According to this argument, the acquisition of scientific knowledge ushers in the disintegration of the so-called religious-idealist worldview, for scientific evidence substantiates the system of scientific materialism (cf. KERESZTES 1952:6). The efforts to spread the ideology of scientific materialism were explicitly anti-religious and anti-clerical in nature, for the clerical reaction was, in the eyes of the authorities, the main ideological supporter of the prevailing exploiters and the greatest

²⁴Arany's narrative poem written in 1846, which brought him his first critical acclaim as well as a burgeoning friendship with Sándor Petőfi. The figure of the protagonist, Miklós Toldi, was preserved in a 16th-century ballad (composed by Péter Ilosvai Selymes), the inspiration for Arany's work. The theme of the narrative poem is the journey of Miklós Toldi – a man of noble origins but reduced to the background and kept as a peasant by his own brother – to the royal court and a life of gallantry he yearned for, while overcoming external circumstances and his own human frailty (AJÖM 1951b, II:97–153). For more on this, see CZIGÁNY 1984:199–201. English translation LOEW 1914.

²⁵György Lukács (1885–1971): philosopher, aesthetician. Between the two world wars, he lived in Moscow and Berlin, returning to Hungary in 1945. Between 1945 and 1949, he taught at the University of Budapest (aesthetics, cultural philosophy). In 1949, the official party line classified his views as right-wing deviation and urged him to practice self-criticism (VÁRDY 1997b; MARKÓ 2002, IV:333–334).



enemy of development.²⁶ According to the paradigm of rural class struggle, the clerical reaction in the countryside formed a strong alliance with the *kulaks*,²⁷ considered to be the rural exploiters (HUHÁK 2013:78). In the regime's propaganda, the village priest–kulak duo was representative of a past that was to be abolished, an obstacle to progress.²⁸ It is no coincidence then that anti-religionism and anti-clericalism have received particular emphasis in popular education.²⁹

In the Soviet Union, the employment of literature in a variety of ways was built into state popular education. It was expected of speakers to use literary examples, anecdotes, and quotes to substantiate and illustrate their claims. The methodology to be followed was summarized by F. Matroszov in a brochure, which was published in Hungarian in 1950 by Szikra Publishing House under the title *How to Employ Literature in Popular Education* (MATROSZOV 1950).³⁰ In Hungary, the journal of popular education, *Művelt Nép* [Literate People], introduced its readers to Matroszov's guidelines in its August 1950 issue. The Hungarian summary highlights the use of literature as a weapon in the work of the Soviet author: "The use of literary examples, anecdotes (!), quotes, and the powerful weapon of literary satire has contributed greatly to eliminating the remnants of capitalist ideology, exposing bureaucrats, corrupt elements, the wastrels of social property; it makes workers aware of the tremendous accomplishments of socialist development, boosts production, reveals the prospects of a bright future" (LUKÁCS 1950). In the spring of 1956, an article in the journal *Népművelés* [Popular Education] titled *A szépirodalom és a materialista nevelés* [Literature and Materialist Education] summarized and evaluated the achievements of socialist popular education and projected its future tasks. Summarizing the experiences of the last eight years, the text considered the use of literature a useful technique in the toolbox of rural popular education.

"Given the inadequate knowledge base of peasant workers, raising ideological issues among the peasantry rarely yields results in a more abstract form. That is why the most important task is to get our peasantry into the habit of reading high-quality books in plain language, to fashion them into readers. The knowledge thus gained would serve as a good foundation for raising ideological issues, especially since discussing these with a peasant audience is possible primarily in relation to specific literary works" (BÁRD 1956:12).

The *Népművelési Híradó* [Popular Education News] regularly published supplemental materials and curricula for the use of popular educators in their various educational endeavors. The poems, short plays, and musical pieces accompanying the educational presentations were intended to arouse the interest of the villagers in these events and to substantiate and reinforce

²⁶"The Church and her priests work primarily to obscure reality, to keep the oppressed in the bondage of the exploiters, and to stop the wheels of history" (BÁRD 1956:11).

²⁷The term *kulak* is a concept of the communist regime's propaganda. In the following, I will use the term in my study without italics for ease of reading.

²⁸cf. Reinhart Koselleck's concept of the historical-political semantics of asymmetric counter-concepts (KOSSELLECK 1985:159–197).

²⁹Anti-clerical propaganda highlighted the poem *János pap országa* [The Land of John the Priest] (1848, AJÖM 1951a, 1:38–42) from János Arany's oeuvre and declared it the poet's "grand anti-clerical satire" (PÁNDI 1952a:117–120; BÁRD 1956:11).

³⁰Matroszov points out that the practice of incorporating literary texts originated with Lenin and Stalin, who followed his example (MATROSZOV 1950:23).



the presentation's content. In December 1950, the SzFTE series *Babonákról és csodákról* [On Superstitions and Miracles], compiled specifically as an educational presentation for a rural audience, included János Arany's narrative poem *A bajusz* [The Mustache].

The text of the guideline for the *Superstitions and Miracles* presentation – having been published specifically to govern rural popular education – is the primary source of how the regime, seeking to disseminate the scientific materialist ideology, viewed the medium for which the presentation was intended: the rural lifeworlds. With an educational intent, the guideline pillories the superstitions that popular education sought to eradicate from the ideology of rural society by means of disseminating scientific knowledge. In the text, the description of each example is followed by the scientific explanation of said phenomenon and the scientific resolution or mitigation of the problem or hazard. In addition to superstitious beliefs, religiosity also gained emphasis in the depiction of the ideology to be supplanted. In this context, popular education could be seen as a battle against the influence of “imperialist mercenary priests” and kulaks, for “(…) traditionalism and superstition are allied with the old noble world and imperialism, serving their interests” (*Babonákról* 1951:6). The tone of the text and the style of the illustrations are often sarcastic, trying to make fun of the enemies of the regime whom it portrays as representatives of unenlightened views (Fig. 1).

Why and how did Arany's poem become an instrument of the “anti-superstition” campaign of popular scientific education, a recommended unit of the presentation on *Superstitions and Miracles*? For context, we shall return to the text of the educational presentations on the life and poetry of János Arany. The guideline attempts to demonstrate through some of his narrative poems on rural subjects – *A Józka ördöge* [The devil of Józka] (1851, *AJÖM* 1952a, III:199–214), *Az első lopás* [The first theft] (1853, *AJÖM* 1952a, III:267–279), *a Fülemile* [The nightingale] (1854, *AJÖM* 1951a, I:219–223), *A bajusz* [The mustache] (1854, *AJÖM* 1951a, I:224–230) – that through these poems, by portraying a life situation considered typical, the poet intended to educate rural



Fig. 1. “There are still people today who think that cabbage should be sown when the moon is full, because then the heads will be as fat as the moon” (*Babonákról* 1951:13, National Széchényi Library, General Collection, 210.676)



populations, thus actually suggesting that Arany's writings were precursors of socialist popular education.

“In his longer epic poems, in which he seeks to heal the errors occurring among the people, he wants to address the people under a tyranny. (...) In ‘The Mustache’ (...), the bare-faced Uncle (!) György Szűcs trusts the Gypsies' superstition, and gets utterly fooled: György Szűcs is put in a large tub amid assurances that the ‘incantation’ will make his mustache grow, and while he is crouching on the bottom of the tub, the Gypsies rob his house” (HORVÁTH 1951:25; cf. HORVÁTH 1954:24–25).

The Mustache (1854)³¹ is a parody of a gullible man who puts superstition above reason, making its performance suitable as the first item on the program recommended for the educational presentation on *Superstitions and Miracles*, intended to promote the materialist ideology. In terms of context, it is worth considering the contemporary acts included in this program's lineup. As a second item, the *Népművelési Híradó* [Popular Education News] recommended Klára Fehér's *Jámbor Jeremiás* [Jeremiah the Pious]. Through a dialog between a peasant farmer woman, a kulak woman, a disguised monk on a bicycle (Jeremiah the Pious), and a female physician, the short, one-scene play demonstrates that clerics and kulaks want to keep the peasantry in the dark about advances in medicine (albeit this time unsuccessfully) (FEHÉR 1950). The third item, Ernő Urbán's *Esőcsinálók* [Rainmakers], deals with a similar subject matter as the previous example: the clergy strives to keep the rural population ignorant (URBÁN 1950).

However, there is another factor that provides a backdrop to the anti-superstition career of *The Mustache*. János Barta's 1953 monograph summarizing the life and oeuvre of János Arany claims that “The mustache represents the haughty, idle type of farmer” (BARTA 1953:104). Arany himself describes the protagonist of the narrative poem as follows: “Ami pedig Szűcs György gazdát / Máskülönb en illeti: / Nem bolond ember volt ám ő: / Ládájába' pénz, egy bögre, / Azonkívül juha, ökre / És – szamara volt neki” [“As far as Master György Szűcs / is otherwise concerned: / he was no foolish man: / money in his vault, by the mugful / He's got sheep, oxen / and even a donkey”] (ARANY 2003:296). The above passage lets us surmise that the affluence of the protagonist was one of the reasons the socialist interpretation considered his character the rural enemy of the regime, a kulak. The description of the protagonist's physical features further supports the socialist interpretation: „Sőt az is szent, hogy már régen / Ott ülne a bíróséken, / Hasa, hája, kéknadrága. . . / Minden kész e méltóságra: / De mit ér, ha nincs bajusz!” [“And it is dead certain that / he'd have already been in the council seat, / His paunch, his corpulence, his blue pants. . . / Everything readied him for this rank: / But what of it all without a mustache!”] (ARANY 2003:296). In the anti-kulak propaganda of the 1950s, the verbal catalog that described the appearance and distinctive features of the kulaks was largely based on the portrayal of obesity. The synonyms used for kulak, such as *zsirosparaszt* [greasy peasant], *hájjas gazda* [fat farmer], or simply *zsirosék* [Fats], served to make the enemy's body seem repulsive. Discussing

³¹The protagonist of the narrative poem *The Mustache* is György Szűcs, an affluent farmer who is unable to enjoy his life despite being wealthy because he is unable to grow a mustache or a beard. Because of his bare face – and therefore lack of an adequately somber, masculine look – the people of the village do not elect him as a village magistrate. The poem is actually a story of the protagonist's embarrassment in a humorous, ironic tone. Because all he wants is to grow a mustache, György Szűcs trusts the traveling Vlach Gypsies stopping by his village that they can help him with their spell, but while their king distracts the host with his “cure,” the Gypsies steal all his valuables from the house. German translation LÜDEKE – GRAGGER 1926:135–143.



the symbolism of obesity, Claude Fischler found that negative value judgments related to obesity are not aesthetic but rather moral judgments. A person who fails to comply with the system of sharing goods and consumes more than others is seen by the community as a norm violator, because their behavior violates the rules of social coexistence (FISCHLER 1987:264–269). The socialist state sought to establish an image of itself as the creator of a society based on equality, where there are no extreme wealth differences. The kulak – who, as an exploiter, is working against achieving equality, and accumulating at the expense of others – brings about extreme inequality in terms of distribution of wealth. In Hungary, the agricultural policy of the early 1950s resulted in a food supply crisis, and the authorities tried to deflect the tensions created by the situation towards large farmers (TÓTH 2016:650). Through these depictions of the kulak physique, the propaganda sought to amplify the characteristics assigned to the enemy, thereby substantiating the legitimacy of the actions against them. This is well illustrated by the 1953 filmstrip made for the SzFTE presentation series *Ádáz ellenségünk a kulák* [Our Fierce Enemy, the Kulak], which, citing Lenin, declares a causal relationship between the character and physical appearance of the kulak. According to the script of the filmstrip, the kulaks “have grown fat on the blood of peasants and starving workers” (Ádáz 1953:9) (Fig. 2).

In the 1930s, shortly after the anti-kulak propaganda began in the Soviet Union, the Soviet concept of kulak emerged in Hungary as well, primarily in the writings of the so-called folk writers and sociographers. Early on, the idea of the kulak had been “invested” with the personality traits and distinctive physical features that would become its hallmark. Later, the anti-kulak politics of the Rákosi dictatorship labeled kulaks as exploiters and employers (as opposed to workers), and using the existing forms of representation, the political propaganda developed a kulak character typical of the pictorial representations of the 1950s (BOLGÁR 2008:52–67). In the imagery of political caricatures published between 1949 and 1956, a static character named Kulák, Greasy Farmer, or Fat Farmer is usually a stocky, overweight fellow with a handlebar mustache, smoking a tobacco pipe, wearing black boots and a black hat, his eyes mean and malicious (TAKÁCS 2003:53–55; cf. HUHÁK 2013:83; TÓTH 2016:649–650). This kind of representation also became dominant in the imagery of the 1954 film adaptation of Arany’s poem A



Fig. 2. “Ádáz ellenségünk a kulák!” (Ádáz 1953:3)





Fig. 3. Bajusz [Mustache] 1954. Filmstrip based on János Arany's poem

bajusz [The Mustache] (*Bajusz 1954*).³² The script of the filmstrip is simply the Arany poem, each scene a separate slide, the propagandistic content emerging in the visuals through the representation of György Szűcs's character, physique, and every detail of his clothing matching the imagery of anti-kulak caricatures (Fig. 3).

What benefit could the propaganda speaking through popular education have hoped to gain by making Arany's protagonist a kulak? The answer lies in the fact that kulaks were represented in propaganda as committed to traditionalism and superstitions, the enemies of socialist development. The story of György Szűcs, a man who gave credence to the "Gypsies' superstition" and was punished for it, was ultimately intended to ridicule the kulak, and confirmed the notion that the kulak is an impediment to the dissemination of the scientific materialist ideology and the antithesis of scientific popular education. The imagery became a medium for added content in the given context, thus making János Arany's poem a tool of the rural class struggle.

CONCLUSION

The junctions in János Arany's biography and oeuvre that allowed him to be included in the socialist literary canon were, of course, not made up by socialism. In many cases, the features of the Arany image presented to the "working people" by different types of popular education followed traditions of interpretation that already existed. The canonization of Arany was done by emphasizing his revolutionism and folklorism while attributing a decisive and instrumental role to Sándor Petőfi in the evolution of the poet's life and the genesis of his writings. Marxist-Leninist literary criticism greatly exaggerated the emphases in its evaluation of the poet's oeuvre

³²Like the texts of popular education, I do not consider the work of the cartoonist, Pál Korcsmáros, to be an individual accomplishment that can be evaluated in isolation.



and made it the exclusive interpretation. It sought to show in some of Arany's texts the foreshadowing of socialist popular education itself, further reinforcing the idea of a genetic interconnectedness between the Revolution and War of Independence of 1848–49 and the aspirations of socialism, an idea born in the year of the centenary by appropriating the memory and interpretation of the historical events. In their effort to disseminate the materialist ideology, the Soviet style popular education sought to utilize literary texts added to the canon, including Arany's poems, not only in literary education but also in the ideological battle. The poem "The Mustache" was accordingly reinterpreted in the context of the rural class struggle and portrayed through popular education endeavors.

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