

14 'This Century Found Its Voice in Him': Some Aspects of the 'Byron Phenomenon' in Nineteenth-Century Hungarian Literary Criticism

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The critic might discover difficulties when trying to define the Hungarian reception of Byron's poetry. Most of the documents mentioning or analysing Byron or his poetry are more informative about nineteenth-century Hungarian literary criticism than about the English poet himself. Naturally, this is not entirely unexpected since, in the history of his reception, the 'Byron phenomenon' marks a totally separate chapter in other nations' literatures and is not simply about how the works of an English poet were received.

For this reason it would not be instructive simply to list all nineteenth-century Byron interpretations to create a kind of annotated bibliography passing for literary history. The 'real content' of these writings is not Byron, but a number of problems of the history of literary criticism and approaches towards literature in Hungary. The subject of interpretation does not seem to be Byron; on the contrary, in most cases Byron is the illustration, a mode of reasoning to something else, to something entirely different.

To make this 'something else' apparent the process of Byron's reception in the Hungarian literary consciousness must be traced.

In the steps of *Childe Harold*

Essays dealing with Byron's influence in Hungary often mention that Byron's name and deeds became well known in Hungary at an early date. The first newspaper article in 1819 reports Byron's swimming across the Hellespont as a novel escapade.¹ At the beginning of the 1820s, several articles reported the Greek War of Independence and Byron's role in it.² These articles often had political overtones since, at this time, Hungary was a part of the Habsburg

Empire, in many respects an Austrian province itself. Thus the Greeks' struggle was often subject to allegoric interpretations; by the liberals as an example or by the conservatives as a potent warning.

Many anecdotes about Byron's private life appeared in the 1830s in the so-called 'Modejournals' (magazines devoted to the fine arts), which gained popularity at that time. These articles continue to reappear later, though less than in the 1830s. While at first Byron's admirable or less admirable eccentricities were the main subjects of these articles, by the turn of the century the poet's impetuous love affairs were more often discussed. Byron's personality and actions played at least as large, perhaps even a larger part, in forming the nineteenth-century Hungarian intellectual élite's way of thinking, than did his poetry. By this time a special, local version of the so-called Grand Tour had become fashionable among the sons (sometimes daughters) of the Hungarian aristocracy.³ In the so-called reformist age of Hungary's history, between the middle of the 1820s and the end of the 1840s, the aim of these tours, besides the improvement of foreign-language skills and seeing the world, was to gain experience abroad, to witness Western European political and economic conditions and, if possible, to adapt those experiences to their home environment. Young travellers of the 1830s and 1840s often used Byron's *Childe Harold* as a guide book literally: they visited the places where *Childe Harold* or his creator had stayed. In 1823, for example, the young, later famous, novelist Baron Miklós Jósika wrote that he would prefer to follow his idol, Byron himself, and fight side by side with him for Greece's freedom, where many only dog the poet's footsteps. Bertalan Szemere, who would later become the Prime Minister in the first independent (from Austria) national government in 1848, also encountered Byron's works while travelling abroad. These had such an enormous influence on him that he visited many places 'preserving Harold's footsteps' during his travels and, when forced into exile after the failed revolution (1848–49), he set off once more in Byron's footsteps to visit Constantinople, Greece and Thrace. *Childe Harold's* figure and voice haunt most of his poems.⁴ Ferenc Pulszky's travel guide was also *Childe Harold*; his adoration in his youthful years for Byron is clear. He includes quotations in his diary and records his *spleen*. He confesses that he had not only devoured the Lord's works but 'even followed Byron's advice when conversing with women'.⁵ Perhaps one of the most outstanding figures of the age of Hungarian Reform, Count István Széchenyi, followed *Childe Harold's* path almost step by step while making his first visit to Italy (as he

³ For example, Countess Blanka Teleki, who founded a modern boarding school for girls in Hungary in the 1840s and her younger sister, Emma, later wife of the French historian August de Gerando, herself a writer, improved their knowledge of European culture and languages on a long Western European tour at the end of the 1830s.

⁴ Bertalan Szemere, *Egy száműzött gondolatai* (An exile's thoughts), *Búcsú Magyarországtól* (Farewell to Hungary), or *László emlékezete* (László's remembrance), for example.

⁵ 'még a nőekkel is Byron előírása szerint társalkodott' (quoted in Morvay 1913, 300).

¹ 'Úszás' (Swimming), in *Hasznos Multságok* (Useful entertainments), I 1819: 149.
² E.g. *Hasznos Multságok* 1821, *Hazai és Külföldi Tudósítások* (National and foreign reports) 1821, 1823 and 1824. Byron was mentioned in *Magyar Kurír* (Hungarian courier) in 1821, 1823 and his death 1824.

would follow Napoleon's route afterwards). Moreover, he regarded Byron as one of the major figures of his age, placing the poet beside Benjamin Franklin, Pitt, Washington, Bolívar, Napoleon and Goethe. He followed Byron – he quite often made lists of famous men – even in his sympathies. The young Széchenyi was often compared to Byron on the basis of his appearance and personality and even more by the similarity of their social status. Széchenyi accepted this identification with pleasure, but, as he himself once told the Countess of Lichtenstein with some Byronic cynicism, it was not the lord's beauty and intellect, but his viciousness, with which he felt familiar.

The various stages of the travels of József Eötvös, Ferenc Liszt, Polixéna Wesselényi, Lőrinc Tóth and József Irinyi became a tourist attraction, even a place of pilgrimage, largely through the memory of Byron's own visits. English travellers to Hungary were also often asked about Byron. So much so that, when a mountebank, long after Byron's death, visited the mansions of the aristocrats in northern Hungary, presenting himself as Byron, he succeeded in benefiting from the poet's popularity for a considerable time (Morvay 1913, 30).

As Aurél Dessewffy noted in his *Árvízkönyv* (Book of the Flood),⁶ Byron's appearance, attitude and even his poetic style, became fashionable by the end of the 1830s. Yet his admiration for Byron reached its peak in the mid-1840s, when 'everyone is interested in the English poet, everyone reads him or knows him by heart, likes or adores him'. It becomes a trend to 'dress like him, to wear an à la Byron tie, whose fringed ribbon casts a wide shadow on their faces; they make love, swear and cry and would – sing à la Byron' (Morvay 1913, 30).

Naturally, the oeuvre also had its share in this huge popularity. A short fragment of *CHP* was published early in 1820 in *Hasznos Mulatságok*, in a prose translation, which was common practice in the era.⁷ In 1824 a journal entitled *Szépliteraturai Ajándék* (Belletristic present) published a fragment of *Cain* and, in the same year, another part appeared in the literary annual *Aspasia*.⁸ After these scattered attempts Lázár Petrichevich Horváth published a three-volume Hungarian selection of Byron's works in 1842, with a detailed biography and critical commentary (Horváth 1842).

Besides these translations, Hungarian readers made acquaintance with Byron generally in French or, most often, in German translations. At the same time more and more people read him in English. The new trend of studying English was mainly generated over the nineteenth century by the

⁶ Aurél Dessewffy, *Árvízkönyv*, Pest, 1839–41. Many of the era's most significant writers contributed to this book with the altruistic aim of helping the 1838 Great Pest flood victims.

⁷ Anon., 'Néhány darabok Lord Byronnak ezen költeményéből: *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*' (Some pieces from Lord Byron's poem 1: *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*), *Hasznos Mulatságok*, 2 (1820): 230.

⁸ B., 'Töredék Lord Byron "Kain"-jából. Kain és Adah alvó gyermekök felett' (Fragment from Lord Byron's *Cain*. Cain, Adah and their sleeping child), *Szépliteraturai Ajándék*, 6 (1824): 20–3, Anon., 'Töredék Lord Byron "Kain"-jából' (Fragment from Lord Byron's *Cain*), *Aspasia*, 1824, pp. 62–5.

fact that, besides Paris, London was gaining importance as the capital for the European élite. London gradually became the new centre of an elegant society, which attracted the upper classes of Hungarian society too. The positions of *bonnes* and *Fraülein*s were often taken over by *misses* in the Hungarian aristocratic households. This trend had a positive effect on the Hungarian reception of English, an interest initiated by the upper classes. Those who had the opportunity to visit England had brought back – among other things – Byron's verses. They were often the members of the highest aristocracy and the more distinguished (thus more contemporarily educated) nobility. The special structure of Hungarian literary and cultural life at the beginning of the nineteenth century also contributed to the rapid dissemination of Byron. Since the lines between the social and the intellectual aristocracy were not so sharply drawn in the Pest literary salons of the 1820s (most of the representatives of the intellectual élite were themselves of the nobility) the common cause of the struggle for the development of a national culture further united the educated and progressive layers of society. Besides, the Anglo-Saxon world with its English language and culture became elegant and fashionable. Naturally, this interest, sometimes amounting to Anglomania, was fomented by other factors. First, in Protestant circles good relationships with England and Scotland had had a long tradition, even among the lower levels of society. For example, many students of the Transylvanian Reformed Colleges had managed to travel to England. In the early nineteenth century, several members of the circle who had gathered around the aesthetic-literary and critical journal *Erdélyi Múzeum* (Transylvanian museum) possessed an English orientation as well as a German one. Later in 1843, an English Reading Club was formed in Kolozsvár. The group, besides having several members and sympathizers of noble origin (Baron Zsigmond Kemény, Baron Miklós Jósika, Countess Blanka Teleki among others), also had many members from the lower gentry, the talented female member Luiz Malom among them. She had read Byron in the original and translated Bulwer-Lytton's *Eugène Aram* into Hungarian. This group's principal aim was to promote English literature, mainly prose, in its original language.

Another source for this revival was the sympathy towards English political structures. The English political system was traditionally regarded as a more successful equivalent of the constitution of the Hungarian nobility. In the age of reform this made England a model for political reorganization, an example for the principle that political and economic reforms became inseparable. Development, improvement and modernization were impossible dreams without a competitive and modern economy. England offered a model for these complicated reform programmes and held out the hope that they could also be adapted to Hungary.

Hungarian travellers often sought and found such models while visiting England, sometimes even against their inclinations. Jenő Horváth (1926, 203) emphasizes the decisive effect of István Széchenyi's first visit and ascribes this to the later reforms he would inaugurate. He noted that the young cavalry officer, who had arrived in England in 1815, had begun to show interest in social reforms and economic modernization to the admiration of his new English acquaintances. He arrived home, perhaps much to his own surprise,

with a tiny steam engine in his luggage (giving a considerable headache to the customs officers), which, according to Horváth, would later become the metaphorical seed to a whole newly established Hungarian industry. More importantly, the Count's adoration for the noble Lord was reinforced by this visit, which was to become a study tour of England. Széchenyi was a frequent visitor in Lord Holland's house, where he not only met Lady Melbourne in person, but also managed to make the acquaintance of Lady Caroline Lamb, who had played such an important part in Byron's life. In his diary, which he wrote, as did many Hungarian aristocrats of his era, in German, there are many references to his experiments in translating Byron: excerpts from *CHP* in a German prose translation, accompanied by a commentary (Gyula 1925–39).

Győző Morvay, author of a historical summary of Byron's Hungarian reception, generally regarded as the most thorough so far, suggests that the impact of *CHP* was enormous (Morvay 1913). His essay, published in 1913, defines two great periods in Byron's Hungarian influence. The first is 'Childe Harold's age of Hungarian *Weltschmerz*' ('a magyar világfájdalmasok Childe Harold korszaka'), from 1828 to 1845. This age is significant first and foremost for the less important poets (labelled by Morvay as 'pseudo- or semi-melancholics' ('ál-vagy félfájdalmasok'))⁹ and those having real Byronic *spleen* but considerably less talent than their idol.¹⁰ At that time, they literally flooded the Hungarian literary journals with their books and verses. This first group's main characteristic is the formal imitation of Byron's adjectives and wording. The content is basically determined by a *fin-de-siècle* Wertherian *Weltschmerz* and by a considerable influence of Ossianism, literary modes which, by the 1820s, had already lost their originality, depth and coherence. An 'affected sentimentalism flirting with passion' ('negédes, szenvedélyekkel kacérokodó szentimentalizmus') had taken its place, one which follows Byron as much as Goethe's Werther, piling up clichéd images. They expressed their personal pain and anguish in uncontrolled terms, a rhetoric which had very little to do with genuine *Weltschmerz* (Morvay 1913, 316). Their poems' 'ever-occurring refrains: endless sufferings, resignation, disappointment, faithlessness, lost hopes, sad, dying life, burial, joyless fading, crying from a thousand eyes, misery, curses, deceiving dreams, sorrowful night of the soul, severe death' match their pen-names which were similarly grave and tragic.¹¹ The many emotive laments of

the Búvölgyi, Búshegyi, Bústavi, Búhalmi, Búváry, Tünődý and Sírvölgyi¹² were considered damaging not only by Morvay, but also by contemporary critics. This tendency was regarded by nineteenth-century literary critics as pernicious and would become a principal target of their pens. In the mid-century it was to produce numerous critical debates. Later, in the second half of the century, it provoked an upsurge of essays on literary theory and aesthetics. All these were strongly connected with the programme for an interpretation of the social role of Hungarian literature. According to the most widespread and influential idea of the time, literature should ideally play the role of the nation's conscience, be a 'guardian soul', the nation's representative and thus the basis for the foundation of the national culture. Perhaps this idea represents the central aspect of the debate since its role is to bind the nation together and give it life. This resulted first in a general expectation of a moral sense and a commitment to the nation's education and progress through literature and its creators. Second, since a national literature was clearly public property, in that the poet, however indirectly, spoke as the community's representative and embodiment (as its advocate or even as its leader, as a prophet or as a pharos or beacon), creative activity was a serious enterprise.

Poets making a cult of their personal pain were found wanting in talent, aesthetically weak, and seen to have wronged the ideal of the 1830s and 1840s. They wrote about their own sorrows (occasionally showing foreign influence), rather than working towards the creation of a genuine Hungarian literature, one corresponding to and representing the nation's true character. Instead of stirring the nation's enthusiasm, they drowned all hopeful sparks in a sea of tears, inducing a pessimistic, melancholic and helpless atmosphere, which might, it was feared, lead to indifference, moral deterioration and, finally, to the death of the nation. If they wanted to find a theme of anguish at any cost, it was asked, why did they not turn to Hungarian history for subject matter? They might find there more than a sufficient number of tragic events so that, in an appropriate artistic mode, they might revive a great heroic past and pay tribute to the heroes of former times. They might bring the growing national consciousness to life, they could urge the nation to action for the future. Before attempting to detail this process, we might consider the era regarded by Morvay as the second period of Byron's influence in Hungary.

Don Juan

In the era 'between 1848 and today' (the turn of the nineteenth century), writes Morvay, almost all of Byron's works had had an influence on Hungarian writers (1913, 327). In his opinion, the main reason for this was that

¹² These pen-names contain paronomasia and play with the fashionable namings of the contemporary sentimental novels. In rough translation they would be something like Sorrowdale, Sorrowmount, Sorrowlake, Sorrowhill, Griefborough, Ponderesson, Tombdale.

⁹ According to Morvay these early poets are: Ferenc Barkóczy, Daniel Győri, József Kolmár, Endre Kunoss, László Lakner, Imre Matics, Soma Orlai Petrics, Gábor Perlaky, János Sebestyén, Antal Sujánszky, György Urházy, etc.

¹⁰ Morvay lists, among others: József Gaál, Antal Zichy, Kálmán Lisznyai, Lajos Szelestey, Gyula Sárosy, Károly Bérczy, Imre Nagy, Boldizsár Horváth; and, although having a somewhat higher opinion of them: Pál Bozzay, Zsolt Beóthy, Gergely Bezerédy, Ferenc Császár, Lázár Petrichevich Horváth and Pál Jámor.

¹¹ 'verseikben örökös refrain: végtelen küszködés, lemondás, csalódás, hűtlenség, összezúzott remény, bús, haldokló élet, temetőhantolás, örömtelen hervadás, ezer szemből sirás, nyomor, átok, csalálmok, lelki bús éjszaka, zordon halál' (quoted in Morvay 1913, 316).

after the failed fight for independence they found strength, a fighting mood and a passion in him, the patriotic sorrow thought to be exemplified in him. Writers turned to Byron with a more mature understanding, as the present hopeless conditions made them understand more clearly his terrifying thoughts and saddened characters. Besides the feeling of *Weltschmerz*, pessimism was gradually gaining ground, which is demonstrated in the awareness of Schopenhauer in the 1860s and later by Hartmann's and Nietzsche's ideas and the spreading of Hindu philosophy. The negation and sense of the aimlessness of life penetrated more deeply into the common literary consciousness.¹³

Nevertheless, Byron's reception is not without criticism at this time¹⁴ and his direct influence is mediated by that of other poets who themselves had started their artistic careers following the traces of Byron. Others mentioned had travelled on a familiar path, for example Moore, Pushkin, Lermontov, Hugo, Musset, Poe or Leopardi.

As Morvay's essay had already emphasized, later echoed by other critics, Lord Byron's influence in Hungary became significant from a literary point of view in the second half of the nineteenth century. The reception of his epic works forms the first phase. Among them *Don Juan* is given the greatest emphasis. If we labelled the former period the era of *CHP*, the second half of the century must be seen in terms of *DJ*.

In the second half of the nineteenth century the theoreticians and critics of national literature were primarily interested in epic works, especially epic poetry. They regarded the epic as the most representative genre of a nation's literature. The most crucial questions raised were how the epic might be modernized and the nature of its relation with other literary genres. The era's leading literary critic, Pál Gyulai, believed he had found a possible solution in the development of the so-called narrative poem and a merger with the epic, artificially creating a naïve, popular/folk epic with a national consciousness. His example was the period's greatest and, according to Gyulai (1908a and 1933), its most representative poet, János Arany (who, incidentally, found the role he was cast in by Gyulai extremely embarrassing). His award-winning epic poem, *Toldi*, published in 1846, was a model for others to follow. Arany later, mostly with the encouragement of his friends and fellow-poets, finished two further parts of the work, entitled *Toldi estéje* (Toldi's evening) and *Toldi*

¹³ 'a szabadságharc után nagyobb figyelem irányul feléje s a politikai elnyomatásban benne találták meg az erőt, a harci kedvet, a szenvedélyt s a hazafíúi bú benne szeretett elmerülni. Az írók érettebb megértéssel fordultak hozzá, mert a sötét viszonyok inkább megértették velük félelmetes gondolatait és komor alakjait. A világtájdalmas világnézet mellett lassankint a pessimistikus terjed el, a melyet a hatvanas években Schopenhauer ismerete, később Hartmann és Nietzsche tanai, az indus bölcsészet elterjedése elősegítettek és az élettágadás, meg az élet céltalanságának eszméi mélyebben nyomultak a költői köztudatba' (Morvay 1913, 327–28).

¹⁴ Morvay regards this as a common tendency of the time in the appreciation of Byron, referring to Carlyle's, Macaulay's and Gervinus's negative opinions (Morvay 1913, 329).

szerelme (Toldi's love). He thus created a full-scale trilogy from the Toldi story relating the main character's whole life (Gyulai 1952).

Yet, in a certain sense, the most influential poetic epic work of the second half of the century would not be *Toldi*, but Arany's other poetic novel, *Bolond Istók* (Istók the fool), published in 1850 (Gyulai 1952). This work contradicted Gyulai's expectations in almost every way and, in many respects, with its form, narrative structure, point of view and strong (self-ironic) tone, the work reminds the reader of Byron's *DJ*. Like the latter it was never completed. *Bolond Istók* is not a Romantic, impoverished nobleman who undertakes various adventures; he is more of a 'village fool' and does not even have a prestigious literary origin, rather that of a commonplace anecdote.

Neither *DJ* nor *Bolond Istók* had had much effect until the arrival of Pushkin's *Evgeniy Onegin*. Subsequently, in the 1870s, this trilogy was followed by a glut of novels in verse. This is not merely Byron's influence, as László Imre (1990) has pointed out. While the 'importation' of genres is a difficult and multi-layered procedure, the Byronic form and method still had a considerable role in the shaping of the genre's form in Hungary. Native authors used the traditions of English literature that had shaped their own new genre. Indeed, the verse novel had already become part of nineteenth-century Hungarian prose. But Byron was clearly influential.

What really can be regarded as 'Byronic' in the poetic novel of this period is the genre itself, the genre's supposed aim and its appearance. According to László Imre, *DJ* is a modern version of epic poetry, one which gave shape to the 'scepticism and ideological unease of post-Napoleonic Europe' ('a napóleoni háborúk utáni Európa szkepszisét világnézeti bizonytalanságát öntötte művészi formába', Imre 1990, 14). This scepticism was not a mere political mood, nor even a personal one, but one which also involved the problems of literary form. For Byron and his contemporaries, 'traditional literary genres not only proved inadequate, but literary forms became questionable as a whole since the universal order and the foundations of the old world view were being shaken' ('nemcsak a tradicionális irodalmi műfajok bizonyultak elégtelennek, hanem általában az irodalmi megformálás vált kérdésessé, mivel az egész világrend, a hagyományos világnézet alapjai rendültek meg', 1990, 14). This general sense of uncertainty, László Imre went on, and this loss of validity was accentuated in the new genre, since it combined the rationalism of the Enlightenment, the popular carnival forms of the Renaissance, the sentimentalism and cult of the personality and emotion of Romanticism with the Sternean grotesque and Classicism's general ideas about the human, combined with liberalism's range of thoughts (14). It was an eclectic form in every respect.

Hungarian literary history further expresses another insistent theme in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially after the Compromise of 1867 between Austria and Hungary. The Hungarians' position was somewhat similar to that of post-Napoleonic Europe in respect of a generalized sense of lost values and disillusionment. The collapse of the 1848 revolution had not only resulted in the devaluation of democratic ideas but it had also undermined illusions based on the Romantic picture of a nation with a national culture set on the foundations of a united people. All classes would preserve their positive features (presuming that all qualitatively different social

classes can keep their independence) and, at the same time, each class would present itself as having a coherent national consciousness, the prerequisites of which are social and legal equality and the gradual elimination of differences. After 1867, when modernization and the improvement of the middle class began to accelerate, resulting in radical economic and social changes, many thought that this progress was not moving in the right direction. With the disadvantages of a modern liberal industrial society before them they came to the conclusion that little was left of the leading ideals of the reform age and the '48. In search of a national literature, the main aims and targets of the arts themselves had consequently to be redefined. Ideas began to form against the canonizing and growing Classical and national-popular school of the 1850s and 1860s known as 'Pál Gyulai', after the renowned critic. This movement accentuated a spirit of pessimism, disillusionment and a sense of lost values. This is why László Imre could remark that 'the binary between Romanticism and Classicism in Byron's works was Arany's revolutionary popular tendency. Moreover, it would even become the nihilism of misanthropy, an outlook disgusted with literature itself following the fall of the liberal conception'.¹⁵ In effect, a special inner opposition (Imre 1990, 293) to the national-popular theory of literature. Byron, after all, associated himself with Pope and, on several occasions, he had characterized the Romantic generation not as a unity but as a disintegrated, chaotic series of mere experiments.

The *Bolond Istók* and the Hungarian representatives of the verse novel in the 1870s and 1890s shared one basic feature of the *DJ*-type novel in verse. They did not simply attempt to cast aside and question literature's patterns of certainty, they even questioned the basic features of literature itself. They tried to create an epic which did not function as a Classical or orthodox literary text: emphatic quotation marks, the intrusion of the author, his comments and detours, intertextual references, literary reminiscences, clichés, parodistic quotations, use of foreign and 'everyday' words, the many tools of irony and self-irony all served this aim (Imre 1990, 273–79). The new genre is recognizably similar to that of the Byronic form; its adaptation utilizes 'local' products, those which conform to national circumstances. This is why the genre became so popular in the last third of the nineteenth century.

Methods of interpretative comparison

In nineteenth-century Hungarian literary theory Byron was the most important, almost emblematic, embodiment of modern man. Gergely Czuczor, from whom this essay's title is drawn, did not stand alone in his opinion that the 'spirit of the times', one of the most significant attitudes of the century, had spoken through Byron.

Byron's life and his personality offered a perfect basis for this interpretation (matching every aspect of the oeuvre and biography) and they played no small

¹⁵ 'ami Byronnál romantika és klasszicizmus párviadala volt, az Aranynál a forradalmi népiesség, sőt a liberális eszmekör látszólagos bukását követő emberundornak magától az irodalomtól megcsömörlő nihilizmusa lesz' (Imre 1990, 123).

part in the transformation of the poet into an emblem for the genre. Byron the writer consequently became the centre of any discussion on literary matters and merit. The 'ideal' author's life corresponded with his works, did not contradict his art and, if it did, then in a paradoxical way, the contrast provided the necessary congruence between life and art: one the positive picture, the other the negative. Biography is usually created in such a way that life and work can overlap as much as possible. The poet even plays off the role he has created and which is expected by the audience against tradition. All Byron's Hungarian critics emphasized this aspect. The process is an offspring of the Romantic theory of poetry and criticism but, interestingly, the real moment of the reception of this basically moral theory was consolidated by nothing less than the emerging Positivist aspect of literary history and national philology.

Byron's reception plays an important, if not an exclusive part in this process. The foregoing examples also demonstrate this process, especially where one of the first Hungarian examples of the linking of a poet's biography with critical literary history employs Byron's persona on a number of occasions. Pál Gyulai wrote of Byron:

In his mood, what gentle and wild, pathetic and ridiculous elements are moulded one into another, and this also runs through his poems. When we read his works, the poet is always on our mind. His personality, like magic, covers all his poems, filling their shortfalls, emphasizing their beauty. We are enchanted and surrender to the strictness of criticism, we forgive him more than we would forgive anybody else, and we entirely give ourselves up to the emotions aroused in our sympathy for the writer.¹⁶

Yet, these lines were about Sándor Petőfi rather than Byron. And his poetry was quite different from Byron's. The basis of their similarity is the 'law of congruence' mentioned above. Consider the following:

[He is] like Byron, whose life did not occupy the world's sympathy before his death. And how their fates resemble each other! Both young and at the zenith of their fame they die struggling for their ideals and with their own death conciliate their enemies and confirm the poetic standpoint they represented.¹⁷

Of course, critics were not only seeking to establish such relationships: after all, the emerging Positivist theory of literary history emphasized the research of influences as one of the most important methods of interpretation. Such an

¹⁶ 'Kedélyén különös vegyületben olvaott össze mi gyöngéd és vad, magasztos és nevenséges s ez elhúzódik költeményein, pótolja hiányait, emeli szépségeit. Meg vagyunk bűvölve, lesszük a kritikai szigort, többet elnézünk neki, mint bárkinek, s egészen átadjuk magunkat az érzéseknek, melyeket a költő iránti részvét felköltött' (Gyulai 1908c, 18).

¹⁷ 'Épen mint Byronnál, kinek élete nem kevésbé vette igénybe a világ részvétét, mint halála. S mint hasonló egymáshoz sorsuk is! Mindketten ifjan, hősök délpontján, eszméikért küzdve, szállottak sírba, halálukkal engesztelve ki ellenségeiket s pecsételve meg azon költői kijelentést, melynek dalmokai valának' (Gyulai 1908c, 19).

approach can be found in Gyulai's essay, one which went as far as suggesting the influence of Byron and Shelley on the Hungarian poet, although the author, Pál Gyulai, was not specific on the point. In an assessment of Petőfi's *Felhők* (Clouds) cycle, written in 1846,¹⁸ Gyulai argues that it is less significant than Petőfi's other works. He does note, however, that the cycle was written while the poet was living in retreat from the world, reading Byron and Shelley.

From the turn of the century, the new Positivist critics tended to describe influences affecting certain authors and works as fully as possible. They also traced Byron's influence on nineteenth-century Hungarian authors, which trend was encouraged once more by the emerging discipline of English studies in Hungarian centres of learning at the outset of the twentieth century.

Jenő Péterfy, for example, in his essay on József Eötvös's technique of novel writing, analyses the similarities between Byron's *Manfred* and Eötvös's novel, *A Karthauzi* (The Carthusian), written in 1839.¹⁹ Frigyes Riedl had pointed out a thematic resemblance between Byron's *The Siege of Corinth* and Mihály Vörösmarty's small heroic poem titled *Eger* (Riedl 1912). Győző Morvay found even more Byronic features in the works of Vörösmarty, a writer whose attention was drawn to Byron by the Greek War of Independence and who had already read several of Byron's works by the early 1820s (in German translations, possibly the Zwickau Schumann version). He cited, for example, the descriptions of battles and landscapes common to both writers. Morvay, however, discovered exact correspondences between his *Délsziget* (Isle of the South) and *The Giaour*. He also mentions the two poets' common pattern of readings (the *Arabian Nights*, and the works of Moore, Tasso and Ariosto), examples which emphasized the similarities between them. Morvay also demonstrated the impact of Byron on the Byron-worshipper Miklós Jósika, especially in his short stories. *Helione* and *Herculaneum* show similarities with Byron's *Heaven and Earth*, but he also had composed a draft entitled *Diamante*, which was to have taken place in Albania and whose main character would have been Ali Tepeleni (Morvay 1913, 54), which suggests an acquaintance with *CHP*. The influence of Imre Madách's drama *Az ember tragédiája* (The tragedy of man),²⁰ which unites the features of Faustian dramatic verse and the *poème d'humanité*, can, according to several critics, be linked to Byron, especially to *M* and *Cain*. Sándor Fest, one of the pioneers of English Studies in Hungary, also studied the Byronic reminiscences of Hungarian literature (Fest 1913; 1917).

It is interesting (yet unsurprisingly in the context of nineteenth-century Hungarian literary theory and its traditions) that while there appeared detailed critical essays on Byron's epic works, the impact of his lyrical works was, apart

from some rare examples, barely analysed at all. The study of his lyrical works was restricted to comparison of colours and moods; the 'grave magic' ('komor varázs'), the spleen, misanthropy, tedium vitae and the never-satisfied eagerness to act all become the 'trademarks' of Byron. The so-called 'Byron-phenomenon' itself is much more complex: it marks the problem which captivated the labours of nineteenth-century Hungarian literary critics. This explores the nature of the influence, how and why literary and cultural receptions happen, how they affect society and what role they have in its development. Yet, it remains puzzling that the nineteenth century would 'find its voice in Byron', as Gergely Czuczor has put it (1835).

The Byron phenomenon or Byron syndrome? (An attempt at identification)

The history of reception offered by Morvay begins with a strange 'Byron definition'. As if identifying a scientific subject, he describes the 'essence' of Byron and what the name really signifies. 'According to recent scholarly opinion, Byron stands for the concept of a suffering personality, pain caused by the imperfection of an ever-changing world.' This far-reaching phenomenon, argues Morvay,²¹ means, from a historical point of view, the realization of a set of seminal ideas emerging in the eighteenth century on a theoretical level and identified with writers like Rousseau, Young, Voltaire and Kant: the adoration of nature, lyric consciousness, scepticism, the desire for freedom, scathing irony, a restlessness that seeks to discover the final questions of existence. On a logical level the adoration of nature harmonizes quite well with the emotional and intellectual superiority of art. Another important part of the theory is the subversive Radicalism which idolizes freedom, which desires a republic in place of limitless despotism and established tyranny. Here the Christian, the pagan and the primitive are united and the collapse of this heroic ideal signifies and yields up a new 'truth' that the world order is without harmony (Morvay 1913, 295–96).

The most important features of this 'Byron phenomenon' had been described by many before Morvay in an attempt to answer the question concerning the circumstances in which the phenomenon emerges and the consequences it might bring about. It seemed a complete phenomenon and had great influence; it could not simply be rejected by judging it as morally harmful. As an ideological trend, it remains uncertain whether one could set it aside. Others, in return, thought the opposite: a thorough examination of the 'phenomenon' revealed positive features which should be welcomed. The question is how could positive features prevail without the disadvantages? In the context of this dilemma nineteenth-century Hungarian critical essays are most instructive; they attempt to map the preconditions of the Byronic by placing Byron on the English intellectual horizon.

¹⁸ First published in Pest, 1847. The best critical edition is in *Petőfi Sándor összes művei* (The complete works of Sándor Petőfi). *Felhők* is in vol. 2 (1845–46), Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1951.

¹⁹ 'Baró József Eötvös mint regényíró' (Baron József Eötvös as a novelist), in Péterfy (n.d., 68–70).

²⁰ The first edition was published in Pest in 1861; the second revised edition, *Madách Imre: Az ember tragédiája* (Imre Madách: the tragedy of man), was published in Pest in 1863.

²¹ 'Byron a mai tudományos felfogás szerint az a fogalom, mely mindazt kifejezi, ami szenvedő egyéniséget jelent: fájdalmat a tökéletlen világ és örökös változása miatt' (Morvay 1913, 295).

In an article published in the journal *Tudományos Gyűjtemény* (Scientific collection) in 1828, Gyula Fenyéry compares English and German poetry or, more precisely, explains the differences between them by describing the different 'characters' or 'identities' of the two nations. Byron takes a unique place in this comparison: 'He is German in his fantasy, but he is English by necessity' (phantasiája merészége által német, angol vala a szükség miatt', Fenyéry 1828, 112). In this essay, the author finds features and expressions of English national character, regarded by others as the peculiarities of his personality, as individual to the poet. In his opinion, the aspiring spirit, his stubbornness, his 'not feeling comfortable with his fate, his striving for the unusual' ('nem érzé magát honosnak a körben, mellybe a végzet állította, szokatlanra törekedett', Fenyéry 1828, 112), the fact that he did not recoil from any obstacles, best demonstrates an English national spirit. 'One cannot find the pedantic, cloistered type of scholar in any of his works, only the man in the poet, who sailed amidst danger on Lac Léman, swam across the Hellespont and went to Messolonghi searching for death' ('egy művében sem lelni a szobatudóst; csak azon embert lelni e költőben, ki veszben hajózott a Lemánon, a Hellespont áltúsza, s Missolonghiban a halált kereste', 1828, 112). English literature corresponds to the English national character best when, the article suggests, the border between life and poetry ceases to exist, more precisely, when life becomes poetry and poetry is transformed into life. Byron is thus an English poet.

However, according to others, Byron is entirely alien from the English character. An author writing in *Magyar Szépirodalmi Szemle* (Hungarian literary review) notes that Byron and Shelley had a much greater influence on the Continent than in their homeland, since *spleen* and *Weltschmerz* are not typical of the pragmatic and rational English. The mechanism of an influence is based, then, upon a kind of 'sympathy': it can prevail where the 'character' exists. The English national spirit is practical and quick-witted, 'proceeds like a man, shapes more strangely as it suits his interests best, attaches itself deeply to ancient institutions until it meets the opposite necessity and then it would rather improve its spirit and soul than struggle with empty forms and the splendour of words, which shows its lively character clearly'. These characteristics are those which are traditionally identified with the features of the Hungarian nation (in the rhetoric of the Hungarian nobility). The notion of 'national characteristics' played a great part in England, becoming a model from the end of the eighteenth century. The English example could be an ideal model for Hungary because the two nations' characters are so much akin.

This notion of the English 'character' stood as an example for literature which strove to serve and give direction to the nation: 'this kind of English character can, in the field of literature, make a nation original and influential in life, since it originates from life, and life can only originate from a living thing'.²² According to this article, the 'true' embodiment of English literature

²² 'utján férfiasan tova halad, az idegent úgy idomítja, mint azt magára nézve jónak találja, ki ősi intézvényeihez er sen tapad, míg az ellenkező szükségét nem tapasztalja, és akkor is inkább lelkét, szellemét javítja, mint sem az üres formákkal és szópompával törődjék, mi legvilágosabb záloga mindenhol talpra esett jellemének'; 'az angol ezen tőrül fakadt szelleme különösen az, mely őt az

is Dickens, whose works have had such a great effect on the reader that there arises in the reader's 'social consciousness', an image which might influence economics and politics peacefully, having realized the necessity of corrections.

A reasoned explanation for national character can also be found in Morvay's essay. He explains Byron's enormous influence in Eastern Europe by the fact that nations living there could often recognize themselves in Byron's exotic features and locations. Hungarians were attracted by the descriptions of a 'warlike and proud character, the mention of a glorious name, the poet's splendid fantasy rich in Oriental images', as well as 'his poems' rhetorical grandeur, his melancholic pain, his revolt, his love of freedom, legendary heroism, his aristocratic emotions ever opposing all his democratism, ruthlessly scathing authority with sarcasm, and his hatred of Austrian despotism.²³

The themes of life-likeness and the ambivalent relation between word and action, are among the most important points of discussion of nineteenth-century literary theory and they recur many times in connection with Byron. As Ferenc Pulszky puts it:

The word wipes the golden dust off thought's butterfly wings, consumes its most gentle scent, weakens its giant strength, and if it saves its beauty, then kills its goodness. Thought has only one son: action; word is only a stepchild . . . Byron, this titan, longing for action, felt it deeply: who could be so rough, who could not pity him, when he exclaims amidst the inner turmoil of his never-realized passions: Actions, actions, said Demosthenes, actions, actions I say, not writing, least of all rhyme.²⁴

Another important element of the Byron phenomenon is its topicality, its modernity. In the travel diary quoted above, Pulszky, personalizing the era's ambiguity, tensions, changeability and unpredictability, compares the spirit of the age to Byron's heroes, taking him as the era's dramaturge, or at least as its most perfect means of expression: 'our time is similar to Byron's heroes, silence outside, storms inside, the river's clean ice covers the foam's giant congestion.'²⁵

irodalom mezejére is elkeresztvén, azt eredetivé, az életre hatalmas befolyást gyakorlóvá tudja tenni, mivel az élettől és életből ered, és elevent csak élő nemzhet' (Anon. 1847, 33–36: 143, 144).

²³ 'az ábrázolt faj harcias és büszke mivolta és egy-egy dicső névnek felemlítése vagy megéneklése, a költő ragyogó, keleti elemekből dúsz képzelete, verseinek szónokias fensége, mélabús és lázongó fájdalma, szabadságszeretete, legendás hősiessége, a hatalmat maró gúnyjával kíméletlenül ostromozó minden demokráciásmus mellett arisztokrata érzelme, az osztrák despotizmus győőlete vonzotta' (Morvay 1913, 298).

²⁴ 'A' szó letörli a' gondolat lepkeszárnyairól az aranyport, elemészt leggyöngédebb illatát, gyengíti legóriásibb erejét, 's ha szépségét meghagyja, jóságát elrabolja . . . Érezte ezt Byron, ezen tettekre vágyó títán, 's ki lehetne olly durva, kibén szánakozást ne gerjesztene ő, mikor az életbe ki nem törhető szenvedélyei' belső vitájában felkiált' (Pulszky 1914, 45).

²⁵ 'időnk hasonlít a Lord Byron' hőseihez, kívülről csend, belülről vihar, a' folyó' felületének tiszta jege elrejtí a' habok' hatalmas torlódását' (Pulszky 1914, 45).

One could almost say that Byron forms the central structure of Gergely Czuczor's summary of English literary history: through the figure of Byron one could see that a great change was setting apart the old and the new, one which proceeded in European history and societies as well as in English literature (Czuczor 1835). One of Byron's translators and his first Hungarian monographer, Lázár Petrichevich Horváth, wrote:

Lord Byron is one of those men who will not be disowned by our age: for (since he is conceived in the marrow of this age) he is praised, glorified, his principles are admired and his genius is flattered by his contemporaries. He is one of the impassioned leaders of recent literary doctrines and political opinions. The whole civilized world recognizes him in this. ... The gloomy complaints of Byron's lyre would take the fancy of the nation, whose main characteristic is gloom, of a nation which was transfigured into a nation under such severe circumstances.²⁶

To play with this metaphor, we might say that the 'Byron phenomenon' offers a function intersecting at the concurrent point of a horizontal and a vertical, a synchronic and a diachronic axis. While the 'horizontal axis' is composed of individual and national psychic features and characteristics, the 'vertical' is made of the atmosphere, the *Zeitgeist*, the interpretations of the traits of the concrete moment. Both the 'characteristics' and the 'ages' can 'speak' only at the concurrent points. The authors cited regard Byron as such a concurrent point, a 'speaking point', at the same time considering this as the secret and explanation of Byron's extraordinary influence.

It seems to be the result of exactly this peculiar function-logic that Byron appears mostly as an illustration rather than the subject of analysis in the essays devoted to English literature or directly to Byron. A significant majority of the nineteenth-century critics and theoreticians of literature strove to find the means to create a modern, up-to-date literature in accordance with their national character. To answer this question, they had to know whether, indeed, the character of the Hungarian nation could meet the requirements of the modern age, or whether modernization might inevitably lead to the disappearance of the national character. So they looked for the 'speaking point', the self-manifesting point of the Hungarian nation and its literature. And the 'Byron phenomenon' often provided an appropriate argument in this process. This can be illustrated by an article adapted from the *Edinburgh Review* and published in the Hungarian journal *Athenaeum*. This article concerns English literature, but it can be read allegorically, in terms of Hungarian literature. *Athenaeum* was an important forum of the so-called programme of the popular/folk trend in literature which, in turn, was regarded as a medium of wide-ranging influence on nation building. At the same time it might

²⁶ 'Byron Lord egyike azon férfiaknak, kit e kor megtagadni nem fog; annak veséiben fogantatva, dicsérik, magasztalják, és csodálják az ő elveit kortársai mikint hizelegnek szellemének. Egyike ő ama politikai vélemények és újabb irodalmi tanok lelkesb vezéreinek. Ilyennek ösmeri el őt az egész civilisált világ. ... Byron lantjának méla keservei tetszeni fognak a nemzetnek, mellynek főbb jelleme a mélaság. Nemzetnek, melly annyi keserv között magasul nemzetté' (Horváth 1842, 1-2).

ensure the viability and modernity of the 'idea' of the nation. At the end of the eighteenth century English literature 'succumbed to the feebleness of senility as well' (as did the Hungarian, suggests the text). It was due to Walter Scott that English literature 'succeeded in rejuvenating, regaining youth's strength and flame once again', since Scott used 'the most popular, and national sources', 'the literature of democracy, legends and ballads, so that his poetry, voice was familiar with every ear'.²⁷ There were two further elements to encourage the rebirth of English literature: Wordsworth who 'democratized the high religiousness and philosophy with refined sense' by using 'the common sources of sentiment and deep emotion'; and Byron, in spite of his apparent misanthropy, who displayed 'intimate sympathy' with the whole of humanity (another democratizing trait) and with all 'that interested his age'.²⁸ The article suggests that if Hungarian literature followed the English example (since there is a close relationship between the Hungarian and the English spirit) and returned to its 'original principles' – to the people, to the poetry of the people – composing in this way a new, national poetry, then literature would rejuvenate itself and gain in strength, as the phoenix of legend could do (to borrow a popular metaphor from the rhetoric of national renewal).

But, Hungarian critics insist, many damned the 'modern', individual reader who wants only to *enjoy* and not to *make* literature. They will be overcome by Byron's 'sombre, but irresistible magic' ('komor, de ellenállhatatlan varázsának') and they will follow his 'unequalled and even his lovable faults' ('hasonlíthatatlan és még hibáiban is szeretetreméltó'); they will be guided wherever he leads them. When the poet-guide disappears, 'the reader returns, as if after a magical experience, to sober and rational life' ('visszatér, mint valamilyen varázs-tünemény után, a józan életbe') (Bajza 1899, 259). A trace of his experience remains, even if he examines his guide with a more critical eye, a guide who,

created only one man and one woman. The man should he be called Harold, Conrad, Lara, Manfred or Cain: he is proud, sullen, cynical, lustful. The woman, Zuleika as much as Julia, Haidée, Gulnare or Medora, is gentle, kind, she wants to love and be loved and is frightening in her passion. That man is Byron himself and the woman is the one his pride desires.²⁹

²⁷ 'a vénség erőtlenségébe hanyatlott'; 'második ifjuság erejére s lángjára férfiasulnia'; 'a legnépszerűbb, nemzeti forrásokhoz'; 'a democratia literatúrához, legendák s balladákhöz fordult, s ezekből származott költészete, melly minden néposztálynak kedves, minden filnek bizodalmas zengéső volt' (Horváth 1842, 1-2).

²⁸ T.L., 'Az angol literatura kifejlésének vázlata Chaucer óta' (Outline of the development of English Literature since Chaucer), *Athenaeum*, 1 (1839): 506.

²⁹ 'csak egy férfit és egy nőt alkotott; a férfi, hívják bár Haroldnak, Conradnak, Laranak, Manfrédnak vagy Cainnak büszke, mogorva, cynicus, kéjvágó s a nő Zuleika szintúgy, mint Julia, Haidée, Gulnare vagy Medora gyöngéd, szelid, szeretni s szeretetni akaró, de szenvedélyében rettentő. A férfi maga s a nő, kit büszkesége kíván' (Szana 1866, 87).

And if the reader would still prefer to read his diaries and letters, because here stands before our eyes 'a true and great man with all his everyday pettiness', then

we see how he increases his incredible irritability further by starving, being so afraid of gaining weight; we see what a devoted friend and lover he can be, but also how he yawns, without the smallest trait of the Byronic pose, in the middle of the greatest love; we see his true loneliness free from any pathos, and above all, we see how honestly his heart could ache for the sufferers and the oppressed, that the idea of freedom is not just an empty literary theme for him, but a central reality penetrating all his being.³⁰

³⁰ 'ez az igazán nagy ember ... mindennapi kicsinyességeivel együtt'; 'látjuk, hogyan ássa alá szervezetét, hogyan fokozza amúgy is rendkívüli ingerlékenységét azzal, hogy éheztesse magát, mert fél a hízástól; látjuk, milyen odaadó barát és szerető tud lenni, de azt is, milyen őszintén, byroni póz nélkül ásit olykor egyet-egyét a legnagyobb szerelem közepén; látjuk igazi, pátoszmentes magányosságát és főképp azt, milyen őszintén becsületesen fáj a szíve a szenvedőkért és elnyomottakért a szabadságeszme mennyire nem üres irodalmi téma számára, hanem egész lényét o a átható, középponti valóság' (Szerb 1941, 468).