

INTRODUCTION

The main difference between fashionable success and real popularity lies in the fact that the latter has stood the test of time, and has been sanctioned by the verdict of successive generations. It does not, of course, follow that an author who is fashionable in his own time must necessarily forfeit his claim to lasting popularity or even immortality. Many a book now listed as a classic was a best-seller when it first appeared. Critics, however, seem to mistrust well-founded popularity and temporary success alike.

This has certainly been so in the case of the Hungarian novelist Mór (Maurus) Jókai, author of the present novel. Born in 1825, and having completed his primary and secondary education sooner than was usual, Jókai took the path traditionally taken by the sons of the gentry: he studied law. But in the favourable intellectual climate of the decades preceding the revolution of 1848, it was practically impossible for a young man of Jókai's artistic temperament and literary aspirations to remain in this profession. He became known to the public when his first short story was published in 1845, and with the success of his first novel in the following year he became established as a major novelist. A year later he was made editor of one of the most important literary magazines, the mouth-piece of a group of progressive-minded young writers and intellectuals, with the poet Petöfi as the most prominent figure of the group.

Jókai was very active during the feverish days of the revolution, and he never betrayed the cause, although, during and after the War of Independence, he shifted from the radical standpoint to a more moderate political position. As a chronicler of this eventful period which was so important historically, he treated his theme in an idyllic, rather than a tragic manner, and by doing so he made his readers forget what had been painful and made them remember only what had been glorious. He in no way gave a sober, critical

analysis of the recent past; instead he gave solace, at a time when it was badly needed. Appealing to the sentiments, in particular to the patriotic feelings of the public, and blending illusion with reality, his writings were received with gratitude as well as praise.

His rapidly increasing popularity, however, was due not only to his success in the field of historical or semi-historical fiction. He tried his hand at almost every kind of prose-writing, and with equal success. A humorous sketch was as much in his line as a large-scale prose romance, a story of village life, or a fantastic novel. Added to the gift of a versatile talent was the gift of inexhaustible creative energy. By way of illustrating the latter it is perhaps enough to mention that the complete edition of his works, published during his lifetime, ran into a hundred volumes. His popularity in his native country was unparalleled and his name also came to be known abroad, since a number of his best novels were translated into various languages (e.g. the present one appeared in two English versions during his lifetime, in Britain under the title *Timár's Two Worlds* and in the United States as *Modern Midas*). The fact that he made a fortune by his pen deserves special mention, since no Hungarian writer had previously managed to do this. When he died in 1904, his status as the grand old man of Hungarian literature had been long established.

It was impossible not to appreciate Jókai's merits, yet his popularity seems to have made critics suspicious and reserved, and even today, when there is no one to question Jókai's rank as a classic of Hungarian literature, the negative traits of his art are stressed perhaps a shade too much. It has been said over and over again that the plots of his novels are extravagantly romantic, or even absurd; the structure of his writings loose; his knowledge of psychology defective, and, as a result, the characterization of his figures sketchy, incoherent and out of proportion; that his much displayed information is superficial and can easily be traced to some encyclopaedia, etc.

Much of this is, of course, true. The impact of Romanticism on Hungarian literature was strongest when Jókai, a schoolboy in his teens and a budding artist, began to learn something of the representative works of European poetry and prose. "The first novel I ever read was Sir Walter Scott's 'Ivanhoe' in a Hungarian translation," he himself informs us; and this, I think, is a fact of peculiar

significance. He admits that, apart from Sir Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, and even Eugène Sue had an influence on his development as a novelist, on his early works in particular. But he also says that as a boy of fifteen or sixteen he learnt English in order to be able to read Dickens and Cooper in the original, which shows that the realistic tendencies of nineteenth century literature appealed to him as well as the works of the romantic novelists of that period.

Influences, however, do not place an author, or if they do, he is significant only to the historian of literature. Similarly, an analysis of his negative characteristics does not show what his art is like; it indicates, at best, what it is not like. Jókai is ranked among the classics because of what is primary and positive in his art; he possesses that true originality which enables a writer to absorb any foreign influence without damage to his own artistic integrity; and he has positive traits which more than counterbalance his defects. All Hungarian critics are agreed that he can tell a story as few other writers can, with a natural ease and a genuine gusto that, even apart from the story, never fails to enchant the reader. By some magic of his own he can also indicate his characters and make us believe in them, however absurd they may be. He has a sense of humour that always saves him from being over-sentimental, and has a style, often criticized for its ballast of Latinisms and touches of bombast, yet wonderfully flexible, expressive, racy, colourful and inimitably original, a style that never fails to bring home what he intends to say.

What is less frequently pointed out, although highly significant and characteristic, is the fact that a most impressive amount of his "material" is derived from first-hand information, and that not a little of what taken from secondary sources is no bookish information, but our common heritage of folklore. A great deal of what we know of nineteenth century Hungary has been handed down to us by Jókai. Valuable as his topographical and sociographical references are, we would not read his novels today, at least not as fiction, if these references served only to provide a "real life" setting, while the main issues of his novels had nothing to do with truth and reality. Fortunately, however, Jókai never stopped halfway in his quest of the truth, not in his lightest, chattiest moods, nor yet in his most fantastic imaginings. A thorough analysis of his works reveals that he was a genuine artist, not merely a skilful craftsman

When the elements of his art have been sifted, and all the requisites of the novelist's craft have been separated and discarded, what is left as the bare essence that resists further analysis, is a pattern made up of the very few universal and fundamental problems of human existence. And that is quite sufficient to explain why his art is felt to be genuine and why it is so popular even today, although literary tastes have changed more than once since Jókai's time. His greatness then, as all greatness in art, can perhaps be best reduced to a simple formula: he had something worth saying and he knew how to say it.

Kálmán Ruttkay