C. P. SNOW

Preface

Hungary is a good deal of a mystery to the English-speaking world. There is a vague impression that it is a country which produces a remarkable amount of miscellaneous talent. If you want high class scientists, get them out of Hungary. John von Neumann, Eugene Wigner, Albert Szent-Györgyi, Edmund Teller, Leo Szilard—two Nobels, one who would certainly have been another if he hadn't died young, not only talent but genius in that group—there are plenty more where those came from. The same with economists, eminent all over the world, ready to produce confident solutions to any problem and contradict each other at the drop of a hat. Films? For years the British film industry was run by Hungarians. Actors? You want a perfect performer for a model upper class Englishman? Better whistle up Leslie Howard, who happens to be a Hungarian. Want a less admirable sardonic Maughamish Englishman? Get George Sanders, who also happens to be a Hungarian.

That impression, though vague, is not inaccurate, as far as it goes. It is perfectly true that Hungary, with a population of about ten million, has produced, and continues to produce, a galaxy of gifted persons quite disproportionate to its size. Compare Canada, with over double the population, enormous natural resources, by western standards well governed. Or Sweden, slightly less people than Hungary, the most

orderly of all societies. Neither has developed anything like the number of the Hungarian world figures. Nor has Australia, immensely rich, strenuously competitive when they feel like it (as in athletics and the visual arts).

What is the Hungarian secret? No one has found an answer. The necessity to survive, Hungarians sometimes say, with a cryptic smile—you others don't know what it's like to be a Hungarian. Anyway the English-speaking world looks on, wonders, and envies. When one arrives in contemporary intellectual Budapest, brilliance is in the air. One feels exceptionally dull or pedestrian. It would be nice to be so clever.

And yet. The impression stops short. The English-speaking world seems abnormally remote from the Hungarian reality. This is at least in part because we are so ignorant of Hungarian literature. About science, not so ignorant, or the performing arts. But about the literature, which is the flesh and bone of any society, almost a dead blank. What does a reasonably cultivated English speaker know of it? He will have heard the names of the great nineteenth century writers, Petőfi, Jókai. He might have read a little (in translation, of course) of both. He could be more familiar with Ferenc Molnár, as an accomplished playwright performed in London or New York. Recently, thanks to the devoted work of *The New Hungarian Quarterly*, he has been able to pick up acquaintance with some major senior writers of today—Gyula Illyés, László Németh, Tibor Déry (also known for political reasons, but a writer needs to be read for his literary gift, which The N. H. Q. has made possible for Déry). Some of József Lengyel has been translated. That is about all. You will, of course, find

specialists in Hungarian in England and America, but those names would be something like the recognition symbols of a tolerably well read man. They are less than he would have of any other of the high literatures of Europe.

Language may be, and must be, one reason for this, though I suspect not the only one. Obviously Hungarian is not an accessible language to English speakers, or, as far as that goes, to other Europeans. Plenty of English speakers aren't completely lost with Latin or Teutonic languages and the Slav ones are at any rate Indo-European. In historical fact, Russian literature travelled early and fast into English, and there has never been a difficulty of understanding on the level of art, whatever was happening elsewhere. Polish literature has been much better known than Hungarian, and the minority Slavs intermittently rather better. Whatever the complex of reasons is, we missed out on Hungarian, and it is our loss.

It can't be completely remedied. Hungarian friends tell us, and I accept it, that we can't reach the core of the literature unless we read the poetry. But how can we read the poetry? Only a few times in literary history has poetry crossed linguistic frontiers in a form which didn't distort it. Very occasionally, as with Edgar Allan Poe in French, it gained preposterously in the exchange and took on a wonder unknown in the original. Usually, instead of that kind of perverse gain, there is a semi-fatal loss, as with Pushkin or Hugo in English. One of the few translations which seems to go over straight is Shakespeare as done by the brothers Schlegel. All these exchanges are between languages closely related and similar in form. Translating Hungarian poetry must be about as difficult as

translating Chinese—perhaps more so, since Chinese grammatical structure is as simple as English.

So we have to make do with prose, conscious of what we are missing, and regretting it. This present volume is a brave attempt to fill, in the medium of prose, the Anglo-Hungarian gap.

Even here, though, the Hungarian editors have had to limit themselves to one genre. We shall have to remain in ignorance of what is being written in Hungarian in the form of novels. This is an anthology of short stories forty-four in all. They spread over a whole range of history and social change, and they represent a good deal of the Hungarian experience. The best of them represent, as one would expect, much more than that, since good art, though it is embedded in its own time and place, speaks to us in a common human voice. There are several such stories here, which quite transcend the local detail. The western reader can take them into his own emotions, as though they were written in his native country and his native society. They belong to us all. That is where art wins.

There are some general features which are likely to be noticed by Anglo-Americans. First, most of the stories are considerably longer than we should think of writing. Many of them run to something like 10,000 to 15,000 words. The technical conditions of our publishing would inhibit us from producing short stories of that length. In fact, the technical conditions of our publishing have fairly effectively inhibited us from producing short stories at all. The magazines which once carried Conan Doyle, W. S. Maugham, Katherine Mansfield, D. H. Lawrence, have, as a curious result of modern economics, all died. In

America, *The New Yorker* still publishes stories, and there good performers like V. S. Pritchett and John Cheever can occasionally be read. In general, however, English language writers, if they write short stories at all, have to contemplate issuing them in collections, in book form. Such collections are likely to have small sales.

This is sad. The short story is a delectable form, and at its best can state its own kind of truth, a different kind of truth from that of novels, and one which, though novels can do other things, they cannot manage. Yet it is probable that, at least temporarily, the short story in English is a dying form. Writers very rapidly, and almost unconsciously, adjust themselves to the technical—or if you like commercial—conditions of their time. In Shakespeare's period, English writers automatically wrote verse dramas. In Dickens's, and for a long while afterwards, they wrote novels. What they will do in the next generation is anyone's guess.

The liberty to write such long and leisurely stories, if one can judge from this anthology, has had with Hungarian writers results both positive and negative. That leads to a second general reflection which might occur to an Anglo-American reader. These stories are singularly uninfluenced by anything which has been happening elsewhere. There is no echo of the harsh tautness of Maupassant. There is not much sign of Chekhov's classical economy. Take one of the less satisfactory stories here, *At Cockcrow*. Chekhov said that if you wanted to describe a moonlit night, all you needed was to mention a reflection from a piece of glass lying in the road. In *At Cockcrow*, the visual detail is piled on a hundred times more lavishly, with the kind of naturalism (as opposed to realism) which

tends to blunt the sensibilities. There is not enough left out, and the cumulative effect is of too great effort for too little.

The less satisfactory stories, then, may appear to us as—how shall we describe them?—unprofessional. But it is probable that in the West we pay a considerable price for our professionalism. Art is a mysterious business, and achieving the sharpest immediate effect may mean that some of the vital substance flies out of the window. Which is, by the way, why nineteenth century novels, less streamlined thau ours, are in essence so much better.

Some of these stories—may be a third of them—by contemporary standards leave out too little. They go comfortably on in their naturalistic passages, sometimes in their naturalistic longueurs. Even so, they tell us something—not about the human condition, which is the achievement of the fine pieces here, to be mentioned in a moment—but about the nature of day-by-day Hungarian living. Here is the third general reflection. The human beings in all these stories, from the most satisfying to the less, are very much the same as the westerners who will read about them. But the social arrangements—not only today, but as far back as the stories stretch—are sharply different. One of the fascinations of the whole volume is what can be inferred in sociological terms.

The main difference is clear and simple. England hasn't had a peasantry for several hundred years. America has never had one. In England, agricultural labour used to be performed by labourers engaged by the day or week, not rooted to the land. These were the people who flooded into the towns in the industrial revolution. Nowadays a small residue of such

agricultural workers are organised in unions, grow such food (with remarkable efficiency) as England can produce on a small island, and have none of the characteristics of peasants.

In America they started from scratch. There was plenty of land, anyone could set up as an independent farmer. That is what happened. Many of those independent farmers made only a subsistence living before they moved west to the great carpet of prairie soil. There, having to learn to use machines because there was no spare labour, they developed the most prosperous agriculture yet known to man. When you see that countryside today there are no communities, just isolated farms, very few people, the incomparably rich cornfields, about as different from traditional European peasant scenes as you can reasonably imagine.

The upshot is that to Anglo-Americans the peasant background in some of these stories will be as strange as though they were set in India. Perhaps stranger in England than in America. A sizeable number of Americans are a couple of generations removed from peasant emigrés from Europe, and some folk memory may linger. In England it is irretrievably lost. So, either straightforward descriptions of a peasant home, as in *Everything's as It Used to Be* (1960), or a similar home in wartime, *The Deserter* (1948), require from us an effort of the realistic imagination. It is easier for us to get closer to Hunyady's *Adventure in Uniform*, published in 1930, telling of a smart young man serving his time in the ranks and walking out with a peasant girl. When she discovers his origin, she leaves him flat, sadly but obdurately.

Class distinctions with us haven't been as stark as

that since before Tudor times, but we can understand. Just as we can understand a complementary story of class distinctions in reverse, Endre Fejes's *Ignác Vonó* (1963), about an ex-private marrying a middle class woman and pretending to be an aristocrat. The detail in this story is occasionally lively, but as a whole too long for the content to be compared with Hunyady's.

The most acute of these stories of social unease is earlier in time (1935), less ambitious, deliberately simple. It is *Omelette à Woburn*, by Dezső Kosztolányi. It is about a student, travelling from Paris to Budapest and getting off the "Hungarian coach" at Zurich with a few francs in his pocket. By mistake he wanders into a smart restaurant, orders a meal, and doesn't know whether he can pay. There are several similar accounts of this dilemma in English literature, but none which rings truer. Recommended as a good introduction to the Hungarian climate.

A good many of these writers seem to be at their most liberated when they are dealing with the fringes of society. In some ways, Hungarian writing may have more affinities with American than with ours, though that is a superficial impression. There are two rather moving stories of derelict performers, *The Music Makers*, by Géza Csáth, printed in 1913, and a later and superior one, *The Organ*, by Károly Pap, the first about a provincial orchestra and the second about a company of down-and-out touring actors. Wistful, regretful, a bite on the edge of the tongue, as with samples of Hungarian humour which reach us.

From a lower layer of society, there is István Csurka's *Kerbside*, which is nearly contemporary. Two street sweepers, man and woman, both round

sixty, man devoted to alcohol (which most of the educated characters in these stories are not, compared with Anglo-American heroes), woman thinking they might as well make a match of it. Not as wryly funny as the last two, but authentic and deeply felt. One can smell the couple's wretched clothes.

Boris Palotai's *Promise, Darling* (1972), which ends with an admirably sharp ironic turn, is edging its way outside society, on its prison fringes, and Tibor Déry's *Ambition and Hilarity* (1946) is right outside society altogether. It is a gem of a story about children—and the affectlessness of children—just after the siege of Budapest. The interpretation of children is similar in kind to Richard Hughes's *High Wind in Jamaica* and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (which appeared much later), but the theme is more carefully embedded in a realistic social scene. Like everything I have read of Déry, the work of a real writer.

My personal favourites are two stories entirely different in kind, by writers I knew nothing of until I read this anthology. One is Ferenc Karinthy's *The Birthday of Emil Dukich* (1958). No one would describe this story as specially elevating, but it is good natured, hearty, tolerant, witty, reminding us all that we are as frail as the next man. It exudes what Anglo-Americans, perhaps wrongly, think of as Central European Schnitzler-like *camaraderie*, mildly malicious, unprudish in sexual terms. At this birthday party for an elderly professor everyone is convivial, the professor's young assistant gets distinctly drunk, though there isn't enough alcohol to get an American academic party started. Nevertheless the young man, becoming more and more emancipated, makes passes of increasing enthusiasm at the professor's young daugh-

ter (whom he contemplates marrying), at the elder daughter, and finally at the professor's wife. He has no great success. Undismayed, he walks home, and encounters a concierge's wife who finds him agreeable. With the cheerful feeling of doing each other a good turn, they go to bed together.

The second of my favourite stories is graver and a work of beautiful talent. It is László Kamondy's *The Student and the Woman*. The story is very simple, as for its theme it should be. A student, aged about eighteen, is earning a few coins rowing people about Lake Balaton. He becomes fascinated, even obsessed, with a woman sunbathing. They come into contact. For a time she fends him off. He makes his way into her house. He would be satisfied with a kiss. In the long run, she isn't. This is executed with extreme economy and mastery. It is the kind of anecdote which D. H. Lawrence could have written, and often attempted to. But this strikes home as much nearer the naked truth than any similar work of Lawrence's. The story, like most of the others in the collection, is splendidly translated. It would shine out in any company as it does here.

For Anglo-Americans, I should suggest the following short list to begin with—the one just mentioned, followed by:

The Birthday of Emil Dukich
Ambition and Hilarity
Kerbside
The Organ
Omelette à Woburn.

There are a dozen others worth real attention. The whole anthology will teach us something, and something very important, about a remarkable country and a remarkable literature.