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## Preface

In order to carry any weight, a recommendatory preface to a *History of Hungarian Literature* must be honest, especially when it is written, as is the case here, by someone woefully deficient in his knowledge of Hungarian literature. But this handicap also has an advantage: it places the composer of the preface, very probably, into the same category as most of the readers of the work. For this *History* is, I believe, oriented less toward the expert than toward the comparatist curious about the literature and culture of this anomalous linguistic island called Hungary within a Germanic, Slavic, and Latin world, an island that has produced, as we all know, a share of world-renowned scientists and musicians (and beautiful women) far out of proportion with its population. What we know much less about, however, is its literature.

Had I been asked, when I was in high school, what Hungarian writer I knew, my answer would have consisted of one name only: Petőfi. That name would, however, have been pronounced with youthful enthusiasm, undiminished by the fact that I had to read him in translation. Even second-hand the thematic mixture of liberty, nature, and love, in youthful, unalloyed, stirring language that no translation could dim, fired the dreams of this *Gymnasiast*. Re-reading Petőfi recently, I found that advancing years have not reduced my fascination with him but have developed a greater sensitivity to the more problematic aspects of his life, thought, and works.

But Hungarian literature is, of course, not just Petőfi, nor Molnár, perhaps the most successful Hungarian writer ever, at least in the West. Hence I, personally, welcome the opportunity of being introduced by the present work to the broad spectrum of Hungarian literature. This *History* takes nothing for granted. It does not bury the reader under heaps of learned, esoteric references, but straightforwardly tells him or her the essential facts about the writer's life and times, the thrust of his thought, the nature of his works, and does not, fortunately, gloss over weaknesses either, for everything cannot be equally good.

I cannot, *faute de connaissance de cause*, assess the accuracy of the literary, philosophical, political, social, and other judgments and selections made in the book. What I can do is to state what it brought to me. Samples will have to do.

It conveyed to me such refreshing poems as Bálint Balassi's (1554–1594) "Celia's Bathing", such honest autobiographical writing as Miklós Bethlen's (1642–1716), and such characteristic epistolary literature as Kelemen Mikes's (1690–1761) *Letters from Turkey* reminding me of certain parts of Steen Steensen Blicher's *En Landsbydegns Dagbog* (1824) which also takes place in the first half of the 17th century. It calls attention to established or potential comparative influences or analogies such as Petrarca's impact on the work of Balassi or Sándor Kisfaludy (1772–1844). Balassi's affinities with Ronsard, Kochanowski, and Shakespeare's sonnets, Kazinczy's (1759–1831) debt to Cicero, Sallust, Horace, Plutarch, Winckelmann, Goethe, La Rochefoucauld, and Barthélemy, Csokonai's (1773–1805) reservations about Hervey and Young or his relatedness to Heine. It refers to the reception of European Romanticism (Herder, Byron, Alfieri, Mme de Staël, etc.) in the writings of István Széchenyi and gave me my first coherent introduction to such Romantic greats as Kölcsey, Vörösmarty (very inadequately appreciated abroad), János Arany, and Jókai. Nor had I knowledge of the Hungarian equivalent of *Faust* or *Moby Dick*, Madách's *Tragedy of Man* (1860).

On the 19th-century Realism side, I had never heard of Sándor Bölöni Farkas's influential *Travel in North America* (1834), nor of such novel and novella writers as Gyulai, Mikszáth (influenced by Dickens, Alphonse Daudet, and Bret Harte) nor of, around 1900, Petelei, Gozdu, Bródy, Gárdonyi, Tömörkény, or Thury. And except for the facile Molnár, I had little substantive information on such 20th-century peaks as Ady, Móricz, Kosztolányi, Tóth, Margit Kaffka, József, and Radnóti. I was aware of Mihály Babits's remarkable *History of European Literature* (1936) but had no inkling of the overall importance of Babits in the literary life of his country, including his setting the highest standards for literary translation. Literary scholarship and criticism, such as the focal periodical, *Nyugat*, with which Babits and others were closely associated in the 1920s and 1930s, are well recognized in the present work.

Insights gained are not limited, however, to specific genres, movements, currents, titles, and names. Other cultural phenomena that elucidate literary evolution receive due attention, too. A few illustrations. Any reader of a history of Hungarian literature must note the signal role played by the Hungarian aristocracy in maintaining Hungarian identity in the many epochs of political dependence. Information provided explains this: about 80 per cent, it seems, of the aristocracy was ethnically Hungarian, whereas a significantly lower percentage held for the majority of the population in these periods. The slimness of the bourgeois class and the involvement of the high aristocracy with foreign culture and politics explains why such a consistent patriotic impetus came from the lower and middle aristocracy. The weakness of the bourgeoisie also accounts for the phenomenon that Romantic writings authored by aristocrats bypassed the bourgeoisie and romanticized the

people. The connection between Free Masonry and literature in the 18th century, or the strong German cultural influence on the birth and evolution of Buda and Pest are just two random examples of much relevant socio-cultural information and explanation provided by this *History*.

No *History* can ever be definitive. But I dare say that for a generation of non-specialist readers of English this work will offer a lively, direct, clear, and rich introduction to the literary facet of a noteworthy culture.

Henry H. H. Remak  
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## Editor's Preface

A history of Hungarian literature in a foreign language written by Hungarian authors came out in 1962; it was *Histoire abrégée de la littérature hongroise*, a joint undertaking by Tibor Klaniczay, József Szauder and Miklós Szabolcsi. The same year it was published in Russian, a German translation followed in 1963, an English translation in 1964, a Polish translation in 1966 and a Bulgarian translation in 1975. The book, long overdue, was, apart from a few critical remarks, well received abroad. The editors and publishers were not only aware of its merits, but also of the shortcomings, partly attributable to the book appearing shortly before the publication, in six volumes, of *History of Hungarian Literature* by the Institute of Literary History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. In this huge work, published from 1964 to 1966, sixty specialists summarized the more important scholarly work that had been devoted to the history of Hungarian literature. The authors of *Histoire abrégée* were naturally unable to take advantage of some of the ideas and insights in this important work. Hence the need to publish a new *History of Hungarian Literature* for foreign readers became more and more urgent. The present *History* is based on *Histoire abrégée* and the six volumes published by the Institute of Literary History; the editors have also taken criticism of the earlier work by Klaniczay, Szauder and Szabolcsi into account.

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