The Seven Labours of Hercules: Volume Five and the Complete Series of the Hungarian History of English Literature

Az angol irodalom története. 5. kötet. A viktoriánus és a modernista időszak ['History of English Literature. Vol. 5. The Victorian and the Modernist Periods']. Edited by Tamás Bényei, Angelika Reichmann and Nóra Séllei. Editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay. Budapest: Kijárat, 2024. Pp. 760. ISBN 978-615-5160-93-6.

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After the appearance of the first volume in 2020, and with the publication of the fifth volume of the Hungarian History of English Literature in the autumn of 2024, the series has been completed. Just to indicate the sheer scale of the Herculean task the editors and the authors have undertaken: the whole series is comprised of seven volumes (volumes six and seven were published in 2022 and 2023, respectively). Their length varies between 331 and 760 pages, the whole series is almost 3,900 pages altogether, spanning almost 1,500 years, and is the work of nearly fifty contributors, experts on British literature from all around the country's English Departments. This project, which started around 2010, and has recently been closed, after nearly fifteen years, is the most outstanding endeavour of the Hungarian community of scholars dealing with British literature. Students, teachers, researchers, and others participating in academic life have had to wait nearly half a century, since the publication of a one-volume history of English literature in Hungarian in 1972 by Miklós Szenczi, Tibor Szobotka and Anna Katona, to put on their shelves a complete and definitive summary of the history of English literature. The work was hindered by several difficulties, including the passing away of the original editor-in-chief, Géza Kállay, in 2017, after which Tamás Bényei took over the responsibilities of coordinating this gigantic project.

The series, including this volume, is new in several respects. The editors and authors had to make numerous important decisions as to what this new history of English literature should look like (for more on this, see the Foreword, the Introduction at the beginning of the first volume by Tamás Bényei [9–25] and Géza Kállay's study

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at the end of that volume [361–72]).[1] I think the entire series, and the fifth volume in particular, can be best characterised by pointing out what they are not. First of all, they are not intended as a reference book or encyclopaedia-like summary of the most important selected authors and their works. However, as is inevitable, prominent authors are given separate chapters in each volume, including the present book: Charles Dickens, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Lewis Carroll, Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling, as well as the modernist writers generally treated as canonical (William Butler Yeats, T. S. Eliot, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence) are discussed in separate chapters of varying length. In spite of the fact that the primary aim of the series was not to set up a new canon, the incredibly rich texts discuss authors, besides the 'great' ones, whom I believe have never even been mentioned in any general Hungarian literary history on English literature: for instance Vera Brittain, Sara Grand, Neil Munro, James Stephens, Charlotte Yonge and Dinah Craik, just to mention a few.

Secondly, the series, consequently, is not oeuvre-focused. Like the rest of the series, volume five does not make an effort to arrange authors in a hierarchic manner, suggesting a canonising gesture of selecting 'major' writers and briefly mentioning the 'minor' masters, as it is seen from the highlighted writers above. Pertaining to this, the series is not centred on oeuvres of writers, a traditional but by now highly questionable and limiting approach to literary history writing (the novelty of volume three, for instance, is that it arranges poets between 1640 and 1830 according to 'authorial circles').[2] That the volume is not author-focused is well evidenced by the fact that, for instance, canonical authors such as the Brontë sisters are not given a separate chapter but are treated in various sub-chapters from diverse perspectives, such as in 'The Victorian Novel: Versions of Realism' by Tamás Bényei (56–105), 'Female Authorship in the Victorian Era' (154–64) also by him, and 'The Prose of the World: The Victorian Bildungsroman' (106–16) co-authored by Tamás Bényei and Nóra Séllei, only to mention the most prominent places where the Brontës surface. Conversely, Yeats is scrutinised in two separate chapters: first his dramatic works in a chapter by Csilla Bertha on the Irish Literary Renaissance (518–32) and then his poetry in a subsequent chapter devoted exclusively to that topic by Zsolt Komáromy (533–53). It was also a unique decision to allot two separate short chapters to Joyce, one to *Dubliners* (1914) – the chapter titled 'Poetics of Fiction:

[1] *Az angol irodalom története*, 1. kötet, *A középkor* ['History of English Literature, Vol. 1, The Middle Ages'], edited by Tamás Karáth and Katalin Halácsy, editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay (Budapest: Kijárat, 2020).

[2] *Az angol irodalom története*, 3. és 4. kötet, *Az 1640-es évektől az 1830-as évekig* ['History of English Literature, Vols. 3 and 4, From the 1640s to the 1830s'], 2 vols., edited by Zsolt Komáromy, Bálint Gárdos and Miklós Péti, editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay (Budapest: Kijárat, 2021).

The Shorter Fiction of James Joyce' – and the other to *Ulysses* (1922), both by one of the eminent Joyce scholars and translators, Marianna Gula.

Although it has been pointed out that the volume is not author-centred, after two excellent introductory chapters, one by Angelika Reichmann on the concept of modernism and its literary historical constructions (465–88) and a jointly written chapter by Reichmann and Bényei on the institutions and networks of English modernism (489–517), the middle section of Part III on modernism provides what we could call sketches of modernist authors and works. Besides the above-mentioned ones, a chapter can be found on Eliot by András Kappanyos (554–61), Henry James by Ágnes Pokol-Hayhurst (562–70), Joseph Conrad by Angelika Reichmann (571–76), Ford Madox Ford, Katherine Mansfield and literary impressionism by Tamás Bényei and József Fagyal (587–98), Virginia Woolf (599–609) by Tamás Bényei and Nóra Séllei and D. H. Lawrence (610–5) by Bényei again. The chapters on prose are always introduced by the title 'Poetics of Fiction' and are typically devoted to one or two representative works of these authors. I think it hugely benefits the volume that it has avoided mechanically going through the canonical authors of the period, devoting, let us say, twenty pages to each – the whole section on individual voices under the heading 'Poetics of Fiction' and Yeats's and Eliot's poetry is eighty-two pages out of the entire 203-page third part on modernism.

What the series really focuses on is what the laconically simple title promises: it is a (hi)story of literature. More precisely, it attempts to narrate and arrange the different (micro-)histories that arise from, on the one hand, the significance of a given author or work in the period, the network of the texts of which the given work is part in a specific era, and on the other hand from the ramifications and effects of the work in later epochs. To cite one characteristic example from the present volume, the chapter on the Edwardian novel, authored by Bényei (371–95), starts with the discussion of how the Edwardian period was constructed in popular memory retrospectively and how later authors (for instance L. P. Hartley, Elizabeth Bowen, Rebecca West or Anthony Powell) reflected on this era several decades later. Yet, it also includes references to contemporary authors like Fay Weldon, Sadie Jones or Jane Harris (372) in the same respect. It is also important that this sub-chapter offers the reader points of further entries to other sites featuring the authors mentioned here, for example pointing out that Hartley will resurface in a chapter on the country house novel and Powell in a section on the *roman-fleuve*, both in volume six, or that the reader might want to jump back to volumes one and two to read about the genre of the pageant mentioned here in connection with *The Forsyte Saga* (1906–21) and Vita Sackville-West's *The Edwardians* (1930; 373).

Thus, thirdly, it is apparent what this volume and the series is not intended to be a linear and monolithic story of literature. It is linear in the sense of its chronological

arrangement, since this project is, regardless of its many novelties, traditional in keeping the basic idea of a 'story,' i.e. it unfolds in time, meaning going 'forward.' However, it was a fundamental concept behind the work that it rejects selecting one story line (not to mention the concept of 'development,' having been overridden a long time ago), at the expense of others deemed less important. Thus, somewhat similarly to George Eliot's polyphonic novels, the volume strives to make the reader feel the complexity and interconnectedness of a given era. Besides, it does not suggest or expect linear reading. The reader is invited to jump back and forth between chapters and even volumes. The boxes inserted into the text serve this purpose, as if they functioned as hyperlinks, and the reader has to train themselves to master a different kind of reading strategy than they were used to, often stopping during the journey to select between paths that these junctions offer.

By saying that the volume and the series are not monolithic, I mean that there must have been hardly any underlying expectation towards the authors as to value judgment or tone. This volume, like the others, is a wonderfully heterogeneous, yet unified, piece, with the distinct voices and approaches of sixteen different authors. There is one voice, however, that dominates the volume, especially in the part on Victorian literature, namely that of the editor-in-chief, Tamás Bényei. Out of the forty-three chapters of volume five, he either authored or co-authored twenty-five, nearly sixty percent (and that ratio is exactly the same in the later volumes, the sixth and the seventh, out of whose sixty-three chapters he wrote thirty-eight).

Furthermore, the claim that the series and the volume is not monolithic is also justified by the fact that it is not 'elitist' in any manner. This is manifested in at least two ways. It does not only target the professionals of the academia, hence the texts are moderately theoretic and consumable for the average reader, as well. Secondly, there is always an attempt to display the plurality of various gender, national and regional discourses, genres and other fields of art, something that would have been unimaginable in the previous, 1972 edition of the history of English literature. There are separate chapters on the material production of Victorian literature (42–55) by Bényei, including publishers, periodicals and illustrations, on the Scottishness of Victorian literature (213–16) by Gertrúd Szamosi, on Lewis Carroll's Alice tales (217–19) by Anna Kérchy, and on Victorian tales and children's literature (220–29) by Bényei, albeit the sections on Edwardian and modernist literature focus on more canonical topics. The volume also highlights the sensitivity to gender roles and national literatures, approaching Victorian literature from a gender perspective, giving separate chapters, for instance, to male and female poets (and a chapter of his own to Gerard Manly Hopkins, by Tekla Mecsnóber) in the Victorian times, or discussing the interrelatedness of gender and modernism (616–44).

Scottish literature is also represented in the volume, as mentioned above, by Getrúd Szamosi's chapter, as well as by Attila Dósa's discussion of Scottish literature at the turn of the century (419–29). Although it would chronologically belong to volume five, the Scottish Renaissance and the Scottish literature of the first half of the twentieth century was given a place in volume six (109–43),[3] dealing with the middle third of the twentieth century, similarly to the chapter on post-war Scottish literature up to the 1970s (538–54), both the works of Dósa. The idea that certain trends overarch artificial categories and chronological boundaries is clearly indicated by the fact that volume seven, which surveys British literature from the 1970s to the present day,[4] also hosts a section on (English-language) Welsh literature from its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century by Angelika Reichmann (350–62). Volume five does not miss out regional varieties of English literature, either, as is indicated by a chapter on regionalism, provincialism and the pastoral in the second half of the nineteenth-century and a chapter on Thomas Hardy's regionalism by Bényei (230–61), as well as a section on Englishness and regionalism at the turn of the century (400–18), also by Bényei. Additionally, three further chapters in the three main sections enlarge the scope of British literature, including the British Empire in the discourse of Victorianism, the Edwardian age and the modernist period (262–84, 336–46, and 645–68, respectively), all three by Bényei.

Finally, the series is also unique in the sense that it does not only concentrate on British literature *per se*, but occasionally offers the reader information on the Hungarian (or even Central European) significance and reception of the literature of the British Isles. To illustrate this, let me quote three passages from the present volume. The chapter on utopia and science fiction at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth by Károly Pintér (359–70) ends with a revealing 'information box' on the Hungarian reception of H. G. Wells, listing his translators between the two world wars, recalling the demise of his literary reputation after 1945 and calling attention to the deficiencies in the translation of his works up to the present day (370). Drawing a parallel between the Austro-Hungarian compromise of 1867 and the partition of Ireland in 1921, as well as the Hungarian reform age literature and the Irish Renaissance, Csilla Bertha points out that culture and national literature played a similar part in taking the responsibility for achieving independence in the two countries (518). Finally, Bényei points out that "the English

[3] *Az angol irodalom története*, 6. kötet, *1930-tól napjainkig, Első rész* ['History of English Literature, Vol. 6, From 1930 to the Present, Part 1'], edited by Tamás Bényei, co-edited by István D. Rácz and Judit Friedrich, editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay (Budapest: Kijárat, 2022).

[4] *Az angol irodalom története*, 7. kötet, *1930-tól napjainkig, Második rész* ['History of English Literature, Vol. 7, From 1930 to the Present. Part 2'], edited by Tamás Bényei, co-edited by István D. Rácz and Judit Friedrich, editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay (Budapest: Kijárat, 2023).

literature of the First World War has no Švejk" (446, my translation), emphasising that no other literature, perhaps with the exception of the Czech, features a comic character in first-world-war literature, alluding to the possible exception of Robert Graves's *Good-bye to All That* from 1929.

Perhaps the most difficult decision the editors had to make is how to draw a boundary between the literary periods. As for volumes three and four, it was certainly a unique decision on the editors' part to treat the years 1640 and 1830 as the temporal limits of the two volumes. While in the case of the first two books, the names of periods – namely *the Middle Ages* and *the Early Modern Period* – were readily available, with volumes three and four it was a conscious decision by the editors to go against well-known periodisation, such as the *Baroque Age*, *Neoclassicism*, *Romanticism* and so on. As Komáromy explains in the general introduction of the third volume: "One of the aims of our divergence from traditional divisions was to dislocate the reader from the habit of being oriented according to periods. The reason we are doing this is precisely to avoid presumptions suggested by periods" (13, my translation), namely that periods are homogeneous and imply some kind of historical essentialism.

In volume five, the editors go back to period names (Victorian Age and modernism), partly because these concepts have been used as a matter of course in any history of English literature, partly because they form an interesting juxtaposition, the former being the name of a cultural and historical period, the latter of an artistic trend (see Foreword, 11). The more traditional solution would have been to include Romanticism and the Victorian Age in one volume (practically from 1798 to 1901), thus creating a separate volume for the nineteenth century, and possibly creating three further volumes for the twentieth century and the first two decades of our century. This is precisely what the editors wanted to avoid, emphasising the fact that there are innumerable links connecting the Victorian period, especially the *fin-de-siècle*, with Edwardian literature and the era of modernism. This decision has, in fact, resulted in the longest volume of the series.

It is also a novelty of the volume that it treats the Edwardian Age in Part II separately and in unprecedented detail, though the decade has so far been practically relegated to the status of an invisible 'transition,' with hardly any significant names between the two great periods. Part II also includes two chapters on the fiction of/about the First World War (Bényei) and on war poetry (István D. Rácz), respectively. Out of the 653 pages of the volume (excluding the Foreword, the Works Cited and the Index), 173 pages are devoted to this era. It is also important to emphasise that naturally, the discussion of modernism does not end in this volume but is continued in the next one from the 1930s onward.

All in all, the voice of the Hungarian community of scholars of British literature can be one of awe and gratitude. A truly Herculean task, volume five of the

Hungarian history of English literature – and the whole seven-volume series – is an invaluable contribution to the discipline in Hungary, in Hungarian, creating a new and up-to-date medium to be able to talk about the 1,500-year history of British literature in the future.