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CONTENTS

István Margócsy: Some Aspects of Hungarian Neology

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Reviews

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CONTENTS

NUMBER 1

<i>István Margócsy</i> : Some Aspects of Hungarian Neology	3
<i>Judit Kádár</i> : Perspectives on Commercial and Political Relations between Britain and Hungary as Seen by English Travellers in the 1830s	9
<i>Virgil Nemoianu</i> : Romanticism and Biedermeier in East-Central European Literatures.....	21
<i>Samuel J. Wilson</i> : Kossuth and American Non-Intervention	39
<i>I. W. Roberts</i> : The Russian Intervention in Hungary in 1849: Some Thoughts and Considerations	49
<i>Júlia Bendl</i> : Herkunft eines Philosophen – Die Kindheit von Georg Lukács	75
<i>Emery George</i> : Miklós Radnóti and Friedrich Hölderlin as Readers of the Book of Nahum	91

REVIEWS

<i>Peter Boerner</i> : Concepts of National Identity (Rudolf Joó)	119
<i>Bethlen István</i> emlékirata 1944 (Denis Sinor)	121
Struggle and Hope: the Hungarian-Canadian Experience (by <i>N. F. Dreisziger</i> with <i>M. L. Kovács</i> , <i>Paul Bödy</i> and <i>Bennett Kovrig</i>) and <i>Béla Várdy</i> : The Hungarian-Americans (Géza Jeszzenszky).....	122
Aujourd'hui – Anthologie de la littérature hongroise contemporaine (Nicolas Cazelles)	125

SOME ASPECTS OF HUNGARIAN NEOLOGY

ISTVÁN MARGÓCSY

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The Hungarian language reform that took place in the first two decades of the 19th century constitutes the first, and one of the most important, events in the intellectual history of modern Hungarian culture. Nevertheless, it yet received a satisfactory interpretation, in spite of many and detailed learned descriptions. Up until now scholars have usually tried to approach the phenomenon either through political history (or rather, through the history of ideas influenced by political history), or through linguistics, ignoring questions of ideology, the two branches of science bearing little relationship to each other. As such descriptions have not been capable of representing the *complex* character of the movement, their results are not only unsatisfactory, but, in a very natural way, almost contradictory, too. Some of the followers of the purely historical description evaluated the movement very positively (the ground of their appraisal being that in a politically rather "quiet" period only this polemic could motivate a greater part of the nation's population, the national characteristics of reasoning got gaining importance in this discussion). Others present the whole language reform as a conservative phenomenon and treat it as a nationalist manifestation of exclusively national interest. They start from the fact that the great debate achieved no *political* results in spite of the great stir, and did not even intend to achieve such results. The linguistic approach to the chain of events is also unsatisfactory because it focuses only on certain linguistic phenomena (e.g. the growth of the word-stock, stylistic changes, etc.), and only emphasized the practical side of the movement, without attempting to interpret its ideological components *within* the scope of usage.

Hungarian neology, however, deserves special attention as an act in the history of ideas. On the one hand, it exceeded the standardizing procedures taking place in all other European literary languages in magnitude and proportions, and, on the other hand, its course of events created so wide a social stir, that it had some significance beyond the limits of general linguistic interest, in contrast with other European varieties of linguistic standardization. The cause of this particular Hungarian phenomenon might be sought in the intersection of two different courses of development. In the language reform movement two trends in the history of ideas met and mixed, which moved independently from each other in other European cultures, if they appeared in them at all. At approximately the same time emerged both a new concept of the nation, which tried to outline the borders of the nation by the borders of language, and a new concept of literature, which secured entirely different and new rights and possibilities for the writer in the usage of language. *Both* ideological phenomena were formulated *within* the

sphere of language, thus neither of them is conceivable without the other (a point which has often been ignored). We have to underline the fact, however, that both had *independent* intentions, which is why one cannot be explained by the other directly.

That linguistic process identifiable in all European languages, towards the standardization and integration of the language of speaking communities, started in Hungary in the last decades of the 18th century, and developed rapidly. Consequently, more grammars were written, together with several large dictionaries, both interlingual and unilingual (explanatory). While the "renewal" of the language did not mean more than the creation or reception of words denoting new socio-cultural phenomena (that is, the *widening* of the language), these purely linguistic phenomena did not involve serious social or ideological analysis. Polemics against neology started when the *whole* of the language was invested with special value by society, and continued when "modern" writers began to adopt a firmly subjective stance in their usage of language.

In the last third of the 18th century the political construction of the concept of the Hungarian *nation* underwent a radical transformation. In place of the old concept of nation, defined from the standpoint of politics and power, a new, culturally conceived concept of nation appeared. It would be possible to quote quite a few texts which claim that nation and language are *identical*, and that the authentic member of the nation is the one who speaks the language, and vice versa. The nation spreads no farther than the functional borders of the language. Language will be characteristic of the nation in its entirety, but at the same time *each* of its elements will carry value, because each element in some way bears certain national characteristics. According to this view language cannot be observed only in a practical way; it cannot be viewed merely as an instrument (by which we express our general thoughts), but has to be viewed in itself, as a substance: its *being* and functioning guaranteeing the being and functioning of the nation. For this reason the grammarian will appear as the representative of the "most national" science and his activity will serve the development or maintenance of the life of nation. Consequently, several, often very aggressive attempts took place to demonstrate the *unique* and true, motionless and unaltered, and thus eternally national structure of the language. This is why cultivation of literature became an overtly national, puristic action: the artist writes in Hungarian and translates into Hungarian to prove that the Hungarian language possesses the capacities which guarantee its right to create the nation. Eventually, this is why the whole concept became two-faced from the viewpoint of the development of language (neology). On the one hand it starts out from linguistic operations (grammar, translation, original literary works of art, etc.), as the basis of any analysis of language, and on the other hand it restricts considerably the possibilities of the use of language and keeps the freedom of possible innovations in definite bounds.

The general question of the creative freedom of *writers* (artists) arises at this point. It is during these decades that a certain *literary* change takes place in Hungarian literature, which can be taken as the beginning of modernity all over Europe: this is the characteristically *conceptual* detachment of belles-lettres from learned literature. This separation, which took place in other countries of

Europe earlier, coincided in Hungary with the process of linguistic standardization. In the case of greater Western European literatures the two movements might have happened independently from each other. In the periods *preceding* neology, Hungarian literature, science and fiction occur together. One of the first prominent writers of the Hungarian Enlightenment, György Bessenyei (whom we consider now mainly as a *belletrist*) repeatedly mentions *science* in his writings, even if he is writing a drama or a novel. From the viewpoint of language this attitude to literature means that scientific and artistic approaches to language are not yet separated. Writer and language scholar are the same according to this definition: the good writer is the one who knows and uses language well, and the good man of letters is the one who calls grammar into being correctly, and vice versa. He who writes is a grammarian at the same time and his performance is judged *linguistically*, too. For this reason descriptions of language and literature overlap: literary works are judged according to grammatical viewpoints and the scientific approach to language is imagined on the basis of the works of *literature*. This integrated attitude to literature considers language as means of thought in a very natural way—the literary work is nothing but a proper and grammatically correct wording of a great, true thought.

In the last decades of the 18th century, however, the idea of the autonomous linguistic work of art also gains currency in Hungary. According to this idea, a poetical work is not only correct formulation, but also an independent, creative gesture. Poetry is not only a subtype of literature in general, but a special form of manifestation, which no longer wishes to tolerate the dominance of other learned disciplines. Modern poets at the turn of the century viewed their poems as autonomous aesthetic works (or they wanted to view them as such), and according to this they wished to get rid of the strict standardization in usage and grammar, in their own usage of language. This was the point which served as basis for the great debates of Hungarian neology, for the discussions of the 1810s. The questions of the polemic were: who regulates language? Who is the judge of language usage? Opinions varied according to whether or not the answering persons approved of the movement towards the autonomy of fiction. Representatives of the grammatical side, who disapproved of the modern belles-lettres (both for its contents and its usage of language) rejected the poet's right to create language and his subjective freedom in using the language. They wanted to insist on standardization and generalization in the language of *literature*, too. The defenders of the "renewal" of language (in the first place their leading figure, Ferenc Kazinczy), however, always referred to the "taste" of the poet, the artist, opposing the dry, hostile-to-art concept of the grammarians. Although they were followers of linguistic integration and general standardization of parlance, they did not consider these demands valid in the sphere of belles-lettres, for this was viewed as individual, subjective creation. That is why Kazinczy, for example, planned to write an "aesthetic grammar", wanting to demonstrate what could be done with language in the sphere of art. Unfortunately, this work was never completed.

The idea of the modern, autonomous, linguistic work of art is very strictly connected with the problem of the substantiality of linguistic expression. The poet, who does not only *compose* his general thoughts, but also *expresses* his

special ideas, which are characteristic only of himself, manipulates language in a radically different way. In the hands of the poet the language ceases to be a common instrument, and becomes an individual, *non-recurring* speech-act. The distinctive sphere of poetical language is created this way. This sphere the poet considers to be grammatically uncontrollable: his usage of words, his novelty—if it is considered to be *beautiful*—is valid, even if it violates the rules in general. The poetic quality of the poetic work (its autonomy) is guaranteed by its non-recurring and subjective nature.

It is here that the basic trend of linguistic ideology and the attempts of literary innovation clash. With regard to political ideology, both the followers and the adversaries of neology agreed: all of them wanted to re-formulate the Hungarian nation in terms of the substantiality of language—they conceived of language as the sign of national being, national substance. But neologists went on to widen this substantiality. While the adversaries of neology rendered valid the specific nature of the usage of language *only* for the *whole* speaking community and emphasized features that are manifested in the *whole* in comparison with the special features of other languages, the followers of neology (that is, those who stood for the separation of the poetic use of language) went on with specification *within* the community and gave *each* manifestation the right for separation. Hence, the ideology of the substantiality of the language created a paradoxical situation in Hungary: within the scope of national ideology it reproduced the starting dichotomy. For instance, those great grammarians (Miklós Révai and his partner in debate, Ferenc Verseghy), who displayed all their activities according to the spirit of the ideology of linguistic substantiality, return to the old thesis (which defines linguistic expression as the means of thought) when they experience the signs of the subjectivity of the writer's freedom.

This paradoxical intertwining is well-illustrated by a pair of quotations of almost anecdotic interest, which at the same time illustrating the history of the reception of Herder, who was one of the thinkers who had great influence in Hungary at that time. One of the quotations comes from Ferenc Verseghy, the grammarian, who was very much against neology, and the other one comes from Ferenc Kazinczy, the leader of the neologists. Both of them quote the same thing to prove their case, yet interpret the thought they repeat word for word in radically different ways. Verseghy was one of the first to propagate the thoughts of Herder in Hungary. In his *Proludium*, which appeared in 1793 and contains a grammar and theory of language, he translated into Latin and published with approval the basic thesis of Herder's theory of language from the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. Language and scholar, language and culture are connected by the fact that the words of language do not mean things themselves, they are only *names*, which express the abstract characters of things, not their objective fundamentals. For this reason, if a name (word) is missing from the language of the linguistic community, then the nation does not possess the idea (or the thing). When a nation does not possess a word, it does not possess the idea or the thing that it represents. ("Ein Volk, das das Wort nicht hat, hat auch die Idee und die Sache nicht.") In the next decade the same statement is made by Kazinczy in its original German form, almost as the motto of neologist movement.

The alternative interpretive context of the quotation and the two kinds of practical conclusions derived from it are fundamentally different. Verseghy admits that the ideas of the words of national languages differ from each other, so-taking a hypothetical and absolutely valid system of signs and ideas as a point of departure—they might bring about incertitude. He wishes to secure the unity and constancy of ideas according to the rational system of his grammar and insists on creating a perfect *dictionary* to remove differences. That dictionary would preclude the differences in thinking deriving from differences in languages. It would fix the meaning of words, widen the mass of words and in so doing (and in enlarging the sphere of ideas) it would support the universal education of the nation. On the other side, Kazinczy emphasizes the freedom to create names (words). According to Kazinczy, the words of the language are not defined and standardized by the hypothetic order of ideas, but by the aesthetic intention of the writer, which is unique and cannot be systematized. The linguistic gestures and manoeuvres of the word help not only the cultural approach to the universe of ideas, but can also create new qualities and new ideas. Verseghy, being attracted by rational systems, closed the routes Herder had opened and put an end to the motions of the world of names (ideas) in his dictionary. Kazinczy uses the opportunity offered by nominalism to strengthen the subjectivistic nature of linguistic creation and to separate an aesthetic preoccupation with language from grammar. To summarize: Herderian ideology is valid both for the grammarian and the writer as an *external* guarantee, but only the writer allows it to penetrate *inside* the scope of language. Finally, it is necessary to interpret Hungarian neology on the basis of the joint movement of three factors. These met and effected (sometimes by weakening, sometimes by strengthening) each other in the demand for a re-formulation of the concept of the nation, in the changing of the theoretical attitude to language, and in the slow process of becoming independent on the part of literature. Neology might be considered to be integrated from a *political* point or view: each participant, without regard to his position in the debate, was the supporter of the new concept of the nation, which produced the theoretical background and framework of the polemic. The different aspects of literature and attitudes to language in themselves cannot be evaluated from a political point of view. From the standpoint of the history of ideas and mentality, the supporters of neology were right for the most part, even if unfortunately, they could not prove their demands for the autonomous aesthetic work of art by high-toned works. This great debate on neology stirred up and clarified for the first time the route for the slow and not always sensational development of modern literature, in the course which, those forces seeking to prevent the development of the literature of subjectivity slowly withdrew. Presumably, the greatest value of the Hungarian neologist polemic was that it removed the remnants of the old-fashioned concept. In this light all those insufficiencies in the theoretical arguments or in the suggested stylistical devices can be neglected. The most important illustration of the whole process is given by the attitude of Ferenc Kölcsey and the young writers of the 1810s. When in the middle of the decade the neologist movement was attacked by a pamphlet which aimed at the linguistic characteristics of neology, they used *literary*, and not *linguistical*, parody in their rough reply. In so doing, they refuted not the style of their adversaries, but their aesthetic attitude.