

## István Gyöngyösi, the „Hungarian Ovid”

JÓZSEF JANKOVICS

*To Jolanta Jastrzębska, the author  
of a Gyöngyösi-paper  
read at Sárospatak in May, 2004*

The reception of the two most important poets of 17th century Hungarian baroque poetry, Miklós Zrínyi and István Gyöngyösi, has run in opposite directions in Hungarian literary history. Gyöngyösi was preferred to Zrínyi at first, however, the latter subsequently reached his zenith and continued to enjoy a renaissance well into the present. Zrínyi, both as poet and politician, became one of the most popular classical figures studied in the 20th century, while Gyöngyösi was almost dropped from the canon. Since the critical edition of his works published in the beginning of the last century was not reprinted, his name was almost forgotten, and it was during the last two or three decades that he got into the front line of research.

In the beginning, his reception seemed to be a success story. His contemporaries in the second half of the 17th century and those in the immediate posterity considered him the poet par excellence, an original genius who succeeded in following and preserving both the classical and the Hungarian literary tradition. His poetry was especially highly valued in the second half of the following century. His books were reprinted from time to time during the 18th century, his manuscripts spread in copies; and his collected works published in 1796, while not wholly authentic, had at least made his texts available to readers. Some years before this Sándor Kovásznai a professor of classical philology in Marosvásárhely, Transylvania (who was an assistant to József Teleki in preparing the poems of Janus Pannonius for publication), realizing the special qualities of Gyöngyösi's poetry, had wanted to edit his works in a scholarly edition. Kovásznai recognized as Gyöngyösi's particular virtues his accurate imitation of Roman authors, and his extraordinary knowledge of rhetorics and poetics. In his unpublished comments on *Phoenix redivivus*, Gyöngyösi's long poem about fate, battles, marriage, and death of the Transylvanian prince János Kemény, which he wanted to publish with critical and textual notes, but which unfortunately remained in manuscript form, he had this to say: „When I started to read the antique poets and collated their works with those of Gyöngyösi's, I came to realize that he had taken all his delicacy, beauty, and charm from them, especially Ovid and Virgil, so that it is impossible to understand his poetry without being familiar with theirs. For just as Ovid and Virgil had imitated and approached Homer and others, so had Gyöngyösi aimed at imitating and reaching the level of Ovid and Virgil, and he did it in an exemplary manner.”<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere in the unpublished preface he wrote: “The source of the delight of Gyöngyösi's poems above other Hungarian poetic works lies in his inclination and ability to fully imitate the classics, above all Ovid, and not some German or French poet. So if Erasmus may be called a Christian Terence or Plautus, then Gyöngyösi may rightly be called a Christian or Hungarian Ovid.”<sup>2</sup> This *epitheton ornans* was first applied to Gyöngyösi by Péter Bod, the well-

known biographer in his encyclopaedia *Magyar Athenas* about the middle of the 18th century, and it is important to note that, just as in Kovásznai's text, Ovid's name was mentioned together with Virgil's. This is an accurate observation, since beside the overwhelming influence of Ovid, it is Virgil's *Aeneid* that proved to be the most important source for the Hungarian poet. This was a peak period for the reception of these classical authors both in Europe as a whole, and for Zrínyi and Gyöngyösi in Hungary.

Some years after Bod, Gyöngyösi was still esteemed by other „literary gentlemen,” whose appreciation was summarized by József Gvadányi: „Such a talented great poet had never been born by a Hungarian mother, and perhaps there will not be born again in the near future.”<sup>3</sup> His talent as a story teller, his delightful language, excellent versification with its strict caesures, fine metaphors, amusing descriptions, the melodic qualities of his astonishing rhymes, lively alexandrines, and his classical allusions – all of these had made his poetry highly enjoyable for his audience.

With the passing of time, however, as the Enlightenment and then Romanticism had introduced a new literary taste, including a „modern” style, a sweeter music in poetic language, and a demand for originality, Gyöngyösi became the butt of critics, especially Ferenc Kazinczy, who while admiring him at first, came to condemn him for his lack of composition, diffuseness, redundancy, and what he considered the monotony of his rhyme schemes. Ferenc Kölcsey, the author of the Hungarian national anthem, had also formulated a cruel critical judgement: according to him, Gyöngyösi, while having an intimate knowledge of mythology and inheriting his capacity for description and character-painting from Ovid, „gave nothing to the nation, which could be called poetically worthwhile.”<sup>4</sup> These statements came to determine the tone of reception for about half a century, and it was the literary historian Ferenc Toldy, and the great poet János Arany, who began a reevaluation of the baroque poet in the second half of the 19th century. In spite of this promising start, Gyöngyösi was nonetheless attacked during almost the entire 20th century for a host of so-called „mistakes”: a superfluous use of mythological machinery, the banality of his frequent topoi, his unnecessary classical allusions, his awkward mixture of genres, excessive lyricism, lack of composition, inability to create strong characters, and making lengthy and boring digressions.

In light of recent developments in scholarly research, new advances in literary theory such as narratology and hermeneutics, these objections, based as they are on a postromantic aesthetic, are anachronistic and historically incorrect. In fact, the „imperfections” listed above may justly be considered virtues if seen from the point of view of baroque rhetorics and poetics. Clearly, Gyöngyösi's aim had been to cater to the taste and expectations of the readers of his own age. His educated readers could readily grasp most of his classical allusions, recognizing his intertextual references to mythological figures and events. They were fully aware of the working of his mythological framework and the role of time in epic poetry; they not only enjoyed the long digressions, but expected them. Author and audience spoke a common language – hence the possibility of a real dialogue between them.<sup>5</sup> From the technical viewpoint of rhetorics and poetics, Gyöngyösi was one of the most self-conscious artists in the Hungarian literature of his time. In the prefaces and dedications to his epic works he gave general explanations of his poetic program and strategy, in which his adherence to the classical tradition was of paramount importance. Latin poetry – „Deák poésis” in Hungarian – was the model by which defined the character of his own poetry, and his special relationship to it also identified the difference between him and his fellow poets and predecessors in Hungarian literature. According to Gyöngyösi, it was through

this distinction that his poetic works were able to reach the level of real *belles lettres*. However, his poetic achievement consists in far more than a simple imitation of Ovidian or Virgilian examples. More significant, the *fiction* in his poems is a unique blend of mythological machinery and historical facts. Antique gods are seen directing the deeds of 17th century figures; Venus and Cupid make them fall in love; Mars rules their military actions; the Fates weave the thread of their lives; and it is the Muses that assist the poet in giving form to his material. The social, political, and moral activities of his historical figures are motivated by having fate on their side and attaining renown in this world, all the while their personal virtues coming to expression via mythological characters or personae of Greek and Latin literature, the latter well known to the contemporary reader. In his preface to his great poem *Márssal társolkodó Murányi Vénus* (The Alliance of Mars with the Venus of Murány) he states his aim: just as Dido's love for Aeneas, that of Paris for Helen, or Thisbe for Pyramus had made their names resound through the centuries, so does he wish to achieve fame for his own hero, the palatine of Hungary Ferenc Wesselényi, and his wife, Mária Széchy. He also wants to ensure immortal life for János Kemény and Anna Lónyay, for Imre Thököly and Ilona Zrínyi, the latter two both princes of Transylvania. In order to highlight their importance and to fulfill the demands of baroque representation, he borrows figures and topoi from mythology to embellish his historical narrative. As he admits, „szaporítottam azt holmi régi fabulás dolgoknak, hasonlatosságoknak és másféle leleményes toldalékoknak közbenvetésével, akik nélkül is a história és abban lévő dolgok valósága végben mehetett volna ugyan, mindazonáltal azoknak nagyobb ékességére és kedvesebb voltára nézve inkább tetszett azt az említett dolgokkal megszínlenem, mint azok nélkül, Tinódi Sebestyén módjára csupán csak a dolgok valóságát fejeztem ki a versek együgyűségével,”<sup>6</sup> that is, he could have written their story realistically, in the straightforward „artless” manner of a chronicle after Sebestyén Tinódi, the wandering minstrel of the previous century, but instead he chose to decorate the plain chronological sequence of events with fabulous material, classical analogies and poetic inventions, i.e., with what the most outstanding 16th century Hungarian poet Bálint Balassi had called *phantasia poetica*, just for the sake of enhancing the beauty of the poem, and for the delight and amusement of the reader. Clearly, in Gyöngyösi's deliberate mixture of historical facts and mythological ornamentation, we can detect a program for a new type of fictional literature.

In order to achieve his stated purpose, Gyöngyösi made use of all his considerable erudition, the result of what must have been a thorough classical education. (He was a student of Comenius at Sárospatak. In the prose texts to his poems there recur the names of, and citations from, Horace, Propertius, Juvenal, Seneca, and Claudianus; of the latter's *Rape of Proserpina* he made a Hungarian translation, or more correctly a paraphrase.) It is an integral part of Gyöngyösi's practice to translate word for word long passages from classical works and insert them in his poem; at other times he quotes, imitates, alludes and refers to other texts. It is often enough for him to mention certain names of persons and places, since he can be confident the whole story will come to life in the mind of his readers. (Demophon and Phyllis, Byblis and Caunus, Theseus and Ariadne, Hero and Leander, Daedalus and Icarus, Phaeton, Laodameia and Protesilaus, Tereus and Procne, to name only the most frequent examples.) The major sources for his allusive network are the works of Ovid: the *Heroids*, *Metamorphoses*, *Ars amatoria*, etc. Gyöngyösi is said to be the author of some anonymous translations into Hungarian of the letters of Paris to Helen, Helen to Paris, and those of Penelope to Ulysses, which shows not only his special interest in the poetic

epistle, following and indeed outdoing Balassi's and Zrínyi's experiments in the genre, but also explains the frequency of this device in his poems. The heroes and heroines in his poems exchange letters in a manner and style similar to their classical models, all the while maintaining their Hungarian character and the everyday simplicity of their language.

As we have seen, the literary arbiters of the Enlightenment and subsequent critics were near-unanimous in finding Gyöngyösi's intertextual embellishments superfluous. He was not only blamed for mixing genres, but was accused of being incapable of writing an epic, or even finding an adequate topic for such a poem. It was said that while in his major works certain features of the epic are demonstrably present, they fail to meet the traditional requirements of the genre as a whole, since he includes too many improper elements from other genres such as the epithalamium, panegyrics, epistles, and the verse chronicle. However, if we hold, as this writer does, that Gyöngyösi was a literary artist of the first order, the question inevitably arises: did he really want to write an epic at all?

The problem was raised first by Imre Bán in the 1960s, who gave perhaps the best modern portrait of Gyöngyösi in the handbook on the history of Hungarian literature.<sup>7</sup> He compared Gyöngyösi's technique of writing an epic with that of Giambattista Marino, and has found certain similarities – an important point because of the connection between Marino's work and Ovid. As is well known, „l'Ovidio napoletano” preferred Ovid and Claudianus to Homer and Virgil. This fact should have certain consequences for Gyöngyösi's manipulation of the genre, since he seems to have been more interested in presenting matters of love and conjugal relationships than describing heroic action in a lofty, pathetic style. Based on this assumption, it is perhaps possible to identify more precisely the genre Gyöngyösi's „failed” epics had been approximating all along. Ferenc Toldy, the 19th century literary historian, had already called Gyöngyösi's poems „novels in verse,” and János Arany agreed, though blaming the poet's lack of talent for composition, and found his works rather „novella” like – that is a story dealing with certain novelties.<sup>8</sup> Some fifty years later József Túróczi-Trostler conjectured that his works took the place of the missing sentimental novel, a „low” or secular-profane genre, which appeared in Hungarian literature only near the end of the 18th century, a hundred years after Gyöngyösi.<sup>9</sup>

Following up the suggestions of Levente Nagy,<sup>10</sup> if we take a closer look at the handling of time, language, and narrative technique in three of Gyöngyösi's poems of this type, we may draw a few important conclusions. According to Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of novel, this genre is made up of three constituent elements: laughter, multilinguality (heteroglossia), and events taking place in the present. (Bakhtin's heteroglossia does not denote the use of different languages but the intermingling of distinct voices or discourses coming from individual subject positions.) To conclude briefly, it is quite clear that all three novelistic components are present in Gyöngyösi's poems. The stories are based on present events, the heroes are well-known contemporaries of Gyöngyösi; laughter can be seen to derive from the parody inherent in the imitation of classical works, at times even approaching the level of travesty, and from the farcicality of situation and humor of the characters as well. Last but not least, the univocity of the epic has been replaced by the polyphonic discursiveness of Gyöngyösi's narratives. *Oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua* alternate economically, while readers must determine on their own as to the identity of the speakers. In Gyöngyösi's major poems, the mixture of genres does not emanate from an inability to write a traditional epic; rather, it is a case of the author's wish to present his narrative in a multiplicity of

## István Gyöngyösi, the „Hungarian Ovid”

discourses. The inclusion of letters, anecdotes, chronicles, lyrics seems to indicate Gyöngyösi's deliberate intentions to move away from the rigid conventions of the epic, and to take steps toward the new genre of the romantic novel or novel in verse. He has thus proved to be not only a preserver of the Ovidian-classical tradition, but a seminal figure in the subsequent birth of the Hungarian novel.

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. JANKOVICS József, *Gyöngyösi István költészetének poétikai-retorikai forrásvidéke*, in *Religió, retorika, nemzettudat régi irodalmunkban*, eds. BITSKEY István and OLÁH Szabolcs. Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, Debrecen, 2004, 332.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. GYÖNGYÖSI István, *Porábúl megéledett Főnix*, eds. JANKOVICS József and NYERGES Judit. Balassi Kiadó, Budapest, 1999, 290.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. GYÖNGYÖSI István, *Márssal társolkodó Murányi Vénus*, eds. JANKOVICS József and NYERGES Judit. Balassi Kiadó, Budapest, 1998, 193.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>5</sup> KIBÉDI VARGA Áron, *Retorika, poétika, műfajok (Gyöngyösi István költői világa)*, *Irodalomtörténet*, 1983/3, 545–591.

<sup>6</sup> *Porábúl megéledett Főnix*, op. cit., 199–200.

<sup>7</sup> *A magyar irodalom története, 2, A magyar irodalom története 1600-tól 1772-ig*, ed. KLANICZAY Tibor, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1964, 184–195.

<sup>8</sup> TOLDY Ferenc, *A magyar költészet története, Az ősidőktől Kisfaludy Sándorig*, ed. SZALAI Anna.

Szépirodalmi Kiadó, Budapest, 1987, 215.; Arany János, *Gyöngyösi István*, in *Arany János Összes Művei*, XI, Prózai Művek, 2, ed. NÉMETH G. Béla, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1968, 434–435.

<sup>9</sup> TÜRÓCZI-TROSTLER József, *A magyar irodalom európaizálódása*, in *Magyar irodalom – Világirodalom*, II, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest, 1961, 35.

<sup>10</sup> NAGY Levente, *Imitációs technikák és az eposz regényesedése a XVII–XVIII. századi magyar epikában*, in *Miscellanea*, Tanulmányok a régi magyar irodalomról, ed. SZENTPÉTERI Márton, József Attila Kör–Kijárat Kiadó, Budapest, 2001, 95.

\* Author expresses his gratefulness to dr. László Géfin for his generous assistance in the translation of the text.