

BOOK REVIEWS

Agnes Huszar Vardy, *A Study in Austrian Romanticism: HUNGARIAN INFLUENCES IN LENAUS POETRY*. State University of New York College at Buffalo, Program in East European and Slavic Studies Publication No. 6, Buffalo, Hungarian Cultural Foundation, 1974. 173 pp., with illustrations, notes and bibliography.

Proceeding from the contention that Lenau's critics have "constantly" taken only extreme stances in connection with the Hungarian element in Lenau's poetry, "some dismissing the influence as non-existent or very minimal, others presenting him as a 'Hungarian poet who sang in German'," the author undertakes what she calls "the first attempt at a comprehensive analysis of Hungarian imagery in Lenau's works" with a view toward unraveling this problem.

Vardy's contention is somewhat over-stated; however, there is no denying that extreme views have been put forth concerning Lenau and Hungary, particularly by some who have written a great deal about the poet — for the most part, Austrians and Hungarians anxious to claim him as their own. The latter have tended to assign undue importance to Lenau's poems dealing with Hungary (a total of only nine have clearly Hungarian themes, and Vardy has appended these to her text), while the former have often displayed here, as elsewhere, the kind of misunderstanding of Austria's neighbors at which Hungarians never cease to marvel. To quote an Austrian scholar chosen at random: Josef Nadler writes, in his *Literaturgeschichte Österreichs* (Salzburg, 1951, p. 253), about the Czechs and the Hungarians in the first half of the last century:

Diese Völker hatten seit Menschengaltern nur ein verkümmertes Eigenleben der Sprache und des volkhaften Bewusstseins geführt. Sie . . . fanden sich einem blühenden [Austrian] Kulturleben gegenüber, das

ihnen so schön wie fremd und nicht erreichbar scheinen musste. Die natürliche Schwermut ihrer Volksseelen und die Schwermut jedes Volksliedes, auf das sie zunächst angewiesen waren und das sie allein vorzeigen konnten, mischt sich... mit Sehnsucht nach einer noch fernen Zukunft, mischt sich aus Nichthaben, Habenwollen und Nichthabenkönnen mit dem Gefühl des Ungenügens und dem Bewusstsein aller innern Hemmungen

Surely the Czechs have another view of this, too; but to make such a statement about 19th century Hungary, which then could already look back on several hundred years of independent literary tradition, especially in poetry, and which, having just passed through a rather sophisticated period of intellectual enlightenment, was at that very time producing first-class writers whose works have since come to be regarded as classics (Csokonai, Vörösmarty, Kölcsey, the Kisfaludy, etc.), is simply absurd; nevertheless, such examples of learned ignorance abound in circles that ought to know better.

Vardy is in a unique position to deal with her topic: a *Germanist* of Hungarian extraction, she understands Lenau's Hungary better than his non-Magyar critics, yet as an American scholar she is able to maintain a higher degree of emotional detachment from the subject than certain Hungarian authors have shown. Thus she is able to prove, more or less convincingly, that which should have been obvious to everyone all along, had literary historians not created the problem: namely, that there is a definite Hungarian influence discernible in Lenau's works, that "the memories of the formative years of childhood and youth never left him," and that his uniqueness in this respect is that, unlike other Germans using Hungarian imagery (Körner, Grillparzer, Stifter et al), Lenau understood the imagery he used, with mind and heart alike. She also demonstrates, probably quite correctly, that Lenau's evidently one-sided, highly romantic depiction of Hungary is not due to his inability to grasp "his native land in all its meaningful reality," but rather to the fact that he never in-

tended to write anything but "highly personalized impressions of his youth" — and that therefore all attempts to evaluate the Hungarian elements of his works outside of "the context of heir artistic imagery" are *ab ovo* false. Many of the poet's critics have failed to keep this in mind.

With regard to method, after describing the problem of Lenau's Hungarian relationship, the overall interest of German literary circles for Hungary in the 19th century and after rendering a brief, but thorough biographical sketch of the poet's early years, Vardy dedicates one chapter each to Lenau's treatment of the *puszta*, Hungarian Gypsy music and "Hungarian Genre Pictures," by which she means three stereotypes frequently encountered in the poems: the figure of the hussar, the Gypsy and the *betyár* (outlaw). By analyzing passages and providing an explanation for numerous details that may not be entirely intelligible to readers not familiar with Hungarian local color, she attempts to interpret the *moods* Lenau intended to evoke with his "Hungarian" poems — whereby she is careful to remind us, again and again, that we are not dealing with Hungarian reality in any sense, but rather with Lenau's subjective, one-sided and romanticised impressions of the landscape and some of its — actually atypical — denizens. In this, her central purpose, the author is, generally speaking, successful, if somewhat uneven in her approach: thus the section on the *puszta*, especially in connection with the "Schilflieder," seems rather inadequate.

Other faults of the work are minor; a somewhat greater attention to reading the galley proofs would have eliminated most of them. There is an occasional error in interpretation on the author's part: for example, while commenting (on p. 116) on the poem "Die Bauern am Tissastrande," she states, "The contrast between the forces of old and new is skillfully conveyed through the effect of the Magyar melodies upon the two generations in the *csárda*. At the beginning, the older peasants are content to sit and watch... but as the melody of the old recruiting song resounds in the air, they... leap to

their feet and join . . . in the dance. They are soon left alone with the memories of the past as the *gypsies and young peasants take their leave . . .*” The trouble is, Lenau mentions nothing about the young peasants leaving; in fact, only the musicians depart, while the peasants, old *and* young, continue to dance, “Toren, die immer noch sprangen, / während schon längst, erschöpft und versiegt / Ihre Musik war heimgegangen.” It is therefore not “evident that Lenau sided with the new generation,” and the conclusions Vardy tries to draw from the passage regarding Lenau’s political opinions are not tenable. (Elsewhere, too, the political arguments are weak.)

On one minor point, the author’s knowledge of the Hungarian landscape fails her. In discussing the “Schilflieder,” she mentions only Lake Fertő as a natural swamp, and adds that in addition to this, “numerous smaller, artificial or man-made lakes and fishponds can be found on the Great Hungarian Plain.” These, too, she implies, could have influenced Lenau. But the truth is that there were extensive bogs and marshes on the *Alföld*, until they were drained late in the last century; as for the man-made lakes, most of them were bulldozed out in Vardy’s own lifetime. Bismarck’s main reason for not invading Hungary — seriously contemplated during Prussia’s war with Austria — was that the swamps in the interior of the country would make military operations difficult and that the army would be decimated by disease. Lenau’s moods were not evoked by “fishponds.”

As for style, the work is enjoyable to read; only an occasional bit of sentimental vaporizing had better been left out. “These giants of nature could tell us so much. But apparently not even Lenau was able to penetrate their secrets” — we learn of the oaks of the Bakony woods. And the translations of the poems, into English prose, must sometimes cause us to wince. Yet Vardy has our sympathy here: “and the swine drops without a sound” is certainly not an acceptable rendition of “Und lautlos sinkt der Eichelmast / Entseelter Gast,” but let him who is able to do these lines justice cast the first stone.

All in all, Vardy’s book is a valuable contribution to Ame-

rican Lenau-studies and a welcome addition to Hugo Schmidt's recent *Nikolaus Lenau* (New York, 1971). It should be read by all who are interested in Lenau's life and works.

LOUIS J. ELTETO
Portland State University

Ilse Pracht-Fitzell: *Gedichte*, Eine Auswahl.

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Das Büchlein enthält eine Sammlung von 22 Gedichten, die unter der Dedizierung "Für John" steht. Der Themenkreis der Gedichte ist ein vielfältiger. Er beginnt mit dem ersten Gedicht "Der Maulwurf", berührt Tier und Pflanze, Eintritt in die Welt und Tod, Glaube, Liebe und Erinnerung. Gegen Ende der Sammlung steigt er auf und in die Höhe mit dem Gedicht "Die Lerche". Obwohl die Themen unverbunden sind, so vereint sie doch alle eine aufwärtsstrebende Bewegung.

Die Formen der Gedichte variieren. Man findet straff organisierte und freie rhythmische Formen. Die Versfüße sind entweder steigend (jambisch) oder fallend (trochäisch) mit einigen wenigen Ausnahmen. In den meisten freien rhythmischen Gedichten gliedert ein regulär-irreguläres Endreimschema die einzelnen Gedichtsabschnitte.

Zwei Gedichte, "Der Maulwurf" und "Der Schatz", haben nicht nur das Motiv des Schatzes gemein; die geheimnisvolle Atmosphäre, die Sprache und der Rhythmus erinnern stark an Goethes "Schatzgräber", so stark sogar, dass man fast gewillt ist, sie als in der Manier Goethes verfasste Gedichte zu bezeichnen. In dem ersten Gedicht begräbt der Maulwurf seinen Schatz, in dem zweiten Gedicht versucht eine Frau ihn auszugraben. Der Schatz in beiden Gedichten ist wohl der Sinn des Lebens. Im zweiten Gedicht wird dieser Schatz noch näher bezeichnet durch das Symbol der Rose, es ist die Liebe.