

Czigányik, Zsolt. 2023. *Utopia Between East and West in Hungarian Literature*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan Cham (Palgrave Studies in Utopianism, ix). 252 pp.

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This first book in English on the Hungarian utopian tradition is an indispensable springboard for catapulting it into the genre's global mainstream. Czigányik's statements confirm my experience (in the USA) that Hungarian literature is little known in the anglophone world, and that Hungarian utopian literature is virtually unknown and rarely documented in studies of utopian literature and science fiction not written by Hungarian specialists. Czigányik explores the literary and social science dimensions of these works, their history of reception and interpretation, their real-world and intertextual echoes, and their fundamental ambiguity. They credibly constitute a tradition, via similarities and/or direct influence.

Czigányik begins with the nature of utopian thought and literature in a social context, and the unique social position of Central Europe and particularly Hungary. The second chapter treats the emergence of utopian thinking in Hungarian literature and the reception of Thomas More's *Utopia*. The subsequent chapters engage these authors and works: György Bessenyei, *Tariménes utazása* (The Voyage of Tariménes, 1804); Imre Madách, *Az ember tragédiája* (The Tragedy of Man, 1862, with multiple translations); Mór Jókai, *A jövő század regénye* (The Novel of the Century to Come, 1872); Frigyes Karinthy, *Utazás Faramidoba* (A Voyage to Faramido, 1916) and *Capillaria* (1921, both translated by Paul Tabori); Mihály Babits, *Elza pilóta, avagy a tökéletes társadalom* (Pilot Elza, or the Perfect Society, 1933); Sándor Szathmári, *Kazohinia* (Voyage to Kazohinia, 1941, translated by Inez Kemenes) and other works.

The main utopias/dystopias of Madách, Karinthy, and Szathmári can be read in English and Esperanto. Karinthy was an Esperantist; other Esperantists translated his works. Szathmári, marginal in Hungarian literature unlike the others, wrote his fiction in both Hungarian and Esperanto. I hope to translate Szathmári's other essential dystopia, *Mašimondo* (in Esperanto) / *Gépvilág* (in Hungarian), into English. Jókai was popular with translations in the anglophone world for a time, but only in recent years did a blogger translate thirteen chapters of Jókai's utopia into English. Lack of an English translation of Babits's dystopia *Elza pilóta*, which anticipates Orwell's *1984* in certain respects, is a serious cause for regret.

Utopian studies is increasingly compelled to address national utopian traditions; here, the hitherto marginalized, liminal situation of Central Europe. Considering authorial intention and reception, this genre's utopian character is inherently ambiguous. Utopia and dystopia are

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² See http://autodidactproject.org/bib/utopia_hungarian.html for references and links to Dumain's bibliographies, podcasts, videos, and texts on Madách, Karinthy, and Szathmári.



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intertwined concepts; opposite interpretations of many works are inherently possible. Here the Hungarian tradition is noteworthy, as satire and irony are especially strong.

Not counting Lőrinc Orczy's lost work *A fehér tatárok országa* (The Country of the White Tartars), the first proper utopia written in Hungarian was authored by György Bessenyei. *Tariménes utazása*, the *summa* of Bessenyei's appropriation of Enlightenment ideas, though written in 1804, was subject to censorship and not published until 1930. The ostensible utopia, *Totoposz*, in which "one can rise without repressing the other," is governed by an enlightened queen. Religious tolerance in a society of rather minimalist religions is the norm. Counterpoised to *Totoposz* are the *kirakades*, whose society is "natural" and "uncivilized." These two groups war against the dystopic *Jajgádia* (Land of Sorrows), a stand-in for Habsburg rule. The complex clashes of utopian and dystopian models combined with satire render this work ambiguous.

Jókai's 1904 novel *Ahol a pénz nem isten* (Where Money Is Not Divine) embodies the Hungarian utopian concern with social justice and nonmonetary values, but also contains a pessimistic prognostication uncharacteristic of the utopian elements of Jókai's work of the 1870s. *A jövő század regénye* (The Novel of the Century to Come, 1872) is relatively peripheral in his oeuvre but was popular and influential in Hungary. Jókai's preface exhibits his awareness of the utopian literary tradition. The novel's ingredients include the problems of militarism, colonialism, class conflict, corruption, overpopulation, and ecological disaster, conceived ultimately in a metaphysical fashion. A century hence, Hungary has advanced to a preeminent position in the Austro-Hungarian empire and internationally. The outstanding technological innovation is a flying machine that transforms social life and ultimately induces world peace. Gender equality of a sort is achieved, but based on traditional gender assumptions. Religion is rationalized, ecumenical, and this-worldly. The novel contains three utopias: global twentieth century utopian developments following the final wars; the city-state of *Home*, whose inhabitants are essentially stockholders in a polity organized like a joint-stock company; and, finally, an isolated "natural" utopia, *Kin-Tseu*, organized along traditional lines but harmonious due to the magical effect of the natural environment.

Czigányik sees God bookending Madách's *The Tragedy of Man* as remote and essentially deistic. Adam's preoccupation is secular: life on Earth in succeeding historical stages. Czigányik is not alone in viewing the play as open-ended, with an inconclusive interplay of utopian and dystopian oppositions. Madách addresses the problems of progress, democracy, despotism, interpersonal cohesion and mob rule, the role of an enlightened leader, reason and earthly passion.

The phalanstery scene—in which science, technology, and instrumental reason rule and emotion has been banished from an allegedly utopian, socialist society—is where "progress" comes to an end. A contemporaneous Hungarian concern infiltrates an otherwise cosmopolitan narrative: Adam objects to the abolition of nationhood. Depersonalization renders the phalanstery a proto-totalitarian state.

Finally, Czigányik emphasizes Eve's role. Gender differences are relevant here, as in the other novels discussed. Adam's idealism and Enlightenment rationalism cannot sustain him in the end; Eve's earthly passion saves the day.

Let me add that Lucifer is the spirit of negation, a foil to Adam's idealism in each scene. The ambiguity of God's final intervention after the dream of history has concluded, while providing an escape hatch into optimism, did not prevent controversy and even censorship of this Hungarian classic at various times, as a pessimistic or nontheistic take on Madách's intention could land the play in trouble.

The dystopian era proper enters with Karinthy. Among other Hungarian gulliveriads, the first major contribution is Karinthy's 1916 novella *Voyage to Faremido*, in which Jonathan Swift's Gulliver undergoes his fifth fantastic voyage, this time to a realm of intelligent robots—the Solasis—that speak or sing a language based on musical notes and from their vantage point of greater perfection present a counter-narrative of humanity's flawed evolution. *Faremido* is "utopian" as a satirical foil to the actual dystopian state of the human world. The argument is that human creations are superior to their creator, and like art, so are machines. From the Solasis' standpoint, organic life is parasitic and a dangerous encroachment on superior inorganic life, but the Solasis need not intervene on Earth, as humanity will destroy itself. The Solasis view organic life as an insoluble contradiction of reason and instinct. As this is satire, we cannot claim that Karinthy literally believed the Solasis' thesis, but Szathmári might have.

Karinthy's *Capillaria*, presented as Gulliver's sixth voyage, is a satire of male-female relationships, predicated on the discovery of an underwater queendom in which the pleasure-oriented female oihas dominate and exploit the diminutive male bullpops. While some characterize this satire as misogynistic, Karinthy condemns male-dominated society, criticizing patriarchy within a disharmonious matriarchal scenario.

Babits's *Elza pilota* presents a dystopian society ensconced in perpetual warfare, in which the lower classes have been collectivized to serve the war machine. The younger generation lacks the experience of individuality, which survives among elders, particularly Mrs. Kamuthy, who has not adapted like her husband and fears her daughter Elza being lost in combat. The society has an ostensibly democratic political order, but in fact functions as a fascist state, mirroring developments in Hungary. Individuality shows up sporadically yet dissolves when people become mob-like and manipulable. The threat of death discourages commitment; intimate relationships tend to be short-term and promiscuity prevalent. Babits introduces a metanarrative conundrum in the form of a book describing experiments with manufactured miniature Little Earths, with an insinuation that the world of *Elza pilota* may itself be a miniature laboratory under scientific observation on a larger planet.

II

Of Szathmári's unpublished trilogy *Hiába* (In Vain), consisting of *Múlt* (Past), *Jelen* (Present), and *Jövő* (Future), written before *Kazohinia*, *Hiába: Jövő: Regény* was published in 1991. In an introduction Szathmári purports to present a transparent, unambiguous text, a conceit to reappear in his later fiction. The novel is set in a Marxist Hungary 150 years hence, when a social order intended to be egalitarian and democratic ends up as a stratified autocracy, and even an alternative termed *antropism* ends up badly.

Voyage to Kazohinia, written in in 1935 in Hungarian (according to textual evidence, though Szathmári claimed to have written it first in Esperanto), went through a tortuous publishing history due to repressive regimes and censorship, beginning in 1941. (The Esperanto edition appeared in 1958.) Szathmári not only drew on Swift, but adopted Karinthy's premises as a foundation. Both Karinthy and Szathmári saw *Kazohinia* as the logical extension of *Faremido*. Czigányik suggests that Szathmári anticipated Orwell and was possibly influenced by *Brave New World*, but note that Szathmári disclaimed to have read *Brave New World* before writing *Kazohinia*. Note also that Madách's *Tragedy* was a major influence.

Gulliver, an uncritical, chauvinistic Englishman, first visits the society of the Hins, a self-regulating but entirely emotionless, robotic, utilitarian, "utopian" society under the principle of

kazo. Even the past does not exist for the Hins, thus erasing history as dystopias tend to do. Gulliver's traditional ideas are contradicted by his hosts, but much worse, the hyperrationalist abolition of extra-utilitarian interests, passion, and personal connection (even in sexual relations) proves intolerable. When Gulliver learns of a separate social enclave populated by the "defective" Behins, he, who is also considered defective, is granted his wish to join the Behins. The Behins are the polar opposite of the Hins: they are entirely irrational and live in a world of arbitrary rituals unchecked by empirical reality, a society wracked by instability and violence. Here Gulliver is the rationalist, criticizing the insanity of the Behins, not realizing he is using the same arguments the Hins used against him.

Czigányik recognizes that an explicit dichotomy is established in the exposition of opposed extremes: the positivism of the Hins, who have banished everything not strictly referential from existence, and the irrationalism of the Behins, who dwell in an arbitrary symbolic universe untethered to referentiality and empirical accountability.

Here we need to consider authorial intention, the inevitable reader's reaction, and other thematic characteristics directly relevant to the text or only marginally so. Czigányik and others note that Szathmári expressed a seeming positive view of Hin society. I can confirm that Szathmári disclaimed that it was intended as a dystopia. Neither ordinary readers nor critics can accept this, so they can only read Hin society as another satiric dystopia. Szathmári's elaborated view is also referenced: that humans' instinctual inheritance, which once served survival in a competitive natural environment, is no longer adaptive and must be modified to function in an advanced technological environment, but the impossibility of doing so short of genetic modification leads to an inevitable pessimistic conclusion. I can verify that Szathmári explicitly adopts Karinthy's notion of an "internal structural defect" in human nature.

Czigányik's revulsion against the Hin "utopia" coupled with his intertextual pursuits leads to some distracting extrapolations. The Hins' domination and eventual extermination of the Behins replicates colonial patterns, he observes. Hin society with *kazo* as its doctrine is analogous to Italian fascism. The Hin social order, functioning automatically, possesses the characteristics of a totalitarian regime, but can also be seen as an anarchist society *sans* the human element. This extreme type of instrumental reason, with totalitarian implications, is a recurrent theme in literary dystopias and popular culture, and in this limited sense intertextual associations are of interest, but I deem these interpretations beside the main point in analyzing *Kazohinia*'s conceptual structure.

Czigányik acknowledges *Kazohinia* as a high point in Hungarian utopian literature despite what he sees as a weak narrative structure. I claim it as the summit of this tradition and a twentieth-century dystopian classic, because it uniquely posits and juxtaposes the dichotomous extremes of the dystopias of utopian instrumental rationality and of nihilistic irrationalism, laying bare fundamental ideological and existential dilemmas of modern civilization.

Czigányik also addresses the anthology *Gépvilág és más fantasztikus történetek* (Machine World and Other Fantastic Stories, 1972), consisting of thirteen stories. Szathmári's collected shorter fiction in Esperanto comprises twenty-seven stories, some of which are more directly relevant to Szathmári's central themes than one story Czigányik singles out: "Adalékok a kompofon történetéhez" (Additional Facts to the History of the Compophone), about an artificially intelligent music-generating machine.

Earlier, Czigányik states that "Hins are organic machines, halfway between Solaxis and humans." He is correct, for the novella *Gépvilág* (Machine World, *Maŝinmondo* in Esperanto)

takes the logic of *Kazohinia* to its ultimate conclusion. Czigányik gives us the first analysis in English of *Gépvilág* outside of my talks.

Ever-evolving technology is an instrument of ever-evolving warfare. The state of *Bravia* eventually constructs a fully autonomous machine which is given the prime directive to operate most optimally for the people of *Bravia*. This machine, like the Hins, cannot recognize the contradictions involved in domination and conquest (treated in other stories not mentioned by Czigányik), and so acting in one-sided consistency efficiently exterminates the population of its enemy, *Heronia*. The machines do not stop there; they kill off all of humanity except for those who are reprogrammed with "perfect" robotic dispositions. Eventually, all of humanity is eradicated, and turning to the imperfections of other creatures, the machines proceed to eradicate other species, and all organic life finally disappears. Apparently, the Esperanto version *Maŝinmondo* goes beyond the Hungarian version, as Esperanto publication has long served to evade censorship by repressive regimes. The machines evolve beyond the physical world into the realm of *ultrasubstancoj* (ultrasubstances). I regard this as a major work that invites comparison with other fictional philosophical treatments of artificial intelligence.

Czigányik's rich overview of the unique Hungarian contribution to the common utopian tradition should secure recognition of Hungary's rightful place in it and stimulate needed further research.