

Sándor Szathmári. *Voyage to Kazohinia*. Trans. Inez Kemenes. Williamstown, MA: New Europe Books, 2012. 372 pp.

Reviewed by William Oberly, University of Minnesota

Voyage to Kazohinia, written by Sándor Szathmári (1897-1974) is a dystopian classic of Hungarian literature that stands alongside Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. The story, presented as a sequel to the latter, borrows its main character from Swift. This Gulliver is shipwrecked and arrives in a strange land or country, where he experiences adventures that serve as a satirical mirror to interwar European society. *Kazohinia* was first published in 1941 and republished some five times between 1946 and 2009, plus an English translation that appeared in Budapest in 1975. The present translation by Inez Kemenes is, however, the first to be published in English for wide distribution. *Kazohinia*, a classic of dystopian science fiction circulating within Hungary since its original publication, draws on a Hungarian literary tradition of fantastic writing, whose contributors include important prose writers of the twentieth century, e.g., Mihály Babits, Tibor Déry, and Karinthy Frigyes, the last of whom Szathmári called his spiritual father (see further: Gabriella Harvig, "The Dean in Hungary," *The Reception of Jonathan Swift in Europe*. Herman J. Real, ed. NY: Continuum, 1989, 223-238; John Fekete, "Science Fiction in Hungary," *Science Fiction Studies* 16.2 (1989), 191-200).

The story begins against the backdrop of the invasion of Ethiopia by Fascist Italy in 1935. Gulliver is aboard a ship heading to Shanghai to protect Imperial British trade zones in China from Japanese expansion. Szathmári sets the ironic tone of the story by mocking the nature of Western society, including family structure, religion, economics and imperialism. Although Gulliver sees through the Italian reasoning for the invasion of Ethiopia as a beneficent mission, and though he identifies oil and coffee as the true purpose of Italian expansion, he nonetheless believes that England's mission of "liberating the peoples of the tropics has always been a heartfelt duty. Sufficient proof may, I feel, be found in the many colonies from Southeast India to the Boers, whose peoples were set free from oppression at the cost of heavy battles" (8). Gulliver's blindness to the similar nature of Italian and English imperialism foreshadows his inability to see the similarities between European culture and the dysfunctional society of Kazohinia.

After being attacked by an Italian vessel, Gulliver ends up on the island of Kazohinia, where, in the first half of the book, he is introduced to the apparently utopian Hin society. The Hins are a technologically-advanced people who have no government, money, religion, or even any words for these concepts. The guiding principle that allows the Hins to live in harmony is "kazo," which is described as "pure reason that perceives with mathematical clarity, in a straight line, when and how it must act - so that the individual, through society, reaches the greatest possible well-being and comfort" (44). This ratio-logical method of "organizing work, rest, sleep, sport, food and our attitude toward our fellow human beings" (45) may be a description of how a



New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.



This journal is published by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program and is cosponsored by the University of Pittsburgh Press

successful post-communist state would function. However, Gulliver quickly learns that the Hins are a passionless and robot-like people, who have no art, literature, music, or spiritual side to them, and no concept of romance, which Gulliver finds out when he starts an amusing sexual relationship with a female Hin. Concepts that have no practical place in the running of Hin society are considered "kazi," which means absurdity. Gulliver's belief in God, his sense of nationalism, and the idea of a nuclear family are all considered "kazi" and explained as non-existent concepts. Although for a while Gulliver learns to adapt somewhat to what he considers a monotonous way of life, he grows increasingly bored and restless. Therefore, he eventually asks to live with the Behins, another group, who are considered developmentally disabled and therefore kept in a reservation on the island. What Gulliver is unable to recognize is that Behin society is a distorted mirror to European civilization.

However, he soon becomes disturbed by the illogical nature of the Behins, who, like the Imperial English, Italian or Japanese cultures he describes in the first chapter, operate on highly illogical and violent beliefs and are divided by the false (and highly amusing) barriers of class, religion and sexuality. Gulliver's response to the Behin way of life is made funnier because, being unable to see the similarities between the English and the Behin societies, he explains their concepts as illusions in the same manner that the Hins earlier dismissed his beliefs. When he is almost killed by a frenzied mob for criticizing the Behin power structure, the Hins come to rescue him and subdue the mob. The story then raises the issues of eugenics and genocide by presenting the criteria for separation between Hins and Behins. Gulliver is told by the Hins that the Behin is a lower form of humanity that has not evolved to the level of the Hin and that the Behin's gene pool must be rooted out from Hin society. Szathmári thus asks the reader to question whether a Hin-like utopia is attainable for humans, as our species seems to be incapable of peaceful co-existence and efficient management, as proclaimed by the Hin society that does not refrain from attacks on others (the Behins) they consider weaker.

Written in the thirties and published in 1941 as Hungary was assisting Germany with the invasion of the Soviet Union and the Nazi "Final Solution" for the "Jewish Question," Szathmári's imagery remains chillingly prescient. At the same time, he is able to deliver this serious critique of human nature with biting satire. An interesting sideline to the publication and translation history of *Kazohinia* is that it became one of the classics of Esperanto literature, having been translated by Szathmári himself, probably with help from a colleague more expert in that language (see: David K. Jordan."Esperanto: The International Language of Humor, Or, What's Funny about Esperanto," *Humor* 1-2 (1988), 143-157). Other writers from Orwell, Huxley and Zamyatin have written utopian/dystopian narratives and have raised many of these same issues as Szathmári, but few have done so with greater humor or irony.