

Pataky, Adrienn. *A hangzatkától a szonettkoszig. A magyar szonett történetéről és nagy pillanatairól* [On the history of the Hungarian sonnet and its great moments]. Budapest: Ráció, 2021. 291 pp.

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Adrienn Pataky's recent monograph, similar to the author's earlier work on the Hungarian sonnet, has already drawn significant critical attention, and one would expect it to become a standard point of reference for further studies in the field. The approximately three-and-a-half-century-long Hungarian history (Hungarian mostly in the sense of written in Hungarian, but occasionally also in the sense of written in Hungary) of this poetic form has probably never been subjected to such sustained and theoretically sophisticated scholarly scrutiny. The subject is indubitably very attractive. At least since Ferenc Kazinczy's early-nineteenth-century neoclassical poetic attempts and critical reflections, a range of Hungary's major poets (as well as a host of less canonical figures) have contributed to the tradition. Moreover, the sonnet presents a very important point of connection between Hungarian poetry and a persistent strain in a variety of Western cultures and languages, which inevitably highlights the vital importance of translation as well.

Nevertheless, there is reason to feel puzzled as to whether the study is actually a history of the sonnet or rather an analysis of the practice of certain exceptional sonneteers. In fact, the subtitle of the monograph suggests that the author, too, is slightly in two minds about the question. It promises to be about both "the Hungarian sonnet's history" and "its great moments." Moreover, it is difficult to know what is meant by history in this instance. As a form, the sonnet probably does not have a history, the fourteen lines and strict rhyming patterns are simply too rigid and persistent for that (even the more recent experimental approaches, the variety of sonnet-inspired stanzaic patterns, or indeed the prose translations of sonnets do not add up to a history). On the other hand, if we assume that the sonnet is more than a form and amounts to a genre, an attempt could be made to identify the characteristics that a history could be based upon. However, this is not a case made in the monograph (which alternates between calling the sonnet a genre and a form) and it would be difficult to find a generic description applicable to all cases. Maybe it would be preferable to reconstruct certain at least partially content-oriented traditions of the sonnet and write a history of the love sonnet, for example. Surely, the canonical postures, stylistic registers, as well as the implied gender and power dynamics are embedded in history. However, Pataky shows little interest in such approaches. Neither does she attempt to distinguish

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other sub-categories, like the devotional sonnet, the political sonnet, the loco-descriptive sonnet, where, for instance, changing cultures of religious meditation, addressing public figures or communing with nature could be observed. Another choice not made here would be to present a social history of the form, in the sense of the changing attributions of value and function shaped by the contributions of the authors, the critics, the publishers, and the broader reading public. So, what remains?

First, the study is historical simply in the sense of chronological presentation, very ambitiously from the beginnings to the present day. This enables the author to connect her subject to broader histories of Hungarian and even European culture as well as changes in poetry and readers' tastes in poetry. Although not a full history, a very fascinating network is created from the different intertextual connections established in major poets' works, enabling an investigation of creative engagements with the past, the forging of traditions and the sometimes rebellion-fraught relationship of master and disciple. It is to Pataky's great credit that she manages to overcome insularly national literary history by giving due weight to translations as well.

Second, there is a consistent interest in how certain questions recur and develop throughout the history of the sonnet. Very broadly, these are questions related to language and subjectivity, both connected to the aptitude of the sonnet for self-reflection. These concepts, unquestionably central to all accounts of modern lyric poetry, prove amenable to a certain degree of historical interpretation, although the latter tends to follow rather well-established insights related to the linguistic turn of the twentieth century or the postmodern turn. The other recurrent motif in the study is the more original interest in the sonic, even musical character of these poems, providing us with ample opportunity to recall that the word sonnet is related to the Latin *sonare* ('to sound'). The first unusual word (*hangzatka*) in the title of the book refers to the first attempt to translate the German *Klinggedicht/Klanggedicht* ('sound poem') into Hungarian. This provides the basic context for what is probably the most ambitious intermedial analysis of the monograph: a reading of János Arany's "illegitimate" sonnet entitled *Naturam furcâ expellas* from the perspective of the rather perplexing musical instrument imagery in the text.

The above-mentioned leading motifs organize most of the book, which, accordingly, does not have a unified thesis to argue, nor a linear narrative to present. Instead, it focuses on some of the most important authors of the Hungarian sonnet with an emphasis on what (to use terminology familiar to Anglophone readers) could be called the high modern and postmodern periods. The methodology is typically selected according to what seems to fit the given writers who are, therefore, not expected to play a pre-determined part in a teleological narrative.

Finally, a word about the "great moments" of the Hungarian sonnet. The account of the first half of the twentieth century focuses (conventionally) on the journal *Nyugat* and on the poetry of Attila József. Pataky shows how translating Baudelaire led Endre Ady to the sonnet and how his inspiration provided a creative model for many (Ernő Szép is offered as an example). We see an important gesture towards broadening the canon in according the poetry of Magda Szabó a separate chapter and highlighting the traumatic element in her poetry both before and after the Second World War. Ágnes Nemes Nagy is the other woman poet to receive extended treatment. Although sonnets do not seem to be central to her oeuvre, it is shown how these experiments embody some of Nemes Nagy's thinking on poetics as well as her connection to major poets of the *Nyugat* period and to European authors as Rilke. The chapter on Sándor Weöres, whose sonnets have already received significant critical attention, is relatively brief but

manages to highlight the importance of translation, especially of Mallarmé. Two less obvious choices follow: György Faludy is seen as an instance of the survival of the Petrarchan and neo-Platonic tradition, with a strong interest in the poetry of Michelangelo as well, whereas vocal as well as musical qualities are in the foreground in the chapter on Domokos Szilágyi. Among the postmodernists, unsurprisingly Dezső Tandori and György Petri receive the most attention. The chapter on Petri is exceptionally valuable, because it is based on a study of unpublished manuscripts and typescripts from the poet's largely unpublished heritage. The book concludes with a survey of the contemporary scene, providing ample evidence of the sonnet's unparalleled skills for survival and renewal.

It has been said that genre history has had its day. While more work might be needed to clarify methods and aims, reading this monograph reminds us of the vitality of this approach and also of the treasures that it can unearth.