

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### METHODS AND HISTORY: A MILESTONE IN AMERICAN STUDIES IN HUNGARY

(Vadon Lehel: *Az amerikai irodalom és irodalomtudomány bibliográfiája a magyar időszaki kiadványokban 1990-ig.* Eger: EKTF Líceum Kiadó, 1997. 1076 pp.)

If American Studies is to be considered a unique discipline, one of the major issues has been the search for an appropriate methodology in the field. However, owing to the perpetually changing nature and to the inherent complexity of the discipline, the struggle to achieve the establishment of adequate and eternal methods for American Studies has always proven to be futile. The constituent elements delineating the parameters of the discipline itself are so malleable that, after considering new perspectives and investigating all the ramifications of the topic, even the best theoreticians of the field could not explore the issue further than raising the question of how to develop a method for American Studies\*.

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See:

Henry Nash Smith. "Can American Studies Develop a Method?" *American Quarterly*, vol. 9 (1957), 197–208.

Gordon Kelly. "Literature and the Historian." *American Quarterly*, vol. 26 (1974), 141–159.

Gene Wise. "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History." *American Quarterly*, vol. 31 (1979), 293–337.

Michael Cowan. "Boundary as Center: Inventing the American Studies Culture." *Prospects*, vol. 12 (1987), 1–20.

Philip Fisher. "Introduction" to *The New American Studies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, vii–xxii.

'The terms that need to be defined here are plastic' is an understatement, since the study of American culture immanently bears in itself the multiform interpretation of the past and present of social consciousness in such a cultural region where the only constant is change, and where the only culture is multicultural and multiethnic. Furthermore, new temporal and spatial dimensions are attached to the inherent complexity of the study of American culture when it is absorbed through the filter of the common awareness of a culture which is not American. In Hungary American Studies as an academic discipline is still in the phase of establishing its principles, thus the scholar who ventures to study American culture will contribute to establishing methods for the discipline.

The aforementioned propositions vindicate the concept that ready-made methods are not provided for American Studies, so the discipline in Hungary must elaborate and develop methods for itself. In the never-ending process of devising local programs for American Studies, the greatest contribution a scholar can make is to register and record the history of American Studies, which will practice influence upon the emergence of new methods. Lehel Vadon's recent *Bibliography*\* fulfils this mission.

When trying to epitomize a comprehensive volume which is the result of an erudite author's indefatigable research for decades, I struggle with selecting the proper words for describing the impressive volume. Lehel Vadon, the chairperson of the first Department of American Studies in Hungary, has devoted his talent and energy to paving the way initiated by László Országh for American studies in Hungary, and his latest bibliography proves to be the peak of his achievement, and to be the greatest asset and repository for those scholars who wish to expand and develop the discipline.

On the one hand Vadon admits that his errand owes a debt to the Országh legacy, and he regards Országh's oeuvre as the greatest encouragement and motivation to continue to work in a field which

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T. V. Reed. "Theory and Method in American Studies: An Annotated Bibliography." *American Studies International*, vol. 30 (October 1992) 4-34.

Paul Lauter. "Versions of Nashville, Visions of American Studies': Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 27, 1994." *American Quarterly*, vol. 47 (1995), 185-203.

\* Vadon Lehel. *Az amerikai irodalom és irodalomtudomány bibliográfiája a magyar időszaki kiadványokban. 1990-ig*. Eger: EKTF Líceum Kiadó, 1997. 1076 pp.

Országh appeared to be the founding father of, and which is still in its immediate post-nascent phase in Hungary. The bibliography is considered to be a contribution to accomplishing the program that was launched and formulated in László Országh's policy-making declamatory essay, 'Az amerikanisztika feladatai Magyarországon' ('The Tasks of American Studies in Hungary'), in 1965. The essay takes stand for the establishment of scientific research and for the scholarly development of American studies in Hungary.

On the other hand it is also a burden to follow the footsteps of the predecessor, and, at the same time, to achieve something genuine by leaving an indelible mark behind that would be noteworthy in comparison to the perpetually fresh works of the great scholar who cast a long shadow. Lehel Vadon's bibliography is so ingeniously impressive that I must proclaim my conviction here at the beginning that he succeeded in establishing a firm position and reputation in the field of American studies. László Országh laid down the foundation stones of the discipline, and Lehel Vadon's *Bibliography* is definitely a milestone.

The volume has received high critical acclaim from Hungarian scholars of American studies. Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, a reader and a critic of the book, considers it a well-structured volume which is logical in handling concepts, and he highly appreciates the author's accuracy and precision in being faithful to the vast material. In his comments on the volume Zsolt Virágos assumes that the bibliography bears indisputable professional benefits and scholarly values, and it implies important directions for further research in order to achieve a better understanding of the literary and cultural areas in American-Hungarian relations: to analyze the sociology of Hungarian reading habits; to map the political forces that shape book-publishing; to explore the direct and indirect literary and cultural effects. All critics agree that the indispensable bibliography supplies a sore deficiency in a discipline where the gaps and white spots outweigh the known and explored terrain.

A deficiency in the sense that the bibliographies published in Hungary—in spite of being very comprehensive and synthesizing—engaged themselves to cover mainly national literature, and they have not explored foreign literature, or secondary sources and philological studies related to literature from abroad. The exhaustive *A magyar irodalomtörténet bibliográfiája* (*Bibliography of Hungarian Literary*

*History*) accomplishes the aim of establishing an up-to-date synthesis of Hungarian literature, but it fails to involve foreign literature in its scope of observation. Some bibliographies treating individual foreign authors and particular periods of literary history have been published, but they have always been compiled without the author's intention of supplying a complete bibliography of sources.

Up until the 1960s, owing to politico-ideological reasons and to lack of interest, American studies in Hungary accomplished modest results, and it did not carry out an extensive research in the field of registering sources of American literature in Hungary, and this failure obstructed the development of reception research and the exploration and exploitation of American-Hungarian relations. It was László Országh, who first endeavored to found a retrospective bibliography of American literature and literary studies. Under his encouragement and guidance at Lajos Kossuth University doctoral dissertations were written on the Hungarian reception of American authors and literary tendencies, and the first bibliographies were the products of serendipity, as they were derived from those dissertations. Until 1990 only ten bibliographies were published in Hungarian periodicals.

The publication of Vadon's current anthology was preceded by fifteen years of meticulous research and, as he remarks in the preface to his bibliography, assembling data from all possible sources required looking through the pages of 1619 different kinds of periodicals ranging from the publication of the first Hungarian periodicals (*Magyar Hírmondó*, 1780; *Magyar Könyv-Ház*, 1783; *Magyar Musa*, 1786) to 1990. When collecting data, he considered each Hungarian literary publication and examined periodicals that were not born purely in the field of belles-lettres or literary criticism but the ones that are of interest and of value for the literary historian. Furthermore, he focused his attention onto Hungarian publications from the territory of historical Hungary and from other countries.

Vadon conducted a bibliographic exploration into every area of American studies in Hungary: he listed all the literary works by American authors in Hungarian periodicals (primary sources), and he treats studies, essays, reviews and book reports, critical comments and articles (secondary sources). Besides registering belles-lettres and literary criticism, the bibliography encapsulates those publications of cultural history, publicism, bibliographical literature and other fields of science that are closely linked to the literary life of the United

States. In spite of the huge collected material, he did not select the data according to any criterion, or he did not wish to filter or grade the bibliography by considering critical principles.

Due to the masterly structuring and editing the author succeeded in compiling a bibliography which is user-friendly. The reader can find the literature related to a special field in one chapter, however, owing to the extreme difficulty of categorizing works bearing overlapping features, publications are mentioned under several headings. When trying to find data, the user must consider the aforementioned structuring principle and is advised to check related topics.

The bibliography can be divided into two main parts: authors' part and general part.

The authors' part follows the alphabetical order of American authors, and the chapters are the names of the authors, who are referred to after the genres they belong to. The authors' pen-names, pseudonyms, dates of birth and death are provided. The personal bibliographies consist of two parts: primary sources and secondary sources. The primary sources are quoted in chronological order according to genre-division. The translators of literary works are mentioned too. The secondary sources list works related to authors and their writings in chronological order. Due to the great abundance of secondary sources, they are grouped into thematic units of essays, articles, publications, news, book reviews and reports, film criticism, TV review, radio review, and literary works about the author. The demanding author of the bibliography compiled data with such care that the titles of the secondary sources are occasionally annotated, which is an invaluable help to the users. Nothing escapes the authors attention when he quotes the titles with their date of publication, volume, issue and page number.

The general part contains such sources that treat American literature in general, and the works in this segment are not only related to individual authors and their oeuvres. If the topic of a source on a particular author addresses questions linked to American literature in general, it will be listed both in this part and the authors' part as well. To make the general part more user-friendly, Vadon groups the sources into thematic units of prose, poetry, drama, theater, literary history, literary theory, literary criticism, American-Hungarian relations, reception, comparative studies, bibliography, publishing,

press, book reviews and reports on anthologies in Hungarian, and miscellaneous.

The 'Appendix' containing the chronological listing of the 1619 periodicals that were examined designates those 395 publications the data of which were absorbed into the bibliography. The 'Index of Names' and the 'Index of Translators' alphabetize all the personal names that occur in the bibliographic title-descriptions, but they do not quote names from the publishing data, pseudonyms, pen-names, acronyms, abbreviations, monograms or initials.

When writing about a book like this, I cannot avoid the question of utility.

Besides being an invaluable philological aid to americanists, librarians, literati, historians, sociologists and students, the book will accelerate processes that will encourage those who want to carry out research in this area. By enhancing the search for new topics it should be an indispensable book for professors and students in higher education and in Ph.D. courses. Furthermore, among the public for American Studies, I must include the audience which, according to Jay Gurian, has a special significance in relation to the discipline, as this inclusion establishes the totality of the discipline. He writes, "If we have a 'method,' it is the approach to ideas and consequences in the round – a total approach something like the 'total theatre' of Bertold Brecht. From the communication point of view, American Studies wants more than most disciplines to include its audiences."<sup>8</sup>

The book opens new vistas since the author does not regard 1990 as a boundary for his research, and he is aware of the transience of such a study, so he includes some references and data from later years. Secondary sources from the 1990s are mentioned related to Kimberley M. Blaeser and Patricia Riley. The choice is not accidental as it indicates new fields of American Studies by focusing on ethnic literature.

Not only does the Bibliography perform the task of being a literary document, but by considering the Hungarian authors of secondary sources, the issues and topics that were explored by them, the politico-ideological commitment of the media, and the indoctrination of the reading public the reader may explore the intriguing questions of the

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Jay Gurian. "American Studies and the Creative Present." *Midcontinent American Studies Journal* (Spring 1969.)

alterations in canon-formation and the changes in social consciousness in Hungary.

A researchers' dilemma is that, on the one hand, they must consider data in retrospect, they must explore what has been written on their topic, and, on the other hand, they must constantly search for genuinely new methods for their work, they must always be in the state of rejuvenation. The greatest strength of the *Bibliography*, which is a record of the history of American culture in Hungary, is that it incites scholars to find answers to the eternal historical and methodological questions that will always stimulate researchers of American Studies to seek new answers: How did American Studies begin in Hungary? What was its reception in the Hungarian academy? How does it differ from previously established disciplines? What have the fields of history, literature, the social sciences, ethnic and gender studies, and popular culture contributed to American Studies? What does it mean to study American culture in a Hungarian context?

The final conclusion is that the *Bibliography* contributes to a better understanding of the changes that shape the character of American Studies in Hungary. It embodies key social and political issues, and indirectly examines the processes of recreating and reconstructing the discipline of American Studies, which "embraces America in a Whitmanish hug, excluding nothing and always beginning."\*

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\*Stanley Bailis. "The Social Sciences in American Studies: An Integrative Conception". *American Quarterly* (August, 1974).

