

Tribute to a Great Scholar of American Studies in Hungary

Vadon, Lehel. *To the Memory of Sarolta Kretzoi Eger: Eszterházy Károly College, Department of American Studies, Líceum Kiadó, 2009. 338 pp.*

András Csillag

Sarolta Kretzoi (1928–2008), the distinguished educator and literary historian of international stature, was among the pioneers who introduced American Studies in Hungary. A survey of the rich bibliography of her writings confirms the fact that—apart from a few British topics—the overwhelming majority of her publications was concerned with American Studies, especially literature, history and culture. She was the first scholar in this country to dedicate virtually all of her research and editorial activity to American Studies, and she did so in an era politically unfriendly to such endeavors. As an inspiring teacher and mentor to a new generation of Americanists in the late twentieth century, her memory lives on in former students—most of them teachers today—who graduated from the universities of Debrecen, Szeged and Budapest.

After working briefly as a bibliographer, Kretzoi's career as an educator and literary scholar found its foothold in 1961, when Professor László Országh, the “grand old man” of American Studies in Hungary, invited her to Debrecen University (KLTE). She taught various courses there to students of English, soon focusing on American literature and culture. Under the guidance of Országh, her patron and mentor, she became an eminent scholar and an impressive, highly appreciated member of the English department. Working with Országh as his close associate, her interest and role in laying the foundations of and finding a place for American Studies in the Hungarian higher educational system proved to be truly significant. Kretzoi, a native of Budapest, was married to a renowned paleontologist. Her earliest publications and translations

appeared under the name “Valkay Sarolta,” then “Kretzoi Miklósné” (Mrs.), a name she used both in everyday life and as an author. Later, especially after her divorce, she changed her name to “Kretzoi Sarolta” or “Charlotte Kretzoi.”

Professor Kretzoi was a remarkable representative of American Studies not only as a scholar but in the lasting impression she left on her students. One of her early disciples at Debrecen’s Kossuth University, Zsolt Virágos, had this to say about her in retrospect:

(She) “was a woman of poise, over thirty, self-possessed, pleasant to look at ... her look was both intelligent and penetrating ... In addition to being a successful teacher, she was also a colorful personality, a devoted colleague, and a sophisticated person whose intellect was always in high gear ... We were particularly impressed with her excellent command of English, not to mention her outstanding pronunciation.” (pp. 11–12)

Following a brief period when she was employed by a publishing house, Kretzoi was invited to the University of Szeged (JATE) in the fall of 1972. She soon became head of the English department there. According to Zoltán Vajda, a contributor to the volume here under review, it is perhaps “not an exaggeration to call her the true founder of English and American Studies in Szeged.” (p. 13) The present reviewer, who was then a student of English at JATE, can only confirm that the standard of organization, instruction and academic work at the department during her tenure improved remarkably. New curricula were developed according to the requirements of modern academic practice. She taught courses mainly in English and American literature but, as she had first-hand experience with and information about life and society in America, a new survey course on American civilization was also introduced.

Kretzoi, who often quoted and referred to Országh in important organizational matters, was herself well-informed and well-connected, fully aware of recent developments on the international academic scene. British and American guest lecturers and instructors came to Szeged on a regular basis, while limited exchange programs to travel abroad were offered to students for the first time in a gradually more tolerant political atmosphere. Thanks largely to Kretzoi’s efforts and motivating spirit, we may observe that the mid-seventies were a time in Szeged when students were able to turn their attention to American Studies as a new and distinct discipline. For those with scholarly ambitions she was always available, ready to give advice and encourage students to involve themselves in

research and conferences. Even after she left Szeged in 1976, she continued to be a mentor to those working toward a doctorate. Her constant inspiration and assistance, occasionally even her use of international connections, proved to be invaluable to her former students in that city.

While still at the University of Szeged, Kretzoi's field of interest and research encompassed various aspects and periods of American literature and culture, from poetry to fiction, essay to translation, biography to history. As Lehel Vadon, the editor of the volume, rightly points out, her translations into Hungarian and her editorial works have played an important role in disseminating American literature in this country. Her pioneering major monograph, *Az amerikai irodalom kezdetei, 1607–1750* (The Beginnings of American Literature), published in 1976, is a comprehensive study of the history of colonial literary culture, in which she discusses the development, flourishing and decline of Puritan literary theory.

In 1977, Sarolta Kretzoi relocated to Budapest, joining the Department of English Language and Literature at Eötvös Loránd University. Thus began the final period of her university career, lasting through 1991, when she retired. In Vadon's assessment, her tenure in Budapest was the culmination of a stellar career indeed: "She was a pivotal professor who brought to the study of American literature and culture a remarkably broad perspective and generated new knowledge in an unusually extensive area, from Puritanism to Modernism, prose and poetry to drama, expanding the canon to include a wide array of diverse voices." (p. 14) At the same time, it should be emphasized that Kretzoi's love of history as a background and a key to understanding social processes was also visible in most of her writings, clearly manifesting itself in such essays on Hungarian–American historical relations as *The American Civil War as Reflected in the Hungarian Press, 1861–1865* (1965) and *United States History in Hungary: Research and Teaching* (1985).

The publication of this commemorative volume, conceived and edited by Professor Lehel Vadon of Eger to pay tribute to Sarolta Kretzoi's oeuvre soon after her death, is an admirable achievement. Vadon, himself a disciple of Kretzoi who felt indebted to her, initiated the project by inviting former students and colleagues to contribute recollections and substantive essays to what must be judged a fitting memorial. In addition to the excellent introductory chapters by the editor

on Kretzoi's biography and scholarly achievements (bibliography), the volume contains nineteen independent essays by Hungarian and American authors. Most of them are renowned scholars in the field of American Studies teaching at Hungarian universities. The contributors celebrate Kretzoi's life and work with essays on subjects ranging from literature, history and gender studies to photography, cinematography, journalism and Hungarian–American relations.

Professor Zoltán Abádi-Nagy's *From Fabula to Story: Cultural Potential and Narrative Technique* is a case study of Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz*. Zsófia Bán, another former student, in her essay *Picture This: Captivity Narratives as Photograph*, gives credit to Kretzoi for her own pursuit of American Studies with these words: "As our academic years went by, she broadened our knowledge in that fascinating, exuberant manner that (was) her very own, opening up a vast, new and exciting territory, a terra incognita, as it were." (p. 77)

Enikő Bollobás, in *Costuming the Body: On Gender Constructions in James, Chopin, and Wharton*, revisits some canonical texts of American literature to show how womanhood is influenced and shaped by the inscriptions of costume on the body. Thomas Cooper writes about translations of Ezra Pound, while András Csillag sheds new light on the relationship of Joseph Pulitzer to his native Hungary and the Hungarians. Éva Federmayer discusses the iconography of the "Negro woman" through the first remaining race movie by Oscar Micheaux. Donald E. Morse provides an analysis of the critical reception of Kurt Vonnegut's "fantastic" novel *Breakfast of Champions*. Zoltán Peterecz describes anti-Semitism in the Hungary of the 1920s in connection with the activities of American banker James Speyer. Judit Szathmári explores the widely used term "Indian country," now meaning virtually any place in North America with an evident Indian presence. András Tarnóc writes about the use and misuse of religion in the historical *Narrative* of Robert Eastburn, held captive by Indians at the time of the French and Indian War. Lehel Vadon studies the reception of Harriet Beecher Stowe and her *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as reflected in the Hungarian press, in the literary history, and in the theatrical life of this country.

In the closing chapters of the volume, Zoltán Vajda contemplates the Federalist and Antifederalist views of national identity in the early American republic, while Gabriella Varró contrasts Sam Shepard's play *Fool For Love* with its movie version. Historian István Kornél Vida analyzes the motives of Hungarian soldiers who fought in the American

Civil War (“*To see this great country united again*”). Zsolt Virágos introduces readers to a consideration of the literary uses of M2-type myths. And finally, Gabriella Vöö is concerned with colonialist representations of the theme of cannibalism in Herman Melville’s *Typee* and *Moby-Dick*.