

One More Tally of Professor Országh's Impact and Scholarly Achievement

Virágos, Zsolt. ed. *Országh László válogatott írásai [The Selected Writings of László Országh]*. Orbis Litterarum 16. Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 2007. 585 pp.

Köbölkuti, Katalin and Molnár, Katalin. (eds.) *Országh László emlékezete [In Honorem Országh László]*. Szombathely: Savaria UP, 2008. 72 pp.

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László Országh (1907–1984), the eminent lexicographer and professor of English at Debrecen's Lajos Kossuth University (now the University of Debrecen), would have been 100 years old in 2007. A household name in Hungary as the creator of English and Hungarian bilingual dictionaries, Országh had an extensive and prolific career that encompassed several specialties within the broad fields of English and American Studies and linguistics. He was an all-rounder: a language teacher, a Shakespeare philologist, a scholar of Anglo-American–Hungarian cultural contacts, an excellent promoter and organizer as head of the English Department at Debrecen, the founder of American Studies in Hungary, the (co-)author, editor and compiler of books, monographs, textbooks, readers and anthologies, the editor-in-chief of the first modern defining dictionary of Hungarian and, to many of his students and colleagues, a trusted mentor and benefactor.

Országh left many tracks in his profession: perhaps his most influential achievement outside lexicography was his monograph *Az amerikai irodalom története* (1967), which was the first comprehensive survey in Hungarian of the history of American literature. Although Országh received little recognition in the politically hostile climate of communist Hungary, he was compensated by being awarded the honorary title of Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in 1979 for

his role as a bridge-builder and cultural mediator, and by being the only non-US scholar to have a Fulbright Visiting Professorship, the László Országh Chair in American Studies, named after him.

In October and November 2007, several commemorative events were held to mark the centenary of Országh's birth: in Debrecen, a László Országh Memorial Day was held, lectures were given on his life and works, books by and about him were exhibited, and a walkway on the woodland campus was named after him; in Budapest, a bronze relief was unveiled on the facade of the house where Országh lived; and in Szombathely, his birthplace, a conference was organized in his honor and a memorial plaque was placed on the outside wall of his one-time home.

An important contribution to the commemoration was the publication of *Országh László válogatott írásai* (= Selected Works of László Országh), a collection of Országh's scholarly writings spanning the entire breadth of his career. Edited by Zsolt Virágos, a professor at the University of Debrecen's Institute of English and American Studies and a former student of Országh's, this volume brings together selected writings and extracts from Országh's major fields of academic pursuit. (Not incidentally, the book came out at the same time as another important publication, the memorial volume *In Memoriam Országh László*, edited by Lehel Vadon and published by the Eszterházy Károly College in Eger.)

The impressively hefty volume is structured as follows (the numbers in parentheses represent the number of pieces in each section): Foreword; I. American Studies: theory, program and practice (5); II. American Studies: the literary culture (9); III. English Studies: British literary culture and renaissance studies (7); IV. Studies in lexicography (7); V. Writings on language pedagogy (4); VI. Cultural history and etymology (6). The first two sections comprise over one-third of the book; the chapter on English Studies roughly another third; the writings on lexicography twenty percent; and the remaining two shorter sections make up the rest. One cannot but applaud the editor's decision to append to the volume Országh's acceptance speech, delivered in English at the British Embassy in Budapest in January 1979, on the occasion of receiving his CBE. The majority of the 38 + 1 selected writings were written in the 1960s and 1970s; eight of them are in English. As Zsolt Virágos informs us in his introductory essay, Péter Dávidházi (chapter III) and Miklós Kontra (chapters IV–VI) provided assistance in the selection of the material. The book offers a representative selection and cross-section of Országh's scholarly output, including writings that are hard, if

not impossible, to come by, even in second-hand bookshops. This was in fact a stated aim of the volume: to fulfill the important cultural mission of preserving these writings and making them available to new audiences.

In view of the sheer bulk of Országh's lifework, the selection of what to include must have been a laborious task. As we learn from the foreword, not counting the more than 20,000 pages that he edited, Országh authored nearly 6,000 pages, of which the present volume contains about ten percent. In addition to showcasing Országh's formidable erudition, the selections also demonstrate the author's vivid and captivating style and the lucidity of his argumentation. The only quibble that can be made about the book is the lack of an index, which would have facilitated cross-referencing for students and scholars. However, besides scholars and English majors, the book is an enlightening reading for anyone interested in literary history, renaissance studies, lexicography, language history, and English and American Studies.

The most fascinating chapters of the book, at least for this reviewer, are the first two on American Studies. A highlight of Chapter I is Országh's "Az amerikanisztika feladatai Magyarországon," in which he draws up a program for American Studies in Hungary—a bold move in 1965, in the midst of the Cold War and at the height of the Kádár era. (Only a few years had passed since the 1957 reopening of the Debrecen English Department after seven years of forced interruption brought about by a political decision of the hard-line communist regime!) In particular, Országh argued for the need to produce a comprehensive standard work on American Studies and an American literary history in Hungarian; the study of Hungarian-American cultural ties and contacts; the establishment of an American Studies department in Hungary; and the exchange of scholars between the two countries. Also included in this chapter is Országh's preface to his ground-breaking handbook *Bevezetés az amerikanisztikába* (= Introduction to American Studies) (1972), in which he mapped out the main tasks involved in promoting research in the then-nascent field of American Studies in Hungary. Other highlights from Chapter II are an abridged version of Országh's doctoral dissertation, from 1935, on the development of American literary historiography (researched during his post-graduate scholarship at Florida's Rollins College in 1930-31, where he studied under renowned American literary historian Fred Lewis Pattee); an excerpt from *Az amerikai irodalom története*; and Országh's studies on Sinclair Lewis and John Steinbeck.

Chapter III contains writings on the gentleman ethos, the social and cultural role of the higher gentry in the development of English literature; a treatise on British Modernist poetry, in which readers may get a glimpse of Országh's wry, witty sense of humor when he sums up his assessment of Ezra Pound's disconcertingly abstruse cantos as "Vödörszám nem lehet likőrt inni" ("You can't drink liqueur by the bucketload"; p. 247); essays on English renaissance literature and on the influence of social class on the rise of the English novel; Országh's monograph on Shakespeare (reproduced in its entirety); and an exacting review of Miklós Szenczi, Tibor Szobotka and Anna Katona's English literary history (written in Hungarian and published in 1972). These writings all date from the 1930s and 1940s, with the exception of the book review.

After the Debrecen English Department was closed down and his tenure was suspended in 1950, Országh self-confessedly took refuge in what Samuel Johnson once described as the "harmless drudgery" of dictionary-making (p. 585). In the first study in Chapter IV, Országh presents an expert analysis of Dr. Johnson's lexicographical method. Two studies in this section deal with the complexities involved in the editing of the seven-volume monolingual dictionary of the Hungarian language, *A Magyar Nyelv Értelmező Szótára* (1959–62), which is heralded as the greatest accomplishment in modern synchronic Hungarian lexicography. A welcome addition to this chapter is Országh's eloquent English-language study "A Plea for a Dictionary of Modern Idiomatic English" (1967), in which he highlights the principal deficiencies of monolingual English dictionaries and argues for a new type of English dictionary which, rather than aiming at comprehensiveness and including a plethora of quotations and etymological information, should put more emphasis on the clear indication of the semantic, syntactic and stylistic applicability of its entry-words. For, as Országh writes in a later essay on the same subject, "This is the only way to turn the herbarium-like dictionary with its *hortus siccus* of words into a linguistic diorama showing the natural habitat of English words in depth" (p. 531).

A sampling of Országh's writings on language pedagogy and cultural history/etymology comprise the last two chapters of the volume. Országh's tireless and active involvement in English language teaching is particularly evident from his "Ups and Downs in the Teaching of English" (1972), which traces the evolution of English language teaching in Hungary. Many of Országh's observations, such as his comment on the

need to tackle the shortage of well-qualified teachers, most of whom seek out other, more lucrative, jobs after graduation, are still relevant and should be well heeded by educational policy-makers in Hungary today. The writings on etymology concern the absorption of English loanwords into Hungarian (included is Országh's delightful piece on *csendilla*).

Országh's 1938 article, reprinted in *Országh László válogatott írásai*, on the travels of an 18th-century Anglican clergyman in Transdanubian Hungary in search of remains of the Roman domination has been duplicated in *Országh László emlékezete*, the other book under review here. This slim volume contains five papers (in addition to the laudatory opening remarks) read at the conference held in Országh's honor in Szombathely on 8 November 2007 and is supplemented with a short biographical sketch and a series of photographs taken at the event. The entire booklet is printed on semi-glossy paper, which makes for crisp text and images.

The papers illuminate both personal and professional aspects of the late professor's life: Zsolt Virágos gives an overview of Országh's career and of the various commemorative events and publications and calls attention to the importance of continuing his legacy; Nándor Papp offers an appreciation of Országh as a caring and compassionate teacher, citing pieces of personal correspondence; Tamás Magay traces the publication history of Országh's 1948 *Concise English-Hungarian Dictionary* and enumerates the innovations introduced in multiple editions over the years (e.g. in the selection of vocabulary, the use of IPA phonetic symbols, meaning discrimination, phraseology, equivalents, culture-bound elements, and the use of illustrations and a visually appealing, user-friendly layout); Éva Ruzsicky highlights Országh's achievements in monolingual lexicography by recalling the meticulous preparatory work that went into the production of the explanatory dictionary; and Péter Hahner provides an assessment of Országh's work in American literary historiography from a historian's perspective, commending Országh for his wide-ranging historical and cultural knowledge.

While the booklet on the Szombathely conference is a valuable contribution to a fuller appreciation of Országh's outstanding lifework, the real treat here is *Országh László válogatott írásai*—a major publishing event that not only cements Országh's reputation as an erudite philologist among those who were already familiar with his oeuvre, but also serves a far more important purpose: by bringing together previously uncollected

or inaccessible writings, the volume presents an unmatched portrait of the “grand old man” of English and American Studies in Hungary to the oncoming younger generation of students and scholars.