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HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW IN HUNGARY

Next to Edgar Allan Poe Longfellow was considered to be the most international poet of nineteenth century America. He was the American epigon of European romantic poetry who planted the seeds of culture in an uncultivated land and during America's adolescence he discovered Europe for the New World. His romantic European style is no ordinary plagiarism as his poetry was born in America but his themes, sentiments and perfection of form remind one of the "Old Continent".

He is the first to express patriotic feelings and to perpetuate episodes of American history and the elements of American traditions through the North American landscape. Through Longfellow the American landscape becomes an integral part of world literature not as a romantic oddity but as a dignified, traditional sphere of domestic progress.

Although he mainly chose domestic themes, he rejected the label of a true-blue American poet.¹ In his epic poems he described the romantic and legendary episodes of European history integrating the most popular themes and elaborate forms into American literature. Longfellow as the first professional poet of the United States deliberately strove to create traditions. He was a versatile, scholar poet who wanted to write in "an elegant, European influenced American style".

¹ "As our national character and world of thought do not differ fundamentally from England, therefore our literature may not differ either." In: Samuel Longfellow: *Life of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (1891).

His Puritan New England upper class bred romantic conscience was in a continuous conflict with his educated self and his imagination and expressive power failed to enable him to transcend the limits of his knowledge. Whereas in his poetry culture and civilization take precedence over creativity and originality, his message reached the masses and he was the most celebrated poet of his age not only in the English speaking countries but all over the world. Due to conscientious efforts to satisfy the literary tastes of the middle class he enjoyed immense popularity in his home country and Hungary as well. "His lyrical poetry was devoid of strange and heated passion as he only sang about the idealized aspects of ordinary middle class life. Longfellow, a sophisticated gentleman with Victorian manners intentionally avoided vulgar, coarse or plain ugly themes."²

Written by the prolific publicist and translator Imre Huszár in 1866, the first Hungarian article on Longfellow and his poetry appeared in the *Fővárosi Lapok*. Huszár introduced one of Longfellow's less famous poems titled "Flower-de-luce", a book of verses where the author paid homage to his former schoolmate and colleague, Nathaniel Hawthorne. According to Huszár Flower-de-luce impressively presented the "pure and simple beauty of reality and attempted to enhance its objectivity with the colors of imagination". Huszár viewed Longfellow as "an artist who had addressed not a nation or an era, but whose eternal appeals voiced the concerns of humanity".³

József Csukássi's—one of Longfellow's first Hungarian translators—more extensive essay appeared in the same paper three years later. The article that retraced Longfellow's life and achievements was the first Hungarian treatise to emphasize the poet's European qualities. "Although a different flower, it gains its fragrance from European soil, a different fruit yet its delicious taste was bequeathed by the same land."⁴ In Csukássi's view Longfellow along with the "grimly original Poe" and the "lofty Bryant"

² László Országh, *Az amerikai irodalom története* (Budapest: Gondolat Kiadó, 1967), p. 158.

³ Imre Huszár, "Külirodalmi Szemle. (Longfellow legújabb műve: Flower-de-luce)," *Fővárosi Lapok*, 289 (1866): pp. 1182—1183.

⁴ József Csukássi, "Longfellow Wadsworth Henry. I.," *Fővárosi Lapok*, 12 (1869): p. 44.

belonged to the "Holy Trinity of American poetry." "He consciously trained himself to attain the highest artistic standards possible and as an erudite, yet impressionable poet with supreme acquisitive and elaborative skills always strove to enhance form with color".⁵ According to Csukássi a lack of humor and vitality along with the limited creative force and the relatively low number of artistic innovations in Longfellow's poetry were the author's Achilles heels. The aesthetician critic and one of Longfellow's first translators Tamás Szana held a similar opinion.⁶

Emil Ábrányi, the noted literary translator and poet considered Longfellow not as the poet of genius but of talent "who not only made a mark for himself in American poetry but demanded a dominant position in European literature as well". Longfellow's tranquil creative process reminded him of the Hungarian poet, János Arany.⁷

The poet and translator János Dömötör appreciated Longfellow's translatory skills and respected his efforts to integrate the motives of European poetry into America's cultural heritage. According to him Longfellow was the most popular foreign poet in Hungary in the 1870s whose most of his poetry was translated into Hungarian, and widely and enthusiastically read by the Hungarian reading public. Dömötör considered Zsigmond Ács, Károly Szász, Béla Szász, Zsigmond Lőrinczy /Lehr/ and József Lévai as the most successful interpreters of Longfellow's works and encouraged them to continue transplanting his words into Hungarian.⁸

József Prém also acknowledged Longfellow's translating achievements and highly praised his unique and often intranslatable poetic language, his noble attitude, lucid thinking and gentle spirit. He highlighted the dignified, profound and sincere morality of Longfellow's poetry that was devoid of humor, witticism or any traces of piquancy.⁹

⁵ József Csukássi, "Longfellow Wadsworth Henry. II.," *Fővárosi Lapok*, 13 (1869): pp. 48.

⁶ (SZ.T.) (Tamás Szana), "Az észak-amerikai költészet. II.," *Fővárosi Lapok*, 199 (1869): pp. 748—785. — The same article: (Tamás Szana), "Az Észak-Amerikai költészet," *Figyelő*, 46 (1875): pp. 545—548.; *Figyelő* 47 (1875): pp. 557—559.

⁷ Emil Ábrányi, "Longfellow Henrik," *Ország-Világ*, 22 (1871): pp. 254—256.

⁸ (D. J.) (János Bömötör), "Longfellow," *Vasárnapi Újság*, 21 (1876): pp. 321—322.

⁹ József Prém, "Longfellow," *Képes Világ*, XI (1871): pp. 247—248.

Two Hungarian journals—that previously provided the most extensive coverage of Longfellow’s artistic achievements—the *Vasárnapi Újság* and the *Fővárosi Lapok* carried obituaries to mark the poet’s death. The *Vasárnapi Újság* recalling the highlights of the life and achievements of the “most popular poet of the century” eulogized him as “a religious man who accepted the present world order, a philanthrope who was devoted to furthering the interests of humanity, an optimist scholar who viewed the history of Christianity with pious reverence and as an impressionable spirit who was open to all elements of European culture.”¹⁰ Imre Czakó and János Dömötör bid farewell on the same pages with the former’s rendition of “A Day of Sunshine” and the latter’s translation of “A Psalm of Life”.¹¹

In his *Fővárosi Lapok* obituary Gyula Pekár recalled his personal encounter with Longfellow¹². On December 12, 1881 Pekár, then a high school student, visited the elderly poet in his Cambridge home near Harvard University which served as George Washington’s headquarters during the War of Independence. Having signed Pekár’s copies Longfellow astonishedly learned about the immense popularity of his poems in Hungary and recalled his personal encounter with the famous Hungarian composer Franz Liszt whose portrait had been painted by the poet’s friend while both visited the composer during Longfellow’s European tour. The painting was displayed in Longfellow’s home after his painter friend had offered it to him as a gift. As a measure of Liszt’s appreciation of Longfellow’s work he set one of his poems to music in 1874. The title of the cantata is *Die Glocken des Strassburgen Münsters* which was conducted by the composer in Budapest on March 10, 1875.¹³

In 1897 Béla Szász one of the foremost Hungarian experts on Longfellow and the most prolific translator of his works authored the only anthology published to this day. In his inaugural address at the Hungarian

¹⁰ —á—r—, “Longfellow (1807–1882),” *Vasárnapi Újság*, 15 (1882): pp. 225—226.

¹¹ Imre Czakó, *Egy napsugár*, János Dömötör, *Az élet zsoltára*, *Vasárnapi Újság* 15 (1882): p. 226.

¹² Gyula Pekár, “Látogatás Longfellownál,” *Fővárosi Lapok*, 15 (1882): p. 490.

¹³ *Zenei Lexikon*. Vol II. (Budapest: Zeneműkiadó Vállalat, 1965), p. 475.

Academy of Arts and Sciences on October 6, 1884 he analyzed the reflexive and ethico-religious elements of Longfellow's poetry.¹⁴

Due to changes of literary tastes of post-1900 America Longfellow fell out of the twentieth century readers' favor and only anthologies and school books ensured his survival in the public conscience. While the significance of Longfellow's literary achievements is beyond dispute, his creative efforts fade into obsolescence as his poems disappeared from the pages of Hungarian literary journals and he was celebrated only at so-called "great anniversaries".

In 1907 in honor of the one hundredth anniversary of Longfellow's birth Antal Radó wrote a commemorative article for the *Vasárnapi Újság*. In his estimation "the erstwhile popular poet did not rank among the giants of literary spirit as he was not a golden tongued bard with soaring imagination and penetrating vision, or a majestic genius, an 'os magna sonaturum', but one of the less significant poets of world literature." Radó sorely missed traces of originality, an "American style" especially in Longfellow's narrative and epic poems arguing that the poet's fame would only be preserved by "those heart stirring, sweet tongued songs where his noble and puritan soul proclaimed the loftiest wisdom without a false note or a pose singing the Psalm of Life"¹⁵. Dezső Kosztolányi could only voice his discontent in the *Hét* and pointed to a few ballads such as the *Excelsior*, the *Evangeline* and a fraction of *Hiawatha* in his commemorative article. "Although Longfellow's poetry sounds as clear as the churchbell, he is only our Sunday entertainment, a delightful afternoon reading to curl up with after a busy day."¹⁶ Nonetheless Kosztolányi grudgingly acknowledged that Longfellow's everlasting fame had been due to his perfection of style.

Professor Arthur Yolland was likely to have been influenced by the Longfellow anniversary in his offer to present a weekly one hour lecture at

¹⁴ Béla Szász, "A reflexiv és vallás-erkölcsi elem a költészetben s Longfellow," *Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Értekezései a Nyelv- és Széptudomány Köréből*, (1884): pp. 3—43.

¹⁵ Antal Radó, "Longfellow évszázados ünnepén," *Vasárnapi Újság*, 8 (1907): pp. 147—148.

¹⁶ Lehotai (Dezső Kosztolányi), "Longfellow," *A Hét*, 9 (1907): p. 143. — The same article: Dezső Kosztolányi, *Ércnél maradandóbb* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1975), pp. 103—105.

the Péter Pázmány University in 1908. The course which was titled "Longfellow's selected poems" was the second university level subject on American literature in the history of American Studies in Hungary.¹⁷

In József Reményi's pantheon of American literature where the author presented a thorough analysis of Longfellow's art, perspective and style the poet appeared as an aesthete and bard of the evolving American middle class. In Reményi's view Longfellow, a descendant of Puritans had been unable to conceal the didactic purpose of his poems making his lines often sound like textbooks put into verse. While acknowledging Longfellow's poetic skills and creative imagination dedicated to the commemoration of life's beauty, Reményi declared that Longfellow's works could not be enjoyed by someone with refined aesthetic taste and ranked him as a second class poet.¹⁸

Antal Szerb regarded Longfellow as the poet of secondary romanticism who worked with romantic elements despite a lack of a romantic spirit. In his view Longfellow was the poet of the petty bourgeoisie "whose tremendous world-wide success was due to the fact that his works were tailor-made to middle class tastes as he sang about the fabulous Middle Ages and his idealistic poems reinforced loyalty to the prevailing political order"¹⁹. According to Mihály Babits "Longfellow was the forerunner of American poetry's supercilious eclecticism harvesting and integrating the ripe stylistic and thematic treasures of European literature into American poetry, much the same way as American billionaires collected priceless pieces of art in their homes from European museums."²⁰

In 1957 commemorating the 150th anniversary of Longfellow's birth the Irodalmi Színpad of Budapest paid homage to the poet's achievements in a

¹⁷ Joseph Szentmihályi, "Outline of Professor Yolland's Activity," *Angol Filológiai Tanulmányok*, II (1973): p. 13.

¹⁸ József Reményi, "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow," *Vasárnap*, 14 (1936): pp. 263—265. — The same essay: József Reményi, *Amerikai írók* (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, [1938]), pp. 24—33.

¹⁹ Antal Szerb, *A világirodalom története* (Budapest: Magvető Könyvkiadó, 1962), pp. 622—623.

²⁰ Mihály Babits, "Líra Amerikában," (1930) in Mihály Babits, *Arcképek és tanulmányok* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1977), p. 372.

special production.²¹ Two articles were published for the occasion as well. The tone of János Viktor's article in *Könyvbarát* reflected the value systems of the indoctrinaire 1950's as he ranked Longfellow among those who "had turned to the humanistic tradition of European culture to seek an antidote for the perceptibly oppressive inhumanity of the first boom period of American capitalism."²² The fact that Longfellow along with Poe approached European standards and paved the way for the first "true-blue" American poet, Walt Whitman, was Longfellow's greatest achievement.

In Tibor Lutter's carefully researched study which appeared in *Magyar Tudomány* the author emphathized with the plight of Longfellow who despite being born in a period when the flames of the romantic movement were about to subside, viewed the bicontinental advance of the latter as his greatest formative experience. Lutter wrote: "He was a wrong man in the wrong time as had he been born a half generation earlier his genius could have achieved the white fiery passion of romanticism and he only preceded Whitman's celebration of America's blossoming into adulthood by a school generation."²³ Longfellow, the poet of the "golden mean" fulfilled the requirements established by János Arany's *Ars Poetica* demonstrated by his sophistication, humanity, and well crafted elegant style. "He was the poet who under the peculiar climate of his time clad in the fading robe of romanticism undertook an arduous, productive effort especially invaluable in the promotion of national culture." Lutter considered Longfellow's consistent realization of his artistic goals—an elegant European influenced American style—the poet's most significant achievement and greatest asset. He defended Longfellow's integrity from charges of plagiarism as he declared his work "a refined masterpiece of English literature, which, while rooted in American soil, met the lofty standards of European elegance." Lutter argued that Longfellow's poetry had shaped the American nation and culture during the period of the revival of the romantic movement making it a significant element of world literature.

²¹ A. G., "Longfellow est," *Film Színház Muzsika*, 3 (1957): p. 5.

²² (János Viktor), "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow," *Könyvbarát*, 3 (1957): pp. 26—27.

²³ Tibor Lutter, "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow," *Magyar Tudomány*, 5—6 (1957): pp. 169—174.

Although Longfellow became one of the most popular Western poets in Hungary in the second half of the nineteenth century, his place in literary history and the evaluation of his achievements are still uneven and controversial. A careful and comprehensive analysis of the true nature of his poetry is still a matter of extensive future research.