

CSILLA BERTHA

TRIBUTE TO THE SCHOLAR, TEACHER AND MAN,
LÁSZLÓ ORSZÁGH

Vadon Lehel: *Országgh László*. Eger: Eszterházy Károly
Tanárképző Főiskola Nyomdája, 1994. 93 pp.

The beauty of humanities is that they—as the name indicates—involve the whole human being; not only the intellectual but also the spiritual, moral, aesthetic spheres of the personality. To reverse it: a scholar and a teacher is truly credible only if he/she pursues the discipline with his/her whole personality; gives, apart from knowledge, a model of moral, aesthetic, humane behaviour. To pay tribute to such a person should also be a matter of total involvement, not only an intellectual evaluation but also an emotional, moral and aesthetic expression of the admiration.

Lehel Vadon's book on Professor László Országgh, entitled simply: *Országgh László* (Eger, 1994) is such a tribute to such a scholar. On the tenth anniversary of Prof. Országgh's death his one-time student compiled two volumes: this description and evaluation of the scholarly career completed with a detailed bibliography, to be a companion volume to the festschrift, *Emlékkönyv Országgh László tiszteletére* ("A Festschrift in Honour of László Országgh") with essays by Országgh's students and admirers.

The book *Országgh László* counterbalances—as much as such a book can have the power to—the general and shameful neglect that this outstanding scholar had to suffer most of his lifetime by the authorities. One

of the greatest and most many-sided scholars of English and American literature and language in Hungary of the twentieth century, the founder of American studies in Hungary, the editor of definitive one- and two-language dictionaries (the latter of which are world-famous), one of the last polymaths with an encyclopedic knowledge, received hardly any high award from the communist leaders of Hungary whereas he was the recipient—and the only Hungarian so far—of the most prestigious honours England bestows upon non-English citizens, “Commander of the Order of the British Empire” (1979). The lack of appreciation on the part of Hungarian communist authorities is, however, to Országh’s credit; he never served the political system, never hid his contempt for the stupidities, meanness and anti-intellectualism of the dictatorship, and kept criticising it with quiet but murderously sharp irony from the vantage point of the enormous superiority of his intellect and wit. No wonder that instead of awards, he received punishment: the English department which he established in 1947, at Debrecen Kossuth University was dispersed in 1950 (when learning or teaching Western languages itself was suspicious), he himself was relegated to the politically least dangerous task: editing dictionaries. One of the indicators of his moral greatness is that he made “a laboratory out of a galley-bench”—to borrow the image of another marginalized literary genius, the writer László Németh, who used it to describe his own experience of having had to earn his living by translations in the ’58s and ’60s. Vadon’s biographical essay emphasizes how many philosophical and philological considerations, how much conscientious work, wide horizon, huge knowledge and all-embracing thinking is necessary for editing such definitive two-language (Hungarian—English and English—Hungarian) dictionaries like those of Országh.

As lexicographer, Országh served not only the learning of English but also the preservation and correct usage of his mother tongue with what he considered his chief work, editing a seven volume Hungarian dictionary, the kind which is usually written once in a century. The enormous work he undertook involved every step from putting down the theoretical considerations, principles and practical problems of compiling it to the actual checking of every single entry. What is more, Országh carried out this

hugely significant work in probably the darkest decades of Hungarian history, the Stalinist '50s, according to his own principles and insisting on choosing his own crew (partly from other neglected but highly qualified scholars),—which, in the words of one of his disciples, Tamás Magay, was in itself more than heroic.

Considered one of the greatest lexicographers in the world, Országh established a school of lexicography. Also as a lexicologist, his achievement is remarkable in tracing the English origin of part of the Hungarian vocabulary. But while the greater public knows Országh for his dictionaries, and teachers of English for his schoolbooks and English grammars, the Americanist scholar, Vadon noticeably writes with the greatest enthusiasm about the Americanist, the author of not only the first history of American literature in Hungary (1967), but also of the first history of American literary-history-writing (1935) in the world. Among others Howard Mumford Jones, “one of the commanding literary historians” testifies to this: “Doubtless there exists somewhere a thorough survey of the problem of American literary history, but the only work I have seen is in Hungarian... by Országh László” (quoted by Myron Simon in his memoirs of Országh). Országh, in his book-length study of American literature gave an original, well-informed, deeply penetrating—despite its conciseness—and highly critical survey of its chief tendencies, movements and authors, always emphasizing the specially American features, the formation of national ideals and values. With his “Introduction to American Studies” (1972) and other, shorter essays on the subject Országh established American studies in Hungary, in his summarizing of the most important features of American history, literature, education, music, arts, politics, philosophy, religion, folklore and other aspects of life and thinking. Outlining the steps to be followed in introducing American studies, Országh gave directions valid even today—ones followed by many of his disciples. Vadon, in writing this scholarly biography and undertaking the editing and publication of the *Festschrift* expresses his respect and admiration for his mentor, so in establishing the first independent American Studies department in the country (Eger, 1990), he desired to fulfill Országh’s wish to have departments of American studies, which the old scholar repeatedly

recommended and also emphatically requested in his last, “testament-like” conversation with the author.

Vadon’s bias for American studies does not make him neglect the significance of Országh’s work in English literature, especially his essays on Shakespeare and on the sources and development of the English novel. Neither does he forget about his researches in cultural studies, in the English—Hungarian and American—Hungarian cultural relationships, and even mentions some of the lesser-known results of those researches such as Hungarian subjects, figures, events occurring in some English Renaissance plays. With these details along with revealing that Országh’s first important essay was written on a Hungarian writer, the author throws light on another side of Országh’s image: that he, while doing the greatest service to spreading and improving the study of English and American culture, was in no way advocating “anglomania”, a turning away from and looking down upon one’s own culture—a common disease in Hungary.

For those interested in English and American studies in Hungary and in the work of this formidable scholar, Dr. Vadon’s book is invaluable in summing up the scholarly career of Professor Országh grouped according to the subjects: Americanist, English scholar, cultural historian, lexicographer, lexicologist, scholar-teacher. He nevertheless, emphasizes the synthesis of these disciplines: “László Országh was the very last member of that generation of great scholars who had to cover full fields of national and international disciplines of philology” and that “he was the only scholar to gain an academic degree in two disciplines, literature and language”. Országh’s many-sided interest can also be seen from the conscientiously compiled and very welcome full bibliography with which Vadon completes his summary of his professor’s work. All through the evaluation the author points out the precision and thoroughness of Országh’s meticulous research in any subject, his enormous knowledge, the originality of his thinking and the significance of his pioneering, introductory and founding work. He successfully combines objectivity, scholarly precision and concreteness as biographer and reviewer, with personal observations and heart-felt warm memories of the onetime student, although the personal memories are

modestly relegated into the notes. He allows his voice to warm up only when speaking about the teacher and the human being.

The students and disciples of Országh are, however, mostly indebted to Lehel Vadon for expressing, if not on their behalf, then instead of them, their respect and admiration with this book and for evoking the well-known figure of the scholar, the teacher and the man whose personality-forming power few could or wanted to escape. The carefully selected photos also help to bring back to life some of those well-known expressions that his students used to look at first with fear, then with awe, admiration and respectful affection. For it was a great privilege to be the student of this grand old man who not only inspired respect for his rare intelligence, knowledge, competence, but who also cast a spell on those listening to him. Who was a model of moral steadfastness and integrity, of independent spirit, of a life-long commitment to work. A model of distinguished elegance and style in physical appearance as well as in speaking—his spoken sentences could have been published as they were, both in English and in Hungarian. “A Hungarian gentleman in the Kádár-regime”, when gentlemanly values were not appreciated, even less encouraged—as one of the contributors to the *Festschrift*, Gyula Kodolányi calls him. A model of unappeasable intellectual curiosity, who, for instance, asked his student who happened to be in Bretagne, specific questions about such little-known treasures as the unique many-figured carved calvaries there, although he already knew more about them than the natives. A truly old-fashioned professor, dignified, fearfully strict and demanding in grading and judging but deeply humane, understanding and helpful, even down to such simple gestures as, for example when a student turned up at the oral examination with a swollen tooth, he immediately dug out a painkiller and brought it and a glass of water to her before starting the exam. Who helped many of his students even years after they graduated, not only with advice and encouragement but also by assigning them tasks, such as, for instance, writing articles for the *Encyclopedia of World Literature* (for which he did extensive editing work), thus giving them self-confidence enough to begin scholarly research and writing on their own.

For all of us who knew him and/or his work, “Országh’s life is an allegory of what, over the centuries, has made Hungary pre-eminent for its creativity and progress in times when hardly more than survival appeared possible” (Myron Simon). For those of us fortunate enough to have been his students and to have known him more closely, he was, in addition, a helpful, benign, inspiring father-figure, whose Debrecen office and Budapest apartment, in Vadon’s words, was a “chapel which we often entered awkwardly and full of uncertainties but which we always left appeased, hopeful and recharged.”

This is why it is not only with intellectual curiosity that one opens Lehel Vadon’s book on László Országh but also with personal joy, warm memories and gratitude. Gratitude on the one hand, for the privilege of having known this exceptional personality and, on the other, to the author for paying this homáge, which not only in its contents but also in its simple elegance of appearance—silver letters on a dark blue cover—is worthy of the subject of the tribute.