

## ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM A HUNGARIAN PERSPECTIVE

**Az angol irodalom története. 6. kötet. 1930-tól napjainkig. Első rész.** [‘History of English Literature. Vol. 6. From 1930 to the Present. Part 1’] Edited by Tamás Bényei. Co-edited by István D. Rácz and Judit Friedrich. Editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay. Budapest: Kijárat, 2020. Pp. 629. ISBN 978-615-5160-94-3.

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‘The History of English Literature’ (*Az angol irodalom története*) volumes span fifteen centuries of the English-language literature of the British Isles from the 6<sup>th</sup> century to our times. The sixth volume focuses on the works published in the middle third of the twentieth century and is part of a two-volume set that covers, in Hungarian, English literature up to the present day. These two volumes end the book series initiated by the late Géza Kállay in the early 2010s. Like the rest of the series, the sixth book presents chapters by multiple authors: Ágnes Balajthy, Zsolt Czigányik, István D. Rácz, Attila Dósa, Ákos Farkas, Angelika Reichmann, Péter Szaffkó and Eszter Ureczky. Tamás Bényei, who is both the chief editor of the series and the editor of volume six, is also the author of 15 chapters out of 26 in the book. Thus, resulting from the expertise of the nine literary scholars in their respective fields, a deep understanding together with unique perspectives characterise the studies. These nine viewpoints provide the type of panorama of literary works and their contexts that a single-authored analysis could not. The chapters fit the objective of the book series: to arouse curiosity about British culture as a whole by addressing questions of social changes and human relationships that affect the creation of literary works. The sixth volume covers English literature from the 1930s to the decades after the Second World War in 554 pages. A bibliography of approximately 1200 items complements this, in addition to the nearly 40 pages of indexes and a table of contents at the front of the book. The reader is further assisted by editorial boxes, not only within the sixth volume but throughout the book series. These notes both provide additional information on the content and indicate which study in which volume discusses the topic of the given paragraph in greater depth or from a different angle. Thus, they enable readers interested in a specific topic to find the relevant passages quickly and easily, without having to read the whole book, chapter by chapter. The text thus fits well within the possibilities offered by the print medium to the twenty-first-century reader who is used to the comfort of clicking on hyperlinks to gain further, more in-depth information on the subject while reading online texts.

The chapters are arranged chronologically, with occasional shifts of focus to geographical, generic, cultural and political considerations within that framework. Halfway through the volume, the chapter on the literature of the Second World War serves as a division both in terms of the structure and the topics discussed. The first part, with flashbacks to the late 1920s, presents the literature of the 1930s, characterised on the one hand by the memory of the Great War, and on the other by the economic crisis and the premonition of a coming war. In the first, longer chapter, Bényei shows the difficulty of putting the literature of the period into a well-defined framework. He describes the effect of politics on literature, palpable in the popularisation of certain genres, such as dystopia (25), on which he elaborates in a separate sub-chapter. His section on proletarian literature demonstrates the variety of ways in which the book approaches a literary work or phenomenon, presenting it within its social and cultural context. The analysis of Robert Tressell's 1914 novel *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (28), for example, reveals not only how the content and style of the work connect to the events of its time, but also presents the process of adapting this hugely popular novel to the stage and how it influenced the British elections after the end of the Second World War (29). In addition, Bényei devotes an entire chapter to the problem of defining modernist literature in the 1930s. He draws attention to theories that saw the need to redefine the term, explains the criteria on which it was reconsidered and the consequent need to change the temporal boundaries of this movement (47–50). In Bényei's studies, the physicality of the cultural context becomes visible. We see the traveller in search of foreign landscapes. We understand what it meant to travel abroad between the two wars and why Poirot travelled so frequently to exotic countries, etc. And to give credit to the structure of the book: those who want to know even more about the phenomena of alienation and the longing for foreign lands are directed by the editorial box to Ágnes Balajthy's "Térkép nélkül: angol utazási irodalom a két világháború között" ['Map without a Map. English Travel Literature between the Two World Wars']. Bényei points out that the confusion caused by the destruction of people and illusions in the First World War, causing physical and psychological wounds, became a notable feature of literature (33). He analyses Isherwood's novel *The Memorial* (1932) as one of the outstanding works portraying the period from this perspective. The introduction to the notion of collective memory and the brief analysis of how Isherwood's book presents it (34) sheds light on how diverse the individual reactions to the collective trauma of war can be. In addition, they provide a valuable contribution to those interested in the research field of collective memory developed by Maurice Halbwachs in the interwar period.

Following Bényei's analysis of the cultural and social context and the prose of the 1930s, István D. Rácz discusses the poetry of the period. He continues this

line of thought in two other chapters, focusing on the poetry of the post-1950s. In his first chapter, he explains why the poets of those uncertain years are considered the poets of the 'golden age' (74). He analyses the poetry of W. H. Auden and the poets of his circle of influence – the Auden Generation – and the works of artists who did not belong to any group, such as John Betjeman or Robert Graves. In his chapters on poetry in the post-war decades, D. Rácz writes about the establishment of institutions that popularised poetry, emphasises the significance of poetry readings and expounds on the principles of editing anthologies. A separate sub-chapter deals with Ted Hughes's poetry, including his *Birthday Letters* (1998), in which Hughes published letters written to his late first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, as a lyrical self. The chapter also prominently features Geoffrey Hill, whose poetry explored the supernatural in the aftermath of the horrors of the Second World War. Moreover, D. Rácz looks at poets other than the mainstream, including Roy Fuller, Charles Tomlinson, and the Maverick poets. The section includes a subchapter on Thom Gunn's gay poetry, which is of pioneering importance in terms of its absence in previous Hungarian-language English literary histories. Lastly, at the end of D. Rácz's final chapter, two sub-chapters focus on the genre of the long poem: Bényei's study examines the relationship between regionalism, modernism and the long poem, while D. Rácz focuses on the problematics of the genre in the 1980s and 1990s.

Aldous Huxley is the only author whose oeuvre receives its own chapter in this volume. Ákos Farkas discusses its place in the canon and provides insight into the processes that shaped it. Farkas gives special attention to *Point-Counter Point* (1928), *Island* (1962) and *Brave New World* (1932). He covers the topic of the debates on eugenics in the 1930s (94), drawing attention to the embeddedness of literary works in culture and social phenomena. Those intrigued by the subjects of utopia and dystopia, related to the works discussed here, can gain an in-depth understanding of these genres, as noted in the editorial box, from Zsolt Czigányik's chapter. Czigányik discusses the definitions and nexus of the two genres, the relationship between possible interpretations of such works and the author's intentions, and the interaction between the genre of utopia/dystopia and political and social processes. Following the chapter on Huxley, the focus of the book shifts to a literary method. The works of the writers of the 1930s, who lived in fear of an even more devastating war than the one before, are traditionally seen in the context of politics and realist writing. However, in her chapter on the mythic method, Reichmann points out that although the 'mythic method' associated with the 1920s was not for a long time seen as a way of writing that actively addressed the issues of the time, this approach has changed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (97). As she explains, the change is detectable in the process of the changing reception of two significant authors of the period, David Jones and John Cowper Powys (97). Reichmann discusses the two authors

in separate sections to give a flavour of their methods but first describes the cross-section of their oeuvre, the mythic method. Drawing on Michael Bell's 1997 book on the relationship between modernist literature and myth (97), Reichmann shows that mythologising writing was tied in many ways to the "sense of relativity" that emerged in interwar Britain.

One of the outstanding achievements of the book series is that it provides an opportunity to write about minority literatures in their own right. In volume six two longer chapters by Attila Dósa discuss Scottish literature. The first analyses the poetry and prose of the Scottish literary renaissance in the first half of the century, while the second chapter focuses on Scottish literature after the Second World War. Dósa juxtaposes the social situation of the central English and the minority peoples in the British Isles and the artistic possibilities resulting from their conditions. He examines the problem of defining Scottish literature in the period and investigates the similarities and differences between the Irish and the Scottish literary revivals, as well as the theatre culture of the pre-war period. In the final chapter, he discusses Highland lyric poetry after 1945, the Scottish prose of the second half of the twentieth century, and the Glasgow theatre of the 1960s and 70s. Dósa's analysis of George Mackay Brown's work, which links the enclosed world of the Scottish Islands with the world of mythology, faith and legend, gives an insight into a particular Scottish atmosphere. The chapter includes an analysis of the prose of Muriel Spark, whose books on urban life have been published in Hungarian but whose most famous novel, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961), is best known in Hungary for its 1969 film adaptation. Dósa's chapters are a great addition to volume six, as in Hungary, it is possible to study Scottish literature only in higher education and mainly as a specialist subject. For the average reader, the difference between English and Scottish literature is often unclear, and these chapters help clarify that difference.

Still in the first half of the book, while describing the interwar period, Bényei covers the major genres and approaches to literary representation in the period in four chapters. These include regionalism and provincialism, the big house novel, as well as middlebrow literature – traditionally associated with women writers – and its domestic novels, novels of manners and novels of sensibility. He devotes a separate subsection to the Golden Age of crime fiction within the discussion of middlebrow literature. He also writes about the identification of the novel as a female genre and analyses the legacy of Jane Austen. In one of the subchapters Eszter Ureczky puts Alan Hollinghurst's novel *The Stranger's Child* (2011) under the lens, describing the characteristics of the contemporary big house novel. These chapters are followed by Bényei's analyses of drama and theatre before and after the Second World War. The description of the decline in theatre-going with the advent of radio drama and the growing number of cinemas gives a good impression of the context in which the playwrights of the era

created their works, the same way as the fact that the lack of state subsidy fostered the founding of commercial rather than experimental theatres and turned theatres with small audiences into spaces for experimentation (243). Béneyei uses the concepts of highbrow and middlebrow, discussed earlier in the context of prose literature, to show how targeting middlebrow prose readers shaped theatrical repertoires.

That narrative is continued in the second half of the volume, with a discussion of the British theatre of the post-war years by Péter Szaffkó. He discards theories connecting the twentieth-century renewal of British theatre with a single play, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, to put the phenomenon into a broader context. Among the reasons, he lists the impact of the Second World War and foreign plays as well as visiting actors (367, 369). He describes the work of the English Stage Company, which stimulated the revival of drama and theatre by providing playwrights with an opportunity to rehearse their plays before their completion with professional actors (372). The chapter also describes the Theatre Workshop, which brought a fresh approach to theatrical life by regarding the text as secondary to the collaboration between actor and director, and discusses the process of the creation and the importance of the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre, two of the most prominent institutions of English drama today.

To return to the section on the interwar period, its penultimate chapter, Béneyei's study on colonialism and literature after Kipling shows how the growing anti-colonialism between the two World Wars affected the canon and led to the marginalisation of colonial-themed works, except for those by authors with established reputations (263). It analyses the role of Kipling's initially misinterpreted oeuvre in this context. By looking at the colonial themes and the reception of works by writers known to Hungarian readers (Kipling, Forster, Orwell) and some they are less familiar with (e.g. M. R. Godden), readers can gain a more nuanced picture of English attitudes to the British Empire and their impact on the reception of said writers. The sub-chapters on the indigenous perspectives in literary texts, their problematics and the satirical tradition of the subject provide intriguing approaches. Keeping the focus on foreign lands, after a subchapter on colonialism, Balajthy's chapter explores why travel was one of the definitive phenomena of the interwar period, what kind of literary texts it produced, and who the authors and readers of travel literature were. How do works of travel literature rank with contemporaneous writings? Balajthy speaks of the heroic glorification of the English explorers who had travelled the world (275) and the gradual transformation of travel literature from a narrative travelogue into the representation of the intimate experience of an inner journey (276). The chapter is a striking feature of the book since it vividly portrays certain social phenomena that have shaped attitudes towards and interpretations of travel and its literature. It describes the sense of alienation that

the physical, economic and spiritual devastation of the First World War created and shows that the act of travelling was a concrete result of that vacuum (276). To show how everyday phenomena can shape the creative process, the chapter explains the reasons why Robert Byron recorded in words and text what he saw during his travels in the Middle East: due to the ban on visual documentation (278).

The chapter on the literature of the Second World War, almost 50 pages long and located halfway through the book, already indicates the role of this historical watershed in literature: an intellectual demarcation line. In the first sub-chapter, Bényei draws attention to how the reception of Second World War literature has changed in recent years. For a time, Malcolm Bradbury's observations were generally accepted, which claimed that while the First World War had led to previously unknown literary realisations, the Second had a throwback effect on creative processes (287). This view has recently changed into an understanding that the literature of the Second World War had its unique, rich taste, influencing generations of writers to come. The chapter analyses this effect on the creation and reception of poetry and the rise of film (289). Bényei gives a long list of writers and poets who served in front-line service or worked in the war administration and speaks of their experience as authors as something characterised by the inadequacy of language to express their experiences. The chapter highlights the contemplative attitude of the period and the emergence of surreal images in the wake of the bombings. It comments on the metaphor of spectrality and the communication difficulties between civilians and demobilised soldiers. This exploration of themes and motifs in the context of social processes is a major contribution to understanding the literature of the period.

After the analysis of wartime literature, the third section of the book focuses on the changing contexts, renewed genres and institutions of post-war English literature up to roughly the last decades of the twentieth century. Bényei discusses the complexities of the notion of Britishness in the changed political and social contexts of the post-war period and the nostalgia that this engendered. The chapter also reflects on the differences between the memories of the war of the British and other "victorious" continental European citizens in literary works. A separate subsection analyses the impact of the Cold War on literature and as part of that impact, the rise of the spy novel genre. Bényei describes the role of the BBC and other artistic groups in the move towards a more democratised culture that was emerging in the 1950s. Analysing the possibilities inherent in working-class literature, his chapter sheds light on the frailty of the working-class author's voice once his works are published. He also presents various contemporary voices on the legitimacy of workers' literature and the impact of the educational reform on the reading public.

Bényei also discusses the development of the novel genre after 1945 in several sub-chapters. He introduces the post-war period by reflecting on the crisis of liberal



humanism and the consequences this had on the themes, structure and language of the novel (478–80). He writes about the campus novel and its gradual shift from the pastoral tradition to comedy and satire, and explores the works of the late representatives of modernism in the 1960s. While examining the presence of parables and allegory in the works of William Golding and Iris Murdoch, the chapter also looks at the experimentalism of Doris Lessing's prose. The chapters maintain a cultural studies approach to literary works to gain a fuller picture of the period and a deeper understanding of the already canonised works. In the book's penultimate chapter, Ákos Farkas examines the English Catholic novel with its social and cultural background. He discusses the controversies associated with Catholic prose in Protestant England and analyses the oeuvre of four significant Catholic authors. These are G. K. Chesterton, who conveyed a sense of Christian values through his detective stories; Graham Green (532), who was sensitive to the fallen and the needy; Evelyn Waugh (532), who was attracted to the ritualistic acts of religion, and David Lodge, who drew on Green's rich intellectual legacy.

For readers interested not only in the literature but also in the culture of the period, *Az angol irodalom története* is both an informative and an intriguing reading. Like other volumes of the book series, volume six uses scholarly language to provide accurate information for professional readers and at the same time remains comprehensible and enjoyable for non-specialists. In addition to discussing literary works in their social context, the book also draws attention to the everyday features and symbolic objects of the roughly three decades it covers. This approach allows the reader to discover connections such as the relevance of the recurring motif of the chrome coating in the texts of the 1930s (32) in Bényei's chapter on proletarian literature or the role the Boots circulating libraries in the early 1900s played in the growth of middlebrow reading audiences (189). It shows how education and its institutions increasingly became the arena for canonical modernist works and offers such novelties as Rose Macaulay's text, which was published as an unabridged work in English only in 2019 for the first time and was therefore unknown in its full length even in its home country. Like the earlier parts of the series, this volume offers a wide range of approaches and knowledge for both Anglicists and lay readers to widen their horizons through gripping analyses of the English language literature of the mid-twentieth century.