

HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE: THE FINAL PIECE

Az angol irodalom története. 7. kötet. 1930-tól napjainkig. Második rész. [‘History of English Literature. Vol. 7. From 1930 to the Present. Part 2’]. Edited by Tamás Bényei. Co-edited by István D. Rácz and Judit Friedrich. Editors in chief: Tamás Bényei and Géza Kállay. Budapest: Kijárat, 2023. Pp. 751. ISBN 978-615-5160-95-0.

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The current, seventh volume with its more than seven hundred pages is a grandiose finale of the herculean project that is titled *Az angol irodalom története* [‘History of English Literature’], and took more than ten years, fourteen editors and sixty-nine authors to be concluded. The aim of the series is to fill a hiatus in the study of English literature in Hungary (and in Hungarian) given that the last comprehensive history of English literature was published in 1972 (*Az angol irodalom története* [‘The History of English Literature’] by Miklós Szenczi, Tibor Szobotka and Anna Katona [Gondolat Kiadó, Budapest]). After the untimely death of Géza Kállay, who was originally the father of this venture, Tamás Bényei from the University of Debrecen took over as leader and editor in chief, and he is also the editor of the seventh volume. In the Foreword of the volume the reader is asked to treat the sixth and the seventh volumes as one piece, given that both focus on English literature from the 1930s until the present – meaning that the authors dedicated 1380 pages to this diverse and tumultuous period. Nevertheless, this review concentrates solely on the seventh volume.

Bényei’s voice dominates the volume, since he wrote eighteen chapters out of the thirty-seven by himself, and co-authored five more. Alongside him, several renowned academics added their own expertise to the title: Iván Nyusztai on absurd drama (44–61), István D. Rácz on poetry (24–26, 146–57, 240–46, 468–74), Attila Dósa on contemporary Scottish literature (311–49), Angelika Reichmann on Welsh literature in English (350–62), Marianna Gula on Northern Irish literature (363–80), Andrea Kirchknopf on Neo-Victorian fiction (427–39), Péter Dolmányos on Northern Irish poetry (381–90), Vera Benczik and Károly Pintér on science fiction (615–24) and Eszter Szép on comic books (642–53), among others. The volume altogether incorporates the writings of fifteen authors, yet, in terms of style manages to be coherent. As stated in the blurb of the volume, it aims to be attractive for the average reader while maintaining academic quality: Bényei does that eloquently, although some chapters (like Attila Dósa’s “A közelmúlt skót irodalma” [‘Scottish

Literature of the Recent Past’], 311–49) are slightly more academic in style – and might not be an easy read for the average reader – while others (such as Eszter Szép’s “A *Punch* magazintól a képregénykönyvig. A brit képregények egyik története” [‘From *Punch* Magazine to the Graphic Novel. A History of British Comics’], 642–53) are a little more informal and may be more accessible for non-academics, as well.

If the reader opens the book and takes a look at the table of contents, they find that the structure of the volume is built on temporal, thematic, spatial and genre-focused blocks, but not necessarily in a linear fashion. The temporally based chapters treat the 1960s – in certain cases together with the seventies –, the 1980s or the Thatcher era and the 20th century as temporal units (see for instance Bényei’s “A hatvanas évek: Swinging Sixties, Swinging London” [‘The 1960s: Swinging Sixties, Swinging London’] 13–26, “Thatcherizmus és irodalom” [‘Thatcherism and Literature’] 158–73, or “A kortárs irodalom változatai” [‘Variations of Contemporary Literature’] 596–614). Spatially – and culturally – the volume emphasises on various occasions that its main focus is English literature (although it is debated within the texts what English literature actually means), yet the literatures of the Celtic nations are also dedicated their own separate chapters in the middle of the volume (Dósa, “A közelmúlt skót irodalma” [‘Scottish Literature of the Recent Past’] 311–49, Reichmann, “Angol nyelvű walesi irodalom” [‘Welsh Literature in English’] 350–62, Gula, “Az észak-ír helyzet az irodalom tükrében” [‘Literary Reflections on the Northern Irish Situation’] 363–80 and Dolmányos, “Észak-ír költészet 1950 után” [‘Northern Irish Poetry after 1950’] 381–90). These chapters – although their authors strive for as much detail as possible in providing a socio-cultural, historical and institutional background on their respective literatures and analyses of major works as well – given their constraints of space and length naturally cannot reach the depths that is achieved in other, more narrowly focused chapters of the volume. The most emphatic themes present in the volume – on occasion in multiple chapters – are for instance the question of the local and global (see Bényei 85–98, 561–95), the postcolonial experience and diaspora literatures (see Bényei 99–111, 492–539, Bényei and Séllei 475–91), gender and class issues such as the relationship of feminism and literature (see Bényei 247–84), the situation of female authors (see Bényei 112–27, D. Rác 285–94), or the literature of the working classes (see Bényei 295–310). Regarding genres, among others the historical novel (see Bényei: 391–426), science-fiction (see Benczik and Pintér 615–24) and fantasy (see Benczik and Bényei 625–41) are addressed in separate sections – with the Harry Potter series having its very own chapter by Ildikó Limpár (654–56).

However, acknowledging the volume’s own complex and not entirely linear structure, Bényei states in the Foreword: “we expect non-linear readers, who turn to these volumes to look up something, and then find their way through the text based

on the table of contents, cross-references and indices” (12, my translation). Although I started out as a linear reader, during the second chapter (Bényei, “A kísérleti regény” [‘The Experimental Novel’] 27–43) I decided to take the advice of the Foreword and follow the cross-references pointing to different chapters of this volume. With that method, from the experimental novels – J. G. Ballard, in particular – I found myself reading the chapters on science fiction and fantasy (615–24, 625–41). These chapters took me back to Bényei’s “A lokális visszatérése” [‘Return of the Local’] (85–98), in which he focuses on local and global perspectives and dissects the concepts of anti-pastoral, post-pastoral and magical realism. Following Bényei’s cross references, I arrived at Scottish literature (311–49) and English Holocaust literature (440–63). My next steps through the volume traced out some very close connections between different chapters that do not construct a block or follow each other in the table of contents, yet, had the volume been edited differently, they might have been grouped together: the chapter on feminism and post-feminism (247–84) lead to the analysis of post-colonial rewritings (475–91), diaspora and multicultural literature (492–539), rewritings of ‘female genres’ (112–27) and the neo-Victorian novel (427–39).

It is fair to say that no matter where the reader starts the volume, the book is able to be read through in various orders and possibly innumerable permutations through the detailed cross-references. Furthermore, if the reader is lucky – or enthusiastic – enough to be in possession of all seven volumes, the same journey is feasible throughout the whole history of English literature, leading to unexpected yet revelatory connections between seemingly vastly different or distant authors, texts, themes or centuries. Therefore, the authors and editors created not one completed, sealed or exclusive history of English literature, but a series of books that provide the reader with many histories of English literature.

Not only volume seven, but the whole *Az angol irodalom története* will be an indispensable aid for students of English Departments in Hungary, as it provides an overview of the entirety of English literature with socio-cultural, historical, institutional backgrounds; it offers more in-depth analyses of certain seminal texts, thematic outlines of others and supplies the reader with enough books to read for a lifetime. The sheer number of texts – primary and secondary source materials – referenced in volume seven alone produces a forty-page-long Bibliography, which in itself provides an excellent starting point for more experienced researchers, as well. The seventh volume – along with the previous ones – is available for purchase at Kijárat Kiadó.