

**Gabriella Vöö. *Kortársunk, Mr. Poe. Felfedező utak az összegyűjtött elbeszélésekben*
[Our contemporary, Mr Poe: Journeys of discovery in the collected tales]. Budapest: Ráció Kiadó, 2016. 407 pp.**

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Edgar Allan Poe has been part of the Hungarian literary consciousness since the middle of the nineteenth century. “Three Sundays in a Week,” the first of his writings to be translated, came out in 1856 (Vadon 919), the year in which Baudelaire published his *Histoires Extraordinaires par Edgar Poe*, bringing the American writer to the attention not only of his countrymen but also of the wider European, including the Hungarian, public. There has since been a steady stream of translations and re-translations and a variety of translators, among whom pride of place is held by Mihály Babits, a literary classic of the last century, who, not independently of his admiration for Baudelaire, rendered quite a bookful of Poe’s tales in Hungarian. (As things go, contenders for that pride of place will probably appear one day, but that is only as it ought to be, we all stand to gain.) Our Americanists are aware of the stature Poe commands in his native land,¹ and treat him accordingly. Nevertheless, the prevalent view among educated readers still is that offered by Babits, for whom Poe served as the context for his portrayal of Baudelaire as a poet of decay (401-03), and by Antal Szerb, who thought the tales were unbridled imaginative projections of the psyche of their author or, when not, experiments in suspense-creation through the exploitation of an unprecedentedly keen logical faculty, eventually resulting, in the invention of the detective story (377-78).

Implicit in my remarks above is that Poe has a substantial readership in Hungary, and indeed he has. It is more substantial than the readership that such contemporaries or near-contemporaries of his as Hawthorne or Melville attract, so what this book has to say is likely to fall on very attentive ears. The principal objective of Gabriella Vöö, associate professor of American Studies at the University of Pécs, is summed up in the aptly chosen title and subtitle: the highlighting of those aspects of Poe’s work that appeal most to our twenty-first-century sensibilities and make him our contemporary. This timeliness, we come to realize as we plunge into the book, is also what appealed to the sensibilities of Poe’s contemporaries and made him an unmistakable product of his age. For the fact of the matter is that, despite the romantic excesses, his texts are saturated with issues of mid-nineteenth-century reality, only we never noticed them or have lost sight of them if we did. Professor Vöö’s book is not the kind of monographic study that has its focus on a narrow range of subjects; instead, it is a comprehensive

companion to the tales, and as such it raises all those matters that scholarship, older as well as most recent, has amassed about them. This approach, by its very nature, places established valuations in a new light and produces new valuations. There is, of course, no shying away from critical judgments, but the book assumes that the reader has a genuine interest in Poe and is familiar with him at least at some fundamental level. Thus it provides no systematic “close reading” in order to unearth hitherto unrecognized nuances of aesthetic beauty; instead, by putting commonly not readily available facts (circumstances of publication, sources, allusions, contexts) as “aids to reflection” at our disposal, it prompts us to proceed with our own explorations. Considering the ways, for instance, in which Andrew Jackson, his person and his politics, intrudes into so many of the tales (“Four Beasts in One,” “Mystification,” “King Pest,” to name a few), is undoubtedly an eye-opener (although I find the claim that, analogously, Melville’s Ahab was modeled on Jackson [69] a bit far-fetched). No less instructive are the accounts of how Poe responded to the social, cultural and scientific issues (sensational criminal cases, mesmerism, the California gold rush) that agitated America at the time (“Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” “Mesmeric Revelations,” “How to write a Blackwood Article,” “Von Kempelen and His Discovery”). The obfuscations and hoaxes Poe deliberately planted in his writings (much in the manner depicted in the Blackwood-parody), the literary allusions, the question of influences, dimensions of nineteenth-century life that have become dated are not passed over, either.

As stated above, there is no shortage of critical judgments in this book, even though the author’s primary concern is to enable her readers to work on their own. Professor Vöö is never dogmatic in those judgments and leaves ample room for us to take personal positions. This is especially noticeable where different interpretations appear to be equally justified, as is the case with “The Fall of the House of Usher” (is the key to be looked for in some kind of cosmogony or in Gnosticism? Are the wild imaginings those of Roderick or of the narrator?). The brief analysis of “The Man of the Crowd” makes much of Baudelaire’s fascination with Poe, but then, with an equally fascinating logic, arrives, via Melville’s Ahab, at Wallace Stevens’s “Snowman” as possible clue to the secret of Poe’s mysterious old man, who thus metamorphoses into an early prefigurement of our “postmodern condition.” But here, too, the final say is the reader’s. (Which is my cue to remark that to see intimations of a potential slave revolt in the “Four Beasts” and the “Rue Morgue” stories seems a simplification reminiscent of the worst excesses of left-leaning radical American literary criticism; that the treatment of the dandy in the context of “Lionizing” might have done with Baudelaire’s contention, as some corrective, that the figure of the dandy was a belated personification of the romantic concept of the heroic.)

The structure of the book follows the chronology of first publications in English. The section headings supply not only the original titles but those of later publications as well when they differ from the original. Vöö’s commendable “textual vigilance” is apparent throughout: she does not let inaccuracies in the translations pass unnoticed. There is a hitch, however: we do not always know which text the translator used—a problem that the editor of the complete (well, not so complete) Hungarian Poe² that Vöö depended on had also found himself up against and had been unable to resolve.

Undaunted by the difficulty, she perused the Hungarian texts for possible flaws and made the necessary corrections, supplying, in the spirit of fairness, the faulty text in a footnote and making no secret of her intention to come up with new translations one day, to replace those she deems inadequate. One can only encourage her in this endeavor, even if it calls for touching (up) the work of some of the “untouchables” in our literary canon. For my part, I am unhappy about the rendering of “Ragged Mountains” of the (almost) eponymous tale as “Rongyos Hegyek” by Babits, to whom “ragged” meant what it does in “ragged-trouserred.”

Corrections and adjustings may soon start if Professor Vöö embarks on what she says she intends to do and what I think she is honor-bound to accomplish: a full monograph on Poe. *Kortársunk, Mr.Poe*, enjoyable as it is, is like four (noble) beasts in one: a complex cultural and political study of early nineteenth-century America with Poe in the center; a portrayal of the growth and vicissitudes of genius; a critical study of Poe’s shorter fiction and, implicitly, a review of the Hungarian reception of that fiction. I hope I am not mixing my metaphors when I say that it is highly desirable that these creatures should be let out of their narrow compound and be given a more spacious existence in the form of another book where, hopefully, there will be room for the poetry and the critical essays as well.

Notes

1. See László Országh–Zsolt Virágos, *Az amerikai irodalom története* (58-67), and Enikő Bollobás, *Az amerikai irodalom története* (84-95).
2. *Edgar Allan Poe összes művei 1-3* [The complete works of Edgar Allan Poe]. Ed. Ernő Nemes. Szeged: Szukits Könyvkiadó, 2000-2003.

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