

Gabriella Vöö: *From the East Looking West: British and Irish Culture and National Self-Definition in Interwar Hungary*. Pécs: University of Pécs, Institute of English Studies, 2011. 116 pages.

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The present book is the first volume of a new scholarly series launched by the Institute of English Studies at the University of Pécs. It includes a range of essays addressing the influence of British and Irish literature on the process of cultural modernization in Hungary during the first half of the twentieth century. The discussions focus on the Hungarian reception of individual authors like Oscar Wilde and H. G. Wells, as well as on some broader issues of defining and negotiating Hungarian national identity by referring to aspects of British and Irish cultural history. Despite the once considerable distance dividing the two countries, Great Britain had been an area of interest for Hungarian intellectuals since the late eighteenth century. British culture was valued as a rich storehouse of viable models for literary innovation, and the British parliamentary system of government provided a standard for political modernization in Hungary. The condition of Ireland, on the other hand, seemed to have resonances with the semi-colonial situation of Hungary within the Habsburg Empire. Admittedly, the literary and cultural impact of Britain and Ireland escalated during the interwar period when members of the Hungarian intelligentsia were eager to make attempts to compensate for a perceived cultural backwardness in relation to Western Europe.

The works of Wilde and Wells were extensively translated, widely read and vigorously discussed during this period. The essay “The Rise of the Hungarian Dandy: Oscar Wilde and the Experience of Modernity in early Twentieth-Century Hungary” traces how Wilde influenced a whole generation of high Modernist authors who regarded rendering his poetry into Hungarian as a necessary part of their literary apprenticeship. Vöö places special emphasis on the role of the literary journal *Nyugat* [The West] in popularizing the works of British and Irish writers, and analyzes the role that Mihály Babits and Dezső Kosztolányi played in disseminating Wilde’s literary works and critical ideas. At the same time she also stresses the belatedness of Art for Art’s Sake even in the context of the early twentieth century literary scene and discusses how, in the mature phases of their careers, Hungarian writers turned away from the Wildean inspiration. Wilde, however, had a lasting impact on a whole generation by inspiring social attitudes like dandyism. Long after his death, his life and work provoked heated debates, exposing deep divisions among intellectuals on issues related to social visibility, morality, and modernity.

Still probing into the complexities of the domain of reception, in the writing “Meddler and Master: Critics and Defenders of H. G. Wells in Interwar Hungary,” Vöö demonstrates that Wells’s fantastic fiction and social novels appealed to authors

across the Hungarian cultural spectrum for a period of time. On the one hand, he was applauded by liberals who appreciated him as an accomplished author of novels of ideas. On the other hand, quite surprisingly, representatives of Hungarian reform pedagogy hailed him as an outstanding educator of the average twentieth-century reader. However, his perceived ideological limitations tended to estrange some of the politically articulate intellectuals whose thought was grounded in Marxism and provided them with the perspective and vocabulary necessary to dismiss Wells as a mere meddler and dreamer.

The second part of the book focuses on the ways in which comparative incursions into European history influenced definitions of the national character in Hungary. In this context, as the essay “A Congenial Race: Reflections of Irish Literature and National Character in the Hungarian Literary Journal *Nyugat*” claims, the Irish were regarded as a “race” with a spirit and culture congenial with the Hungarian. Anchoring their argument in rather vaguely defined notions of temperament and national character, writers like Frigyes Karinthy and Antal Szerb, as well as the philosopher Lajos Prohászka, pointed out, in what they deemed to be the representative types of the two nations, a set of common mental and spiritual markers. Also, the political and national crisis following the First World War and the cultural controversies of the interwar years brought about a revival of the issue of national spirit and character in Hungary. The elevation of the nomad as a persisting national type and the attempts of prominent intellectuals to invent a national myth were reminiscent of some of the efforts of the Celtic Renaissance. In both cases, Vöö argues in “Migrant, Wanderer, Fugitive: Competing Metaphors of National Character in Interwar Hungary,” attempts to define the nation’s inherent character and to forecast her destiny were symbolic expressions of both desires and anxieties rooted in the two countries’ colonial and semi-colonial past.

The essays in the volume shed light on the dynamics of a Central European culture characterized, on the one hand, by a certain kind of belatedness in respect to Western Europe, and by openness to modernizing influences on the other. In her book Gabriella Vöö deploys the comparative approach strategically, calling the informed reader’s attention to a unique cultural dialogue on both sides of Europe.