

FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

Lecture Twenty-Five: English in Hungary. The Future of “English”

First Chairs of English in Europe

• Vienna	1875	Harvard	1872
• Berlin	1876		
• Budapest	1886		
• Prague	1896		
• Uppsala	1904	Oxford	1904
• Rome	1906		
• Paris	1907	Cambridge	1912
• Moscow	1942		

Hungary and the British Isles

Contacts, cultural and other, very rare before the Reformation. A steady trickle of Protestant students (“peregrines”) to England in the 17th c. Consider:

- György **Komáromi Csipkés**, *Anglicum Spicilegium* (Debrecen, 1664): first English grammar by a Hungarian (in Latin);
- Edmund **Chishul**, *Travels in Turkey and Back to England* (1747), recalling his stay in Gyulafehérvár (Alba Iulia) in 1702: “the professor of the *Schola Albensis* [the Protestant College] . . . has traveled [sic] into England and other countries, and is a great admirer of the English; for which reason his study is full of our books, and he both writes, and speaks, and even teaches our language once a week to his scholars. His name is *Kaposi Samuel*, and was made *S. Theologiae Doctor* by a *diploma* from the Prince of Orange.”

Consider also Empress **Maria Theresa**’s hostility to English (“the language of irreligiosity and immorality”).

Interest in English literature growing in the 18th century and culminating in the Reform Age in the 19th c. First translations from French and German translations, cf. György **Bessenyei**’s tr. of Pope’s *Essay on Man* as *Az embernek próbája* (1772); **Csokonai**’s tr. of *The Rape of the Lock* (now lost); **Kazinczy**’s *Hamlet* (1790) and Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* (1814); János **Kis**’s tr. of Hugh Blair’s *Lectures* as *Blair Hugo’ Rhetorikai és Aesthetikai Leczkéi. Némelly kihagyásokkal és rövidítésekkel angolból* (1838).

Fascination with Shakespeare steadily moving towards culminating achievement of *Shakspere minden munkái* (The complete works of Shakespeare, 19 vols., 1864-1872; 1878), ed. János **Arany**.

English at the university

Jean **Lemouton** appointed Professor Extraordinary of English Language and Literature at the **Magyar Királyi Tudományegyetem** (Royal Hungarian University) in 1828. Author of *Grammatica Anglica* (1826).

First Chair of English in 1886 by order of Ágoston **Trefort**, with Arthur **Patterson** as head (author of *The Magyars: Their Country and Institutions* [1869] and translator of *Új földesúr* [868]). Succeeded by Arthur **Yolland** (1899-1947). Curve of development: from language teaching to custodianship of literature (no “philology” in the German sense!); student numbers up from 20 in 1890s to 150 in 1935 (but only 99 degrees taken in 1921-35). Most theses in literary topics, at times very modern (Joyce, D. H. Lawrence). A new impetus to English by the introduction of the language into secondary education in 1924. English (literature) one of the more demanding subjects. Minister of Education Kuno **Klebensberg**: “elmeképző” (mind-broadening) as opposed to “gyakorlati” (practical) subjects—English among the former. The situation: although unmarketable in the 1920s, Hungarian, Latin, history, geography were very popular with male students at the university because they believed that they could depend on what they had learned at grammar school—the idea of hard work not relished. The English department comes in for high praise:

De bezzeg ábrázoló mértanra vagy angolra nem lehet tanárt kapni. Ha végignézem azoknak a névsorát, akik Yolland Arthur barátomhoz . . . iratkoztak be, akkor tele van a lista Máriákkal, Ilonákkal, Erzsébetekkel, de kevés a János, a József meg a Ferenc. Itt nem elég a gimnáziumból felhozott tudás, itt új dolgokat kell keservesen tanulni, amiktől sokan fáznak. (“Pályaválasztás és megélhetés” [1929])

But teachers of descriptive geometry or English are impossible to get. When I look at the list of those who have registered [. . .] with my friend Arthur Yolland, it is full of names like Mary, Helen, Elisabeth, but names like John, Joseph and Francis do not abound. Here you will not survive on what you have learnt at grammar school; here you have to work hard to learn new things, the very idea of which gives many people the creeps. (“Career Options and Livelihood” [1929])

The vicissitudes of the 1950s: only 10 students in 1951. Rapid expansion from the 1960s on.

Chairs of English established in University of Debrecen (1938) and Szeged (1946; 1969).

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Literary studies in the postmodern age

Diagnosis in Harold **Bloom's** *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994):

After a lifetime spent in teaching literature at one of our major universities [Yale], I have very little confidence that literary education will survive its current malaise. [...] Surrounded by professors of hip-hop; by clones of Gallic-Germanic theory; by ideologists of gender and of various sexual persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited, I realize that the Balkanization of literary studies is irreversible.

Pragmatic considerations: education is expensive, students choose subjects that help them in the hunt for jobs in the “postjob age” (Michael Bérubé, *The Employment of English* [1998]).

Blaming the university

Few students with a genuine love of reading; in some universities literature is integrated into cultural studies where it takes a back seat (Bloom).

Instruction with no focus, shopping-mall curriculum.

Work ethic inadequate; poorly trained and undermotivated teachers, with little knowledge of the classics or of “the full range of the humanities”; minority literature and marginal topics as safe subjects (Bérubé).

“Publish or perish”; the balance between teaching and research upset; “overpopulation” of books (and authors), combined with substitutes for reading (television, the cinema)→“the real question is not ‘What shall I read?’ but ‘What shall I not bother to read?’ ” (Bloom). There is a “vast production of articles and books,” which “disappear without trace. No one even pretends any longer to ‘keep up’ with everything published on even a single major author”; “an enormous expenditure of time and energy that might have been much better spent on matters that bear more directly on the classroom” (Robert Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English* [1998]).

■ British reaction: “trailing decades behind America, British universities need not make American mistakes” (John Sutherland, *TLS* Sept. 4, 1998).

■ In J. M. **Coetzee's** *Disgrace* (1999), David Lurie, former Professor of English literature in Cape Town, now—owing to a rationalization—teaches communications, and some English literature (e.g. Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, for six students), if there are students who sign up.

Blaming theory

Deconstruction the principal scapegoat; it pretends to be anti-authoritarian when in fact it is authoritarian and judgmental, only, all its judgments are negative. It is preoccupied with failure; “a secular displacement of lapsed theological belief in a fallen humanity,” it has systematically destroyed traditional assumptions about the relationship between literature and reality. By calling into question the reliability of empirical knowledge in both the human and the physical sciences, by reducing everything to the status of text, it has disposed of the idea of truth and its attendant notions, intentionality and causality (Avrom Fleishman, *The Condition of English* [1998]).

■ Literature's self-implosion: “We need expert evaluative critics – but our professors keep denying the value of literature itself”→literature's “Ratner moment” (after jewellery tycoon Gerald Ratner who destroyed his company by publicly deriding its products, and therefore those who bought them). “Over the past three decades, many English Literature academics have acted just like this” (John Mullan, *TLS* March 12, 2008).

A cautionary tale

Alan D. **Sokal** and Jean **Bricmont**, *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science* (1997, English trans. 1999). Trial balloon launched before publication in the form of a hoax: postmodernist (French) intellectuals, Deleuze, Derrida, Lacan, Irigaray, Lyotard and others, who deny rationality; regard, without acceptable evidence, even the natural sciences as only narratives or myths. Sokal submitted nonsensical hodgepodge of the ideas of these authors in “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity,” to trendy *Social Text*, which enthusiastically accepted it.

These authors speak with a self-assurance that far outstrips their scientific competence: Lacan boasts of using “the most recent development in topology” and Latour [French sociologist] asks whether he has taught anything to Einstein. They imagine, perhaps, that they can exploit the prestige of the natural sciences in order to give their own discourse a veneer of rigor [sic]. And they seem confident that no one will notice their misuse of scientific concepts. No one is going to cry out that the king is naked.