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Far Away From Everything: Leonard Cohen in Hungarian

Abstract

The paper looks at the Hungarian translations of Cohen's poems and two novels, with references to the main features of the translations and to critical responses. For Hungarian audiences, Cohen is far better known as a singer of his own songs than as a writer of poetry and fiction.

Résumé

L'article parle de la traduction des poésies et de deux romans de Leonard Cohen tout en se référant aux caractéristiques principales des traductions et des réponses critiques. Le public hongrois connaît Cohen plutôt comme chanteur de ses propres chansons, moins comme écrivain et poète.

It is very difficult, maybe impossible, to investigate Leonard Cohen's literary work separately from his musical oeuvre: Hungarian audiences have known him since the '70s almost exclusively as a guitarist and singer, if they know him at all. Copied and re-copied cassette tapes, jam sessions with friends and the rare Cohen LP from the former Yugoslavia: this is what was available for encounters with the oeuvre or, to be more precise, with its pop music segment. In the case of Cohen's songs, defining them as pop-music, or even as pop-culture, is far from being precise. His most famous song, "Suzanne", like several others, was originally published as a poem in a collection of poetry. This road can also be walked from the other direction: the expressive and intricate songs "Democracy" and "The Future", which served as the lead track in Oliver Stones' controversial movie *Natural Born Killers*, were later included in poetry volumes. So Cohen creates his art *in between* the various art forms. A case in point is *Book of Longing*, his musical project with Philip Glass, who composed music to Cohen's poems. This work was performed in Béla Bartók National Concert Hall, Budapest i, July 2008, with Glass conducting the orchestra.

The singing of poems (especially to the accompaniment of an acoustic guitar) evoke again from time to time something from the bygone era of the troubadours. Acting as audience to the singing of poems may resemble the situation that Jorge Luís Borges describes in connection with his poem "El otro y el mismo" ("The Self and the Other") in the following way: the performer-poet's idea is created between the troubadour and his audience in the course of the interpretation. This approach makes it possible to channel the successful communication



between actor and recipient. The two poles of the actor and the recipient are necessary for the creation of a work of art, present at the same place at the same time with a very strong mutual relationship between them. Cohen's Hungarian audience got the same experience on 31 August 2009 in the Papp László Sports Arena in Budapest. The charismatic figure of the singer who accompanies his own performance is not unknown in Central or Eastern Europe. The Russian poet and actor Vladimir Visotsky and the Hungarian Tamás Cseh also followed this ancient tradition in their art. Tamás Cseh talked highly of Cohen's art, and admitted his indebtedness toward the older master.

Unfortunately, the intensive Hungarian reception of Leonard Cohen's art is basically limited to appreciation of the poet-bard, at least on the popular level, and Cohen's Canadian roots pass unnoticed. These roots, however, are important not only as the poet's background, or because his homeland awarded him the Order of Canada (Canada's highest civilian honour) in 2003, but also because he is a member of those generations of English Canadian poets for whom the opportunities and issues of multiculturalism and multilingualism are very important.

The 471st volume of the Modern Könyvtár (Modern Library) series published in Hungary by the Európa Publishing House in 1983 was an anthology bearing the title *Gótika a vadonban* (*Kanadai angol nyelvű költők*) (Wilderness Gothic: Anglophone Canadian Poets). Béla Köpeczi's Introduction highlights that the volume aimed to supply a general knowledge on Canadian literature and fill gaps in its appreciation in Hungary. The poetry volume was edited by James Steele, a professor at Carleton University in Ottawa, who also wrote the Epilogue and the Notes. Béla Köpeczi explained the Canadian cultural and social backgrounds and their historical roots in a short Foreword, while James Steele introduced the authors of the book to Hungarian readers. Interestingly, references to the labour movement in this volume, published in the Communist era, are not in Köpeczi's Introduction but in Steele's essay. Steele draws a detailed portrait of Cohen as bard or troubadour, but there are only a few, though informative, short remarks about his art. Steele highlights the importance of the connection with nature in Cohen's poem "Suzanne", but he remarks that this connection cannot be equated with the heritage of Romanticism, because Cohen ironizes Romanticism in his other poems. Steele mentions anarchistic cosmopolitanism in connection with the poem "Style", and makes a very important statement about the sensitive and intimate world of Cohen's poems, pointing out that it is the social relationships that characterize Cohen's figures, and not their social position.

Canadian-Hungarian poets worked on the Hungarian translations of various pieces included in *Gótika a vadonban*, for example László Kemenes Géfin and György Vitéz: the former translated most of Cohen's poems. He displayed especial sensitivity towards free verse, but in his translations the reader cannot easily reach or understand the inner rhythm of Cohen's poems (although there are also some free- and prose verses by Cohen in the volume). Katalin Szűr-Szabó's translation of "As the Mist Leaves No Scar" (serving as an introduction to the Hungarian translation of *The Favourite Game*, published decades later) is as accurate as Kemenes Géfin's, but Szűr-Szabó probably renders the musical side of the poem more successfully, and her rhymes better evoke the original. Kemenes Géfin's translation skills are not as problematic as those manifested in István Tótfalusi's translation. Tótfalusi translated only one of Cohen's poems, "Suzanne Takes You Down", as "Suzanne levisz" ("takes you down[wards]"). Tótfalusi

disconnects the rhythm of the poem and refuses to pay attention to the poet's intended cosy-stumbling rhymes. (The blurb of the Hungarian translation of *Beautiful Losers* refers to the same poem as "Suzanne elvisz" ("Suzanne takes you away"): this version is more suitable than Tótfalusi's title, not only regarding the English original, but also as far as the connotations of the Hungarian phrases are concerned. The history of the translations of this poem is full of vicissitudes: one translator even "translated" the name "Suzanne" into Hungarian, making it "Zsuzsanna", but this version of the name is not a suitable rendering of the original rhythm of the poem. János Bródy – himself a poet-songwriter and guitarist – interpreted the same title as "Suzanne elvisz téged" ("Suzanne takes you away"; here the "you" – "téged" – is explicit) for the 2003 CD of Cohen's songs in Hungarian.

Cohen's prose can easily confuse the Hungarian reader. The poet wrote two longer prose works in the first decade of his career: *The Favourite Game* was published in 1963 and *Beautiful Losers* in 1966. Both are significant experiments of his, presenting different but exciting intellectual journeys for the reader. It is characteristic of the Hungarian reception that the blurb of *The Favourite Game*'s Hungarian version refers to one of the January 2000 issues of *The Globe and Mail* and compares Cohen's novel to J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. This comparison creates a preconception for the potential reader, which unfortunately narrows the reader's expectations. I think *The Favourite Game* cannot be compared to *The Catcher in the Rye*, either in plot or concerning the levels of interpretations. The lead character's family relations do not tragically in the text – as the blurb suggests: they (for instance, the mother) only play a minimal role in the process of the hero's coming of age. I do not share the views of critics who consider Salinger's novel a cult-novel from a generational point of view.

The four-decade history of the Hungarian reception of Cohen creates a precisely drawn picture of the author, shaped to a great extent by the Cohen interpretations of some popular Hungarian performers such as the actor András Kern's record *Engem vársz* ("You are waiting for me") and the singer-guitarist Zorán Sztevanovity with his many interpretations of Cohen's tracks, some of which have little to do with the original songs. The two novels do not fit into this picture for Hungarian readers, but this situation is obviously not the fault of the novels. The above statements are most relevant in the case of *Beautiful Losers*. According to the legend (and why should the legend not be true, at least in the arts?) he wrote his three-movement work on the Greek island Hydra, under the influence of drugs. Of course one can read the novel like a psychedelic trip book. Canada in the '50s and '60s can also be reconstructed from the text, especially Montreal, which serves as background and set to the surrealistic vision-journey. This is the multicultural Montreal in which – just like in the novel – the French nationalist movement is closely intertwined with the liberal demands of the '60s, at least in the souls of the lead character(s) and the (not always legal) attempts to realize them. Leonard Cohen does not create situations, opinions or characters suitable for various ideologies; instead, he attempts to condense the broad view of the Montreal of those days into an anthropomorphic microcosm, in which effort he probably follows the legacy James Joyce, who had a considerable influence on North American prose writing in the second half of the 20th century. The richness of meaning is obvious and also explicit in László Kőrös's Hungarian translation, but it may sound strange to Cohen fans. *The Favourite Game* was published in 2003 by Ulpius Ház Publishing House under the title *A kedvenc játék*, while *Beautiful Losers* was published in 2006



by Cartaphilus Publishing House as *Szépséges lúzerek*. We can only hope that these translations will sooner or later force a turn in the reception of Cohen in Hungary.

Critical responses to the translations of these two novels are scarce. *A kedvenc játék* was reviewed on 14 August 2003 by J. A. (using only initials) on the website www.alone.hu, saying – in an over-familiar style – more about Cohen himself than the novel, and concluding that “the reader can learn more from a single chapter than from all the *Cosmopolitan* magazines of the world”. For this reviewer, Cohen’s first novel – although easier to read than his second, or his poetry – cannot be ranked among the top-100 overseas novels.

The review of *Beautiful Losers* by Zsuzsa Lukács in *Szépirodalmi Figyelő* (no.3, 2006) is more profound than the previous one. In her view, however important pop-rock is in Cohen’s art, it has had a disadvantageous influence on his literary reception. For this reviewer, *Szépséges lúzerek* is an anti-coming-of-age story, and belongs to postmodern literature by eliminating the difference between sacred and profane as well as between sexuality and religion. She draws attention to postcolonial theory (e.g. by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari) as theoretical background to Cohen’s second novel. For this Hungarian reviewer, a female Holy Trinity – the saint, the wife and the goddess of fertility – is created by Cohen. She concludes by stressing that Cohen writes about beauty in life, even if the heroes themselves are losers.

The third review (by an anonymous author), entitled “Vesztesek, mégis szépek” (“Losers, still beautiful”), on www.harmonet.hu (26 April 2006) criticizes the blurb of the Hungarian translation of *The Favourite Game* by stressing that Cohen is not a singer who writes novels but a poet who is also a rock-singer. In this review, *Beautiful Losers* is Cohen’s most significant prose work. Besides the usual Kerouac allusion, the influence of Burroughs and Bukowski is also hinted at. Unfortunately, the review continues by offering a mediocre analysis of Cohen’s role in the history of rock music, instead of elaborating on his literary merits.

The potential Hungarian Cohen-reader is very, very far away in space, in time and most of all, in literary appreciation from the way aestheticism, philosophy, politics, intimacy, ethnography, multiculturalism and anthropology appear in Leonard Cohen’s fiction.