To the Hungarians

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About the author

Dániel Berzsenyi [1776, Egyházashetye (Southwest Hungary) – 1836, Nikla (Southwest Hungary)]: poet. He was the offspring of a noble family of Lutheran denomination. He entered Sopron Lutheran Lyceum around 1790, where he acquired the basis of his education, especially in Latin and German poetry. He married in 1799 and led the lifestyle of the lesser nobility in Southwest Hungary. As a poet he was discovered by the circle of Ferenc Kazinczy. He emerged as one of the most important literary figures of the first two decades of the nineteenth century, acquiring fame for his mastery of Greek and Latin verse forms. Although initially he was considered a poet of exemplary genius, he eventually clashed with the leading Hungarian literati. In 1817 Ferenc Kölcsey published an unsympathetic review of the 1816 edition of his poems in the only Hungarian-language scholarly periodical of the time, Tudományos Gyűjtemény (Scientific collection). Berzsenyi’s counter-attack, Antirecensió Kölcsey recensiójára (Counter-review to the review by Kölcsey) aroused much opposition. In the ensuing phase of his career he concerned himself mostly with the questions of aesthetics, seeking to support his negative evaluation of Kölcsey’s writings. His melancholy, to which he was periodically subject from 1809 onwards, became increasingly deeper. Although he became a regular member of the Academy in 1830, he declined to move permanently to Pest and felt himself marginalized. He has been canonized in Hungarian literary history as the major figure of transition from classicism to romanticism. In the twentieth century he has also been interpreted as a tragically misunderstood genius (see László Németh, In minority).

Main works: Versei [Poems] (1813, second enlarged edition: 1816); A magyarországi mezet szorgalom némely akadályaitól [On some of the hindrances to agriculture in Hungary] (1833); Poetai Harmonistica [Poetic harmonistics] (1833); Összes művei [Collected works], 3 vols., (Edited by Gábor Döbrentei, 1842).
Context

After the ferment of the early 1790s, culminating in the short-lived experiment of parliamentarism and the ill-fated ‘Jacobin conspiracy,’ the Hungarian political elite experienced a deep crisis both in cultural and in political terms. The two decades after 1795 were marked by the withdrawal of the most important intellectual figures to the private sphere, although the land-holders enjoyed considerable economic prosperity due to the agrarian boom in the years of the Napoleonic wars. At the same time, the wars demonstrated the inability of the Hungarian gentry to cope with the radically altered conditions of modern warfare. In short, socio-economic and political transformation was challenging the traditional social and cultural self-image of the nation. Dániel Berzsenyi responded to this crisis of identity with a very specific poetic genre which combined the atmosphere of ‘country house poetry’ with references to both classical mythology and the Hungarian past.

This complex vision, in which he expressed his bitter criticism of contemporary mores, an idealization of the bellicose virtue of his forefathers, and a harking back to the myth of an ancient constitution, makes Berzsenyi an emblematic figure of the period. The poem, ‘To the Hungarians,’ a variation on motives found in the Roman poet Horace (Carmina, III. 6.) with its theme of the sins of the ancestors (“delicta maiorum”), can also be read as a reflection of the identity-discourse of the Hungarian middle nobility just before the unfolding of the Reform Age. It revisits the most crucial early modern topoi of identity in a highly pessimistic setting—contrasting the virtuous past with the corrupt present.

The poem is also representative of the integration of certain key elements of the early-modern ‘national’ discourse (such as the motif of ‘elect nationhood,’ and the post-humanist vision of patria) into the new cultural idiom of the ‘National Awakening.’ The poet concentrates on the problem of ‘corruption,’ deploring the deterioration of the moral and institutional cohesion of the body politic. Drawing on contemporary popular literature treating Hungarian history (such as István Losontzi’s textbook of 1773, Hármas Kis-Tükör – ‘Triple Small Mirror’), he devises a historical narrative, contrasting the “800 years of glory” of the ancient Hungarians, who were able to withstand the most dramatic historical vicissitudes as long as their virtue was intact, to the present Hungarians, who have forgotten their heroic past, have sunk into idleness, and set their personal interest over the call of patriotism. At the end of the poem this imagery of corruption becomes encapsulated in a ‘cosmic’ vision—with a reference to the rise and fall of ancient empires such
as Troy, Carthage, Rome, and Babylon—of the inconstancy of the goddess Fortuna, and the “iron fist of the Centuries,” which elevates all human creations to glory, only to destroy them ruthlessly in the end.

The key topos of the poem, with its focus on the ancient virtue of the community of noblemen, are characteristic of the language of ‘classical republicanism.’ Importantly, however, Berzsenyi, by birth a member of the nobility of Western Hungary, which was traditionally loyal to Vienna, did not turn this in the direction of the anti-Habsburg version of the Hungarian identity-discourse cultivated by the Calvinists of Northeast Hungary and Transylvania. Instead, he described (for instance, in his poem, ‘To the rising nobility’, which was rhetorically the closest to his ‘To the Hungarians’) the ancient glory of the nation in terms of its unswerving loyalty to the—Habsburg—ruler.

As the poem survives in four different versions, it is possible to follow the shifts in Berzsenyi’s perspective, both in poetic and ideological terms. If we compare the first version, dating from before 1797, to the definitive one, there are some interesting omissions; for example, in verse 5 he eliminated the pejorative historical references to Ferenc Rákóczi II and Gábor Bethlen and replaced them with the more abstract allusion to “the murderous century of Zápolya,” thus muting the political and confessional edge of the poem, as these two figures were central to the Calvinist-Transylvanian historical canon. This might have been a step towards formulating a more unitary national referential system transcending previous internal divisions.

He also omitted the detailed references to the decay of sexual morality, religious observance and military virtue—all central to the republican paradigm as well as to the Enlightenment genre of ‘philosophical poetry,’ a genre which was gradually becoming outdated as the imagery of corruption was becoming more metaphysical and less social. What takes the place of this moral invective is a series of references to a new vision of the nation. Instead of detailing the corruption of customs, Berzsenyi emphasizes the ‘de-nationalization’ of the Hungarians—a vision concentrated in the powerful symbols of the ‘forgetting’ of the national past and the abandonment of the national language.

Berzsenyi’s cultural-political narrative of Hungarianness encapsulated in this poem entered into a complex dialogue with the emerging ‘linguistic nationalism’ of the 1810–1820s. The catastrophic defeat of the noble insurrection against Napoleon in 1809 at Győr left him without illusions concerning the military power of the nobility. By 1811 he came to admit that the national project should be future-oriented rather than just perpetuating the ‘ancient
virtue’ of the nobility: “I was looking for the way to express nationality, even though the nation itself might be already lacking.” This was not incompatible with the ideology of the movement directed by Kazinczy, who tried to popularize the ideas of linguistic revival among the middle nobility as well. At the same time, his theoretical conflicts in the mid-1810s signalized a broader ideological shift away from the classical models and towards a mimetic competition with German cultural patterns. As a result, his peculiar synthesis of the language of classical republicanism with the national discourse of the nobility gave way to the cultivation—and reinvention—of folk traditions and the politics of incorporating the non-noble population into the symbolic framework of nationhood.

To the Hungarians (I.)

Oh you, once mighty Hungary, gone to seed,
can you not see the blood of Árpád¹ go foul,
can you not see the mighty lashes
heaven has slapped on your dreary country?

Amidst the storms of eight blood-soaked centuries
the battered towers of Buda still stand aloft
although a thousand times, in anger,
you trod upon your own self, your own kin.

Your beastly morals scatter it all to dust –
a brood of vipers, venomous, hideous,
lay waste the castle which beheld the
hundreds of sieges it used to smile at.

You stood defiant even against the wild
Xerxes-like hordes of Outer-Mongolia;
you could resist even world-conquering Turkey’s
mighty assault on the East and yonder;

¹ Árpád (? – 907?), chief of the Hungarian tribal confederation at the time of the conquest of the Carpathian basin, and ancestor of the first royal dynasty.
you did survive the murderous century
of Zápolya\(^{2}\) – the secret assassins’ hands –
while you stood firm amidst the flames of
family blood-feuds in retribution,

for you were led by virtues of yesteryear –
with Spartan arms you conquered throughout your wars;
wristing you won, and Hercules-like
war-hammers shook in your steely fist-hold.

But now – you are gnawed by venomous, stealthy death.
Behold: the oak that proudly withstands the storm
that cannot break it from the North, but
vermin can chew up its mighty root-work

and then it’s felled by only a flimsy breeze!
That’s why the firm foundation of every land
must be morality un tarnished
which, if destroyed, Rome will fall and founder.

What are Hungarians now?! Sybaritic wrecks –
they’ve ripped their splendid native insignia off
while, from their homeland’s ravaged bulwarks,
building a palace as lair of leisure –

they shed their ancient mantle of champions;
forget their tongue; they’re aping the strangers’ talk;
they stomp the nation’s Guardian Soul,\(^{3}\) and
foolishly worship a childish idol.

How diff’ rent rang the thunder of Hungary
amidst the blood-soaked battles of Attila,
who boldly faced half of the world in
punitive anger against the foul West!

\(^{2}\) István Szapolyai (or Zápolya), king of Hungary (1526–1540), elected by the anti-Habsburg faction of the nobility after the battle of Mohács. The power struggle between him and Ferdinand I Habsburg divided the country and contributed to the collapse of the unitary monarchy.

\(^{3}\) In the original version this line alludes to the ‘national Genius.’
Árpád, our Chief, the founder of Hungary, 
had braver troops to fight the Danubian shores, 
how diff’rent were the swords of Hungary 
Hunyadi⁴ used to repel the Sultan!

But woe – this is how everything perishes. 
We bear the yoke of fickle vicissitudes; 
the fairy mood of Luck has tossed us 
playfully upward and down, while smiling.

The iron fist of centuries finishes 
but all that man has built; gone is noble Troy; 
gone are the might and pride of Carthage, 
Babylon, Rome – they have all gone under.


⁴ János Hunyadi (c. 1407–1456), governor of Hungary during the infancy of king Ladislaus V, famous for his heroic struggle against the Ottomans, especially the defense of Belgrade in 1456.