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### **The Figure of Lajos Kossuth in Our Literature**

It is always literature that immortalises great personalities of history in a way “more lasting than brass”. Heroes represented by statues are always exposed to the times, history and politics: we know well how many reproductions of Hungarian historic personalities cast into statues were destroyed by blind rage all around the Carpathian basin following Trianon; among them one of the masterpieces of János Fadrusz, the equestrian statue of Queen Maria Theresa as well as innumerable statues of Kossuth, Széchenyi and Petőfi. There was a time when only a single statue of Lajos Kossuth was standing in former Hungarian territories in Romania: the one in Nagyszalonta (Salonta), the destruction of which the inhabitants of the city had prevented. Otherwise, many statues of Kossuth, born 200 years ago, fell victim to the devastation in Transylvania and Upper Hungary even though it might have been his representation cast into brass or carved into stone to appear the most often in the public squares in the old Hungary.

Statues could be battered down, crushed, re-carved (this happened indeed!), so it is truly literature that is able to preserve the memory of significant historic personalities in a manner “aere perennius” (Horace). This is the case in our literature as well, since many literary works have immortalised the figures of Saint Stephen, Saint Ladislaus, John Hunyadi, King Matthias, Gábor Bethlen, István Széchenyi, Miklós Wesselényi and, naturally, Lajos Kossuth. Now that I try to take this literature into account, I observe it with a bit of wonder that Kossuth engaged the attention of poets less while almost all of the above-mentioned historic personalities inspired a smaller volume of poems in Hungarian poetry. Therefore, I will also try to reconstruct the Kossuth image of prose (and dramatic) literature primarily concentrating on how this literature reflected this outstanding personality of our history.

The figure of Kossuth belongs, no doubt, to the romantic trend of national traditions: legends and myths surround his personality and statesman’s activity. Folk poetry shows the “sacralisation” of his figure well, for innumerable songs and ballads bear evidence of the affection of the Hungarians for the leader of the 1848–49 revolution and war of independence. However, presenting the figure of Lajos Kossuth through folk poetry cannot be the theme of this short study; besides, several folklorists have already investigated it (Mihály Zsilinszky in 1868, Elek Benedek in 1882, Lajos Katona in 1894, and Géza Hegedűs and Gyula Ortutay in 1952 on occasion of the 150th anniversary of the birth of the statesman).

Let us, therefore, discuss the literary representations of the figure of Kossuth and examine what impression our hero born two hundred years ago left on Hungarian narrative literature. We can say that the personality of Kossuth gave

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inspiration to our narrators already in his life, what is more, during the war of independence. The first reference coming from a writer is probably from the pen of Ferenc Kazinczy who reported on one of the first political appearances of the young lawyer from Zemplén in a letter addressed to László Bártfay dated on 25 January 1831. Kossuth protested against the recruitment demands of the Viennese government in a sensational speech at the county assembly at Sátoraljaújhely. In the words of the old master: "Lajos Kossuth rose and made his speech with his arms akimbo and with unconceivable audacity and so much vigour as if he held the torch of a rising in his hands." According to the outstanding historian, Sándor Lukácsi, who edited an anthology (*Kossuth. Írások Kossuth Lajosról* [Kossuth. Writings about Lajos Kossuth]) from the literary representations of the figure of Kossuth in 1952 (on occasion of the 150th anniversary of the birth of the statesman), it was in this short sentence where the name of Lajos Kossuth, a public figure of the county, could be read for the first time.

The activity of Kossuth became more widely known in Hungarian writers' circles of the Reform Era when he was arrested in May 1837 on account of his writings published in *Törvényhatósági Tudósítások* [Municipal Reports]. László Bártfay described the cruel story of the arrest in a letter written to Ferenc Kölcsey and dated on May 7, 1837, while Miklós Wesselényi urged on support for the family of Kossuth in a letter written to Kölcsey on May 8. Kölcsey himself protested at the county assembly of Szatmár against the armed arrest of the young lawyer and newspaper editor. From then on, the activity of Kossuth, his struggle at the county and national assemblies and his work as a newspaper editor and journalist received continuous attention in literary life, literary magazines and, after some time, in literature.

The first literary representation of the figure of Kossuth can be connected probably to the novel of Miklós Jósika entitled *Egy magyar család a forradalom alatt* [A Hungarian Family during the Revolution] published in 1861. This novel, which has almost been completely forgotten, records the manly determination of the chairman of the Committee in the description of a turbulent meeting of the National Defence Committee (Honvédelmi Bizottmány): the body set up to save the homeland listens to the ominous news on the advances of the Austrian troops coming from Upper Hungary and Transylvania with increasing despair. It was the audacity and faith in the revolution Kossuth proved that saved the situation, which was close to turning critical. "Lajos Kossuth forgot nothing, he remembered everything," closes Jósika the dramatic scene.

Subsequent to this, the figure of Kossuth appeared in the works of Mór Jókai who recorded the story of the birth of the Kossuth tune in the *Kossuth-album* [Kossuth album] in 1868; Albert Pálffy who recalled the figure of Kossuth in his novel entitled *A régi Magyarország utolsó éve* [The Last Years of the Old Hungary] published in 1894; Alajos Degré who described the young Lajos Kossuth in his work entitled *Visszaemlékezések* [Recollections] published in 1883–1884; Károly Eötvös, who presented the struggles of the governor-

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president several times in his novelistic description of the age entitled *Gróf Károlyi Gábor följegyzései* [Notes of Count Gábor Károlyi] and his work entitled *Emlékezések* [Memoirs] (both published in 1901). János Vajda also depicted a praiseful picture on the figure of Kossuth in several works of his, among them in his memoirs entitled *Egy honvéd naplójából* [From the Diary of a Honvéd]. He called attention especially to the oratorical talent of the leader of the war of independence that captivated everybody.

In his work entitled *A nemzet élő eszményülése* [Living Idealisation of the Nation] that appeared in the *Kossuth-album*, it is János Vajda again to render account of the stirring address that the chairman of the National Defence Committee delivered in front of a voluntary unit from the Great Plain: "Kossuth stood in front of the troops and delivered a rather short speech, he addressed a few encouraging words to them. These were simple words, quite different from those speeches that he usually told the intellectuals of the nation and of which I had been lucky to witness the most wonderful one. And yet, the effect of these words is impossible to describe. The whole company that had seemed a motionless, unfeeling and dead mass, as if suddenly set on fire by some divine spark, appeared fighting the enthusiasm in their hearts, not knowing how to express it. The galvanic effect of every single word was clearly manifest. The chests swell, the arms rose, the swords gleamed, the eyes sparkled and an almost untameable impatience seized all as if they could have rushed upon the enemy in that very moment. (...) Who will write about him that he was the greatest of the orators of the world, will say little, almost nothing. True, his speeches delivered in the House of Representatives are unmatched masterpieces of oration and future generations will understand why they could have the effect they had. Yet, reading those few ordinary words that he addressed, for example, to the troops, the reader will wonder how they could have had such an extraordinary effect given that there is nothing special, nothing marvellous in them after all! And thinking about this, the reader will be compelled to think that here the power of neither an orator, a patriot nor an ordinary great man must have been at work but instead the fascinating power of the charm of some extraordinary, wondrous individual! Whose personality and pure presence had an enchanting power on his compatriots in the strictest sense of the word."

Thanks to the contemporary writers, the leader of the war of independence on several occasions appears in front of us as a mythic hero. The real analytical analysis of the work of Kossuth, however, can be encountered in those works, mostly memoirs, that describe the figure of Lajos Kossuth – his efforts to promote the issue of Hungarian independence in Turkey, England, the United States and Turin in Italy – in exile, subsequent to the failure of the great national struggle. Accordingly, I am thinking of the memoirs and diaries of Ferenc Pulszky, Sándor Teleki, Károly László, Fülöp Figyelmessy and Károly Eötvös. These are the most important sources – besides the documents of Kossuth himself – on the life and activity of the emigrant governor-president.

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It is worth recalling a chapter of the *Emékiratok* [Memoirs] of Ferenc Pulszky that describe the moments of his arrival in the United States: "Visits on Staten Island followed one another; at noon, the Freemasons marched past in front of Kossuth in their vestments that one can see in Europe on the rare occasion of the feast of the lodge, with all their ribbons and stars, and there was music in the light of torches in the evening. Kingsland, mayor of New York, also came and arranged with Kossuth that as soon as we arrive at the Castle Garden, there would be masses of people expecting a speech. We will drive to the inn afterwards where we will be the guests of the city during our stay in New York similar to all those Hungarians who had arrived earlier by boat on the Mississippi and had been provided for by the city."

We can encounter the figure of Kossuth relatively rarely in the narrative literature of the turn of the century maybe due in part to the fact that this epoch was concerned not so much with the age (and consequences) of 1848–49 as with earlier historic eras and here I think of the historic novels of Kálmán Mikszáth and Géza Gárdonyi for example. Otherwise, Mikszáth recalled the figure of Kossuth as a child in an anecdote in the first chapter of his novel entitled *Különös házasság* [Unusual Wedding]. Lajos Tolnai, an almost forgotten narrator of the end of the 19th century, mentioned in his novel entitled *Báróné ténsasszony* [Honourable Baroness] that nearly religious expectation lived among the people about Kossuth who would return from exile and once more lead the war of independence of Hungary.

Naturally, the figure of Kossuth was present in the literature of the twentieth century as well. Primarily in the works of Zsigmond Móricz; among others, in his novels on Sándor Rózsa and his work entitled *A boldog ember* [The Happy Man]. Although Móricz depicted Kossuth with great appreciation, he, so to say, judged the activities of the statesman from a "popular" point of view and, because of this, tried to deprive his figure from those mythic features that the novels and memoirs of the 19th century attributed to him. He presented him as a historic hero who was able to accomplish truly monumental actions when his intention fully coincided with the desires and needs of the popular masses and when it was these desires he realised. In truth, he attributed another mythic aura to him: after the aura of the champion of liberty, with that of the popular hero according to the evidence of *The Happy Man*. "One true leader did the Hungarians have – he records the words of the »happy man« –, Lajos Kossuth and nobody else... Because this Lajos Kossuth was at the chancellery by Ferdinand, uncle of Francis Joseph. He was the subject of the king. He worked with all kinds of letters. But he also worked in Hungary with the other potentates to leave the Germans and have a fine Hungarian homeland... When he could see that the potentates were at his side, he brought the letters home. But the Germans did not like that and war broke out because of this. Because Lajos Kossuth wanted to have one fine Hungary and that everybody could live a decent life there."

Besides Zsigmond Móricz, others like Endre Ady and Gyula Juhász also drew their own picture of Kossuth. Ady, as a young journalist in Debrecen, questioned

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the “civis” city in the June 17, 1899 issue of the daily Debrecen, why it delayed raising the statue of the hero of freedom: “It is a duty of honour of Debrecen – he declared – to raise the statue of Kossuth!” Gyula Juhász confessed the commitment he felt towards the heritage and memory of Lajos Kossuth in the aphorisms of his volume entitled *Holmi* [Things]. These seven letters, he said thinking about the name of Kossuth, form the big dipper of the Hungarian sky that always shows the path toward the victory of freedom. Széchenyi is only the greatest, Deák is the wise, but he is our father. (...) Kossuth is not a tragic figure. Just as no messiah can be tragic. Tragic is the people that does not recognise and follow its messiah. Thy kingdom come! – the Hungarian person can feel this prayer more profoundly than anybody else.”

The figure of Kossuth appeared in Hungarian literature later on too, for example in the work of Ferenc Móra entitled *Dióbél királyfi* [Nut Kernel Prince]. In spite of this, one can conclude that our narrative literature, similar to our dramatic literature, could not make much of the figure and personality of Kossuth. This could be a result of the fact that national feelings and common consent placed this personality on the highest pedestal of Hungarian history and the historic figure covered with a next-to mythic light could not be suitable for the psychological analysis that appeared as an obligatory norm for modern literature. Similar to this, Hungarian dramatic literature also ignored the figure Kossuth for the most part. A meaningful fact might be that László Németh presented the fate and personality of István Széchenyi and Arthur Görgey in rather outstanding works, while Kossuth is missing from among the heroes of his historical dramas.

In reality, it was Tibor Cseres to break with this myticising and legend-building (almost obligatory) tradition, when his interest turned toward the figure of Kossuth and he wrote his novel entitled *Én, Kossuth Lajos* [I, Lajos Kossuth], which appeared in 1981. Cseres wanted to present and, through this, understand the actions and political decisions of the statesman. He tried to find an authentic answer to questions that have remained timely since the times of Kossuth, the issue of the independence of the country for example. More exactly, the eternal Hungarian historical and political dilemma on how a small country, hard-pressed by its neighbours and exposed to the strategies of the great powers, could restore and defend its independence. Another such issue is the cardinal question that in the end decided the fate of historic Hungary so unfavourably: how a multinational state could be maintained in an age of reviving nationalisms. The novel of Cseres, written in the first person, seeks to shed light upon the inner world and struggles of Kossuth and reconstruct those thoughts and feelings that could determine the decisions and actions of the statesman.

Hungarian dramatic literature, and this might be surprising, hardly paid attention to the figure of Kossuth, at least not in the truly lasting works. Nevertheless, we have a historical drama that presented his figure with historic authenticity, psychological insight and genuine poetry. It is the drama of Gyula Illyés entitled *Fáklyaláng* [Torch-flame] written in 1953, which was a great

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success in its time at the Katona József Theatre and at several theatres all around the country and within the Carpathian basin. For example, in Marosvásárhely (Targu Mures), where more than a hundred performances were held (at the hundredth performance in January 1956 the writer himself appeared). In addition to this, Illyés was committed to deal with the legacy of the War of Independence of 1848–49 and the activities of Kossuth in both poems and prose.

His Kossuth drama stages the legendary figure of Hungarian history and, as opposed to the coolly thinking and rationalistic Görgey who is also evoked in the second act, the governor received a romantic tinge and carried the mythic characteristics of the Kossuth legends living among the people. In reality, Illyés tried to make the Hungarians of his age have faith in that transitory moment of slightly shaken oppression in 1953 (Stalin died), when certain hopes sprang up about the reorganisation and strengthening of national life. The confidence of the historic drama and the exaltation of the figure of Kossuth stems from here, since this figure has always been a symbol of national independence and freedom. Miklós Béládi is right when he writes in his major study (*A múltteremtő* [The Past-maker]) on the dramas of Illyés: “The most beautiful Kossuth portraits of Hungarian literature comes to life in this act. The debate of Kossuth and Görgey is interwoven with the newly arising faith in the revolution on the part of Illyés – who has experienced so much despair and forced renouncement –, which means that this time the people can finally find their home and feel the country their very own.”

Ideas and visions on the past and the future, on national history and desirable national strategy have always permeated the representations of Kossuth in Hungarian literature. (Similar, by the way, to the representations of Széchenyi.) In the end, not only the figure and fate of a historic hero, the governor-president was the topic of these portrayals but also the history and fate of the nation. This was the reason why it has always been so difficult to depict a new picture of Lajos Kossuth. Maybe now, at the 200th anniversary of his birth we have to resign ourselves to the fact that the figure of Kossuth appears in Hungarian literature not primarily in its individual, human and spiritual sense but as the life and history of the nation: the perpetual symbol of the always timely desire of freedom and national identity that has to be renewed again and again. This is the fate of the greatest heroes of our history. The name of Kossuth remains such a call word that addresses our national identity, self-respect and the spirit of the nation itself.