

OPENING REMARKS

to the Comparative Criticism Colloquium, Veszprém June 15–17, 1989

I'm pleased to welcome the participants of the fifth conference of comparative literature. I don't think I need to over-emphasize the importance of the programme in terms of the spiritual and intellectual opening it represents. Given the historical circumstances under which Hungarians have been compelled to live in the past few decades the implementation and organization of such a conference is a true achievement. I've always believed in it, and I fully believe in its future, too: let me prove it with something that seems like an administrative affair. I recommended Péter Dávidházi, who is twenty years my junior, to represent Hungary in the joint committee of social sciences in the future.

Naturally, the continuity of our co-operation hasn't solely depended on our intentions. It's hardly possible to maintain a scientific programme unless it undertakes the task of clarifying real research problems. I think, ours has attempted to do so with precision. American literary scholars, whose thinking is, of course, open, probably find it almost impossible to imagine how difficult it was to create the conditions for choosing topics for our conferences which not only meet the American suggestions but at the same time have Hungarian antecedents, similar trends and results. It was quite natural that at the first conference in 1981, we discussed our general principles on comparative literature. We managed to convince our American colleagues that we had had some initiative in comparative theory and research in Central and Eastern Europe. After this first step, the second followed naturally: the examination of interdisci-

plinary questions in literary scholarship. Our periodical, named *Helikon*, devoted a special issue to this topic as early as the sixties. The 1985 analysis of the change in genres was able to rely on phenomena appearing in Hungarian literature in transition. When, last time, we discussed nineteenth century realism, we were faced with a topic in literary theory which had provoked extreme views for a long time. While organizing that conference, we expressed many times that what interested us most from among suggestions for topics was comparative criticism. Our institute decided already at the end of the sixties to write the history of Hungarian criticism after finishing the huge, comprehensive project of a six-volume literary history. Although in this research we had to start almost from scratch, we have produced quite a few achievements. We have published volumes introducing the Middle Ages, the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the age of positivism. Forthcoming is the analysis of the concept of literature in the age of Reason, soon the monograph on the second half of the nineteenth century (which can be termed as the age of national classicism) will be ready. We have started working on the twentieth century, as well. I would like to say a few words about this last topic since during our conferences the research into Hungarian literature confronted us with the idea of universality. We were aware of the fact that the history of criticism implies the examination of the relationship between the history of ideas and that of literature; and once we realized that the history of criticism in fact coincides with the history of the concepts of literariness, then poetic conceptions would have to be re-evaluated as well. In the age of positivism, for example, this was taken for granted. But in other periods when Hungarian criticism was not under the influence of a universal movement, only a deeper and more complex analysis was able to emphasize universal points of view.

In the first part of the twentieth century there was only one critical movement in Hungary which could be regarded as universal. This was *Geistesgeschichte* in the 20s. Before that,

however, when at the turn of the century the ideal of modernism started to dominate, no ideas or methodological principles could be found which could be linked to any of the internationally recognized movements. I, personally, like to call the beginnings of Hungarian modernism the age of impressionism, although I know that the use of this term is much debated not only in the history of criticism, but in the history of literature as well. I admit that the Hungarian critics of the period were less able to express their views on the period and the world than contemporary writers. The reason is that impressionism sacrificed itself when it denied the justification for thinking in terms of systems, so it failed to clarify and systematize even its own principles. Still, when modern Hungarian critics, inspired by Oscar Wilde and Alfred Kerr, for example, saw the recording of the self of the critic as the only possible way of describing a work of art without any preconceptions, then they launched a historically motivated attack on inherited and obsolete poetic dogmas, thereby introducing new poetic values in modern literature. But soon it became obvious that their struggle had to be carried on even if it would eventually turn against the impressionists. In the early stages of Hungarian modernism several critics came to realize that the essence of Hungarian literary modernism was the creation of literary autonomy in the ontological sense and the expression of the metaphysical self after the pronouncement of the freedom of the individual. Young Lukács and the art historian, Lajos Fülep (regarded by Charles de Tolnay as his master), were involved in this exterior and interior debate at the beginning of the century. At the time this conception could only offer a theoretical alternative, but it was reaffirmed by the achievements of writers such as Endre Ady, who summed up his vision of existence in the social and historical context of World War I. Mihály Babits, who started with a major essay on Bergson and ended up expressing neoclassical ideals is also an important figure in this intellectual debate. This theoretical alternative and these literary achievements paved the way for the

second period of modernism, which can be characterized by – instead of neoromantic subjectivity – the application of objective ideals and methods. Even though the requirement of exactness and prestructuralism was not voiced systematically at that time in Hungarian literary thinking, still there were certain tendencies parallel to them, and there also appeared the ideal of impersonality exemplified by T. S. Eliot between the two world wars. After the exciting interlude of *Geistesgeschichte* in the twenties, the Hungarian poetic revolution started only the sixties. Slow as it was, it created the chance of reintegration into universal literary thinking. I am fully convinced that this conference was born out of this revolution, too.

I think dialogue is the confrontation of different historical situations. I hope my opening remarks have convinced you that this conference is not only an exchange of abstract ideas, but the confrontation of the principles and methods for a long-term project which includes the requirement of universality.