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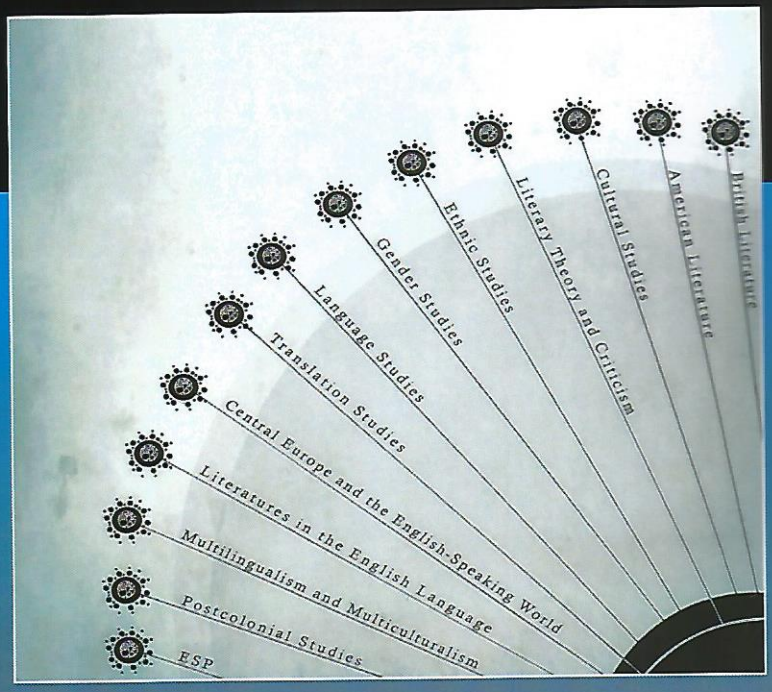

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(DE)CONSTRUCTING 19TH CENTURY HUNGARIAN STEREOTYPES IN JOHN PAGET'S *TRAVELOGUE*

BORBÁLA BÖKÖS[31]

ABSTRACT

John Paget, English doctor, agriculturist, and traveler in the 19th century became famous for his two volumes work entitled Hungary and Transylvania (1839) and for moving to Transylvania and becoming a "Hungarian" later on. His travelogue provided a positive image of Hungarians as well as of the Hungarian Revolution, and served as a crucial source of information for the Western society regarding the situation in Hungary before the Revolution in 1848. This paper looks at the ways in which Hungarian "otherness" is discussed in Paget's travel narrative against British national ideals. I am interested in how the travelers' gaze is influenced by diverse points of views and how it is returned by the gaze of local inhabitants. Therefore, I will discuss the portrayal of Hungarian stereotypes as contrasted with English national ideas and characteristics. Through describing the manners and customs of the inhabitants, Paget manages to offer a compelling view on various cultural signifiers which represent traditional means in Hungarian self-definition surviving in the shadow of the Habsburg Empire.

In the 19th century English travelers' interest in Hungary and Transylvania was significantly raised. As Hungary became such an important destination for British visitors in this period, their travel accounts provided intriguing insights into the cultural, as well as into the political climate of the era. Among the many factors that made Hungary a desirable destination for foreigners, one can enumerate the improvement of travelling conditions due to the appearance of steam-shipping, the Hungarian elite's receptive attitude towards British political and cultural models, as well as the newly occurred business opportunities (investing into railway, bridge building, and so on).

[31] Partium Christian University.

Hungarian social transformation emerged as a result of increasingly influential West European liberal ideas spreading during the Age of Reform. According to László Kósa, Count István Széchenyi became one of the greatest initiators of reform trends among the aristocracy, and advocated the idea of national self-determination. The latter meant a demand for full self-determination in the face of Vienna, the Habsburgs, and the empire, and stressed the setting up of a bourgeois liberal state, under a responsible government, with a legislation based on popular presentation.[32] Vienna considered such reform trends as being major threats to imperial centralization. Thus, political struggles became more and more sharpened. While some of the landlords, such as Széchenyi, insisted on winning over the Viennese government circles for the Hungarian plans, and focused on a slow, gradual transformation, the majority, such as the gentry and the serfs, wanted a quick solution to the crisis.[33]

In such circumstances the ways in which Hungarians and their cause were seen by Western Europeans seemed to be of utmost importance. As the causes of nation and progress were closely linked, it became crucial for Hungarians to be seen objectively by foreigners—a demand that was going against the Habsburgs' interests. Among the many visitors that tried to depict a quite unbiased picture of Hungary, one can find John Paget, whose journey was meticulously recorded in his extensive book entitled *Hungary and Transylvania (1839).* This work served as a travel guide for other British visitors after him. Paget also became famous for moving to Transylvania and becoming a "Hungarian" later on. His travelogue provided a positive image of Hungarians as well as of the Hungarian Revolution, and served as a crucial source of information for the Western society regarding the situation in Hungary before the Revolution in 1848.

This paper looks at the ways in which Hungarian "otherness" is discussed in Paget's travel narrative against British national ideals. I am interested in how the travelers' gaze is influenced by diverse points of views and how it is returned by the gaze of local inhabitants. Therefore, I will discuss the portrayal of Hungarian stereotypes as contrasted with English national ideas and characteristics. Through describing the manners and customs of the inhabitants, Paget manages to offer a compelling view on various cultural signifiers which represent traditional means in Hungarian self-definition, surviving in the shadow of the Habsburg Empire.

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[32] Kósa, László (ed.), *A Companion to Hungarian Studies, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 1999, 165.*

[33] The latters' objectives were expressed by Baron Miklós Wesselényi. The government, attempting to end the reform movement by reprisals, put him on trial and condemned him (Kósa, *A Companion to Hungarian Studies,* 166).

John Paget's interest in Hungary and Transylvania was raised first when he met his future wife, Baroness Polyxenia Wesselényi in 1835. In the spring of 1835 he travelled to Hungary together with his friends: William Stanford (1806-1882), an English journalist, and George Edward Hering (1805-1879) an English landscape painter. His experiences were recorded in his *Hungary and Transylvania; with Remarks on their Condition Social, Political, and Economical* that was published in 1839 in London. On the front page one can read a motto chosen from Dante's Divine Comedy: *Beata Ungheria! se non si lascia piu malmenare*! (Oh Happy Hungary, if she escapes further abuse!),[34] suggesting that he felt true sympathy towards the condition of Hungarians and was hoping for better times that awaited the country. The account of the tour through Hungary and Transylvania among the Carpathians became very successful in London, and Hering's illustrations that accompanied the book were also published in a companion volume in 1838 entitled: *Sketches on the Danube, in Hungary, and Transylvania.*

The first Hungarian translation appeared in 1987, and, according to the editor of this translated volume, Sándor Maller, Paget's work was the most beautiful and well documented work on Hungary and Transylvania written in English in the 19th century. It was very successful in London during the Hungarian Revolution in 1849, and in the following years it was republished four times. It was first published in America in 1950, shortly before the arrival of Lajos Kossuth.[35] Maller adds that Paget's work was the most truthful account of Hungary and its inhabitants in those years, and, because of it, Paget was elected member of the Hungarian Historical Society (Magyar Történelmi Társaság) in 1868.[36] The latest edition of the book appeared in 2011 in Kolozsvár (Cluj) and is, indeed, a very thorough work that completes the selective translation of Maller, while adding the translation of Paget's *Memoires VI*, a diary in six notebooks written in June, July, and August 1849 dealing with the Hungarian War of Independence. The diary, now preserved in the Széchenyi Library, is a very precise description of daily events, both in terms of military movements and local, family life. As Klára Cs. Lingvay, the editor and translator of the volume argues, Paget provides a shattering picture of the historical atmosphere that pervaded Kolozsvár (Cluj) before the occurrence of the great national tragedy: the crush of the Revolution.[37]

[34] Paget, John, *Hungary and Transylvania*, London, John Murray, 1839, front page.

[35] Maller, Sándor, *Paget, John. Magyarország és Erdély.* Válogatás, translated by Zsuzsa Rakovszky, Budapest, Helikon, 1985, 339.

[36] Ibid., 339.

[37] Lingvay, Klára Cs., *Paget, John. Magyarország és Erdély. Napló*, Cluj-Napoca, Kriterion, 2011, 35.

John Paget's *Hungary and Transylvania* is quite an unusual travelogue: besides providing the traveler's personal experiences, it offers a thorough social, political, religious as well as an economic description of the country. This more than nine hundred pages account of Hungary in the Reform period, together with its positive and negative aspects, shaped the new ways in which Hungarians were perceived by Western Europeans. In the introduction Paget claimed the following:

> I would not willingly deceive him [the reader] in anything. I am deeply interested in the welfare of Hungary, and I have thought that one great means of promoting it would be to extend the knowledge of that country in the west of Europe, and more especially in England. But although I naturally wish that others should partake of the interest which I feel, I have not thought it either just or wise to conceal, or to gloss over, faults existing either in the country, its institutions, or its inhabitants. I know there are those who think, that "to write up a country," a traveller should describe everything in its most favourable light; I am not of that opinion, - I do not believe that a false impression can ever effect any lasting good.[38]

In his work Paget provided a detailed description of Hungarian realities, emphasizing the positive aspects of specific Hungarian virtues and values (such as, desire for freedom, the beauty of music and language and their shaping force of national identity), as well as the sympathy of Hungarians towards English culture and language.

Hungary: Civilization and Intercultural Relations

Paget's work appeared in a period when Western society had little, or almost no objective knowledge of Hungary, moreover, false images persisted about Hungarians as being uncivilized and dangerous. As János Kovács puts it, before the 1848-49 Revolution Hungary was seen as a "terra incognita," that is, an unknown land, hidden from the eyes of foreign nations.[39] Such false legends and myths were created and circulated on purpose by the Habsburg administration.[40] As the Habsburg regime attempted to prevent visitors to enter Hungary, Paget was among the first who destroyed the false myths fabricated about the country. At the beginning of his travelogue, he wrote:

[38] Paget, *Hungary,* (viii-ix).
[39] Kovács, János, Paget János esqu. életirata, Kolozsvár, Keresztény Magvető, 1893, 98.
[40] Ibid., 94.

> The reader would certainly laugh, as I have often done since, did I tell him one half the foolish tales the good Viennese told us of the country we were about to visit. No roads! no inns! no police! we must sleep on the ground, eat where we could, and be ready to defend our purses and our lives at every moment! In full credence of these reports, we provided ourselves most plentifully with arms, which were carefully loaded, and placed ready for immediate use; for as we heard that nothing but fighting would carry us through, we determined to put the best face we could on the matter. It may, however, ease the reader's mind to know that no occasion to shoot anything more formidable than a partridge or a hare ever presented itself; and that we finished our journey with the full conviction, *that travelling in Hungary was just as safe as travelling in England.*[41]

The tolerant Paget could not understand the reasons behind such enmity between Austrians and Hungarians. He continued the above mentioned description, and commented on the absurd mutual feeling of distrust that existed between the two nations:

> Why or wherefore, I know not, but nothing can exceed the horror with which a true Austrian regards both Hungary and its inhabitants. I have sometimes suspected that the bugbear with which a Vienna mother frightens her squaller to sleep, must be an Hungarian bugbear; for in no other way can I account for the inbred and absurd fear which they entertain for such near neighbours.[42]

Later he mentioned that when approaching the border of Hungary, he and his friends showed their passports to the border guards, as usual, but his passport "was declined with a polite bow, and an assurance that I was in Hungary and had no longer need of it ... My heart beat more gaily in its prison, my blood flowed more freely through my veins, as I blessed the land where some trace of personal liberty still existed."[43] This very much "European" country surprised the English travelers to a great extent.

During his journeys Paget described each city and region with great precision, detailing the social, ethnic, and natural features of the respective area. Through such descriptions his appreciation of contemporary Hungary came to the foreground. When he arrived to Pest, he realized that Count Széchenyi, "the Greatest Hungarian" opened the Casino, a social institution for the elite. The Casino came into being as a result of Széchenyi's visits in the United Kingdom,

41 Paget, *Hungary*, 3.
42 Ibid., 3.
43 Ibid., 5.

where he could attend the Clubs designed for English gentlemen. Paget offered a very intriguing picture of the Count: the great reformer admired Great Britain's laws and institutions, and urged the deepening of economic relations between England and Hungary. Indeed, when Paget saw the capital city for the first time, he immediately fell under its spell, and admitted that it was as beautiful and civilized, as London. Regarding the means of transportation, he noticed about the fiacre in Budapest that it was "none of the dirty, heavy, shabby, slow coaches, found on the stands of London; but a very clean, smart, open caléche, with two high-bred little horses which whisk along at a famous rate; and the driver as far superior in sharpness and wit to his wooden-shod confrére of Paris as the equipage is to that of London."[44]

Paget was also deeply touched by the Hungarians' interest in the English language and literature. He remarked that one can find in the Casino the *Athenaeum*, the *Edinbourgh Review*, the *Quarterly Review* and the *Foreign Quarterly Review*. Hungarian readers knew the works of Shakespeare, Byron, Scott, and Bulwer. While visiting the wonders of Buda, he found that every shop had a name and a sign, just like in London in the past: "so that you may buy your cigars at the Young Prince; your cravats, at the Three Graces; and bonbons, at the English Lord."[45]

During his journeys, Paget not only described the industry of mining, agriculture, thermal baths, viniculture etc., but also Hungarian people, their habits and clothing, their everyday life, and their hospitality. He constantly made comparisons between the British and Hungarian ways of life and institutions. Thus, the Golden Bull was compared to the English Magna Charta, Hungarian political and social institutions to English ones, Hungarian tastes and attitudes to British behavior, as well as Hungarian desire for freedom was matched to the British nation's love of liberty.

Upon visiting Count Széchenyi's estate not far from Pest, he got the opportunity to look at the way Hungarian peasants lived. As he observed the wealth of his host, the beautiful farm and the livestock, he claimed in admiration: "I think I hear an old English squire exclaim, 'Hem! I do believe a man might live in Hungary'."[46]

While entering a peasant's cottage, he was amazed by the whitewashed rooms, by the look of the furniture, the wooden seats, the oaken table, a bed heaped up to the ceiling with feather-beds—an item of luxury and part of the wife's dowry.

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[44] Ibid., 231.
[45] Ibid., 243-44.
[46] Ibid., 285.

He concluded that such conditions would mean "altogether, perhaps, as good a picture of a rich and prosperous peasantry as one could find in any part of the world."[47]

On the Images of Hungarians

In trying to get a more accurate picture of Hungarians and the true "Magyar" character, Paget claimed that the best place to go was Debrecen as well as the Hungarian "puszta" (plains). The English traveler stated that the Hungarian language was spoken here in its purest form, and the national peculiarities were strongly preserved.

> The pride of the Magyar, which is one of his strongest traits, leads him to look down on every other nation by which he is surrounded with sovereign contempt. All foreigners are either Schwab (German) or Talyán (Italian); and it is difficult to imagine the supercilious air with which the Magyar peasant pronounces those two words. (...) The Magyar is accused of being lazy; and if by that is meant that he has not the Englishman's love of work for its own sake, I believe the charge is merited. A Magyar never moves when he can sit still, and never walks when he can ride. Even riding on horseback seems too much trouble for him; for he generally puts four horses into his little wagon, and in that state makes his excursions to the next village, or to the market town. This want of energy is attended, too, with a want of perseverance. The Hungarian is easily disappointed and discouraged if an enterprise does not succeed at the first attempt. The Magyar character has a singular mixture of habitual passiveness and melancholy, mixed up with great susceptibility to excitement. The Magyar's step is slow and measured, his countenance pensive, and his address imposing and dignified; yet, once excited, he rushes forward with a precipitation of which his enemies have often felt the force.[48]

Then he continued:

> The Magyar peasant has a strong feeling of self-respect, at times bordering perhaps on foolish pride. (...) To all this is united a sense of personal decency, and a fastidious delicacy in certain matters, scarcely to be found amongst any other people The

[47] Ibid., 290.
[48] Ibid., 504-505.

> Magyar has a passionate love of country, united to a conviction that no one is so happy and prosperous as himself. The Swiss does not feel a more devoted attachment to his mountains than the Magyar to his plains.[49]

What emerges from the aforementioned quotes is a picturesque description of local Hungarians, an image seen through the English traveler's eyes. Such descriptions helped in the development of a certain exotic image of Hungarians in the period of Romanticism, thus going against the ideas that referred to them as barbarian nomads settled in the middle of civilized Europe. Paget, with such images of freedom-loving, proud Hungarians, (especially the "puszta" shepherds) contributed to the spreading of a new context in which the nation could be seen: Hungarians were forgers of national self-consciousness under the pressure of Viennese absolutism; an image that quickly became well-received by Western liberals.

Finally, Paget added to this description the sense of nostalgia that pervaded the Hungarian spirit: the Magyar "is seized with an irresistible desire to weep over the miseries of his fatherland. With high and low, the reign of Corvinus, when Hungary was respected abroad and the peasant protected at home, is the imaginary golden age to which they all refer."[50]

In the description of Hungarian people's everyday life, Paget pointed out many aspects that may be interpreted as elements of a strong holding to national ideas. This is present in the description of how music plays an important part in upholding Hungarian national identity, as well as in the preservation of strong religious beliefs. He also appreciated the progressive spirit of Hungarians: the plans of Count Széchenyi regarding the building of a bridge, railway, and steamships filled his heart with great enthusiasm, and considered Hungary as a land of great economic opportunities.

There is a typical cultural signifier that was discussed in connection with Hungarian nationalism, and of which Paget wrote quite extensively: the moustache.

> [The] length of mustache is a matter of considerable pride to its possessor; the officers of a regiment of hussars have been known to allow extra pay to a soldier who was very remarkable in this way, to enable him to maintain his mustaches in wax. In no country

[49] Ibid., 519.
[50] Ibid., 520.

> of Europe is the mustache held in such respect as in Hungary; all, except the clergy,—masters and servants, professors and students, from the highest magnate to the lowest peasant,—cherish with vast affection this hirsute covering of the upper lip.[51]

Paget continued his account with a funny anecdote: a child hearing that they do not wear moustaches in England, exclaimed in awe: "Why, you must all look like great girls then!"[52]

The moustache, this typical symbol of Hungarians, appeared earlier in Paget's travelogue, when he visited a school for the deaf and the dumb, and to his great surprise the sign used by them for expressing the notion of "Hungarian" was "touching the upper lip indicating a moustache."[53] According to Alexander Maxwell, the moustache not only indicates Hungarian nationality, but also masculinity. He claims that this national icon is so strong that many Hungarian proverbs may have considered "a Hungarian without a moustache" as unnatural a state of affairs as "a king without a country" or a "priest without a book."[54]

On the one hand Paget talked about the preservation of national ideas and the great national pride of the Hungarians; on the other hand, he mentioned how his hosts proved to be very appreciative of British culture—even being followers of British traditions. While attending the various balls in Budapest, after describing the beautiful national costumes of the ladies, Paget mentioned that he became puzzled when it came to describe the ball:

> ... but what points am I to seize on, by which to distinguish it from a ball anywhere else? There is not a dress or a costume of any kind, that differs a particle from those of London or Paris; not a dance, save the waltz and quadrille; not a gait or movement, that is not common to ladies and gentlemen of any other country.[55]

Hungary, in Paget's eyes, was a country on the way towards progress and civilization. He described its culture, literature and arts, its wonderful cities, buildings, as well as natural wonders, but also gave an objective account of the bad roads

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51 Ibid., 463.

52 Ibid., 465.

53 Ibid., 321.

54 Maxwell, Alexander, Tobacco as Cultural Signifier: a Cultural History of Masculinity and Nationality in Habsburg Hungary, *AHEA: E-journal of the American Hungarian Educators Association*, Vol. 5, 2012, 13. Maxwell quotes Ballagi (93-94) and enumerates proverbs such as: Eb a Magyar bajusz nélkül, Eb a király ország nélkül, Eb a pap könyv nélkül.

55 Paget, *Hungary*, 449.

in Transylvania, the poor settlements of the gypsies near Cluj, and so on. All in all, based on what he saw and experienced, he believed that in Hungary there were prospects of good things to come, he believed in a happy, glorious future.

Conclusion

John Paget in his travelogue provided valuable information about Hungary and Transylvania for the English public. His book introduced the English people to life in a country that was previously considered to be an exotic, remote place, as well as a dangerous, hidden land. By describing the cultured elite of the country, the real condition of peasants and nobles, the progressive spirit of Hungarians, and by offering a compelling portrait of Count Széchenyi, Paget—going against Habsburg interests—undoubtedly contributed to the debunking of false myths that were constructed about Hungarians in Western Societies.

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