

Homéros Magyarországon. Adalékok [Homer in Hungary. Contributions]. By Zsigmond Ritoók.

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Homer is part of the innermost tissue of the core canon of European literature.¹ The title, *Homer in Hungary*, thus implies a double commitment. An examination of Homer's reception in Hungary emphasizes the European roots of Hungarian culture in terms of origin, and the interweaving of Hungarian and European culture in terms of historical evolution. And it is also significant that it is precisely this canonical author of the European tradition, or more precisely the history of the influence of Homer's work, that will be the object of study. Ritoók thus advocates the preservation and transmission of traditional European culture, a unique fabric of Greek, Roman, Jewish and Christian elements, in other words, the continual reweaving of them. Both commitments are equally important today.

Ritoók's book is an untimely undertaking. Not a single person writes such a book these days. Today, "research teams" are organised to produce such a work—to realise such "research projects"—"research proposals" are written and, in the happy end, the "results of the research" are published in volumes. Ritoók worked in a different way. He has summarised, not in the manner of accumulation, but in some way, the essence or rather distillation of seventy years of reading Homer and Homer reception: alone and unique. With admirable diligence, knowledge, erudition, systematic and analytical skills.

The great advantage of working in this way is that it makes possible a unified and individual perspective to prevail. The difference between innovation and invention is decisive here. In the neoliberal university, there is an organised "knowledge

1 Translated by the author, the Hungarian version of the review was published here: Simon, "Ritoók Zsigmond."

production” for the “knowledge economy” (the language used by university officials to talk about the university, and worse, by ourselves, on the university, in a self-dangerous submission to the ideological violence of this language).² The watchword of “knowledge production” is the repeatable, programmable and programmatic innovation (however paradoxical this may sound at first). While the principle of all worthwhile works in humanities, including Ritoók’s book, is the unique and unprogrammable invention. This unique and idiomatic invention means in this case both to find and to invent something new. Above all, what stands out in the book is the incredible wealth of data—invention as finding and discovery. The new in the humanities, and in art and culture in general, always comes in some way from the heritage, while never being reducible exclusively to the heritage. For invention requires, as in the present case, a gaze that sees with curiosity and interestingly, but at least always from *somewhere* and *in some way*. And it needs a *heureka*—Ritoók in the *Ion* translated it as “lelemény,” “invention”—or the process of *heuresis*, which can never be reduced to heuristics. It involves not only data, but also giving or gift (in Plato, the gift of the Muses). But gift never arrives without alert readiness and work, just as data is never without its interpreting reader.

What characterises the view at work in *Homer in Hungary*? First, from where does Ritoók look? This can be approached from two directions; from both, we arrive at the same vaguely obscure place. (Or is it already dark?) At the end of Chapter I, *Homéros a magyar iskolában* [Homer in the Hungarian School], Ritoók writes: „But there is already a 9th grade textbook that organises the literary material around aesthetic or ethical nodes (»problems«), but in which Homer is not mentioned” (p. 75). This is a scandal, even if Ritoók is right, of course, that for Homer to remain part of school education, i.e. of *Bildung*, it is necessary to bring him into dialogue with the issues that are relevant to young people today, so that he does not remain ‘dead knowledge.’ This idea stems from the gadamerian hermeneutic approach of Ritoók. This closure of chapter, with its warning, leaves open the question of the possible future of reading Homer. In any case, the possibility of silencing of the classical tradition looms on the horizon of the book. Ritoók also speaks of this in interviews: never as a *fait accompli*, but always with a sense of the looming possibility—and usually with some cautious optimism.³

The other, equally ambiguous position is the one identified at the end of Chapter III (*Homéros a magyar irodalomban* [Homer in Hungarian Literature]). The last Hungarian literary text that Ritoók deals with is Péter Nádas’ ‘satire play,’ *Siren Song*. In a few short sentences, Ritoók accurately depicts the post-apocalyptic state

2 For this see: Szentpéteri, “*Non damus fidem*,” 197 (accessed on 22 September 2023); for broader context: Hamacher, “Freistätte.”

3 E.g. here: Ritoók, “Ha már a külső szabadságot,” 43 (accessed on 22 September 2023).

of the world that this text shows to us as our present (but also in a kind of mythical timelessness). It is as if we have arrived at the end point of the *Odyssey* of Europe, of European civilisation. “No god, no law.” “Khaos opens his mouth wide”—these are the words of Nádas’ text.⁴ This critique of European civilisation, however, still speaks in the language of Greek myths and often Homer’s. These emphatic places may also mark the interpretative position of Ritoók: as a resigned witness of the closure of a tradition (this closure may of course last for a long time to come), but trusting in a revival in some time (there has been such closure and revival in the cultural history of Europe).

One step closer: *how* does Ritoók look? How can we characterize his approach, that is, what methodological framework informs his reading of the Homeric tradition in Hungary? Ritoók does not waste much time in indicating this, but his book, from this point of view as well, seems to be unified. Jan Assmann’s mnemohistory may perhaps offer the closest analogy. Mnemohistory “is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered. It surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past.”⁵ For mnemohistory, the question is not to what extent representations of a particular, common object approximate or achieve factual truth, but it “concentrates exclusively on those aspects of significance and relevance which are the product of memory—that is, of a recourse to a past—and which appear only in the light of later readings.”⁶ Ritoók is interested in how Hungarian culture has “remembered” Homer in different periods, i.e. how it has used and appropriated him again and again under its own particular conditions and according to its own particular socio-cultural interests, and thus how it has woven him into the ever-renewing cultural texture of its own present. In the sense of the principle—a favourite quote of Ritoók, which could even be his motto—which Terentianus Maurus put it this way: *pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli*. It is not only the narrowly defined literary and scientific context that determines the way in which the reader (text user) understands the text. Thus, the book does not only provide us with a history of Homer’s literary influence (including the translations), and not even with a narrative of his purely scholarly reception, but with a historical picture of the intellectual relations of Hungarian culture as reflected in the mirror Homer offers us. And more than that.

Chapter I of the book deals with Homer appeared in the education in Hungary (*Homéros a magyar iskolában* [Homer in the Hungarian School]). This is perhaps the methodologically most innovative chapter of the volume. This chapter is the one that goes beyond the limits of a narrowly conceived intellectual-historical approach

4 Nádas, *Szírénének*, 72 and 95 (My translations.)

5 Assmann, *Moses*, 9.

6 Assmann, *Moses*, 9.

of *Geistesgeschichte*, since the school as a specific dispositif is perhaps the most exposed to the influence of the material and political conditions of its environment, and without an analysis of these conditions we cannot get a picture of its functioning. The way is quite fascinating in which Ritoók, with outstanding historical knowledge, relates the history of Homer in Hungarian education to the historical development of the intellectual conditions, ecclesiastical and political developments, the needs of the authorities, educational policy and structural changes in general education in different periods. Special emphasis is always given to cases where the reading of Homer in schools, or Greek teaching in general, went in some way beyond the narrow utilitarianism of ‘instrumental knowledge.’ A certain bias towards the literary reception of Homer’s texts as aesthetically effective works is perceptible—when encountered in a school practice, Ritoók always emphasises this with palpable sympathy. Let me be the last to condemn this amiable bias or even inconsistency.

It is not strictly methodological, but the most striking feature of the book’s discourse, its argumentation—and hence entirely its discursive character—is a certain balance, impartiality, restraining, fairness, even modesty. It is not an illusory belief in some kind of objectivity (that would even be immodest and in contradiction with mnemohistory), but a useful doubt about the validity of what one is saying, and a desire to understand (not necessarily accept) the possible truth of another’s opinion. This is an important hermeneutic virtue, which could even be called an exercise of *fairness*, Ritoók’s *gentlemanly* linguistic (and, glancing up from the book, not only linguistic) behaviour. I have used characteristically English terms for a reason: there is something ‘*English*’ about the whole book’s argumentation and diction, which is defining.⁷ Throughout the book, but perhaps most prominently in Chapter II: *Homéros a magyar tudományban* [Homer in Hungarian Scholarship]. This is the most elaborate and unified part of the work, and should obviously be a required reading for Greek and Latin majors.

This chapter is not a narrow history of Homeric scholarship. The mnemohistorical perspective requires a multiple contextualisation of the object. On the one hand, Ritoók interprets the Hungarian Homeric scholarship against the background of contemporary or slightly earlier Western developments. For him, this setting is evident, and for many today is as well, but it was not always so. However, provincial attitude cannot be fought with provincialism determined by the opposite orientation. Hölderlin and his interpreters, from Heidegger to Peter Szondi and Hans Robert Jauß, are right: the own must be appropriated just as much as the foreign. Hungarian Homer scholarship has been mostly in line with, and sometimes a little behind, Western scholarship, but there have also been more than a few instances where it has anticipated certain views formulated elsewhere only later. Perhaps

7 At least, the way the Hungarian language and cultural perception stereotypes “Englishness”.

most interestingly, it was not scholars but artists who were at the forefront of this field. The impartiality of Ritoók's approach is shown by the fact that he analyses the insights of Ferenc Kölcsey, János Arany and László Németh as being on a par with scholarly research. On the other hand, the author of the monograph also includes the broader cultural, ideological and even social and political history of Western and Hungarian scholarship in the discussion. Particularly valuable and illuminating are the passages that discuss the impact of Homer studies on the wider language and culture of any period.

I will highlight just a few examples. Ritoók's hermeneutical orientation is reflected in his special emphasis on those experiments that consciously examine Homer from the perspective of the questions of their time. Even Janus Pannonius did the same (p. 77). For D'Aubignac, at the end of the seventeenth century, Homer criticism was "not merely a matter of aesthetics or history, but also a guarantee of the right to free research based on reason alone, as opposed to blind acceptance of authority" (p. 82). Far beyond the interest of Homeric philology is the detailed examination of the differences between *génie* and *genius* (pp. 85–88). Thomas Blackwell's thought is situated in the area of tension between the idea of civil progress and the idea of the rights of the individual as an ideal of an initial, free, albeit savage, state. And his insight into the importance of the receptive side, the impact of Homer's poems as oral works, will find its echo in the twentieth century, after the textual criticism of positivism of the nineteenth century, which largely forgot about the works as literature (pp. 88–90). From the beginning, the German approach to Homer studies was guided by a historical perspective. Herder, whose "image of Homer in a certain sense summed up the poetic and cultural image of the German Enlightenment" (p. 98), uses the image of organic development as the master trope for the development of Homeric poetry—after the earlier images of mechanical assemblage (p. 96).⁸ The nascent German national idea makes Herder's notion that the Greeks' culture was autochthonous, that they did not follow foreign patterns, intelligible (p. 98 [n. 286]). Wolf's approach, which already imposed the aspect of historicity on the texts, can be linked on the one hand to the development of the study of antiquity as an autonomous discipline, and on the other hand to the fact that this discipline can easily become detached (and in most of the nineteenth century did become detached) from the perception and grasp of the relevance of ancient works to the present, as demanded by Nietzsche and others (p. 101). This damning dichotomy between aesthetics and philology (or more precisely, *Altertumswissenschaft*) is instructive and still relevant today.

In Hungary, in the case of György Alajos Szerdahelyi, the aesthetic approach prevailed at the end of the eighteenth century, in a form, that was "at the European level of the time" (p. 108). The Homer studies of the turn of the eighteenth and

8 Ritoók's remarks here are somewhat similar to Blumenberg's metaphorology.

early nineteenth centuries also fit into this tradition. An interesting strand of the chapter, as I have already mentioned, is the consideration of the contributions of non-specialist poets and writers. Ferenc Kölcsey's reasoning in *Nemzeti hagyományok* [National Traditions] can be truly understood from the perspective of cultural anthropology,⁹ going all the way forward to Károly Marót, the twentieth century classicist (p. 119). If I estimate it correctly, despite all his restraint and unbiasedness, Ritoók's favourite is the great Hungarian poet, János Arany, not only as poet but also as a brilliant essayist. Here again, the author emphasizes the applicative importance of engaging with Greek epic for Arany (p. 122 and 127). The above-mentioned requirement of self-knowledge is not only to be understood as a hermeneutical principle: it is also not the last resort as an antidote to the frustration of provincialism. With regard to the lively world of orality and epic song as performance, "Arany (...) saw things whose importance would be highlighted by subsequent researchers, mostly only in the twentieth century," from Radloff to Svenbro (pp. 127f.). Similar to this are László Németh's great insights into the formulaic composition of oral poetry, which are contemporaneous with the discoveries of the scholarship (Milman Parry; pp. 154f.).¹⁰ Gyula Hornyánszky has been largely forgotten as a Homeric scholar, while his relevant works "were entirely at the level of European scholarship" (p. 142). Both elements of the statement are true, Hornyánszky's treatise on Homeric speeches could (should) still be relevant for those who study the performative performance of literature (even in the political sense).¹¹ Therefore it is particularly sad that even Hungarian classical scholarship has almost completely forgotten about him; those who take him into account, it is only because of his book on Hippocrates. Ritoók also mentions here that Hornyánszky's relevant works, since he wrote little in a foreign language, remained unknown to the world outside of Hungary. This deficiency of Hungarian classical studies, which is hopefully becoming more and more a feature of the past, is rightly mentioned several times in the book. A sadly distorted example of the ideological and political-historical influences on the discipline is the ideological pressure that, in the middle of the twentieth century, the Hungarian Homeric studies, which were just flourishing, were subjected from those who wanted to "rob us all of our Europeanism."¹² Ritoók also analyses the serious scholarly achievements of the communist era with great fairness (and obviously with

9 Pál S. Varga has shown this before, though mainly from a more general philosophical perspective, not so much from the comparative ethnology, which is what Ritoók is primarily interested in here. See S. Varga, „...az ember véges állat...”

10 According to Ritoók (p. 155), it was precisely Károly Kerényi who first recognised and formulated this in his afterword to the German edition of Németh's novel *Iszony*, and who has so often been opposed to László Németh.

11 I wrote about it here: Simon, "Forschungen."

12 Vajda, "A gonosz birodalma." (accessed on 22 September 2023).

no little self-discipline), because there were some great scholars in this era as well, from Imre Trencsényi-Waldapfel to Árpád Szabó and from *Árpád Brusznjai*, who was executed after the 1956 revolution, to János Sarkady, and quite rightly highlights the moral courage of those who opposed the official ideology (pp. 178f.). (Ritoók, by the way, includes here not only Marx, but also the relevant works of Engels, who belonged to a completely different league, and even of Stalin, for the sake of the credibility of his reconstruction.) That the study of classical antiquity, let alone the study of Homer, could have been a moral issue is still difficult to understand for those who lived through that period on the other side of the Iron Curtain, let alone for those for whom the Iron Curtain as a metaphor itself is only a bizarre historical term. The author's work on Homer—which is also discussed in the book, and in which Ritoók consistently refers to Ritoók in the singular third person—analyses not only epic song culture and textual history but also the early Greek epic's view on poetry and art (pp. 176–8). He combines aesthetic and historical-philological perspectives (which are sometimes dangerously divergent in classical studies), as did Zsolt Adorjáni in his 2011 study, the review of which concludes the chapter's argumentation before the section summarising it (p. 184).

The most powerful testimony to Homer's culture-forming and people-shaping influence, to the communicative force of the epics, can be found in its impact on Hungarian literature. Chapter III (*Homéros a magyar irodalomban* [Homer in Hungarian Literature]) deals with this topic. This, too, is done with impressive knowledge of the material and a supremely confident orientation in the periods and works of Hungarian literary history—from Janus Pannonius to Péter Nádas. Yet with a certain sense of incompleteness. Ritoók's analysis of literary influences, intertextual relationships, quotations, allusions and rewritings is mostly limited to an analysis of content, of semantic relationships, focusing mainly on motifs, plots and psychological and ideological connections. Linguistic-poetic comments are to be found mostly in the form of short notes, and these are not what basically organise Ritoók's critical discourse. Perhaps the most spectacular demonstration of linguistic and poetical events is in the metrical analyses of Móricz's reading, but these splendid feats are relegated to footnotes (as less important?), although they do contain subtle and illuminating observations, and with the masterly application of an often neglected point of view of literary analyses (pp. 242–69). The sketchy and terse (of course, tersely to the point) presentation of the aesthetic interpretations can be partly explained by the limitations of the scope—but this explanation does not eliminate the aforementioned sense of incompleteness. The interpretation of Vörösmarty is an important and fine exception: here Ritoók expands on his reading of the intertextual functioning of certain metaphors and symbols, and his nuanced presentation of the differences in the repetitions of the same plot elements is also convincing (pp. 210–13). His analysis of Kosztolányi's fairy tale play, *Lótuszevők*

[The Lotus Eaters], is also noteworthy. The exploration of intertextual connections is exemplary here too, and the interpretation of the play's 'philosophy of art' is also convincing. Kosztolányi's text, precisely in its linguistic complexity, with its ambiguities, is able to make perceptible, how the tension between reality and unreality in poetry becomes a floating that constitutes the 'reality' of art itself (pp. 233f.).

It should be noted here that Ritoók mostly refrains from making evaluative statements. This is particularly typical and somewhat questionable practice in Chapter III. This reticence is, of course, linked to the use of the mnemohistorical perspective throughout the book. It is also probably linked to the restraint and unbiased approaching that have already been mentioned. But how justified is the avoidance of evaluative reflection in aesthetic and literary-historical investigation? To refrain from an evaluative moment can lead to poor levelling. Should we also consider the aesthetic value of literary works with the 'neutrality' of the mnemohistory? That is: should we not consider it at all? I cannot believe that. The history of literature—especially if we understand it, as Ritoók does, as the history of texts rather than authors—cannot renounce the literary reading, which necessarily involves differentiating, evaluating, canonizing moments. Not every work has the same aesthetic power in every age. Zsigmond Móricz's drama *Odysseus bolyongásai* [The Wanderings of Ulysses], written in 1924, receives the most extensive discussion in the survey of literary influences of Homer's work. This can be partly explained by the fact that the play is little known. Yet this long explication is disproportionate, especially when the play's aesthetic success (rather lack of success) and its literary historical context are taken into account. "mert sok ész van az emberi agyban, / de vérrohanás csakis egy van a testben [for there are many intellects in the human brain, / but there is only one bloodrush in the body"—here, according to Ritoók, Móricz "formulates one of the fundamental problems of the drama" (p. 245). Let's not get hung up on the clumsiness of the "brain" which contains "many intellects." Let's just think for a moment: what does this cliché, formulated in an extreme simplifying juxtaposition (reason versus instinct/biology/sexuality), say about humans, about the existential situation of twentieth century human existence, about its possibilities of self-understanding? Two years before the publication of Dezső Kosztolányi's novel *Édes Anna*. After Kafka and Proust. At about the same time as Luigi Pirandello's *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore*. (In 1925, a year after Móricz's play was written, the text was also published in Hungarian in Frigyes Karinthy's translation, under the title *Hat szereplő keres egy szerzőt* [Six characters in search of an author].) But I should not be unfair myself: Strindberg wrote *The Father* in 1887, and *Miss Julie* in 1888. Móricz's play was written decades after the paradigmatic plays that naturalistically portrayed the identity crisis of the modern individual in the fatal conflicts of sexes as well as sex and gender.

Finally, another critical remark. This concerns the author's decision to republish his previously published studies sometimes not at all or only in significantly shortened form, as chapters or sections. Here, I suppose, the courtesy principle is at work: let us not bore the reader. The problem is that for the majority of readers, this book would presumably be their first encounter with ideas previously presented (sometimes in difficult-to-access publications). And thus, that is no longer courtesy. But if we do not want to use the language of politeness, the discursive coherence and proportionality of the book, i.e. its scholarly aspects, would require that what has already been said elsewhere be republished by the author in the new context of the monographic treatment, adapted to this new exposition. Such a lack is particularly regrettable in the case of Chapter IV, which examines the periods of the Hungarian translation of Homer (*A magyar Homérosz-fordítás korszakai*). At the beginning of the chapter, Ritoók informs his readers that he has earlier published two studies on the subject, and what follows here is based on these two pieces (p. 298 [n. 988.]). However, the chapter on the translation of Homer, which is just over ten pages long, is thus both disproportionately short compared with the other three chapters and, most importantly, provides a very sketchy summary of the previous findings. And anyone who knows the two previous studies in question¹³ will agree with me that they are full of sensitive linguistic observations and critical (!) remarks, illuminating arguments on theory and history of translation (and even history of theory of translation), the omission of which is a great loss. After all, Homer's cultural, literary and linguistic productivity was most directly and probably most powerfully and extensively expressed in and through his translations.

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13 Ritoók, "A magyar Homérosz-fordítások. XVIII–XIX. század"; Ritoók, "A magyar Homérosz-fordítások. XX. század."

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