

National peculiarities in approaching the Classics: The case of Catullus with Hungarian modernism

PÉTER HAJDU

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/WLS.2023.15.3.1>

The Greek and Roman classics seem to be naturally included in any concept of world literature, be it a supranational canon, the sum of works circulating outside their context of origin, or a global economy of publishing literary texts. Although this usage is obviously Eurocentric, the central role they play in the Western literary system can be paralleled by that of the respective classics in other systems.¹ In his conversation with Johann Peter Eckermann on January 31, 1827, Goethe emphasized the special importance of the Classics: the epoch of world literature might have been at hand, and people might have looked about themselves in foreign literary works, but the Greeks were to continue to function as the only universal and eternal standard of evaluation (Goethe 2013, 19–20). If literary value depends on a comparison with the Classics, then they also function as a language of comparison between various national literatures.

COMPARATIVE VS. WORLD LITERARY APPROACHES TO THE CLASSICS

Unlike world literature, comparative literature tends to disregard the Classics, probably because the concept of nation is more important for the latter. How far does comparative literature reach back in time? When the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) launched the book series *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* at its 1967 congress in Belgrade, the Renaissance was designated as the chronological starting point of the discussion (ICLA 1969, 785). The reasoning in the background seems to have been something like this: no system of literatures in vernacular languages developed in the Middle Ages, when Europe was dominated by a unified literary system in Latin, so comparison does not seem a suitable method for that period. Actually, the preliminary draft and the questionnaire sent out to ICLA members, which functioned as the basis for the development of the plan of the book series, set the Middle Ages as the point of departure: “since the national literatures of the current Europe, generally speaking, started evolving and differentiating according to their national character in the Middle Ages, it seems correct to start the discussion of European literatures according to literary trends with

the Middle Ages” (776). This preliminary insight was modified due to the answers to the questionnaire, because the comparatists thought that “it is essential for comparative literature to study literary borrowings, movements, parallelisms, and mutual relations between nations”; such studies need already established and differentiated national literatures. It is possible to begin a history of European literatures with the Middle Ages, but that will not be a comparative literary history (785). The first draft of the *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* explicitly put the differentiation of national literatures as the *terminus post quem* of comparative literature.

The concept of a monolithic Medieval culture in Latin can be challenged both from a linguistic and a geographic viewpoint. In the High Middle Ages, several vernacular literary cultures created masterpieces that remain highly appreciated: from Old Occitan and *althochdeutsch* lyric poetry and the Old Norse epics, to Old English *Beowulf*, to the Old French *chansons de geste* and the Middle High German *Nibelungenlied*. A comparative approach to that literary field is far from non-existent, but it is rare. Latin, however, has continued being a productive medium of literature. Even today some people write and publish poetry in Latin, and modern literary works are also translated into Latin² from various languages. If Latin were one literary language among many today, Latin literature since the High Middle Ages could be compared with others, but this is not the case. Neo-Latin studies seem to be a separate discipline not really open to comparison, perhaps due to the international character of the community that produces literature in Latin. The nation may be the fundamental notion of comparative literature and comparison without nations seems inadequate, and that is why the discipline can hardly go back to times without at least the protogenesis of nations. Comparatists have recently exerted significant efforts to get rid of the pre-conception of nation (or at least diminish its influence), focusing on concepts like hybridization, cosmopolitanism, and multilingualism, but the nation is frequently still very much present in such research, at least as the villain, the concept to oppose. Geographically, the monolithic Latin culture of the Middle Ages did not cover all of Europe, much less the whole world. Several other literary cultures flourished simultaneously, and some of them had direct cultural contact with Western Europe (considering that actual contact is sometimes regarded as a prerequisite to a comparative literary analysis). In Southeastern Europe the Byzantine culture used Greek, in the Mediterranean region (including southern Spain) there was a powerful Arabic literary culture, not to mention other major traditions such as the Hebrew, Persian, Armenian, Syrian, Coptic, and other literatures not far away. The idea that medieval literature cannot be approached comparatively is not only Eurocentric, but also very narrow, both geographically and culturally. But if it can be done, why is it not? On the one hand, some scholars try to apply comparative methods to Medieval literatures; ICLA’s abovementioned *Comparative History* series, for example, has been planning a medieval volume for decades now.³ As long as comparative literary studies solicit more and more contributions from previously excluded geographical areas, comparisons of earlier literary traditions from such areas will be increasingly important. For example, the ICLA awarded its 2013 Anna Balakian Prize to Aurélia

Hetzel's *La reine de Saba* (The queen of Sheba, 2012), which scrutinizes the appearance of this Biblical figure as a symbolic story in various literatures. The monograph was published in Garnier's series "Perspectives Comparatistes" and around one-third of it (over 200 pages) discusses ancient and medieval literary material from a wide comparative viewpoint. On the other hand, there are disciplinary problems in the academic system, since medievalists have a training different from that of the comparatists, and specialists of the Arabic, Coptic traditions, etc., are rarely associated with the comparative field. An additional problem is caused by the change in the notion of literature that happened in the 18th century. The previous notion embraced everything written, including discursive texts, while literature nowadays means texts in which the aesthetic aspect prevails. Therefore, scholars of the medieval textual heritage frequently conduct research that a comparatist would define as history of religion, theology, or cultural history rather than literary studies.

The situation with ancient literature is slightly more complicated. In the field delineated as classical Antiquity we have two complex literary cultures, Greek and Latin, which can be and often are approached in a comparative way. Classical philology had already been comparative (reflecting on the relationship between Greek and Roman traditions), but it is not referred to as comparative literature, because it is a different academic field with its own departments and ways of training. However, non-classical Antiquity also offers immense material for comparison. In the broadly same geographical (Mediterranean/Near Eastern) area, there are ancient literary cultures such as Egyptian, Hebrew, and Hittite that are discussed and studied comparatively, and their links to classical Antiquity are scrutinized. But again, such research is not called comparative literature. This discussion has not even included the possibility of comparisons with more distant ancient cultures, such as Indian and Chinese, to which the cultural connections are not so frequent or obvious.⁴

From this description, it follows that there are no genuine obstacles for a comparative approach to pre-Renaissance literature, but such an approach would imply crossing academic boundaries. However, European comparatists can seldom do without the Classics. The following sections will focus on the role the Classics might play in comparative literature studies, approaching what is called *Nachleben* in German classical philology (but also in English) from a different angle, namely from that of national literature.

It is highly disputable whether literature (not to mention the literary system) has developed continuously from Antiquity to our times, but it is indisputable that European nations regard classical Antiquity as their own past – at least culturally. This includes not only those nations that claim to have classical ancestry, but also those that do not. The classical ancestry can first of all be linguistic (in the case of Romance languages and Greek), but also historical (in the previous territory of the Roman Empire) and perhaps even genetic. All these three options can be regarded of course as culturally construed narratives. However, a number of nations which have none of those links to classical Antiquity have "adopted" that era as their cultural ancestor nevertheless. Ancestors of some modern nations are mentioned in classical sources only as enemies living outside the Empire, and there are ones that are not mentioned

at all, either because they were living too far away, or because they had not yet arrived in Europe. Most of these nations still regard themselves as cultural descendants of classical Antiquity. Such differences can result in different strategies of identity constructions and attitudes towards the Classics. We have reasons to suppose that 18th-century German humanism put the accent on the Greek part of the classical heritage mostly because Germans did not regard themselves as descendants of the Romans. The Italians and French did perceive a direct descent, and that may be why for them Virgil was the greatest ancient epic poet in the 18th century, while the Germans preferred Homer to counterbalance French cultural hegemony (Marót 1948, 44–49).

Although the importance of a common religion (rooted in Antiquity) is undeniable for the development of this cultural adoption, schools also have played a central role. Until the middle of the 20th century, the notion of literature and the methods and techniques of reading or interpreting were taught primarily through ancient works. This primal impact deeply influenced would-be readers' and writers' ideas about the basic literary genres, what literature actually is or does, and which are the greatest books ever written. This naturally does not mean that authors could not create things completely different from what was taught in school, since they could and did so. Contemporary literature cannot easily find its way into classrooms, but both writers and readers tend to be more fascinated by the most recent achievements. However, the classical heritage is not only a subconscious model (maybe even one to rebel against), but it also offers a wide range of thematic and structural raw material to exploit, while a set of possible cultural references shared with all the educated readers might ease literary communication. Therefore, the Classics can also be used as a communication code. The influence or the reception of a work or an oeuvre (to look at the same phenomenon from different angles) is a legitimate topic of research in comparative literature studies, but the point under discussion here is not a comparison between ancient and modern literatures. I am rather suggesting comparisons between various items (be they literary works or authors or national literatures) of modern literary cultures where the *tertium comparationis*, the viewpoint or the medium of the comparison, is the classical heritage. This is where the Classics become the language of comparison.

The ways various epic poets make use of Virgil, of course, can be regarded as one thread of the genre's history, but they also allow one to compare national traditions and individual works. If we look at epic poetry, the impact of the *Aeneid* may seem primarily to be an issue of poetic formation. Epic poetry has not been popular in the last two centuries, which undermines its prestige also retrospectively. The impact, however, has not been confined to the work's own literary genre. Several dramas and operas took their plots from Virgil's epic, from *Dido, Queen of Carthage* by Christopher Marlowe (1594) through *Dido and Aeneas* by Henry Purcell (1688) to *Les Troyens* by Hector Berlioz (1856), and beyond. Klaus-Dietrich Koch's book *Die Aeneis als Opernsujet: Dramaturgische Wandlungen vom Frühbarock bis zu Berlioz* (The *Aeneid* as an operatic subject: Dramaturgical transformations from early Baroque to Berlioz, 1990) states that more than 140 operas were based on the *Aeneid* before Berlioz. Perhaps this example is not representative, since, as Biaggio Conte put

it, “Vergil’s *Nachleben* is Western literature” (1999, 284), but this illustrates why analyzing the use of Virgil in western literature is a language of comparison. When stories or motifs that are obviously classical are used in modern context, the emphasis is laid on the ways of adaptation and elaboration, which solicits comparison.

HUNGARIAN MODERNISM’S RECEPTION OF CATULLUS AS A CASE STUDY

This section will test the above insights on the relationship Hungarian modernism developed towards Catullus’s poetry. The enthusiasm about the Classics in the Hungary of the 1930s might be regarded as a symptom of escapism in the context of high modernism, but Catullus rather functioned as a trigger for definitely modernist poetics. The usage of the Catullan oeuvre reveals much about those modernist users, who were more fascinated by Catullus’s multiple tensions than by Augustan poetry, which was at that time regarded as harmoniously balanced. The following four examples reveal less about the rich potentials of Catullan poetry than the peculiarities of the interwar Hungarian literary scene.

In 1921, Mihály Babits (1883–1941) published a collection of poetic translations of erotic poems from world literature, entitled *Erato*. The massive presence of the Classics in the volume suggests that their canonical status was supposed to legitimize the whole endeavor, but also that Babits needed ancient poetry to “spice up” the traditionally reserved or even prudish Hungarian poetic diction. About a third of the poems included in the collection come from Antiquity, and the presence of Catullus with three poems is only surpassed by Baudelaire (five) and Verlaine (four). What is remarkable is that two of those translations place an overemphasis on expressive explicitness. Babits translated the vague formulation of poem 75.4, “omnia si facias” (whatever you do), as a wild orgiastic image: “bár ezer aljas kék ajkai nyalnak” (although the tongues of a thousand base joys are licking you).⁵ In the climax of poem 58, Catullus used a unique metaphor which does not have sexual meaning anywhere else in Roman textual heritage except for the 79th epigram by the 4th-century poet Ausonius: “[Lesbia] glubit magnanimi Remi nepotes” (peels the descendants of generous Remus).⁶ Babits decided to use the rudest Hungarian word for sexual intercourse, although slightly refining it with the frequentative mood, which, however, could not be printed even in this anthology of erotic poetry and was only indicated with a blank space: “... kolódik egész nemes Rómával” ([Lesbia] is f...ing the entire noble Rome). The metric pattern suggests that the three points indicated the lack of one long syllable, and it is not difficult to find out which word. Several of Catullus’s poems contain explicit sexual content, but Babits did not select those for his erotic anthology. However, he must have been excited by the poetic discourse that was alien from the Hungarian tradition, and took the opportunity to include obscene expressions and images in his Catullus translations. Both the practice of omitting Catullan content with dotted lines and of using him as a pretext for sexually explicit poetry found followers.

It was Catullus’s political invective that inspired Gyula Illyés (1902–1983), who started his poetic career in avant-garde circles, but with his first published poetic col-

lection *Nehéz föld* (Heavy soil) in 1928, he claimed to represent the cause of the exploited Hungarian rural population. Despite the palpable avant-garde and Hungarian national commitment, the book starts with an epigraph from Catullus (c. 29, 1–2):

Quis hoc potest videre, quis potest pati,
nisi impudicus et vorax et aleo...
[Who can see and tolerate this,
except for the shameless, the voracious, and the gamblers?]

With this motto Illyés emphasized social indignation as a central feature of his poetry and referred to Catullus to contextualize the language of political commitment and anger as an eternal and noble tradition of world literature, in sharp contrast to the *l'art pour l'art* tendencies of his contemporary literary scene. This motto was not a unique gesture on Illyés's behalf; when in 1937 the newly established journal *Argonauták* (Argonauts) tried to unite all the anti-fascist writers of the younger generation (Rónay 1967, 86), Illyés published the translation of three poems by Catullus in it. Two of them – “*Odi et amo*” (c. 85) and the elegy at his brother's grave (c. 101) – could not carry any political message in themselves apart from a general support for the tradition of European humanism, as opposed to the new barbarism of the Nazis. However, the third one, the cursing attack against Cominius (c. 108), represents the same heated and politically engaged discourse that the first collection's epigraph invoked.

István Vas (1910–1991) sought inspiration in Catullus when he became dissatisfied with the avant-garde free verse of his first poetic attempts. He first read Catullus in János Csengeri's domesticating translation, which used Hungarian national metric patterns and rhymes for most of the poems. He sensed something appealingly modern in that poetry but found the rhyming form hopelessly outdated, so he started seriously learning Latin (building on the insufficient memories from his high-school education) to be able to read Catullus in the original. However, his knowledge of classical metrics was too limited to realize the rhythm, and he read Catullan poetry as if it was free verse. This productive misunderstanding helped him find his own voice (Vas 1983, 2.52), although not before he learned about the musicality of ancient metrics (42). What Vas found in Catullus was inspiration for a definitely modernist poetry, and the feature he must have found most attractive was the combination of emotional intensity and severe logical structures of reasoning.

Milán Füst (1888–1867), a highly esteemed figure of Hungarian modernism, wrote a drama entitled *Catullus*, first published in serialized form in the journal *Nyugat* in 1928, which did not debut on stage until 1968. A diary entry from 1921 attests to Füst's genuine interest in and enthusiasm about Catullan poetry:

Catullus: really the most magnificent poet! – And how different these people are! – Sincere, honest sensuality, – but not only frivolous – they felt the deep, shocking, mystical beauty, the archaic crudeness of sex! – They saw the depth in it, which there is in everything, you just have to see it... We sometimes forget for centuries to see the depth in a manifestation of life... And we start categorize the phenomena of life: this is of higher rank – this is

noble, this is beautiful! – That is why digging up old times brings so many surprises! And the sincerity about homosexuality [or] incest! – Freud is an excellent mind, after all! And he is right! These things have really big importance! (1999, 1.620)

Füst read ancient poetry as a transparent manifestation of life, and what astonished him was the otherness of that life. Sincerity or honesty were crucial concepts for the appreciation of Catullan poetry in the 19th and 20th century (cf. Hajdu 2007). As a true modernist, Füst wanted to understand Catullus in the context of Freudian psychoanalysis and focused on the explicit representation of topics that functioned as taboos in the European society of his day. He thought that through such an approach he could dig up “deep”, “mystical”, and “archaic” meanings in that poetry. However, his *Catullus* does not give much credit to such a Freudian approach to the Catullus “myth”, since the characters of the drama hardly speak overtly about anything and none of the “very important” taboos are discussed in any way. Catullus and Metellus (Clodia’s husband) are hopelessly overpowered by Clodia’s sex appeal, and the sheer emphasis on the sexual nature of those attractions might have a Freudian air. Clodia wants to see her husband dead and asks her lover Catullus to kill him. Metellus seems to find Clodia’s wish acceptable and in the finale, after watching Clodia dance, he kills himself as a gift proving his love rather than a desperate gesture of frustration. The connectedness of death and desire (possibly triggered by but extended far beyond the Catullan “odi et amo”) also situates the play in a Freudian context.

The two most obvious modernist problems targeted in Füst’s *Catullus* are the post-tragedy horizon and language as an unreliable carrier of meaning. None of these central issues show a direct link to the classical topic of the play. Post-tragedy does have much to do with the heritage of classical drama but is rather connected with the fin-de-siècle bourgeois theatre.⁷ Regarding the problem of language, *Catullus* is a drama in which the dialogues hardly mean communication; dialogues rather prove the characters’ inability to communicate. The utterances are fragmentary and unfinished; since it is usually difficult to tell what the characters are speaking about and they tend “to leave the cognitive path their previous sentence prepared” (Schein 2017, 352), misunderstandings and parallel monologues are ubiquitous. This drama is undeniably a modernist approach to the classical heritage, specifically to Catullan poetry and its biographical context as it was offered (and partially created) by positivist classical philology.

CONCLUSION

The example of the role Catullus played in interwar Hungarian literature demonstrates the potential of the Classics as a language of comparison and as an essential feature of world literature. From the viewpoint of influence studies, *Nachleben*, or *Rezeptionsästhetik*, all these findings could reveal something about Catullus, namely how different ages discover, update, or emphasize different potentials of a classical work. However, from the viewpoint of the comparative approach to the Classics as part of world literature, the examples reveal more about Hungarian modernism. It becomes clear that Catullus offers a landscape in which the interwar writers could

scrutinize a basic problem of modernism, i.e., language. Catullus's poetry solicited experiments with a poetic language of explicit eroticism in the case of Babits and the elaboration of a politically engaged poetical language in the case of Illyés, while it ignited Vas to experiment with a new kind of modernist poetics. Füst's drama on Catullus engaged more philosophically with language as an unreliable carrier of meaning. The last formulation refers to a general feature of modernism: although presenting the problem in a drama with an ancient setting with Catullus as its protagonist appears as a rather particular case, looking for inspiration for the renewal of different segments of Hungarian poetic language in the Classics seems typical of Hungarian modernism.

NOTES

- ¹ For the concept of literary system, see Miner 1990.
- ² *Winnie ille Pu*, Alexander Lenard's 1958 Latin translation of A.A. Milne's work was the first foreign language book included in the *New York Times* Best Seller list (Milne 1958). Although most Latin translations are made from children and young adult literature, not all of them; see e.g. Goethe 2005; Süskind 2004.
- ³ Currently the plan is a comparative history of Latin literatures in the Middle Ages and early modernity, which is not exactly the kind of comparison delineated above but definitely challenges the concept of monolithic medieval Latin culture.
- ⁴ An important attempt in that direction was Wiebke 2014.
- ⁵ All translations by the present author.
- ⁶ It is much discussed whether the obscene meaning of the metaphor follows only from the context or it was a generally known usage. In Ausonius's epigram it must mean a manual practice since it is differentiated from fellatio and two ways of penetration.
- ⁷ Pace (Schein 2017, 348–60), who interpreted the *Catullus* in the context of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, indirectly linking the drama to the ancient tragedy.

REFERENCES

- Conte, Gian Biagio. 1999. *Latin Literature: A History*. Trans. by Joseph B. Solodow. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Füst, Milán. 1999. *Teljes napló*. 2 vols. Budapest: Fekete Sas. https://reader.dia.hu/document/Fust_Milan-Teljes_Naplo-8004.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. 2005. *Werther Iuvenis Quae Passus Sit*. Trans. by Nicolas Gross. Weißerhorn: Leo Latinus.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. 2013. "Conversations with Eckermann on *Weltliteratur* (1827)." Trans. by John Oxenford. In *World Literature in Theory*, ed. by David Damrosch, 15–21. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hajdu, Péter. 2007. "The Rhetoric of Sincerity." In *Klassizismus und Modernität*, ed. by Ibolya Tar and Péter Mayer, 17–23. Szeged: SZTE Klasszika-Filológiai Tanszék.
- ICLA. 1969. "Rapport Relative Au Projet d'une Histoire de La Littérature Européenne." In *Actes de V^e Congrès de l'Association Internationale de Littérature Comparée (Belgrade, 1967)*, ed. by Nikola Banašević, 775–794. Amsterdam: Swets and Zeitlinger.
- Koch, Klaus-Dietrich. 1990. *Die Aeneis als Opernsujet: Dramaturgische Wandlungen vom Frühbarock bis zu Berlioz*. Konstanz: Universitätsverlag.

- Marót, Károly. 1948. *Homeros, „a legrégebb és a legjobb.”* Budapest: Egyetemi Nyomda.
- Milne, A.A. 1958. *Winnie Ille Pu*. Trans. by Alexander Lenard. London: Methuen.
- Miner, Earl. 1990. *Comparative Poetics*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Rónay, László. 1967. *Az Ezüstkor nemzedéke*. Budapest: Akadémiai.
- Schein, Gábor. 2017. *Füst Milán*. Pécs: Jelenkor.
- Süskind, Patrick. 2004. *Frangantia: Historia Homicidae*. Trans. by Nicolas Gross. Weißerhorn: Leo Latinus.
- Vas, István. 1983. *Nehéz szerelem*. 4 vols. Budapest: Szépirodalmi.
- Wiebke, Denecke. 2014. *Classical World Literatures: Sino-Japanese and Greco-Roman Comparisons*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

National peculiarities in approaching the Classics: The case of Catullus with Hungarian modernism

World literature. Comparative literature. Translation. *Nachleben*. Medieval literature.

The Greco-Roman Classics form a body of texts that belong indisputably to world literature, yet they are often left outside the scope of comparative literature because of their ambiguous relationship to the concept of national literature. This article describes the current situation of academia in which the comparative approach to the Classics is limited and tests the possibility of regarding them as a code or a language of comparison. The attitudes of various national literatures towards the Classics in different historical periods are revealing not only of ancient literary traditions but also about modern ones, and provide a solid basis for comparison. The second part of the article discusses the presence of Catullan poetry in Hungarian modernist literature as a case study. Roman poetry was invoked mostly by some progressive circles of the interwar literary field to promote the development of various linguistic facets of the modernist poetic discourse. This example shows how the Classics enter the world literary space through national literatures' active involvement with them.

Péter Hajdu, CSc
College of International Studies
Shenzhen University
Nanhai Dadao 3688
Shenzhen
China
pethajdu@gmail.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3623-1578>