



KÉPES, GÉZA

KÉPES, GÉZA (b. Mátészalka, Hungary, 1 January 1909; d. Budapest, 19 August 1989), Hungarian poet and translator of Persian poetry. He was the son of a blacksmith and proud of his origins, claiming that the legacy of his father's craftsmanship as a skilled artisan had somehow percolated through to his own poetical production.

He began his education in Mátészalka and continued his studies in the Protestant gymnasium of Sárospatak, where he began translating Greek and Latin poets and composed verses in Latin. He completed his literary and philological studies in Hungarian, German, and English at the Pázmány Péter University of Budapest as a fellow of the prestigious Eötvös College. He then became a teacher in the gymnasium of Sárospatak and a tutor in the English Institute there. During World War II he worked as a translator for the Department of National Defense and took part in the Hungarian resistance.

Appointed professor at the Eötvös College in 1945, he also headed the literary department of Rádió Budapest. In 1955 he founded Magvető, a publishing house that soon achieved great popularity. In 1956 he was elected secretary of the poets' division of the Hungarian Writers Association. On 4 November 1956, when the Russian army invaded Budapest to quash the Hungarian uprising, Képes issued a most moving appeal for help addressed to the writers of the world, writing in his capacity as secretary general of the Hungarian section of the Pen Club. No arrest or retaliation followed when the communists reestablished their rule over Hungary, except that, in 1957, he was discharged from Magvető, the publishing house that he himself had established. He was,



however, kept under close observation for almost two years. He then became a member of the Institute for Literary History, a think-tank for highly esteemed but politically ill-favored scholars. It was about this time that he began to show an interest in classical and modern Persian language and literature.

Having translated numerous works from classical (Greek, Latin) and modern languages (English, French, German, Finnish, Russian, Bulgarian, and Japanese), he was now enchanted by Persian literature. For two and a half years, under the guidance of the Iranian section of the Eötvös Lóránt University, he studied classical Persian authors. During this period he translated into Hungarian selections from the *Divān* of [Hafez](#), the *Robā'iyāt* (Rubaiyat) of [Omar Khayyam](#), the didactic narratives of [Sa'di](#), and a few odes from the Tajik poetry of [Abu'l-Qāsem Lāhuti](#).

In transplanting Persian poems into Hungarian, Képes successfully tried to preserve the formal features of the original, on the principle that form is an integral element of the poetic expression. Not only did he reflect in his Hungarian translation the meter, rhythm, rhyme arrangements, alliteration, and other components of the external form, but he also followed the often-intricate inner structure of Persian poems. Thus, his translation scans like the Persian original, and maintains to a great extent the semantic and formal correlation of the poem's inner elements. The *maṭla'* (opening line) of one of the first odes in Hafez's *Divān* is an example:

*Agar ān tork-e širāzi bedast ārad del-e mā rā
Be kāl-e hindu-yaš baḵsam Samarqand o Boḵārā rā.*

If that Turk of Shiraz captures our heart,
To her Indian mole will I bestow the cities of Samarqand and
Bukhara.

*Ha sirāzi török szépem kezét szivemre tenné hát
Oda'dnám hindu holdjáért Samarkandot meg Bukharát.*

The above translation meets the requirements of the *hazaj* meter and displays the same parallelism of objects and notions within the distich: cities, parts of the body, names of people, metaphors for the Beloved, etc. (Rypka).

His involvement in Persian deeply affected his own work. While in his early



years he was an impressionist, strongly influenced by Hungarian folk poetry, as well as by poems in Greek and Latin, from the late fifties the influence of classical Persian is felt both in the intellectual and formal qualities of his poems. He began to use a greater variety of verse forms and applied new techniques. Some of his poems, such as the “Tavaszi betegség” (Sickness in spring), the poem he wrote when his wife was taken seriously ill, bear all the poetic hallmarks of Hafez’s odes, even the *radif* “féltelek” (I am concerned about you) seems to echo the leitmotif of the poem at the end of each verse.

In the 20th century Omar Khayyam was a celebrated figure in the Hungarian literary scene. Fourteen poets tried their skills in translating his quatrains into Hungarian; Képes was the finest among them. The influence of Omar Khayyam’s quatrains can be observed in his epigrams. He gradually abandoned the biting personal tone and the berating style. His tenor became more philosophical while making subtle points, laced with irony or a touch of sarcasm. From modern Persian poets he also masterfully translated a few epigrams of ‘Abbās Forāt (d. 1968), for example:

*Šotor-rā ba ‘aybi gereftand, goft
Kaṭā bar bozorgān sazāvār nist!*

They found a fault with the camel. He said:
It is most unseemly to carp and cavil at men of eminence!

*Hibáztattam én a tevét. Nincs vita!
Felelt ő: Nagyokhoz nem illik hiba!*

As a scholar Képes produced essays on various topics of Hungarian and foreign literature. Dealing with Persian, in an article entitled “*Hafiz et Csokonai*,” he analyzes the Persian poet’s influence on the works of the famous Hungarian poet, Mihály Csokonai Vitéz. Following the traces of Persian poetry in the West, he emphasizes the role of two Hungarian philologists of the 18th century, Franciscus Dombay and Carolus Reviczky, in introducing Persian poets and the Persian language to Europe. In a letter of 27 November 1975 (preserved in a private collection), he deplores the fact that Western lexicons ignore or say very little about these two outstanding scholars.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works by Képes: Poems.

Márványba véslek (I carve you in marble), Budapest, 1933.

Gorgó mereng (Gorgo meditates), Budapest, 1944.

Vajúdó világ (The world in labor). *Válogatott és új versek* (Selected and new poems), Budapest, 1954.

Só és bors (Salt and pepper), Budapest, 1956.

A mindenség énekei: Új versek (The songs of the universe: New poems), Budapest, 1961.

Önarckép hegy formájában (Self-portrait in the shape of a mountain), Budapest, 1978.

Translations.

Napnyugati madarak (Birds of sundown), Budapest, 1937.

A szabadság magvetői (The sowers of the seeds of freedom), Budapest, 1949.

Válogatott műfordítások (Selected translations), Budapest, 1955.

Ének Igor hadáról (Song about the army of Igor), Budapest, 1956.

A sziget éneke: Angol költők (The island sings: English poets), Budapest, 1959a.

Finn versek (Finn poems), Budapest, 1959b.

Napkelte Mongóliában: Verses utinapló (Sunrise in Mongolia: Itinerary in verses), Budapest, 1959c.

Háfiz: Versek (Ḥāfeẓ: poems), Budapest, 1960a. *Quasimodo válogatott költeményei* (Selected poems of Quasimodo), Budapest, 1960b.

Szádi: Rózsáskert (Sa'di: Rose garden), Budapest, 1960c.

Essay.



“Háfiz és Csokonai” (Ḥāfez and Csokonai), in I. Sötér and O. Süpek, eds., *Littérature hongroise – Littérature européenne: Etudes de littérature comparée publiées par L’Académie des sciences de Hongrie à l’occasion du IVème Congrès de l’Association internationale de littérature comparée*, Budapest, 1964, pp. 287-304.

Studies.

György Rába, “Búcsú Képes Gézától” (Farewell from Géza Képes), *Nagyvilág*, 1989, p. 11.

Jan Rypka, “Bāqī and Ḥāfiz,” lecture in the Turkish Department of the Eötvös Lóránd University, Budapest, 22 January 1957.

Róbert Simon, ed., *Perzsa költők antológiája* (Anthology of Persian poets), Budapest, 1968.

Róbert Simon, Erzsébet Brodszky, et al., eds., *Klasszikus perzsa költők* (Classical Persian poets), Budapest, 2002.

Ágotá Steinert, ed., *Omar Khajjam, A Mulandóság Mámora: száz rubái 14 magyar műfordító tolmácsolásában*, (Omar Khayyam, The ecstasy of transitoriness: one hundred *robā’is* in the interpretation of fourteen Hungarian translators), Budapest, 1997.

Erzsébet Vezér, “A mindenség énekese. Képes Géza halálára” (The singer of the universe. On the passing of Géza Képes), *Élet és Irodalom*, 1989, p. 34.

Originally Published online: April 7, 2008

[Archived version from the previous EIr. online edition.](#)
