

Introduction: Decoding Anonymous

In one of the parks of Budapest one can see a sculpture featuring a sitting figure in a monk's garb, with the hood pulled down over the face. While the statue is relatively recent (sculpted by Miklós Ligeti in 1903), the model is centuries old. It represents the medieval King Béla III's court notary whose name is still unknown. He is therefore customarily called Anonymous, and celebrated as the first chronicler of the Hungarians. Closer inspection reveals that the sitting figure has no face. That is, he has cheeks, a nose, and eyes, but no individual features. As such, he is indeed a puzzling epitome of a historical mystery.

So are Hungarians. Their language has been identified, but their ethnic prehistory has not been. Their obsession with their origins is similar to that of an orphan without a clue about his parentage. More self-assured nations may not understand such a fixation. Yet, a culture represented by some 15 million speakers of the same language (of whom 10,200,000 form Europe's ninth most populous nation) is more than an anthropological rarity, such as a vanishing group of a few hundred speakers. In spite of all their proverbial pessimism and self-pity, Hungarians don't appear to be perishing. For a small nation that has endured severe setbacks in modern times, Hungarians play a larger role than their numbers and the size of their economy warrant in the affairs of a turbulent region of Europe.

Unfortunately, whoever takes an interest in their culture is still faced with a difficult dilemma: either to learn their language or to rely on less-than-adequate secondary information on Hungarian history and culture. Hungarians have been unable to bring their achievements to the attention of the world. Their outstanding thinkers, scholars, educators, and writers are virtually unknown abroad, due to a near-complete lack of translations.

This reader constitutes an attempt to fill this hiatus, presenting in the English language a representative selection of discursive prose by twenty-four eminent Hungarians of the past one thousand years. Besides allowing insight into the tenuous phenomenon called "national character," some of the published reflections will probably strike the reader as quite original, even pioneering, ideas. This selection of documents did not aim to gain the approval of one or another group of Hungarians or to illustrate an all too familiar phenomenon — consequently, neither the list of names nor the issues were intended to be definitive.

An introduction to different thematic units, notes explaining different references in the text, a short biography of the authors and information about the translated texts, and a chronological summary of historical events mentioned in the volume, are meant to facilitate the construction of a historical and logical context. While the method of compilation may not meet general approval, those who are able to compare the translations with the unabridged Hungarian text will find that the selection was kept as balanced as possible.

All the chosen texts appear here in new translation, but some are already available in English, in old publications which can be found only in a handful of large research libraries of the North American continent. Such are Széchenyi's works, *Hitel* (On Credit) and *Világ* (Light), published in translation in 1900; Kossuth's "Danubian Confederation" (1942); and Bartók's two essays published in our collection, which appeared in English in a collective volume in 1976. None of these works were excerpted and/or published with the editorial intent of this volume.

Cultural studies have taken an upswing in recent years. Under the fashionable banner of political correctness, it has been assumed that European cultures were sufficiently mapped up by now, and only the vast third world needed attention. The present volume will try to prove otherwise, making the reader more familiar with a culture at the very heart of Europe — a culture less accessible so far than many others on the globe.