

**GEMS FROM PETOFI AND OTHER
HUNGARIAN POETS,
[TRANSLATED] WITH A MEMOIR OF
THE FORMER, AND A REVIEW OF
HUNGARY'S POETICAL LITERATURE**

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Gems from Petofi and other Hungarian poets, [translated] with a memoir of the former, and a review of Hungary's poetical literature by Wm. N. Loew

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WM. N. LOEW

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FROM

PETŐFI AND OTHER HUNGARIAN POETS,

[TRANSLATED]

WITH A MEMOIR OF THE FORMER,

AND A

Review of Hungary's Poetical Literature.

BY

W. M. N. LOEW.

"Liberty and sweet Love,
These two I ever need;
Willingly I would yield
For Love my life's poor meed;
But even my love would yield
To Freedom's claim thereof."

PETŐFI.

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PREFACE.

In offering this volume to the notice of American readers the publisher and the translator have a twofold object in view, viz.—a desire for the honor and more general understanding and appreciation of their native land, and a heartfelt sense of affection and respect for the land of their adoption.

There are certain achievements in art which belong at once to the world, and need no medium of language to convey their special value and meaning. Such are those of Music, Painting, Sculpture and Architecture.

In these arts, especially in the two first-mentioned, Hungary has proved herself no sluggard, as Americans will be among the first to recognize. It is the aim of the present work to show, in an earnest, loving and reverent spirit, that the historic and storied land of the Magyar has had, and still has, poets—God-born sons of song—who have written in immortal verse of her sufferings and her hates, her triumphs and her loves.

In the literature of a country alone are its desires, sentiments and sympathies definitely and intelligibly expressed, and its esoteric kinship with the rest of the world made manifest.

If the issue of these translations contribute to this end the labor expended upon them will not be considered as in vain.

PAUL O. D'ESTERHAZY,
Publisher.

WM. N. LOEW,
Translator.

NEW YORK, November 1881.

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SONNET.

What worthier tribute could thy children pay,
Land of the Magyar, set on suffering's height,
Than bring thy hidden charms to all men's sight,
And to the world thy wealth of song display?
We know thy glorious record's long array,
Thy plains from heroes' graves with verdure bright
Thy clear, sweet streams, ensanguined oft by fight,
Thy peaks o'er which dawned freedom's militant day

But those who sing with mutable voices clear
Of war, of love, of freedom, of desire,
And tuned in turn the slack strings of thy lyre
We fain would know, and hold their music dear,
Echoing it back from this far hemisphere,
Where love and freedom fetterless respire!

JOHN MORAN.

NEW YORK, November 1881.

ALEXANDER PETŐFI,

A MEMOIR OF THE GREAT HUNGARIAN POET AND A
REVIEW OF HUNGARY'S POETICAL LITERATURE.

"Liberty and sweet Love,
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For Love my life's poor meed;
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To Freedom's claim thereof."

PETŐFI.

I.

THE Hungarian revolution of the year 1848-9, has, during this century, in a more eminent degree than any other historical event directed the attention of the world to the home of Petőfi. Of the many distinguished men with whom in these momentous years the world became acquainted, there are few, perhaps, much more admired by Hungary herself, or that come recommended to the notice of an observing student with much more interest than Alexander Petőfi.

Whether considered as the brilliant genius, who, grasping the lute of the Hungarian people, imparted to it a more harmonious string and a sweeter tone than it probably ever had, or, considered as the young warrior—a chieftain of liberty throughout the world—who, with sword in hand struggling for freedom, fell a victim to his valor and heroism; or considered as a nation's great poet, who was equally great as a dutiful citizen;—his story is calculated to strike forcibly the attention and to touch the springs of admiration and of sympathy in no common sense. The character of the times in which he lived, the cause he served, his own adventures, his deep devotion to the muses during all his lifetime, his participation in a most glorious war, the amiable qualities and fine taste developed in his writings, above all the influence of his songs over the nation—all offer to the essayist a theme more fertile than usually falls to his lot in recording the lives of poets, and one upon which he would love to bestow the illustration it deserves.

Both language and versification present themselves more fully formed and more vigorous in the poetry written by Hungarians since the beginning of the last quarter of the last century; and this progress is a matter of no surprise if we attend to the multitude of circumstances which at that time concurred to favor poetical thought. *Francis Toldy*, beyond doubt the very foremost Hungarian literary historian, calls the period then beginning "the age of second prime" and defines the same to extend from the year 1772 to 1849, dividing it into three periods, to wit: *a*) the epoch of rejuvenation (1772-1807), commencing with the appearance of *Bessenyei* and extending to, and including *Alexander Kisfaludy*; *b*) the epoch of the purifying and beautifying of the national idiom (1807-1830)—a memorable period in the history of Hungarian literature, covering the labors of *Francis Kazinczy*, of *Charles Kisfaludy* and partly of *Michael Vörösmarty*; and finally *c*) the *Széchenyi* period (1830-1849), in which Hungarian language, poetry and science, as well as Hungarian national life and politics, developed themselves to a high degree, surpassed only in the eminence attained by the country during the last few years (1865-1881).

This division is not merely the dictum of one man. The nation adopted it and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the foremost scientific-literary body of the land, celebrated in 1872 the centennial birthday of rejuvenated Hungarian literature.

Hungarian patriots—says *Toldy* while speaking of those days—noticed with sadness that the traditional tongue was beginning to lose the hold it had upon the masses. The more educated classes ignored it almost entirely and the Magyar language was in danger of dying out and utterly perishing. The chosen few knew but too well, that, when once the language of a nation is sacrificed, the nation's fate is sealed; and with a hearty will they undertook to rescue the ancient race and tongue. *George Bessenyei* became the leader of the school which undertook to imbue with fresh life the degenerated race. He stood at the head of a noble army of literary warriors, who did their work well, so that when, but few years after *Bessenyei*'s first appearance, *Joseph II*, the Austrian emperor (Hungarian king *de facto* only, but not *de jure*, inasmuch as he never took the oath of allegiance and was not crowned as such) ordained the adoption and use of the German language not only in the administrative, but partly also in the educational departments of Hungary, the nation was found wide awake. A healthy reaction had set in, producing the most beneficial results, and the first systematized attempt to Germanize the Magyar nation became an ignominious failure. Another attempt to wipe out and to crush Hungarian nationality, and one more dangerous than the first, perpetrated by Austrian emperors

sixty odd years later, culminated in that heroic, bloody struggle in one of the encounters of which the hero of this literary essay and biographical sketch fell with an inspiring battle-hymn on his lips and a powerfully wielded sword in his hand.

During these more than seventy years of struggles (1772—1849) to place the Hungarian nation on a healthy, sound basis of national life, to restore the Magyar language, and to establish with its aid a Hungarian literature of merit and value, Hungary presents the striking and peculiar appearance of seeing its national life almost exclusively resting on the shoulders of its authors and its poets. *Count Emil Desseoffy*, a prominent Magyar national economist said the truth when he called the *litterateurs* of those days the "soldiers of the national cause." It is truly remarkable that, almost without any exception, every statesman and politician of that period to whose share it fell to battle against the despotic encroachments on the national constitution by Austria, or to battle for reform and advancement within, is a poet or an author. Exceptions are the stalwart sons of the *vámegység* (*comitatus*-county) (*vice*-ishpans and notaries, etc. etc.) who did the actual fighting. Nowadays politicians, statesmen are entrusted with this sacred task, but, from the early days of this century up to the breaking out of the great revolution in 1848, Hungarian literary writers were the guardian angels of the nation's cause, protecting this by watching over the nation's language "and tending it with the same piety, with which the Vestal virgins kept up the sacred fire to which the destinies of their country were bound forever" (*Francis Pulszky*).

George Bessenyei (1742-1811) is the acknowledged founder of the present school of Hungarian literature, and his greatest merit, his foremost claim to the gratitude of his country, lies in the fact of having brought the conviction to the mind of his contemporaries that a nation can only be civilized with the aid of its own vernacular idiom. The period between Bessenyei and *Petőfi* covers the most interesting epoch in the history of Hungarian poetical literature. It is with a certain degree of self-denial that we abstain from giving its specific history here, but this would outrun the limits of the present task. We content ourselves therefore with a mere cursory review and leave the thirst for knowledge awakened by these lines to be satisfied by the perusal of works more broad and more comprehensive in their scope than are these brief explanatory remarks. What a glorious task one would have in fully describing the labors of Bessenyei and his disciples. *Baron Lawrence Orczi*, *Abraham Barcsay*, *Alexander Baróczi*, *Paul Anyos*, *Count Joseph Teleki* and *Joseph Péczeli*, the members of the so-called French school of Hungarian literature, which, although it did not lead the poetry of the