

## EVOLUTIONARY EXPERIMENT IN THE LYRIC POETRY OF BÁLINT BALASSI

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In an interesting and useful paper ‘On Literary Evolution’, Franco Moretti argues that the development of genres and other literary forms proceeds at two speeds: very slow and very fast.<sup>1</sup> He cites the work of evolutionary biologists Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldredge to the effect that ‘Change is more often a rapid transition between stable states than a continuous transformation at slow and steady rates’ (Moretti 1997: 268). I want to apply this observation to sixteenth-century Hungarian lyric poetry, particularly to the development of the ‘lyric coda’, that is, the closing stanza of the *ének*, or ‘song’. I shall cover a range of poets, but my focus will be on the lyric verse of the great poet of the Hungarian literary Renaissance: Bálint Balassi (1554–1594).<sup>2</sup> Once again, a range of poems will be examined, but I shall concentrate on a single example: ‘Széllyel tündökleni’. This is, for the most part, a translation of a neo-Latin poem called ‘Ad Manilium Rhallum’, by the Greek-Italian poet, Michael Marullus (c. 1548–1500). But Balassi adds a coda to his translation, and this coda is the centre of my discussion. Balassi writes: ‘Marullus the poet wrote this in Latin, and see, I, for my part, have translated it into Hungarian, beside my good horse, whilst I was on the grass, when I lived merrily with my brave men, taking leave of my sorrows’ (37). This coda is as close as Balassi comes to a statement of his own ‘arrival’ as a lyric poet within the pan-European Renaissance; and at the end of this essay, I shall argue that it is this impression of ‘emergence’ – the sense of something suddenly appearing that was not there before – that is the mark of the onset of one of the periods of rapid transition noted by Gould and Eldredge. In fact, it is the mark of the ‘Renaissance’. But the main part of the essay will be devoted to the somewhat slower processes by which the Hungarian lyric coda developed a particular generic variant – the colophon – in the mid-sixteenth century; and how the colophon developed further during the next half-century; and how the experiments of Bálint Balassi, in particular, illustrate the usefulness of a loosely ‘evolutionary’ analysis of these generic changes.

### **I. Generic Adaptation: Soldiers in a Spring Landscape**

Let us start with a familiar concept from evolutionary biology: *adaptation*. This concept works on the basis that not all specimens of the same species are identical: some have features which make them 'fit' their environment better than others – hence the 'survival of the fittest' (*aptus* is the Latin word for 'fitting'). The possession of these features depends on the genetic heritage of the lucky individuals, who, because they survive, pass on their genes to the next generation — and so on. Thus the species is gradually 'adapted' to the environment, not consciously or deliberately, but as the result of the success stories of countless individual specimens.

Such a model may be applied quite usefully to literary genres, so long as we do not try to introduce the concept of intentional alteration. This is not how adaptation works in nature, so we should not seek an evolutionary explanation where, really, we are still thinking in terms of the classical concept of the *inventor*. Yes, individual lyric poets — to stay with the genre in question — did make alterations to the received forms in which they wrote: they *experimented*. But it is only when a large number of poets all make the same experiment, and are satisfied with its outcome, that generic adaptation occurs. This is not to say that a particular new feature may not be traced back to an original inventor, only that, from an evolutionary perspective, such a derivation is not important.

Moreover, we also need to consider that the new feature is not only a response to a change in the old environment, but, also, that it can quite quickly induce a new change in the environment itself, which then causes further changes — and so on. This is because literature is not immune from the dynamic processes of fashion and novelty. A highly successful novel can change the market for which it was produced if it comes at the right time. The best-seller that spawns a host of imitations can be seen as the 'creation' of a new genre, or, more soberly, as producing an 'adaptation' of an old one. This is perhaps particularly remarkable in periods of rapid transition, where the appeal of innovation can be manipulated by certain players in the cultural system.

But we do not normally think of any of these things when we talk about 'adaptation' in literary studies. Here the emphasis is usually on the techniques of transferring material from one medium to another ('from page to stage', 'the film of the novel', and so on). Or it can focus on the way individual writers 'adapt' material to their purposes, that is, how they make it 'fit' their own needs or desires. This is not adaptation in the evolutionary sense, however, since it deals with only a single event; but it may well produce the *invention* that leads on to an alteration in the genre at large which parallels evolutionary adaptation more closely.

In this first section, I shall be using the concept of *adaptation* in a non-evolutionary sense; but my analysis of the changes made by Balassi to Marullus will still serve to introduce the less familiar concept of *exaptation* which will be the

focus of the second section — and this is a model which is drawn much more precisely from evolutionary biology, as we shall see. Let us start quite simply by lining up the two poems so that the main difference can be seen at a glance (for an alternative translation of Marullus, cf. Kidwell (1989: 91–92), for the Latin text, see 269-70):

Marullus: 'To Manilius Rhallus'

Balassi: 'Széllyel tündökleni'

1. Do you not see the roofs coloured by the various hues of the spring flowers, nor the door-posts tied back with violets? Green youth stands in the midst of the garlanded girls.

1. Do you not see this earth glittering everywhere with splendid flowers? The meadows are scented with sweet-smelling roses and with many-coloured violas; groves, hills, valleys everywhere sound with many kinds of bird-song.

2. Boys sing in celebration the first day of May, and so do old men long retired; everyone is dancing for joy, people of every age are smiling happily.

2. Garlanded with fresh roses, women and maidens dance with the youths; sweet-voiced children sing merrily, everyone feasts merrily; heaven, earth, and waters all, do you see, enjoy themselves in such a way as if they were regenerated.

3. Cupid himself, his hair thrown back on his shoulder, shines in his golden-yellow mantle; he is quick both with his quiver full of arrows and with his bow.

3. Moreover, Cupid also arranges his blond hair higher up on his forehead; like an angel, he flies here and there on soft little wings, he shows his merry mood, giving the hand of each one to his fair fiancée in the dance of love.

4. One moment, as he flies about here and there, he joins the youths in the ring-dances they have been wishing for, whilst, with his well-known arts, he prepares food for the first fire;

5. and the next moment, in the middle of the troop of girls, he

dresses the blond head of this one  
and of that, and his face adds glad  
glory to their eyes.

6. Good Rhallus, let go of your wild  
lamentations; already you have  
given enough thought to the fall of  
our fatherland; now amusement  
calls, and, cares set aside, sweet  
pleasure.

7. Why do we waste the brief period  
of life allotted to us, lamenting  
every day like wretches? Formerly,  
we, too, were happy, though our  
fortune was bad enough; and we also  
drank the height of joy.

8. Hyllus, my boy, bring out the  
three-year-old wine; let both  
sadness and sorrows retire far away:  
this entire day will surely have  
shone for me and my *genius*.

4. Therefore, do not grieve, my  
good brave companion, be void of  
all cares; much care has been  
sufficiently endured — in vain; let  
it be already far from us; now let us  
drink, feast, make merry, dance, let  
us take leave of our sorrows!

5. Perhaps we should rather not  
worry our young lives away with  
things that are past; nor can we  
know when and in what hour we  
shall be summoned? What should  
we care? If God is our good lord, he  
can make all well.

6. Worrying sorrow, woe-making  
love, be far from us; let golden cups  
filled with good wines pass  
between us; for God has brought us  
this day for our pleasure.

7. Marullus the poet wrote this in  
Latin, and see, I, for my part, have  
translated it into Hungarian, beside  
my good horse, whilst I was on the  
grass, when I lived merrily with my  
brave men, taking leave of my  
sorrows.

Two of the alterations are visually obvious: one is the addition of the coda; and the other is Balassi's relative lack of interest in the detail of Cupid (three stanzas reduced to one). But a closer reading reveals two other highly significant changes: (1) Balassi shifts the setting of the scene from the town to the country; and (2) he turns Marullus's exiles into soldiers. Why does he do this? Why does he 'adapt' Marullus in this particular way? We shall have to leave Cupid out of consideration, but the coda and the 'relocation' of the poem require our close attention.

Balassi's adaptation of Marullus is complex, and we shall take as our guide the great Hungarian scholar, Rabán Gerézdi:

This astonishing and magnificent conclusion develops the colophon of the Hungarian poetics of song into the coda of an artist; it asserts at a single stroke all the many ways in which Balassi has deviated from his model. Amongst his brave men, by the side of his horse, lying in the grassy pasture, with the poet in his hand, as he lies there idly — what could be more different from Marullus's holiday celebrations amongst the houses and gardens than the holiday-time of nature in its entirety, and the revelry of his 'brave men'. (Gerézdi 1964)

This is very much the standard *topos* of critical commentary on this poem. As Tünde Tóth dryly observes: 'There is a fairly strong consensus of opinion about this poem in the critical literature' (Tóth 1998). But the warmth with which Gerézdi writes of this coda is still very remarkable, and we shall return to this point later.

Leaving Gerézdi's comments on coda and colophon to the next section, we may note that he mainly contrasts the two poems on the basis of their chorographical location. There is a clear and evident opposition between the 'grassy pasture' of Balassi and the 'houses and gardens' of Marullus. Indeed, this is a traditional opposition: 'the city and the country', *rus et urbs* — and so on. Indeed, the opposition highlights the generic novelty of Marullus's poem. May Day is the great festival of spring — the symbolic moment of transition from winter to summer that was (and is) so important in agrarian society. Hence its association with 'nature in its entirety', as Gerézdi says of Balassi's poem; and we may feel that Balassi is tacitly 'correcting' Marullus by relocating his May Day poem in the country — where it properly belongs by virtue of its seasonal setting. In Marullus, the natural world is represented by flowers, but they are only ornamental, decorations on roofs and door-posts, whereas Balassi returns them to the wild, to their natural place in the order of woods and birds and meadows. Generically, Balassi 'adapts' the material he finds in Marullus to the pan-European tradition of the song of spring, or in Hungarian, the *tavaszi-ének* (or its more calendrically specific variant, the *májusdal*, or 'May song').

Here we may pause to observe that, in the so-called 'Balassi codex', which is the volume in which Balassi arranged a sequence of sixty-six of his poems around 1589, 'Széllyel tündökleni' is headed 'Eiusdem generis'. It is 'of the same kind' as the poem which precedes it: 'Áldott szép Pünkösdnek'. This is another spring-song, set during Whitsun rather than May Day, and one of its headings is 'In laudem verni temporis' ('In praise of spring-time'). In other words, we might also translate the heading of 'Széllyel tündökleni' as 'of the same genre'. Or rather: *genres* — for 'Áldott szép Pünkösdnek' is armed with two generic indicators, the other being 'Borivóknak' ('For wine-drinkers'). The poem ends with a call for drink, as does

Marullus's lyric. 'Szélllyel tündökleni' is thus *eiusdem generis* (or *eorundem generum*) as both his own 'Áldott szép Pünkösdsnek' and 'Ad Manilium Rhallum'. The other heading gestures towards the *latorének*, or 'rogue-song', the sort of composition made popular in the *Carmina Burana*; but we will concentrate on the vernal genre.

Returning to Gerézdi, we note that he does not produce the same kind of opposition between the main figures of the two poems: we hear a good deal about Balassi's soldiers, but not of Marullus's exiles. This is because Balassi does not merely 'correct' Marullus here, by restoring the traditional rural setting of the spring song; he really does 'adapt' his material to his own individual poetics, rather than those of the genre of the *tavaszi-ének*. 'Áldott szép Pünkösdsnek' offers a useful comparison here as well. The poem starts with a description of a spring landscape: sun, breeze, roses, nightingales, trees and bushes, violets, streams and springs — and horses:

4. For, after tiredness, you [viz. the spring] fatten up their limbs, refreshed, with dewy grass, building up their sinews with new strength for the chase. 5. And the fine brave soldiers, too, who live on the front, gallop here and there and everywhere on the sweet-smelling meadows; now they also rejoice, and pass away the time. 6. One takes care of his fine horse whilst it grazes, another cheerfully feasts with his friend, and another, meanwhile, has the smith clean his bloody weapon (34–35; for an alternative translation, cf. that of Keith Bosley and Peter Sherwood in Klaniczay (1985: 159–60).

In other words, here we have another 'spring landscape with soldiers', described in meticulous and remarkable detail.

Balassi's first readers would have been surprised by the way in which he alters the content of the traditional spring-song by removing the familiar figures of the lover and his beloved and replacing them with soldiers and their friends (and horses). The alteration is by no means arbitrary. Balassi is writing a variant of the *tavaszi-ének* adapted specifically for men like himself: the soldiers of the front between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, who, in late April or early May, took advantage of an informal cessation of military activity on both sides to take their horses out onto the fields, where men and beasts alike could refresh themselves and prepare for further battle (Szentmártoni Szabó 2004: 46). Hence spring is praised not simply because it is beautiful, but because it breathes new life into the warriors and their horses. It is God's gift to the fighting man, and hence the season itself is 'blesse'd'.

This 'militarization' of the spring landscape is peculiar to Balassi. In fact, Lóránt Czigány goes as far as to say that 'It is his account of nature seen through the eyes of a soldier that makes his poetry unique in Renaissance and Mannerist

poetry' (Czigány 1986: 50). Thus, whilst the transference of the setting of Marullus's poem from the town to the country may re-align it with the pan-European spring-song, the transformation of his exiles into soldiers is more of a personal experiment in combining elements of two traditional Hungarian lyric genres: the *tavaszi-ének* and the *katonaének*, or 'soldier-song'. The *katonaének* has its own range of topics (prayer, farewell, and so on); and Balassi develops some of these in various lyrics (see Pincombe 2007). But the only poem he actually designates as a *katonaének* — 'Egy katonaének in laudem confiniorum' ('A soldier-song in praise of the marches': poem 61) — is also set in exactly the same vernal landscape as 'Áldott szép Pünkösdney' and 'Széllyel tündökleni'. It begins: 'Valiant warriors! What in the whole world could be fairer than the frontiers? There in springtime men like to hear the song of many fair birds; the field is fragrant and the fair dew falls from the sky to the delight of all' (for an alternative translation, see Bosley and Sherwood in Klaniczay (1985: 172–74)). Here we have an interesting generic question: Is Balassi 'militarising' the *tavaszi-ének*? or 'vernalising' the *katonaének*? Or do we have a single new hybrid genre: the Balassian *tavaszi-katonaének*?

In any case, this is a hybrid which did not pass on its genes to later generations: Balassi is unique in pursuing the theme of 'soldiers in a spring landscape'. It failed to catch on, and this is because Balassi's experiment was very personal. He was an aristocrat, but, for most of his life, without land, and thus obliged to make his way by means of military service where he could find it. The image of the soldier-poet may well have been psychologically important to Balassi, and, to return to 'Széllyel tündökleni', it is interesting to note that Balassi must have been aware that Marullus was a soldier-poet as well. We know that Balassi read Marullus in an anthology of neo-Latin writers published in Paris in 1582 as *Poetae tres elegantissimi*. Here he would have come across several lyrics in which Marullus deals with his own military experiences; so Balassi may also be 'correcting' Marullus's poem by filling in the detail that he and Marullus were not only exiles but also soldiers. But in any case, Balassi's 'adaptation' of Marullus was an evolutionary dead-end.

However, 'Széllyel tündökleni' is still of great interest to the evolutionist — but in a slightly different context. Gerézdi writes: 'This astonishing and magnificent conclusion develops the colophon of the Hungarian poetics of song into the coda of an artist'. It is in the poem's relation to a series of changes relating to the coda that we may see the process of 'exaptation' most clearly at work.

## II. Generic Exaptation: Colophon and Coda

The concept of *exaptation* was first given currency in a paper by Stephen Jay Gould and Elizabeth S. Vrba in the 1982 volume of the journal *Paleobiology*. They invented the word in order to fill a gap in the 'taxonomy of evolutionary

morphology' (Gould and Vrba 1982: 4). But the title of their paper is generously inclusive: 'Exaptation — a missing term in the science of form' — and it is one of the terms Moretti applies to the history of literary forms (Moretti 1997: 273–78). Gould and Vrba are interested in the way characteristics which had evolved through natural selection through a process of 'adaptation' to their environment could be 'co-opted' and given a different function by a process of 'exaptation'. They explain:

They [viz. these special features] are fit for their current role, hence *aptus*, but were not designed for it, and are therefore not *ad aptus*, or pushed towards fitness. They owe their fitness to features present for other reasons, and are therefore *fit (aptus) by reason of (ex) their form, or ex aptus*. (Gould and Vrba 1982: 6)

Fitness, function, form: these are the concepts that we must now apply to the Hungarian lyric coda.

What I have translated as 'coda' is in Gerézdi *záradék*, derived from the word *zár*, 'to close', which emphasises its function as a clause or other device which closes or concludes a document (such as a legal 'codicil'). The important thing here is that it not just a 'final stanza', nor even a 'closing stanza', but a part of the text which stands in a relation of semi-independence from the main part: a *coda* in Latin is a 'tail'. The 'colophon' — Gerézdi's *kolofon* — is a special kind of coda. In sixteenth-century Hungary, both short and long poems were very frequently concluded with a final stanza (sometimes two) in which the poet states when and where he or she composed it.

These two words need to be understood in terms of what I have rendered by the phrase 'poetics of song', or, in Gerézdi's Hungarian: *énekköltés*. The word *ének* is the usual non-technical Hungarian word for 'song'; *költ* means 'poem', and *költés* is 'poetics'. The word *ének*, however, includes not only 'lyric poems', in the modern sense of short compositions in verse, but all kinds of 'Poetry for Singing' (Nemeskürty 1982: 57). These included longer narrative compositions, such as the *históriás ének* ('historical song'), which dealt with the exploits of Hungarian heroes past and present. This is what Sir Philip Sidney encountered when he made his brief visit to Hungary in 1573, perhaps as a guest of Balassi's father, János. He recalls how he sat at feasts amongst Hungarian nobles and heard 'songs of their ancestors' valour' (Sidney 1973: 118; cf. Gömöri 1991). The colophon seems to have had its origins in these longer compositions.

The origins of the lyric coda in the form of a colophon may be traced to the oral delivery of the *ének* as song. How did the singer signal to his audience that his song was over? The coda generally fulfils this purpose by breaking the spell that the singer's words have cast over the audience, by means of which they forget that he is there and listen raptly to his song — perhaps with eyes closed. He ends the song by reminding them of his presence, no longer the mere source of the voice

that sings, but a real person physically present before his listeners. The specific function of the colophon, however, is to draw attention directly or indirectly to the singer-composer's individual identity. In the terms of László Szilási's 'Brief History of the Colophon before 1650', the colophon is 'referential': it refers the listener to the real person standing before them, lute in hand, expecting applause (Szilási 2008: 87).

The development of the colophon seems to have happened quite quickly. They start to appear in the mid-sixteenth century, and Lóránt Czigány notes that it was now that 'the *históriás ének* gained wide popularity', and that 'The itinerant singers who performed them', unlike earlier singer-composers in an oral tradition, 'had almost always written down their compositions, which frequently survived in print' (Czigány 1986: 40–41). These men wanted to be known for who they were, and this is why they 'signed' their compositions with a colophon. So, when the great poet of the *históriás ének*, Sebestyén Tinódi (?1510–1556), published his *Krónika* ('Chronicle') in 1554, 'the colophons already shine in their full (referential) glory' (Szilási 2008: 87). Nor were these colophons restricted to heroic poetry, for even a humorous drinking-song could be so dignified. An amusing example of this function is the coda of Tinódi's own 'Sokféle Részögökről' ('Many kinds of drunkards'): 'The one who composed this, Sebestyén by name, did so in thirst, in Nyírbátor, fifteen hundred and forty-eight; if the stewards do not provide wine, then they are cursed!' (also translated by Snodgrass in Klaniczay (1983: 108–11)).

As the century progressed, the colophon started to appear at the end of poems which, though still *énekek*, and thus 'songs', were probably designed to be read rather than sung and heard. In other words, the original *function* of the colophon was lost, but its *form* survived in poem after poem after poem. Clearly, the colophon was very much 'fit for purpose'; but the function it fulfilled was very different. A process of exaptation has taken place.

Szilási does not comment on Balassi's colophons in his 'Brief History', but his remarks on Balassi's experiments with the *záróstrófa*, or 'closing stanza', are still very relevant to our present topic. Szilási argues that Balassi's great innovation was to move away from the traditional 'referentiality' of the colophon, by means of which the poet established his historical identity and the extra-literary facts of the poem's composition, and towards a more sophisticated 'fictionality', in which the relationship between the closing stanza and the rest of the poem, and particular the 'I' — or *én* — of each part — is rich and complex.

Originally, the 'I' was referential in order that the singer's name might be known and thus advertised. But other details were no less essential in this respect: the where and when — Tinódi's Nyírbátor and 1548. They provide a kind of authentication of the poet's claim to authorship. Then, later, these circumstantial details came to be just as important in their own right, especially when the need for self-advertisement was no longer so pressing. In the terms of Francis Cairns's invaluable study of *Generic Composition in Greek and Roman Poetry* (1972), there

was a shift in the order of 'primary elements' — those which are pretty much essential to the 'form' of the genre — and 'secondary topics', which are more optional (Cairns 1972: 6).

This shift soon gave rise to a host of variations. So, for example, Péter Ilosvai's famous *Toldi Miklós históriája* [The story of Miklós Toldi] simply gives the year — 'fifteen-hundred and seventy-four' — without the place (II. 252); whereas the anonymous author of the *Rusztán császár históriája* [The story of the emperor Rustanus] (c. 1570) simply tells us that he wrote the poem 'in a village by the river Dráva' (II. 184). But the omission of the year is very rare; and usually some indication of both time and place is given, as, for example, in a poem that Balassi must have know quite well: the Calvinist preacher Péter Bornemisza's 'Isten városáról, az mennyországól való ének' [A song about the city of God, in the country of heaven]. The poem ends: 'It was in fifteen-hundred and sixty-seven that Péter Bornemisza wrote this in the castle of Zólyom' (I. 765). Balassi's father, János, was the captain of Zólyom, and Bornemisza acted as his son's tutor during the mid-1560s.

These colophons follow a basic model, then, but they are supplied with other details in line with a well-established set of topics which never seem to have acquired primary status. Examples of the *topoi* of the colophon might include the prayer or other reflection of a pious or moral character which is frequently incorporated into the colophon, as in Gáspár Veres of Szeged's *széphistória* ('pleasant story'): *Titus és Gysippus históriája* ('The story of Titus and Gysippus'): 'I wrote down this little story in verse in Dés, by the side of the river Szamos, in the year fifteen-hundred and seventy-four. May God direct our actions!' (II. 580). Common, too, is the hint that the poet's identity is revealed in an acrostic at the start of the poem, as in Gergely Szegedi's 'Micsodás az fesvény ember' ('The marvellously avaricious man'): 'Somebody wrote this song in Debrecen; he put his name at the head of the stanzas; in fifty-five it pleased him to write about avarice' (I. 703).

Most significantly, the acrostic *topos* points to an important long-term development in the form of the colophon, as poets started to write them to be read as well as — or instead of — to be heard. Acrostics can only work with texts which are written down and where the letters which spell out the name can actually be seen. And in the case of short poems written or printed on a sheet of paper, the original function of the coda as a mark of conclusion must have been redundant. But poets continued to use the traditional year-and-place colophon well into the seventeenth century — as a purely optional and largely ornamental *topos* of the poem as a whole.

The process of exaptation was well under way when Balassi started writing in the 1570s, then, and his own colophons are very much in this new 'tradition'. Seven of the sixty-six poems of the main sequence of the Balassi codex have colophons. Poem 27 ('Az én szerelmesen') concludes: 'At the end of fifteen-

hundred and seventy-eight, when my beloved was in doubt about me, I put this all together thus; you will find her name at the head of the verses' (70). Here is the *topos* which guides the reader to a name concealed in an acrostic — but it is the beloved's name and not, as is more usual, the poet's. The poem is, in fact, headed: 'On the name of Anna'; and the woman in question is Anna Losonczy, the wife of the captain of Eger, where Balassi was in military service. There is another *topos* here, too: 'recapitulation'. The colophon restates the main theme of the poem in much the same way as the main title: 'In which he writes of how his beloved was angry and suspicious without reason'. But we also notice that there is no place mentioned in this stanza.

Balassi's later colophons are more complete — and more complex — than his earlier attempts. In most of them, he elaborates on the mention of time by not only stating the year of composition, but also the time of year, sometimes the very day, by means of reference to the Christian calendar of feasts and fasts. Poem 59 ('Szerelem istene') contains an acrostic 'on the name of Zsófi'; and it ends thus: 'When the glowing beetle comes in the month of St John, in the middle of summer, then, offering up my soul as a sacrifice to a sweet maid, I wrote this in verse, in fifteen-hundred and eighty-nine' (145). Here the poem is dated to June 1589, then, but note the new *topos*: 'circumlocution'. The 'glowing beetle' (*fényes bogár*) of this poem is the *szentjánosbogár*, or 'glow-worm', literally 'St John's beetle'. The title of poem 62 ('Vitézek karjokkal') tells us it is about 'a maid called Margareta'. It ends: 'The day after St Lawrence's Day, in fifteen-hundred and eighty-nine, whilst living like a hermit at the foot of snowy mountains, I wrote in verse of her who is like an ermine, and whose name means the beautiful pearl in the language of wisdom and learning' (153). Here we have a simile drawn from natural history: the word for 'ermine' is *hölgy*, which also means 'lady'. The allusion to the pearl might also be included as an example of this *topos*, but it may also constitute a further *topos*: 'etymology'. The name 'Margareta' does indeed derive from the Latin *margarita* or Greek *margaritēs*, both meaning 'pearl'.

Let us return to the coda of 'Szélllyel tündöklenni': 'Marullus the poet wrote this in Latin, and see, I, for my part, have translated it into Hungarian, beside my good horse, whilst I was on the grass, when I lived merrily with my brave men, taking leave of my sorrows'. And to Gerézdi's comment on it: 'This astonishing and magnificent conclusion develops the colophon of the Hungarian poetics of song into the coda of an artist'. Balassi's coda (or *záróstrófa*) is not a colophon of the old kind, for it does not give the year of composition, nor name the town or river or wherever it was composed. This, of course, has not stopped Balassi scholars from trying to locate the 'scene' of the poem in historical time and space. 'Perhaps he wrote it in May 1584' (Szentmártoni Szabo 2004: 46). If so, then he may have written it near Végles, where he was stationed at the time (Kőszeghy 2004: 33). But the scene is more likely to be fictional rather than referential: an idyll, or 'little image' (Greek: *eidullion*, 'little picture').

Balassi is experimenting here as elsewhere with his closing stanza. We have the three primary elements of the old referential colophon: person, time, place — but all ‘anonymised’. He could have written (say): ‘Bálint Balassi composed this, in the spring of fifteen hundred and eighty-four, at Végles, with his horse at his side, and his men all around him’. But he methodically suppresses all the names, leaving us with the structure of the colophon perfectly intact, but emptied of its usual referential content and filled instead with an extremely compelling fiction. In fact, it may be that is precisely because he does not name names that the coda is so ‘astonishing and magnificent’. The anonymity allows the reader to ‘identify’ much more easily with the subject of the poem. Here is István Nemeskürty:

We could hardly invent anything more beautiful even today. The former warrior of the border castle, in springtime, lets his horse loose on the fresh grass — let him enjoy the tastes of spring after the dry hay-bales of winter! His brave men gallop here and there, whilst he, leaning his back against the trunk of a tree, reads Marullus, and, his fancy caught, turns it into Hungarian there and then. (Nemeskürty 1978: 97)

Nemeskürty was entranced by the coda, just like Gerézdi. And there *is* something fresh and arresting — almost exciting — about the idyll he either reports, or, more likely invents. In the final section of this essay, I shall try to relate this phenomenon to an ‘evolutionary’ description of the Hungarian Renaissance.

### **III. Balassi and the ‘moment’ of the Hungarian Renaissance**

One reason why Gerézdi and Nemeskürty are so impressed by the coda of ‘Szélllyel tündökleni’ is, I suspect, the fact that they are Hungarian scholars writing at a time — 1964 and 1978 — when Hungary was not a politically independent country. National sovereignty was, of course, seriously compromised by Hungary’s position *vis à vis* the Soviet Union (confirmed in a complicated way by the suppression of the Hungarian Uprising of 1956). It is easy to see how quietly nationalist sentiments might lie behind the warmth of their appreciation, not so much of the beauty of Balassi’s landscape painting in the coda, as of his proud assertion of his ‘Hungarianness’. He writes: ‘Marullus the poet wrote this in Latin (*deákul*), and see, I, for my part (*im, én penig*), have translated it into Hungarian (*magyarul*)’.

On the pan-European level, however, what is important is that Balassi is setting up his own national vernacular as a language which can be used as a vehicle not only of literary *imitatio* but also *aemulatio* for works written in the *koinē* of pan-European culture: Latin or neo-Latin. This situates him at a particular ‘moment’ in the history of the Renaissance which is very similar to situations in

other national contexts. So, for example, a year or two earlier, in a letter published in 1580, the English scholar, Gabriel Harvey, complains of experiments in the new 'quantitative' metres which ignore native English accent and try to impose the neo-classical prosody of short and long syllables (Harvey 1912: 631). Balassi is not so impatient, but he is motivated by the same sense of the aesthetic independence of national-vernacular poetry and poetics.

This point is worth emphasising in the light of the standard account of the Hungarian Renaissance, at least, for English-language students, elaborated over several decades by the Hungarian scholar, Tibor Klaniczay. For Klaniczay, the Hungarian Renaissance begins in the mid- and late fifteenth century, and is then interrupted by the catastrophe of the battle of Mohács in 1526, when the Ottoman army defeated the Habsburgs and occupied most of Hungary. Then, round about 1570, the political situation relaxed somewhat, and there was what Klaniczay calls 'the renaissance of the Hungarian Renaissance' (Klaniczay 1992: 174–75). So there is, as it were, *one* 'Renaissance' — with a capital R — but *two* 'renaissances' — with a small *r*. Balassi belongs to the second renaissance, and to what Klaniczay designates as the 'heyday of the aristocratic-courtly renaissance' from 1570 to 1600 (Klaniczay 1973: 164).

For Klaniczay, what allows us to think of these two shorter renaissances as constituting one long Renaissance is their shared emphasis on the exemplarity of Italian culture. What is different about the two periods, or sub-periods, is that Hungarian writers and readers in the late fifteenth century were interested in neo-Latin literature, and those in the late sixteenth century were concerned with vernacular literature; and Klaniczay is able to marshal an impressive list of Hungarian noblemen whose libraries contained works by writers such as Bembo, Ariosto, Dante, and Tasso (Klaniczay 1973: 204). But Balassi, it seems to me, was not particularly attracted to Italian literature, and Italian is only one of the many languages from which Balassi translated. His literary culture was, in fact, extraordinarily cosmopolitan: 'in addition to his native Hungarian he was proficient in eight languages: Latin, Italian, German, Polish, Turkish, Slovak, Croatian and Rumanian' (Nemeskürty 1983: 64). Latin — more precisely: neo-Latin — was perhaps his favourite. He translated Buchanan and Beza, and also translated neo-Latin prose. For example, in the early 1590s he made a Hungarian version of Edmund Campion's *Decem rationes* (1581), which was published posthumously in 1607.

More needs to be said here with regards to Italian literature, however, since Balassi is regularly claimed as a Petrarchist. Yet he may actually have never read Petrarch. György Szónyi, who has written an illuminating comparison between the Petrarchism of Balassi and that of Sir Philip Sidney, notes Balassi's direct debt to Marullus's poems, and to works by one or two other poets — but not to Petrarch's *Canzoniere* (Szónyi 1990: 64). It is more a question of Balassi's response to a certain pan-European phenomenon. Then as now, this style was

associated with the name of Petrarch, but it was already more of a 'style' than a 'brand'. Likewise, Imre Szabics has demonstrated an extraordinary similarity between Balassi's lyrics and the poetry of the troubadours, but he concludes that there is no direct link between Balassi and these twelfth-century poets, only an 'ontological and typological affinity', mediated by other writers and traditions, notably, as it happens, pan-European Petrarchism (Szabics 1996).<sup>4</sup>

Balassi translated a play from the Italian, too, but he calls it a *Szép magyar komédia*, or (in the diction of his Elizabethan contemporaries) 'A Pleasant Hungarian Comedy'. Nor does he acknowledge his debt to the *Amarilli* of Cristoforo Castalietti, who is himself hardly a 'classic' of *cinquecento* literature. *Amarilli* was published in 1587, two years before Balassi wrote his play, and he seems simply to have liked it, or even merely seen its 'usefulness' as a plot which could fit his own tangled amatory situation. It is not a *hommage*, then, to Castalietti or to the Italians. Rather it may reflect the other side of the cultural dynamic of the pan-European Renaissance: *imitatio* produces *aemulatio* — the desire to be 'like' the model gives way to a desire to be 'as good as' or even 'better than' the model. Balassi explains in the prologue that the Italians, French, and Germans all write love-comedies: 'So I too desired to enrich the Hungarian language with this Comedy, so that all may realize that what can exist in other languages can also exist in Hungarian' (Balassi 1985: 185). The national-vernacular motivation is strong here, too.

Balassi's assertion of his own status as a Hungarian poet, then, squaring up to the neo-Latin poet Marullus, occurs at a specific 'moment' in the history of the Hungarian Renaissance, but also in the pan-European Renaissance. It is when poets emphasise the equal status of their own vernaculars and the neo-Latin *koinē*. But in the case of the coda to 'Széllyel tündökleni', it might be argued that this moment is more intense, since, in all of his many translations, this is the only occasion on which Balassi mentions the name of his source. It is as if he is consciously positioning himself for 'entry' into the pan-European literary arena. The coda stages his own 'emergence', then, onto the literary scene of late sixteenth-century Europe — and this leads to my concluding observation on the use of an evolutionary model for the historical analysis of generic development.

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We started with Moretti's application to literary history of Gould and Eldredge's idea of 'punctuated equilibrium': long periods where nothing much happens, then short bursts of rapid change (cf. Moretti 1997: 268). But there is also a 'moment' where the rapid change starts to happen — a moment of *acceleration*. Such moments are not hard to detect, because contemporaries comment positively on the innovation or negatively on newfangledness. In some ways, the moment of acceleration is actually easier to identify than the periods of slow or rapid change, for what metric are we to use to calculate the relative rate at which this change

occurs? But we may still point to the remarkable extent of experimentation in the lyric genres in the second half of the sixteenth century in Hungary as evidence of the sort of compressed novelty that marks one of these moments of acceleration. And this is surely what we mean by 'renaissance' when we do not use the term to describe the 'rebirth' of some earlier literary culture, but, rather, as the 'birth' of something new that was not there before. To return to the English Renaissance, C. S. Lewis, famously reluctant to use the word *Renaissance* in his influential study of *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century* (1954), writes thus of the moment, in the late 1570s, where 'Golden' takes over from 'Drab': 'Then, in the last quarter of the century, the unpredictable happens. With startling suddenness we ascend' (Lewis 1954: 1). Unpredictable, startling, sudden: this is a description of a moment of 'rapid transition' as it is felt not only by men and women in Elizabethan England, but also by the modern critic.

Gerézdi and Nemeskürty respond as they do to the coda of Balassi's 'Széllyel tündökleni' not simply because they are Hungarian, then, but because they recognise what it there for all to see: the moment where Balassi suddenly 'appears' in the history of pan-European Renaissance literature, in an idyllic scene of his own devising which presents an image of himself as the Hungarian soldier-poet. This image emerges from the swirl of experimentation with codas and colophons, and remains a sort of icon, serenely resistant to the turbulent flood of change.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> My thanks to Anita Werkner for sending me invaluable research materials from Budapest and for checking my translations from Hungarian.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from Balassi refer by page to (Balassi 1986); all quotations from other Hungarian poets refer by volume and page to (Varjas 1979). All translations from Hungarian and Latin are my own. References will also be provided to alternative translations when these are available.

<sup>3</sup> Szabics's essay has a useful French summary, from which I quote here.

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