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Miklós PÉTI: *Paradise from behind the Iron Curtain: Reading, Translating and Staging Milton in Communist Hungary*, London, UCL Press, 2022, 296 pp.

Over the past few decades, there has been an increasing emphasis in literary theory on the significant interplay between literary works and the cultures that interpret them. Questions are raised about the ways in which critiques and translations engage with the text and in which these responses consequently shape the public's reading choices and interpretations. A remarkable illustration of this phenomenon, as shown by Miklós Péti, can be found in the reception of Milton's oeuvre in Hungary between 1948 and 1989, which reveals a highly politicized and ideologically driven response.

The translator behind the first Hungarian translation of *Paradise Regained* since the 18th century, Péti has already written extensively on the subject matter of his first monograph in studies such as "In 'Milton's Prison': Milton in Hungarian Translation" or "*Paradise Lost* on the Hungarian Stage in 1970." Now his focus becomes crystal clear: he provides a comprehensive documentation of how the reception of John Milton's works was influenced by cultural policies during the four decades of Hungarian state socialism. Péti traces how the reevaluation of Milton's writings led to a selective promotion of certain works, such as *Paradise Lost* or the revolutionary sonnets, while others were marginalized or, on the contrary, like *Samson Agonistes*, brought back from oblivion.

Péti cites the renowned Hungarian poet Lőrinc Szabó's correspondence about the translation of *Paradise Lost* in the first chapter of the book. Szabó writes: "I shudder to think of Milton, the magnificent, whom I should really start now." As Péti points out, the poet's anxiety is "as much fuelled by personal artistic concerns as by the workings of communist cultural policy" (19). Part of Szabó's concern was indeed well-founded, considering that during the era, authors faced censorship and suppression. The control over literature rested in the hands of individuals occupying positions of authority within the cultural hierarchy, granting them the power to dictate its course. Yet, Péti shows how Milton's words, with the help of Szabó's lyrical genius or that of Ágnes Nemes Nagy, among others, resisted ideological constraints and stayed what they really are: profound thoughts on humanity, which, even if only momentarily, "suspended [the] Hell of the Cold War" (146).

Péti lays the groundwork for his study by highlighting its necessity: after all, it indeed surveys "a narrow and rather marginal segment of Milton's international reception" (6). By doing so, he ends up uncovering intriguing parallels and distinctions between Milton's Hungarian and Anglo-American reception in the

second half of the 20th century. The reader is also provided with a few pages of historical context that the author elaborates on in the coming chapters, so the book becomes rather easy to grasp for those less familiar with Eastern European history.

Chapter 1 examines the reception of Milton's two epics, *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, which received completely contrasting treatments during the era. While *Paradise Lost* was praised, the latter "virtually ceased to exist for Hungarian audiences" (24), mainly due to its thematic misalignment with the propaganda that aimed to highlight the revolutionary nature of Milton's works and bury the religious aspects as deep as possible. By close reading short excerpts, Péti provides commentary on Szabó Lőrinc's and István Jánosy's translations as well as on the 1970 stage adaptation.

In Chapter 2, Péti draws attention to the rather surprising emergence of a critical tradition that focuses on *Samson Agonistes*, resulting in several different translations. This tradition reveres Samson as a proto-socialist hero, both in Anglo-American Marxist and socialist writings, as well as in the countries behind the Iron Curtain. Péti points out that while these explicitly politicized perspectives on Samson indeed demonstrate a comprehension of the work's political potential, the reasons behind them have to do more with the dynamics of communist cultural policies than with the drama itself.

Chapter 3 focuses on Milton's prose works, such as *Areopagitica*, which itself presents a captivating subject matter given the relative obscurity of scholarship on Milton's prose. The chapter's highlight is the commentary on Tibor Lutter and Miklós Szenczi, who emerged as influential figures in all matters related to Milton during this time, and whose treatment of Milton's works, as Péti shows, serves as a symbolic representation of the wider patterns of reception in communist Hungary.

Chapter 4 deals with Milton's shorter poems and presents the intriguing story of a 1958 publication of a select few of these. The volume ended with an afterword that attempted to guide the readers towards a specific interpretation, while, as Péti points out, the poems themselves presented Milton as a classic poet who primarily explored traditional themes. The highlight of the chapter and possibly the whole book is Péti's discussion of *Sonnet 23* as translated by Ágnes Nemes Nagy, a female poet otherwise silenced by the regime, as it challenges the patriarchal views that surrounded Milton's Hungarian reception as well as the perceived "masculinity" of the poet himself, pointing out how literary translation when done masterfully is able to complement the original.

In the second half of the book the reader is provided with the Hungarian script of the 1970 theatrical performance of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (based on Jánosy's text), accompanied by an English rendition by Péti himself, which allows for further contemplation.

Despite the similarity in overarching conclusions across each chapter, Péti's meticulous scrutiny of translations, journals, correspondence and so on, combined with the intelligence with which he puts the pieces together, never leaves the

reader bored. *Paradise from behind the Iron Curtain* is not only a much-needed piece of Milton scholarship, which points out the connections and divergences between the Anglo-American and the Eastern European treatment of Milton's works, but also an outstanding example of a reception study that, as the reader may have previously hoped, goes beyond being merely a compilation of different translations and critiques. It offers astute commentary on the profound influence of politics on interpretive practices, highlighting, at the same time, the ways in which the voices of resistance are able to shine through ideology – a lesson that is, unfortunately, a valuable one nowadays.