

ZITA TURI

“Dreams always speak in Welsh” – Fictional Realities in Antal Szerb’s *The Pendragon Legend*

The Pendragon Legend (1934) by Antal Szerb is partly set in Wales and recounts the history of the Rosicrucians from the perspective of the Hungarian scholar János Bátky. Wales may at first appear to be an unexpected location for a novel by a Hungarian author to take place, but its ancient history of occultism and distant setting make it a fitting backdrop for the thrilling plot to unfold. Szerb experimented with several prose genres and combined different narrative styles to create a text that blends science with occultism, history with bogus history, and dream visions with reality. To achieve this, I will argue, he adopted the Welsh theme for the novel in which stories with varying degrees of authenticity are fused in a delightful and playful manner.

The main character, János Bátky, works as a researcher specialising in the history of the Rosicrucians at the British Museum in London. Bátky meets Owen Pendragon, the Earl of Gwynedd, who invites him to his castle in Llanvygan, Wales, where the scholar undergoes a sequence of fantastical adventures. Szerb wrote an essay entitled *The Rosicrucians (A rózsakeresztések)* about the topic, in which he expressed his critical views and scepticism of occult studies while also acknowledging the cultural significance of Rosicrucianism. Although Szerb claims that *Fama Fraternalitatis* (1614) by Johann Valentin Andreae, the most important text of the Rosicrucians, was a deception, the readers, as András Wirágh notes, are to decide whether to consider the novel to be an exciting commentary on the essay or, conversely, the essay functions as a disclaimer for the novel.¹ Bátky refers to the ambiguity around this secret society and the Pendragon family, the genealogy of which he narrates as follows:

The Pendragons trace their origins – though I notice the line isn’t exactly clear – to Llewellyn the Great. This is the Llewellyn ap Griffith who was beheaded by Edward I, the king whom János Arany immortalised for the young reader in Hungary as riding a pale-grey horse. The old Welsh bards who went to their death in the flames singing like the doomed heroes of their own tragic art were

¹ WIRÁGH András: *Fantasztikum és medialitás: Kísértetek és írásművek a magyar prózában Nagy Ignácól Szerb Antalig, Irodalomtörténeti Füzetek* 180, Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Bölcsészettudományi Kutatóközpont Irodalomtudományi Intézet, Fórizs Gergely (ed.), Budapest, Reciti, 2018, 198.

in fact being punished for praising the house of Pendragon. But all this is in the mists of the past.²

The text alludes to a ballad entitled “The Bards of Wales” (“A walesi bárdok,” 1857) by János Arany, a piece central to the Hungarian literary canon and a perhaps somewhat surprising contribution to the formation of Welsh identity in the 21st century. The Welsh town of Montgomery and Magyar Cymru,³ a society promoting Hungarian-Welsh relations, had a plaque which commemorates Arany in English, Welsh, and Hungarian installed in the town centre in 2017; it was originally given to Montgomery in 2019 but could not be unveiled until after the Covid pandemic in 2022.⁴ This occasion was particularly significant for Welsh-Hungarian relations, as it celebrated Arany’s ballad, the main character of which is King Edward I, who, according to legend, had 500 bards killed for refusing to celebrate him. Arany sought inspiration in this story and used it to denounce Emperor Franz Joseph I, who, after the bloody retaliations that followed the 1848–1849 Revolution and War of Independence, was regarded as a tyrant by most Hungarians.

Although it is difficult to pin down the sources Arany used for the poem, Katalin Hász-Fehér notes that he owned a copy of Charles Dickens’s *A Child’s History of England* (Tauchnitz, Leipzig, 1853), which contains an annotation by Arany in Chapter XVI (“England under Edward the First, called Longshanks”).⁵ He also had a copy of Friedrich Steger’s historiography entitled *Allgemeine Weltgeschichte für das deutsche Volk* (1848), which marks 1277 as the year of the massacre in Montgomery.⁶ Another probable source was Ferenc Pulszky’s travelogue (*Uti vázolatok 1836-ból*) published in *The Book of the Flood in Budapest (Budapesti Árvízkönyv, 1839)*, which contains a long description of England and Wales. The contrast between Pulszky’s characterisation of the West Country in England and Wales is sharp, calling the former “the realm of machinery and factories” and describing the “tower-like steaming chimneys, dark factories covered in smoke, roaring locomotives, children spinning around them, earning peanuts each week. They make a living on their own, and although they can’t experience the joys of childhood, they are independent and get used to the struggles of life [...]”.⁷ What Pulszky describes is the ramifications of industrialisation

² I will refer to the English translation by Len Rix. I use my own translations for other primary sources originally written in Hungarian. Antal SZERB: *The Pendragon Legend*, transl. Len Rix, London, Pushkin Press, 2006, 16–17.

³ <https://magyarcymru.home.blog/>

⁴ Craig DUGGAN: “Montgomery unveils plaque for Hungarian poet Janos Arany”. *BBC News*, 14 May 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-61448325> Accessed 27/04/2023.

⁵ Katalin HÁSZ-FEHÉR: “Bárdok Walesben: A walesi bárdok keletkezés- és közléstörténete”. *Irodalomtörténet*, XCV/2, 2014. 208.

⁶ HÁSZ-FEHÉR: *op. cit.* 208.

⁷ PULSZKY Ferenc: “Uti vázolatok 1836-ból”. In B. Eötvös József (ed.): *Budapesti árvízkönyv*, Pest, Heckenast Gusztáv, 1839, 121: “[...] torony alaku magas gőzkéményeket, füstbe burkolt sötét gyárakat lát az ember, mozdonyok zugnak, ’s gyermekek forgolódnak körülök, ’s két forintot p. p. kapván

in urban regions in England, which he contrasted with the idyllic scenery of Wales as “a province that has been amply gifted with the charms of nature.”⁸ Then Pulszky goes on to describe the Welsh people, who

[...]preserved their national identity despite the efforts of the English, and despite that it [Wales] had been occupied by England for centuries. Notwithstanding the dominance of the language, the English could not erase old Welsh customs and literature, and they could not silence Gaelic speech. Although Edward I had 500 poets slaughtered to prevent resistance in the country, even today there is a harp in every shed where people sing the songs of the travelling bards.⁹

The legend of the 500 bards characterises Welsh identity as one fighting against English oppression. This is also echoed by the plaque unveiled in honour of Arany in Montgomery, which, on the one hand, served as a tribute to his poetry and, on the other, gave locals an opportunity to reiterate Welsh national identity largely characterised by the centuries-old resistance against England.

Arany was probably familiar with several books that dealt with this topic. Hász-Fehér argues that the majority of English, French, and German works focusing on English history in the 18th and 19th centuries mention the episode about Edward I and the bards, but none of the available texts reference figures.¹⁰ Besides Dickens’s *A Child’s History of England*, Arany was likely to have been inspired by Scottish poetry and he translated the anonymous Scottish ballad entitled “Sir Patrick Spens” (1765)¹¹ in 1853; he probably also knew Thomas Gray’s “The Bard: A Pindaric Ode,” a poem featuring Edward published in 1757.¹² Hász-Fehér adds that the legend of the bards has been mentioned in almost every English-language historical work since the 17th century. The story was first cited in *The History of the Gwydir Family* (first published in 1669) by a Welsh nobleman called Sir John Wynn, and although the legend has been considered true by most Welsh historiographers, English historians often question

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 legalább hetenként, munkájokért magok tartják ki magokat, 's ha a' gyermekség' vidor örömeit nem is ízeltetik, legalább jó eleve szoknak a' függetlenséghez 's komoly gondolhoz.”

⁸ PULSZKY: *op. cit.* 121.

⁹ PULSZKY: *op. cit.* 121–122: “Angolhont elhagyván, Walesbe mentünk, ezen a természettől minden bájaival bőven megajándékozott tartományba, melly nemzetiségét az angolok százados törekedései ellen is, bár századok óta Angolhonhoz csatolva, mind eddig épen megtartotta. Angol élet még mindig el nem törlesztheté a régi szokásokat, angol nyelv, literatúrája minden kincsei mellett, el nem némíthatta a gael beszédet, 's bár I-ső Eduard 500 költőt egyszerre levágotott, hogy a nemzetet a régi időkre emlékeztette, forrásba ne hozzák, még most is minden pitvarban a hárfá áll, mellyen a vándor dalnok énekeit hangoztatja.”

¹⁰ HÁSZ-FEHÉR: *op. cit.* 209.

¹¹ For more on Arany’s Scottish and Welsh sources see ELEK Oszkár: “Skót és angol hatás Arany János balladáiban”. *Irodalomtörténet*, I/10, 1912. <https://epa.oszk.hu/02500/02518/00008/pdf/> Accessed 26/04/2023; TOLNAI Vilmos: “Arany balladáinak angol-skót forrásaihoz”. *Irodalomtörténet*, II/1, 1913. <https://epa.oszk.hu/02500/02518/00009/pdf/> Accessed 26/04/2023.

¹² HÁSZ-FEHÉR: *op. cit.* 211.

its authenticity and regard it as a myth that has been fabricated to overshadow the kingly virtues of Edward.¹³

While Arany was certainly fascinated by the story of the bards, he also appears to have been sceptical of its credibility. This is revealed by a piece he published in the journal *Koszorú* (*Wreath*) which explains that some of the bards “may have died in the resistance, but the story of this carnage, I think, was devised by poets, who later wrote ballads about this topic and sang them by the fire in Wales until they grew to believe that they are true.”¹⁴ Clearly, Arany considered the story to be inspirational, but merely used it as a vehicle to explore issues of power, political resistance, and moral integrity.

Such conflation of history and legends is a recurring theme in *The Pendragon Legend*, one example being the dialogue between Osbourne and Miss Jones, who shares a strange dream about a dog she believes to have been “the dog of hell.”¹⁵ The dog foreshadows Osbourne’s death in the Castle of Pendragon, following which Miss Jones says that “Dreams always speak in Welsh,”¹⁶ thus creating an association between the unreality of dreams and Wales. Osbourne explains that the old lady has been on her death bed for three years and likes him very much, which is why she insists that he does not visit the castle. Then the young man makes a joke about his own death saying that then the “prophecy would be fulfilled. I’d become a legend, like my ancestors who lived in nobler times. I’d be like one of those Homeric heroes whose death is prefigured three cantos beforehand. Sensational.”¹⁷ Here Osbourne conflates family history with family legends – the Pendragon legend – and literature, which also questions the credibility of Szerb’s novel. His sister, Cynthia, makes a similar remark earlier in the text when she says to Osbourne that “you’ll completely undermine folkloric research. After this I can never again be sure what is genuine and what is humbug.”¹⁸ Cynthia’s note sounds as if it was Szerb’s comment on the ironic quality of the novel, the title of which includes the Latin term “legenda,” which originally meant “to be read” and was a popular genre in the Middle Ages to portray the lives of saints and martyrs and which would have been regarded authentic by most readers in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Wirágh observes that *The Pendragon Legend* is constructed through a web of intertextual references in which Bátky, on the one hand, is the interpreter of the legend, and, on the other, he is also responsible for its recording and creation by deciphering the signs and commenting on the events.¹⁹ Szerb liked to fuse historical

¹³ HÁSZ-FEHÉR: *op. cit.* 216.

¹⁴ Qtd. in HÁSZ-FEHÉR: *op. cit.* 218: “[...] az ellenállók között lelték halálukat, de ez a tömegmészárlás így, azt hiszem, csak a hegedősök képzelgése, akik, sok évvel később, mondhatnám költöttek egy históriás éneket erre a témára, és addig énekelgették azt a velszi tűzhelyek mellett, amíg el nem hitték, hogy igaz.”

¹⁵ SZERB: *The Pendragon Legend*, 130.

¹⁶ SZERB: *ibid.* 130.

¹⁷ SZERB: *ibid.* 130.

¹⁸ SZERB: *ibid.* 89.

¹⁹ WIRÁGH: *op. cit.* 199.

events with fictional narratives, for which the increasing interest in occultism²⁰ and mythologies emerging at the end of the 19th century provided a wealth of materials.

The end of the 19th century marked the emergence of the Celtic Revival (or Celtic Twilight), a cultural and literary movement which focused on Irish, Welsh, and Scottish mythology, literature, and art. Szerb writes about this cultural trend in *The History of World Literature (A világirodalom története, 1941)* and refers to *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867) by Matthew Arnold, in which he notes that Celts are “always ready to react against the despotism of fact.”²¹ Here, Arnold critiques the tendency to conflate factual information and fiction in the Celtic mind. Szerb also quotes this line²² and adds that the Scots and the Welsh were less involved in the Celtic Revival than the Irish, although the Welsh translated a collection of legends, the *Mabinogion*, into English.²³ The 1920s, Szerb continues, marked a decade of intense interest in legends and mythologies (e.g. *Joseph and His Brothers* by Thomas Mann in 1933 and *Mornings in Mexico* by D.H. Lawrence in 1927), and he goes on to discuss the works of John Cowper Powys, who used Celtic legends in *Wolf Solent* (1929) and *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932). Szerb first praises Powys for his incorporation of mythology to create “an unnameable and obscure ambiance” and “the kind of indescribable and disturbingly profound meaning that lurks in the dreams of Dostoevsky’s heroes;”²⁴ however, he adds that “no matter how great an author he is, he could not avoid mannerism. His later novels, *Jobber Skald* and *Maiden Castle*, seem to be imitations of the first two, and his more recent works are completely unreadable [...]”²⁵ *The Pendragon Legend* may be read as Szerb’s response to the Celtic Revival, even though he maintained a critical distance and parodied the genres of this literary trend.²⁶

²⁰ György Szőnyi discussed the emerging interest in occultism in the first half of the 20th century and argued that authors like Iván Baktay, Mária Szepes, and Béla Hamvas made significant contributions to spiritual literature and philosophy in the era. For more on occultism in Hungary see SZŐNYI György Endre: “Művészet és okkultizmus”. AudMax esték, Szegedi Tudományegyetem, 18/06/2018 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RJaaKolgu-8&ab_channel=SZTEB%C3%B6lcs%C3%A9szet%C3%A9s%C3%A1rsadalomtudom%C3%A1nyiKar Accessed 02/05/2023; SZŐNYI György Endre: “Capital Magic – Occult Budapest”. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVK6asuCJuM&ab_channel=Gy%C3%B6rgyE.Sz%C3%B6nyi Accessed 02/05/2023.

²¹ Matthew ARNOLD: *On the Study of Celtic Literature* (1867). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/5159/5159-h/5159-h.htm> Accessed 27/04/2023.

²² SZERB Antal: *A világirodalom története*, 9th edition, Budapest, Magvető, 1941, 186.

²³ SZERB: *ibid.* 724.

²⁴ SZERB: *ibid.* 819: “megmarad homályos sejtelemnek, amelyet nem is lehet néven nevezni. Az a fajta kimondhatatlan és riasztó mélyebb értelem ez, amely a Dosztojevskij-hősök álmaiban lappang.”

²⁵ SZERB: *ibid.* 820: “Későbbi nagy regényei, *Jobber Skald* és *Maiden Castle*, már olyanok, mintha az első kettő utánzatai volnának és legutóbbi írásai már teljesen elviselhetetlenek [...]”

²⁶ Szerb very much appreciated the work of Yeats, who was one of the figureheads of the Celtic Revival and an important author with profound interest in occultism (cf. *A világirodalom története*, 722). Aladár Sarbu discusses Yates’s works focused on Rosicrucianism (e.g. “To the Rose upon the Rood of Time,” “The Lover tells of the Rose in his Heart,” “The Secret Rose”) and argues that the structure and themes of his *Rosa Alchemica* (1896) resemble those in *The Pendragon Legend*. Aladár SARBU: “Szerb Antal, W. B. Yeats, Walter Pater és *A Pendragon legenda*”. *Filológiai közlöny*, LXIV/2, 2018. 70.

József Havasréti points out that Szerb's novel oscillates between two cultural contexts: popular genres and cultural exclusivity. Havasréti explains that the former may be characterized by the features of detective novels, ghost stories, and adventure novels; the latter is a reference to the fact that Szerb was a scholar and wrote about the Rosicrucians with philological rigour and panache. The most obvious examples of cultural exclusivity are the secret societies and the occult-magical knowledge that play an important role in the novel.²⁷ Regarding occultism, Szerb's position is twofold: on the one hand, his ironic remarks indicate that he was not a believer in occult studies; on the other, he, although ironically, acknowledges the cultural significance of such secret societies. As he put it in his essay entitled *The Rosicrucians*: "But it's not fair to just laugh at the Rosicrucians. Although many of them were fools and swindlers, the society mainly included people who were driven by a desire for knowledge and the uneasiness of striving for truth."²⁸ This is echoed in the dialogues between Bátky and the Earl of Gwynedd, who is obsessed with Robert Fludd (1574–1637), the occult scientist and physician best known for his theories concerning the interconnection between the microcosm and macrocosm, which he wrote extensively about in *De naturae, seu technica macrocosmi historia* (1618). In *The Pendragon Legend* the Earl compares Fludd's ideas to those of 20th-century scientists as follows:

Fludd, sir, wrote a lot of nonsense because he wished to explain things that couldn't be accounted for at the time. But essentially – I mean about the real essence of things – he knew much, much more than the scientists of today, who no longer even laugh at his theories. I don't know what your opinion is, but nowadays we know a great deal about the microscopic detail. Those people knew rather more about the whole – the great interconnectedness of things – which can't be weighed on scales and cut into slices like ham.²⁹

Szerb adopts a neutral position in the conflict between the 20th-century understanding of science and views of natural philosophy before the Scientific Revolution. While he uses irony and humour to express scepticism, he remains impartial and acknowledges that although the achievements of modern science are impressive, they lack the holistic perspective Fludd and his contemporaries would have viewed the world from.

In his article about *The Pendragon Legend*'s occultism and the book's reception, György Szőnyi observes that in the 1930s in Hungary, critics who were unfamiliar

²⁷ HAVASRÉTI József: "Ponyvaregény és kulturális exkluzivitás – Szerb Antal: *A Pendragon legenda*, 1934". *Literatura*, XXXVII/4, 2011. 142.

²⁸ SZERB Antal: *A rózsakeresztesek*. In *A varázsló eltörti pálcáját*, Budapest, Magvető, 1961, 32–33: "De azért nem igazságos dolog, ha csak nevetünk a rózsakereszteseken és az aranycsinálókon. Ha sok is volt közöttük a bolond és csaló, a társaságok magvát mégis olyan emberek alkották, akiket az igazi megismerés vágya, az igazság felé küszködő nyugalanság vezetett."

²⁹ SZERB: *The Pendragon Legend*, 11–12.

with the study of occultism tended to focus on the book’s structure, narrative techniques, and other literary devices while dismissing its subject matter.³⁰ Endre Illés published a rave review about Szerb’s novel in the 1935/3 volume of the journal called *West (Nyugat)*, in which he referred to the book as the combination of “a two-volume history of Hungarian literature and a collection of excellent, but perhaps too methodical, essays.”³¹ Illés praises Szerb’s use of “ample expertise for the sake of a joke” and his “misleading swindles” and calls him a “rare and shining talent” and his work the “detective novel of learned readers.”³² He concludes the review by highlighting the novel’s “only flaw: the mystical elements have not been transformed into reality or untruth through some kind of witty sublimation. Because in the end, the writer and the reader knowingly deceive each other.”³³ Illés focuses primarily on Szerb’s brilliant juggling of various genres (academic and literary) and praises both his witty incorporation of materials and his scepticism.³⁴ The last comment echoes Cynthia’s exclamation about not being able to tell the difference between “what is genuine and what is humbug”³⁵ mentioned earlier, and it also chimes with Osbourne’s response of becoming a legend to Miss Jones’s dream.

Szőnyi also notes that ambivalence is one of the most appealing features of the novel. Szerb leaves the nature of esoteric occurrences obscure: Bátky’s vision may be perceived as a real experience or as a dream, two interpretations which would both fit into the remit of the novel.³⁶ This kind of ambiguity is detectable throughout the entire work, especially, as I argued, in Szerb’s use of a variety of genres and the confusion of history with anecdotal legends, for which the Welsh setting provides a fitting context.

While “The Bards of Wales” by Arany may be associated with a political pretext (that is, as a sign of resistance against the Habsburg empire after the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1848), Szerb’s choice of Wales is very unlikely to have been political. He may have partly chosen this setting because as a researcher he had spent a year in

³⁰ SZŐNYI György Endre: “Az ezotéria diszkrét bája: Szerb Antal Pendragon legendája és néhány előképe”. In Jankovics József (ed.): „Nem súlyed az emberiség!”... *Album amicorum Szőrényi László LX. születésnapjára*, MTA Irodalomtudományi Intézet, 2007, 863.

³¹ ILLÉS Endre: “Pendragon-legenda: Szerb Antal regénye”. *Nyugat*, 1935/3. <https://epa.oszk.hu/00000/00022/nyugat.htm> Accessed 26/04/2023: “[...] egy kétkötetes magyar irodalomtörténet és seregnyi kitűnő, de talán túlon túl módszeres esszé édestestvére [...]”.

³² ILLÉS: *ibid.* n.p.

³³ ILLÉS: *ibid.* n.p.: “Egyetlen fogyatékosága: a misztikus elemeket végül sem sikerült valami szellemes szublimálással valósággyá vagy hazugsággá átváltoztatni: Mert végül író és olvasó egymást csapják be, s ezt mind a ketten tudják.”

³⁴ Some English language reviews consider the novel in the context of the horror tradition, while others compare it to Poe’s works. Paul Bailey classifies the novel into the genre of pastiche, and Nicholas Lezard calls it an early precursor to *The Da Vinci Code*. Richard Hyfler likens Szerb to Dan Brown, and Albert Manguel points out that Szerb was aware of the parodistic potential of Gothic literature (WIRÁGH: *op. cit.* 195).

³⁵ SZERB: *The Pendragon Legend*, 89.

³⁶ SZŐNYI: “Az ezotéria diszkrét bája”. 865.

Britain in 1929–1930 and thus could incorporate recent experiences of the country into the novel. In a letter to Dionis Pippidi from Paris on 28 June 1932, Szerb reveals: “I’m writing an adventure novel, it’s set in a haunted castle in Scotland, you can imagine the rest. I hope I can wring a couple of pennies out of it. Realpolitik.”³⁷ One of Szerb’s goals was to make profit by writing the novel, which he thought would become a bestseller. Indeed, it was well received when it was first published in 1934, which may have been partly due to Szerb’s recycling of the Gothic tradition and the Celtic theme as well as a general interest in occultism in the 1920s and 1930s in Hungary. He first planned to have the story take place in Scotland, known for its haunted castles, but eventually he changed his mind and chose Wales. Szerb often refers to Scots and the Welsh together as Celts, and it is possible that he was inspired by Arany’s use of the Welsh theme, which certainly made the novel’s Welsh episodes more relatable for contemporary Hungarian readers. It may also be the case that he simply wanted to use a location which would have seemed exotic to Hungarians, who probably knew even less about Wales than Scotland.

Christina Les discusses European fiction between 1900 and 2010 and she dedicates an interesting chapter to the narrative function of the Welsh setting in *The Pendragon Legend*. She argues that Szerb may have chosen Wales because of its otherness compared to European countries.³⁸ The comparison with London’s urban setting, Les adds, “allows Szerb to access space untainted by real-world associations and there to indulge in pure fantasy.”³⁹ While London represents “normality and all things civilised,” Wales is portrayed as an impenetrable wilderness where Bátky gets lost.⁴⁰ Indeed, the two locations invite highly different narrative styles: the London episodes are presented as perplexing detective stories, but the mysterious events in Wales gradually evolve into an incomprehensible ghost story and sheer irrationality.

In Wales, Bátky feels more misplaced than in England, and Les argues that this may be because the Welsh themes and spaces are highly unfamiliar to most European writers, which allows for more artistic freedom than locations with extensive cultural associations.⁴¹ In the novel, the focus falls on Welsh landscapes and not on Welsh culture or language,⁴² and the Welsh scenes are blended with references to England throughout. When Bátky sees an apparition the first night he stays in the Earl of Gwynedd’s castle, he narrates the encounter as follows:

³⁷ Szerb Antal *levele Dionis Pippidinek*, transl. Réz Pál: “Egy kalandregényt írok, egy skóciai kísértetkastélyban játszódik, a többi el tudod képzelni. Remélem, ki tudok sajtolni belőle néhány pengőt. Realpolitik.” <https://www.holmi.org/1995/07/szerb-antal-levelei-dionis-pippidinek> Accessed 26/04/2023.

³⁸ Christina LES: *Space Beyond Place: Welsh Settings in European Fiction, 1900–2010*, PhD Dissertation, Bangor University, 2019, 5. [https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/space-beyond-place\(0975e7e1-9282-40f2-8f66-27f5f836fc27\).html](https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/space-beyond-place(0975e7e1-9282-40f2-8f66-27f5f836fc27).html) Accessed 27/04/2023.

³⁹ LES: *op. cit.* 63.

⁴⁰ LES: *op. cit.* 80.

⁴¹ LES: *op. cit.* 17.

⁴² LES: *op. cit.* 91.

In front of the door, with a flaming torch in his hand, stood a gigantic medieval figure. Just to be clear on this: not for a moment did I think it could be any sort of ghostly apparition. While it is a fact that English castles are swarming with ghosts, they are visible only to natives – certainly not to anyone from Budapest.⁴³

Interestingly, Szerb here refers to superstition as fact with reference to England, even though Bátky is in Wales when he comments on the incident. The confusion of Welsh and English identities is another recurring theme in the book. When Bátky meets the Earl of Gwynedd, the Earl says: “I am not English. I am Welsh. That makes me, apparently, fifty per cent more like a Continental.”⁴⁴ Being half Welsh, the Earl implies, makes one partially European, which may also be understood as Szerb’s criticism of Englishness, which Szerb grew rather bored of when he was working there in 1929. In another letter to Dionis Pippidi on 11 November 1929 he explains this as follows:

I’m a bit tired of England. Imagine people sitting around the dinner table, eating soup that tastes exactly like the meat and the cake, an indefinably bourgeois taste, and all these people chat about is the theatre and the royal family: this is how I see England. It seems that people here are still driven by the old, incomprehensible superstitions of the Victorian era: that is, they believe that life deserves to be lived. When there is a crisis in India, their papers are full of details of dinner parties given by the Prince of Wales in honour of veterans.⁴⁵

Of course, this may be yet another example of Szerb’s irony, or it may mean that the stereotypes he had been familiar with before he went to England, he found to be true. Either way, his portrayal of Britishness is rather confusing: Scottish and Welsh are simply considered to be Celtic, and Welsh and English are repeatedly conflated in his writings. In *The History of World Literature*, he notes that John Cowper Powys was Welsh, but later calls him “the greatest representative of depth psychology in English literature” (315). Indeed, although Powys was born in Derbyshire, he had a Welsh background, lived much of his life in Wales, and even though he knew Welsh, he wrote in English.⁴⁶

⁴³ SZERB: *The Pendragon Legend*, 64.

⁴⁴ SZERB: *ibid.* 10.

⁴⁵ Szerb Antal levele Dionis Pippidinek, transl. Réz Pál: “Ami Angliát illeti, kicsit belefáradtam. Képzelve el, amint az emberek az asztal körül ülnek, kanalazzák a levest, amelynek pontosan olyan az íze, mint a húsé és a süteményé, meghatározhatatlanul polgári íz, s ezek az emberek kizárólag a színházról és a királyi család tagjairól csevegnek: én ezt az Angliát látom. Az itteni embereket, úgy tűnik, ma is a Viktória-kor régi, érthetetlen babonái hatják át: vagyis azt hiszik, az élet megérdemli, hogy megéljék. Amikor a nyakukba szakad az indiai válság, lapjaik tele vannak annak a vacsorának a részleteivel, amit a walesi herceg a régi frontharcosok tiszteletére adott.” <https://www.holmi.org/1995/07/szerb-antal-levelei-dionis-pippidinek> Accessed 26/04/2023.

⁴⁶ For more on Powys and Szerb see LES: *op. cit.* 35–36, 60–93.

Szerb, who was one of the most prominent academics in the field of English studies in the late 1920s and early 1930s in Hungary, relied on his research of the culture and literature of the British Isles and on stereotypes Hungarian readers would have been familiar with when he wrote *The Pendragon Legend*. Bátky makes a comment on a Welsh character Osbourne refers to as the prophet Habakkuk – an old man called Fierce Gwyn Mawr – saying that “It was a disturbing, fantastic, strangely threatening sight, complete with the obligatory wisps of straw in the hair that every self-respecting lunatic in Britain has spotted since the days of King Lear.”⁴⁷ The Hungarian text reads “every self-respecting English lunatic” (“minden jóra való angol őrült”),⁴⁸ which, again, highlights the semantic confusion regarding the national identities of the United Kingdom. Using fictional and stereotyped views based on literary examples, Szerb yet again confuses Welsh and English cultural allusions, which adds irony to the text. Zsófia Bárczi argues that this irony accommodates mixed genres, themes, and literary trends through the imitation of the multifaceted genre of the essay, in which fragmentation is not an insufficiency, but rather an opportunity to cross genre boundaries.⁴⁹ Szerb dissolved these boundaries and produced a work with a rich network of intertextual connections and literary allusions that the reader is to disentangle in order to understand the novel.

András Wirágh points out that the reference to Byron’s *Don Juan* in *The Pendragon Legend* is an allusion to *Bolond Istók* by János Arany (1850), which cites Byron’s line “My way is to begin with the beginning”⁵⁰ in English.⁵¹ Szerb includes this sentence at the very beginning of the novel, and he also begins his essay on French, English, American, and German novels (*Hétköznapok és csodák*, 1935) by saying “let’s begin at the beginning.”⁵² Wirágh argues that it is difficult to distinguish between these texts, and the reader has to identify the literary allusions and establish connections in order to understand the text. Bátky, Wirágh continues, the “doctor of unnecessary sciences,” often uses quotations in his communications with other characters and incorporates them into his narrative, which thus becomes a “literary collage” made up of various sources. This includes inscriptions of the tomb at Pendragon Castle, Bátky’s notes, and short letters and messages written by him and sent to him.⁵³ This aligns with Bátky’s characterisation of the Earl of Gwynedd, who, Christina Les observes, he describes as someone “wreathed in laurel on the frontispiece of old books.”⁵⁴ Bátky likens the Earl to a book, saying that he “seemed to embody an historical past the way

⁴⁷ SZERB: *The Pendragon Legend*, 257.

⁴⁸ SZERB: *ibid.* 125.

⁴⁹ Zsófia Bárczi: “Műfaji játékok Szerb Antal *A Pendragon legenda* című regényében”. *Literatura*, XXVIII/2, 2002. 207.

⁵⁰ János ARANY: *Bolond Istók*, <https://mek.oszk.hu/00500/00597/html/bio1.htm> Accessed 28/04/2023.

⁵¹ WIRÁGH: *op. cit.* 205.

⁵² Antal SZERB: *Hétköznapok és csodák: Francia, angol, amerikai, német regények a világháború után*, Budapest, Révai kiadás, n.d., 6. <https://mek.oszk.hu/15100/15106/> Accessed 28/04/2023. “Kezdjük a kezdetén.”

⁵³ WIRÁGH: *op. cit.* 205.

⁵⁴ LES: *op. cit.* 72; SZERB: *The Pendragon Legend*, 9.

no book ever could,”⁵⁵ and when Bátky becomes aware of the “dark and dangerous escapade” he experienced in Wales at the Earl’s castle, all he wants is to return to the “British Museum, and the impregnable calmness of books.”⁵⁶

Despite the Welsh location, the readers learn relatively little about the country, and, as Les argues, the landscapes, weather, and other aspects of the natural world gain more significance than local people and their culture.⁵⁷ The episodes in Wales are largely based on stereotypes of ruined castles, lakes, forests and “ordinary Welsh characters in the novel are much less developed than the aristocratic Pendragons.”⁵⁸ They are mostly stock characters like the nervous priest, mad prophet, and superstitious peasants, who do not shape the course of events in the novel.⁵⁹ As a result, the Welsh locations become “very different and even otherworldly surroundings.”⁶⁰ Wales, therefore, could be seen as “a portal to a certain kind of space, characterised by otherness, liminality and distance from all that was previously known and familiar.”⁶¹ The otherness and liminality of Welsh spaces chime with Szerb’s combination of various genres and textual references as well as his intermediary position regarding occultism.

Szerb compares Wales to Hungary, a country the culture and language of which seem similarly alien to Western Europeans. When Bátky introduces himself to Maloney, he responds that he had never heard of either Hungary or Hungarian people. Maloney first thinks Bátky makes fun of his ignorance, then he asks:

“And where do you Hungarians live?”

“In Hungary. Between Austria, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia.”

“Come off it. Those places were made up by Shakespeare.”⁶²

The dialogue reveals that Eastern Europe from a British perspective is portrayed as equally alien as Wales from a Hungarian point of view. When Maloney asks Bátky to say something in Hungarian, Bátky recites Endre Ady’s poem (“A nyári délutánok,” 1907) and Maloney says: “Very nice. But you don’t fool me. That was Hindustani.”⁶³ Hungarian sounds incomprehensible to Maloney in the same way as Welsh sounds unrelatable to most Hungarians. Interestingly, Endre Illés’s review

⁵⁵ LES: *op. cit.* 202.

⁵⁶ Referenced and quoted in LES: *op. cit.* 67.

⁵⁷ LES: *op. cit.* 5.

⁵⁸ LES: *op. cit.* 64.

⁵⁹ LES: *op. cit.* 64. Szerb placed the fictional Llanvygan Castle into North Wales and included some real locations such as Corwen, Caernarfon, Moel Sych, Bala, Rhyl, and Llandudno in the novel and he even the invented locations, e.g. Caerbryn and Abersych, to deliver “an air of authenticity,” which shows that he had some geographical knowledge of the region (LES: *op. cit.* 6).

⁶⁰ LES: *op. cit.* 5.

⁶¹ LES: *op. cit.* 5.

⁶² SZERB: *The Pendragon Legend*, 31.

⁶³ SZERB: *ibid.* 32.

of *The Pendragon Legend* refers to Maloney, who is Irish, as “this big, athletic English boy,”⁶⁴ a comment which, again, reveals the considerable confusion regarding English-speaking nations among Hungarian intellectuals in the 1930s.⁶⁵

Maloney’s dismissal of Hungarian as nonsense is similar to Bátky’s attitude to the Welsh language. Les observes that in the novel Welsh is characterised as “incomprehensible ‘jabbering’”⁶⁶ of indigenous people and even “the philomath Bátky shows no interest in learning” it, and the language is linked with local superstition throughout.⁶⁷ Welsh is contrasted with the use of Latin, which is the key to understanding occult studies and which “boosts Bátky’s importance in the plot because he is often the only character present who can understand it.”⁶⁸ Szerb appears to have made a comparison between Wales and Hungary, two nations that are remote and linguistically and culturally inaccessible to most Europeans; their inclusion thus provides a suitable context for a novel about the Rosicrucians.

In *The History of World Literature* Szerb argues that “world literature” constitutes literature written in the great Romance (French, Italian, Spanish) and Germanic languages (German and English). He argues that literature written in great European languages is not necessarily more valuable than that of small nations; however, Szerb continues, speakers of great languages only learn each other’s language, and, similarly, speakers of smaller languages only learn great languages. Thus, “only the literature of the great languages and the privileged few of smaller ones which are translated into great languages can enter common literary consciousness [...]”⁶⁹ He adds that although other languages may join the canon in the future, this “is an injustice we sons of small nations feel the most. But it is one of those fundamental injustices rebelling against which would be a juvenile and Don Quixotesque struggle.”⁷⁰ Although speakers of major European languages have limited access to the culture and literature of small nations, Szerb took advantage of his marginal position as a Hungarian writer. He, by adopting an outsider’s perspective and excessive use of irony, turned this around and wrote a novel in which he used stereotypes to experiment with different genres and create a compassionate mockery of occultism.

⁶⁴ ILLÉS: *op. cit.* n.p.: “ez a nagydarab, sportoló angol fiú.”

⁶⁵ In general, Britishness and Englishness are still frequently confused in Hungary; for example, the British royal family is frequently called the English royal family and the British pound is known as the English pound.

⁶⁶ LES: *op. cit.* 191.

⁶⁷ LES: *op. cit.* 192.

⁶⁸ LES: *op. cit.* 65.

⁶⁹ SZERB: *A világirodalom története*, 8: “ilymód a közös irodalmi tudatba, a ’világirodalmi tudatba’ csak a nagy nyelvek irodalma kerülhet be, a kisebb nyelvekből pedig az a kiváltságos kevés, amit a nagy nyelvekre lefordítanak.”

⁷⁰ SZERB: *ibid.* 9: “A jövőben további nyelvek irodalma léphet be a világirodalomba; de ebben a történelmi pillanatban csak eddig terjednek a világirodalom határai. Ez igazságtalanság, azt mi kis nemzetek fiai érezzük legjobban; de azok közé az alapvető igazságtalanságok közé tartozik, amelyek ellen harcolni gyermeki dolog és donquijotéria lenne.”

I have argued that Antal Szerb’s choice of the Welsh setting plays an important role in the narrative construction of *The Pendragon Legend*, while also serving as a commentary on occultism and the Celtic Revival that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Szerb experimented with a variety of literary genres and combined several narrative techniques to create a work that conflates science with occultism, history with pseudo-history, and dreams with reality. The novel is made up of stories with varying degrees of authenticity intertwined in an amusing manner. The otherness and the liminal quality of the Welsh locations allowed Szerb to fuse different genres and textual references, as well as to express an intermediary position and irony regarding occultism. He appears to have drawn a parallel between Wales and Hungary – two countries that are linguistically and culturally barely accessible to speakers of larger European languages – through the Welsh setting and by having a Hungarian character narrate the story. Eastern Europe seems just as alien and mysterious from a British viewpoint as Wales is from a Hungarian perspective. As a result, the Welsh setting allowed Szerb to set the plot in a space which Hungarian readers would have had very few, if any, real-life associations of, and which thus could frame the fantastical plot.

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Abstract

My essay focuses on the interconnection between the Welsh setting and narratology in The Pendragon Legend by Antal Szerb. Szerb experimented with several prose genres and combined different narrative styles to create a text that blends science with occultism, history with bogus history, and dream visions with reality. To achieve this, he adopted the Welsh theme for the novel in which stories with varying degrees of authenticity are fused. I argue that the Welsh setting in the novel reveals considerable confusion concerning the nations that make up the United Kingdom. At the same time, it also provided an opportunity for Szerb to set the plot in a space which Hungarian readers would have been familiar with thanks to “The Bards of Wales” (“A welszi bárdok”) by János Arany, yet probably had very few real-life associations of, and which thus could accommodate the fantastical plotline.

Keywords: Szerb Antal, occultism, *The Pendragon legend*, Wales, narratology

Rezümé

„Az álmok mindig walesiül beszélnek” – Fikció és valóság Szerb Antal A Pendragon legenda című regényében

Tanulmányomban Szerb Antal A Pendragon legenda című regényében vizsgálom a walesi helyszíneket és azok narratológiai jelentőségét. Szerb a regényben számos prózai műfajjal kísérletezett és különböző narratív technikákat vegyített, s egy olyan szöveget hozott létre, amely ötvözi a tudományt az okkultizmussal, a történelmet a mendemondával, a látomásokat pedig a valósággal. Ehhez a regény nagy részét Walesbe helyezte, ami egyben rámutat a brit identitással kapcsolatos félreértésekre az 1930-as évek Magyarországon, másrészt teret biztosít a misztikus történet kibontakozásához.

Kulcsszavak: Szerb Antal, okkultizmus, *A Pendragon legenda*, Wales, narratológia