The notions of translation and canon formation have both attracted fiercely critical attention in the last decades, but their connection to each other is rarely discussed in any detail. This connection might seem quite simple and unilateral at first sight, since the market of high culture mostly demands translations of canonised pieces of literature. At the same time those foreign works that are available in good translation have a better chance to move towards the centre of the canon. What I am taking into consideration here is the canon of world literature, of course, which is also a much debated topic. World literature seems to be a sort of canon itself, since it is usually not regarded as the all inclusive sum of every national literature, not even the collection of the best works of them; it is rather a selection of the most important pieces in the development of literature. But importance necessarily depends on a viewpoint. It goes without saying that the selection of pieces of world literature usually applies a Eurocentric viewpoint. Canon formation in world literature is regarded as a matter of power in many cases. Powerful nations are supposed to have a bigger chance to have their cultural products accepted as prestigious. And if they have the biggest markets for cultural goods, they might be in the position to decide on the possibly broad acceptance of the products of the less powerful, and this can be interpreted as a decision about canonisation. Members of smaller national communities often complain that their literary products have less chance to become parts of world literature. But what does it mean: to be regarded as prestigious by everyone? To be canonised in an international or global culture? Or rather, to be canonised in the three or four decisive, i.e., most powerful, markets for cultural goods? In turn, small countries are supposed to be

2 See Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, “Canon, Translation, and Literary History”, in Across Languages and Cultures 4(1), 2003, 5–18.
much more exposed to external influence, and therefore even their own readings of their own literature might be structured and performed by world literature.\(^3\)

These broadly circulating ideas imply a belief in a sort of global consensus about, or at least a hierarchic view of, the canon of literature as a whole. I cannot imagine such a consensus, and I will not accept such a hierarchy. I think world literature exists in (maybe heterogeneous) national versions, and every nation offers or elaborates its own canonised selection. These offers are necessarily competitive, and hegemonic cultures have a better chance to convince other ones of the agreeable nature of their choice. But in this field smaller nations have equal rights, and they can also accept or reject the suggestions of the hegemonic cultures. In the last decade of the nineteenth century Shakespeare suddenly stopped being translated into Portuguese due to a nationalistic fervour of those years that was especially hostile to Britain.\(^4\) Any national culture may decide on ideological or political grounds that the weight of a hegemonic culture should be decreased in that special national version of the canon of world literature. Dismembering of the Hungarian kingdom after World War I was the most traumatic experience of modern Hungarian history, and the dominant strategy to face this experience was (and for a consistent part of the population still is) to believe that Hungary had been victimised. And for some not really obvious reason public opinion came to the conclusion that Hungary had been a victim of an injustice perpetrated by France above all other countries. As a result, French cultural goods have less chance to become steady parts of a canon in Hungary.\(^5\)

This description of the conditions of the national canonisation of foreign literature does not seem to fit in with the reception of ancient literature, which can be regarded as international heritage of all of Western culture (at least). Nonetheless, the ancient canon also has its national versions. The Germans focused on Greek antiquity at the end of the eighteenth century, and they insisted that Homer was a greater poet than Virgil, and this tendency is usually described as a reaction to the French cultural hegemony on the continent. Speakers of Romanic languages regard themselves as descendants of the Romans, and therefore they tend to rate the Roman part of Antiquity more highly. In the France and Italy of the eighteenth century Virgil was esteemed the greatest classical poet, while Homer was regarded as a naïve beginner.


\(^5\) I refer only to the example of Proust who is unquestionably part of the canon. Only three volumes of the novel *A la recherche du temps perdu* were translated into Hungarian in the 30s. A complete translation is to appear now. The other basic works of European modernism have complete translations. James Joyce’s *Ulysses* is available in two Hungarian versions (Gáspár 1947 and Szentkáthy 1974) and Musil’s novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* was translated by Tandori in 1977.