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THE HUNGARIAN *ZEITROMAN* AND  
HUNGARIAN MODERNIZATION AT THE BEGINNING OF  
THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

When did the concept of Central European identity first appear in Hungarian literature? Having concentrated my research on the modern era, I cannot answer this question; but I am convinced that if this concept existed during the nineteenth century, it took an essentially different form at that time than the one it assumed under the intellectual milieu of the early twentieth century. During the first half of the last century the goals of nationalism and independence defined the dominant ideology of Hungary's Reform Era and guided the efforts at modernization as well. The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 and the ensuing rapid development of the middle class offered opportunities not only for the solution of social, political and economic problems, but also created a common ground for the modernization of the various societies, cultures and economic structures of the Habsburg monarchy. In short, the expansion of bourgeois mentality did not merely oppose the order that conserved the interests of the nobility but projected the ideals of modernization into a new dimension. This is revealed in an especially significant manner by the fate of the artistic and literary revolutions at the turn of the century.

In Hungary the literary upheaval had to confront above all the populist-nationalist ideologies of the public under whose sway the representatives of bourgeois values felt excluded. Consequently the premodern Hungarian writers at first depicted the novel characteristics of urban life, described the changed life-styles, and simultaneously gave expression to the desire of the new social

classes and strata for new moral values. The conflicts with the conservative populist-nationalist concepts were further enhanced by the reality that Germans and Jews formed a considerable part of the rapidly emerging Hungarian middle class. However, the Hungarian moderns, without respect to their either bourgeois or noble origins, did not wish to content themselves with merely recording the social changes but also desired to revolutionize art and literature. While the premodern Hungarian writers concentrated primarily on the portrayal of the new patterns of life and its new protagonists, the moderns at the beginning of the twentieth century also analyzed the new role of literature. Thus, their inner revolt simultaneously served both the development of the bourgeoisie and the struggle for the ontological autonomy of literature. Modern Hungarian writers did not wish to exchange their dependence on conservative nationalism and ethics for the benefit of middle class interests, but labored for the establishment of an entirely independent and self-determined literature. Of course this was not a teleological process: the goals grew out of conjectures and experiments, as well as from the struggle against conventions. Thus, the new literary awareness appeared at the same time in the autonomous aesthetic values and in the description of the social conflicts that lay behind them. The most valid history of Hungarian literary modernism is naturally embodied in self-determined autonomous works, but transitional compositions, which were in conflict with literary conventions, provide the background for this history. It is peculiarly fortunate that Hungarian literature from the early part of the twentieth century was furthermore able to document the evolution of Hungarian modernization. The *oeuvre* of several of the era's great poets and some still current novels, as well as the many *Zeitroman* of the day defined Hungarian literary history at the beginning of the twentieth century. The value of most of these *Zeitroman* remained momentary, but they provide an exciting and detailed picture of the age. The frailty of the genre arises precisely from its practitioners' desire to follow the form of the traditional novel, their sense of obligation to fictionalize, precisely when the authors' most important experience is conditioned by the transformation of life and the rapidly expanding metropolis.

The ideal of the big city and the autonomous literature that arose parallel to it created the new common denominator of Central European identity. This was a presentiment of a supranational universality, which could be established by a self-determined art. This universality could also confront social and national problems, but viewed these from a broader perspective of human existence. As a result, I thought that examining the concept of Central European identity, perhaps it would be useful to draw attention again to some forgotten examples of the Hungarian *Zeitroman*.

A reader of early twentieth-century Hungarian novels will quickly notice that the depiction of the age in this literature does not merely at times play a central role or pry apart the substance of fiction, but establishes the literary conventions dominating the novels of the period. The first appearance of this genre in the twentieth century, Ferenc Molnár's *Az éhes város* [The Hungry City], which was first published in 1901, comes in the form of a *Zeitroman*. For contemporaries this title became a symbol. Fifteen years later Margit Kaffka's heroine in *Állomások* [Stations] cites Molnár's title, "... this city, the hungry city, the poisoned city ...", and from the attributes of this symbol she unfolds her thoughts on "the disintegration of what had been initially so promising" and the consolation of the "vision". This genre emerged from Balzac's career novels - as Sándor Bródy's analogous 1902 work *A nap lovagja* [The Knight of the Sun] also shows. At the same time as the genre developed, it was liable gradually to lose its fictional characteristics. The conditions giving birth to the genre, however, were so strong that the pathlessness of the new literary style instead of frightening the writers, constantly urged them on to newer and newer experiments that violated its rules. Especially the increasingly troubled second decade of the twentieth century and the war years proved to be fertile ground for the *Zeitroman*. In 1914 three similar examples of the genre appeared in Hungarian bookstores. Between 1915 and 1919 six more followed. In the end the golden age of the Hungarian *Zeitroman* culminated in two novelists' efforts, *Az elsodort falu* [The Village that was Swept Away] by Dezső Szabó in 1919 and *Halálfiái* [The Sons of Death] by Mihály Babits in 1927. The common inspiration is obvious:

the change of eras stemming from the expansion of urbanization, the economic and artistic modernization, and the challenge of social dissatisfaction. The turn of the century generation saw itself surrounded by greed, snobbery and social climbing. With a mixture of amazement and criticism it observed the greedily maturing capital; and its accounts condemned both Jewish parvenus and those who defended narrow conservative interests. How might posterity view the author of *The Hungry City*, the first attempt to take stock of the new conditions? Above all we should see him as an audacious young man, who would hardly have taken up the task of shaping the fiery substance of rapidly changing Hungarian life, if he would have been able to compare the suppositions of his work to his personal experiences. Ferenc Molnár, twenty-three years old in 1901, had already authored two collections of short stories. His first novel was a typical product of youth, but the work's lack of maturity does not stem from his earlier novellas nor from the casual anecdotal nature of Hungarian prose. *The Hungry City* is a grand composition, which creates a sense of dissatisfaction not for its lack of expansiveness, but for its execution. Just as the Budapest that emerges from its pages, *The Hungry City* is built of plaster. Its walls arose too quickly, while its spaces remain empty, and its decorations reveal the signs of borrowed templates.

The plot resembles a fairy tale, where the protagonist, a poor bank clerk travelling on the advice of his doctor to Opatija by the Adriatic, meets an American millionaire and his daughter. He marries into millions and returns to the hungry Budapest with the power to do wonders.

The youthful Ferenc Molnár was daring to take on the project of coloring in the panorama of Budapest at the turn of the century, but he lacked the courage to face the challenge of the story. He intended the book as a work of realism, but its substance and his handling of the material instead projected a fairy tale. The protagonist's experiences can only serve as a frame for the introduction of the world of disorganized and rapid capitalist expansion. Paul Orsovai is guided neither by his personality nor his fate, for he lacks both. His story would require a special novelistic

device in order to make his incredible adventures appear authentic. We would hardly be mistaken, if we said that Mikszáth's *Új Zrínyiász* [New Zrínyiad], which had appeared three years earlier, influenced *The Hungry City*. Kálmán Mikszáth, the leading novelist of the previous era, brought back to life one of Hungary's heroes in the struggles against the Turks and injected him into the great social, economic and political changes of the *fin de siècle*. Knowingly accepting anachronism, Mikszáth employed satire in order to authenticate his work. Unfortunately the inexperienced Ferenc Molnár did not notice the necessary artistic cohesion of Mikszáth's criticism of capitalism and his use of satire. Had he done so, he would surely have found a valid artistic instrument, which would not necessarily have been the narrative. A number of his critics found fault with the work's journalistic and publicistic qualities, underlying which they discovered the signs of naturalism. At the same time the journalistic and publicistic qualities are lifeless in the novel only because they need to be validated by its fictive aspects. The documents freed from fictionalization could create an open system and turn openness into a prosaic form. Of course Ferenc Molnár's successors during the early decades of the twentieth century also had to confront the same problems, and they also left for our time the establishment of the self-authenticating modern documentary novel.

In the first years of the century two other novels had to face the dilemmas of *The Hungry City's* genre and the challenge of social modernization. In 1901 Tamás Kóbor in the novel *Budapest* was obliged to apologize that he had sacrificed fiction for the sake of portraying the city. Moreover in 1903 Ferenc Herczeg's *Andor és András* [Andor and András] forsakes the self-determined foundation in order to depict the age. During the next decade however, the *Künstler-roman* most often overlaps the unchangingly virulent descriptions of the times.

Kálmán Harsányi's first novel published in 1914, *A kristálynézők* [The Crystal Gazers], is hardly more for today's readers than a remnant of literary history. Yet it belongs to the circle of such great literary challenges as Mihály Babits' *A gólyakalifa* [The Stork Caliph] and Dezső Szabó' *Elsodort falu* [The Village That Was

Swept Away]. Fantasticality associates *The Crystal Gazers* with the former and the populist conception of Hungarian tragedy with the latter. "The most vital problems of *The Village That Was Swept Away* all lurk here in this book", wrote László Németh, "One can feel that one needs only purity and culture, and then one will be able to see, if one wants, how the remnants of the Hungarians must think in this colonial town of a colonial land sinking under the weight of cosmopolitan merchandise"<sup>1</sup>.

Fantasticality, psychology and the depiction of an age come together, and not for the first time during the revolution in the genre - simultaneously signifying the attractions of neo-Romantic influences and a recognition of their basic aesthetic precepts. A peculiar psychological problem provides the fantasticality of *The Crystal Gazers* and also *The Caliph Stork*. Kálmán Harsányi's protagonist Fábián Balogh, a writer, identifies himself with a hypothesis of occult psychology, according to which, "the whimsical apparitions of self-hypnosis can be controlled and limited to the recognition of true reality". At the end of the novel Fábián, locked once and for all in a world of irreality, contemplates his beloved and scorned Budapest.

This true substance of Budapest could be significant in *The Crystal Gazers* because in his this worldly condition Fábián is by calling a man of moral and artistic principles, who struggles against the modernizing world and for an ideal of Hungary that transcends past and future. According to him, the modern Budapest is the prey of ostentatious, noisy, resourceful, cynical and deceptive people, the victim of artistic and political fashions as well as stolen cosmopolitan cultures, and a function of ill-matched hodge-podge communities. Against these stands a courteous humility, a helpless but more valuable material, the disintegrated sect of the impotent and mortally wounded. This love and hate reveals Budapest as "anyone's daughter", whose "every drop of blood is corruptive poison, but whose face is beautiful".

This concept is a part of early twentieth-century cultural criticism, but applies both the conservative past and the disturbing

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<sup>1</sup> LÁSZLÓ NÉMETH, *Harsányi Kálmán*, in "Napkelet" 1929, I, pp.942-943.

modernization. If we accept the truth of its paradoxes, we can identify this stance as a conservative radicalism.

The fictional truth of *The Crystal Gazers* does not depend on its evaluation from the perspectives of a philosophy of history, society or art. Fábíán Balogh's behavior and *Weltanschauung* might be valid even without these, if they would have been justified by the inner laws of the novel. But these inner laws could only prevail, if the fantasticality of *The Crystal Gazers* would be forged together with its criticism of society and art. On the level of the story the author makes efforts in this direction. Fábíán believes that only those can become crystal gazers who are impotent and mortally wounded, because looking into the crystal is spiritual suicide. Such are the honorable incompetents, the courteous Hungarians refusing to participate in the jostling. Consequently the tragedy of the crystal gazer could symbolize their fate. And it would do so, if the logic of the fantasticality would become the novel's train of thought. But the bogus knowledge of crystal gazing receives a subordinate place both in the social history and the artistic criticism. Thus, its fantasticality remains purely a curiosity, while the national, social and artistic conceptions must hold their ground in their own abstract medium.

The other artistic novel of 1914, Gábor Oláh's *Szegény magyarok* [Poor Hungarians], has primarily been preserved in the collective memory of literary criticism because of a scathing review by Ady. "This 'brawny talent', as someone once described him, has now worked out his muscles in this lamentable exercise", wrote Ady in 1914. "It's a pamphlet, let's say a lyrical pamphlet, and what is so monstrous is that Gábor Oláh wants to say everything here, and he has said everything, everything that he knows ... I also appear in this pretentious accomplishment. All of us can recover from this appearance on the stage, but scarcely Gábor Oláh, whom I love and pity. I would like to cry when I consider to what extent writing has driven wild an upright fellow from Debrecen, a man unjustly and wrongfully inflicted with neurosis ..." <sup>2</sup>. It is understandable that above all we search for the themes of Ady's

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<sup>2</sup> ENDRE ADY, *Oláh Gábor: Szegény magyarok*, in "Nyugat" 1914, I, pp.497-498.

criticism in *Poor Hungarians*. They are easy to find, because one can quickly see that the work is a fictional description of the age in which the modernizers (the writers of *Nyugat* [West]) and the poor Hungarians embodying the author's intentions appear on the opposite sides of the cultural front.

Let us now put aside the polemical arguments of Oláh's contemporaries, and let us rely on the aesthetic suggestion of the novel. Therefore, in the self-determined novel our standard must be that only the historical characters' inner correspondence provides suitable grounds for an evaluation, and their significance can be merely extended by external impulses. The author of *Poor Hungarians* omits precisely the inner impulse. He is above all animated by the modernizing of Hungarian literature, and into the vacuum, which should have been filled with the fictional vision, he crams the documentation of the age. Along with Ady, the author parades forth the entire gallery of *Nyugat's* authors, and raises most of Hungary's artistic, social, historical and ethical problems at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this novel Debrecen is the guardian of the genuine Hungary and the symbol of Hungarian orthodoxy. He rightly asks: in the modern age will literature be the expression of the individual or of the nation? When he says, "Freedom is always the dream of unfree people", his words stand the test of time. But when he ruminates on the Hungarian nation's future and desire for freedom, he impetuously mixes together sensible arguments with foggy theories. Thus, in his description of the age appear the Germans, the Slavs, and among them the Hungarians struggling for survival. He sees socialism as an expression of the Jews, which is foreign to the monarchic Hungarian people, just as the republican form of government is also alien to them. Elsewhere he considers even Hungarian monarchism insufficient, and offers long demonstrations of the Sumerian origins of the Hungarians. While he endures the trials of the impoverished along with his heroes, he prophetically foresees the coming war, which will destroy Hungary. We would more accurately reconstruct the novel's themes and passions, if we would describe the work as a composition of mosaics in which the individual characters' opinions constitute the fragments of ideas. On the Jewish question the



author initiates a debate in which his two main protagonists collide. On the other hand he employs a crank philosopher to expound the theory of the Hungarians' descent from the Sumerians. The history of the novel has often demonstrated that the writer can present his views and judgments in dialog form. Gábor Oláh on the other hand is incapable of making the dialog take the form of a novel, because most of the time he unfolds his ideas in the form of stories within the story. Thus, his work is a fictional description of the period or a *roman à clef*, whose validity depends on the inner truth of the assembled documents.

In the end after a little honor and many travails a youthful death awaits the main protagonist of *Poor Hungarians*. What caused the tragedy? The fragments depicting the age assembled into stories within the story show no causal relationship between the modernization of Hungary and the fate of the hero. And we have to confess that its logic of causation could at best make *Poor Hungarians* a didactical novel. On the other hand, if we disregard the logic of causation, the destiny of Hungary becomes the original source of the tragic ending. Could this suggestion of the writer authentically describe the age of Endre Ady and its revolution? In fact, posterity has left *Poor Hungarians* on the margins of literary history.

Here I am forced to take little note of Margit Kaffka's depiction of the period, *Stations* (1914-1917), which is better known than the works we have been considering. I can only refer to the fact that Kaffka saw herself as a participant in the artistic revolution of *Nyugat*, and that she also evaluated social modernization in light of the movement's perspectives. Her reasoning constitutes the answer of the individual. With resignation she cites the acceptance of social roles and her understanding of the revolution remains skeptical. On the other hand, as we have seen, László Németh believed that Kálmán Harsányi was Dezső Szabó's forerunner. And Dezső Szabó himself considered Gábor Oláh as a Hungarian genius of kindred spirit. Not only Monday morning quarterbacks noticed this connection: Dezső Szabó had already begun to construct his anti-liberal and anti-individualist conceptions by the latter half of the twentieth century's second decade. He intended his first

novel, *Nincs menekvés* [No Escape], published in 1917, as a study in psychology, but in reality he surrendered to his notions of depicting the age and his right-wing radicalism. Our attention in this work is increasingly drawn to the milieu, the portrayal of which the author contemptuously derided in the preface. The deportment of the small town lords, the amusements of the gentry, the frivolous locales and life-styles of Pest, the gallery of early twentieth-century Hungarian stereotypes induce more convincing motivations for the work, than the ambition to write a psychological novel, the mere portrayal of a phenomenon of existence to which Dezső Szabó himself drew attention in the title. Two motives in particular emerge from this broad depiction of the age. One is the myth of the ancient power of living on the land, which momentarily offers a solution to his protagonist. The other is the criticism of liberalism, which later defined Dezső Szabó's entire attitude. One minor character described the hero and his age with the following words, "I know you very well. For a long time I have seen all that you are, because I look at you through my suffering. And do you know the cause of all this? The French Revolution. Don't think that I have gone mad for your sake. But never before have people rubbed against each other more despicably than in this precious democracy ... Was robbery and murder ever organized on a grander scale than by this putrid democracy? Free competition, for shame! This only means that all potential scoundrels are made scoundrels. Because they have neither claws nor fangs, they supplement themselves with laws, so they can better rip and devour flesh ... You also are the victim of this. Because democracy silently tramples on everyone who declines to elbow other aside ..." <sup>3</sup>. We could follow for for a while yet the raging of this enemy of liberalism, but we will decline the opportunity because we have to admit that in *No escape* this motive only appears as part of the description of the age. We know that later the cited antiliberalism is conflated with the fallacy that it represents the manifestation of the Hungarian character. However, the author of *No Escape* is more interested in the natural history of individualism.

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<sup>3</sup> DEZSŐ SZABÓ, *Nincs menekvés*, Budapest [1917], p.115.

It is hardly accidental that the protagonist's classmate enumerates the proliferation of individualism among the sins of democracy. "What a luxuriant meadow your rich life would have been in the old days! And now little Dénes has been cast out, democracy has battered him into an individual ... And poor Dénes is suffocating from individuality ... The ulcer of individuality has grown so much in you that it has clouded your vision, and you think the whole world is sick. You see, this is individuality. This is the gift of democracy"<sup>4</sup>. From this perspective we can discover the unity of the depiction of the age and the psychological novel embedded in *No Escape*. If a pathological burden was not the essence of the protagonist's consciousness of self, but instead a past consisting of the perpetual agglomeration of selves disturbed the hero, then the vindication of the author's central idea would require neither natural nor mystical argument. Unfortunately in his first novel *Dezső Szabó* placed the emphasis elsewhere and sacrificed the delineation of the actually existing problem of individualism. His ideology also kept him from later reopening the literary case, but it is hardly an accident that *No Escape* offered an encouraging path for the *Zeitroman*.

We can also see that the early twentieth-century Hungarian novels describing the period are linked to the mental process of the artistic novel. Those familiar with the genre have long known that the artistic novel constitutes an inner dialog of an artistic creation, or a mirror which faces itself. At the beginning of the modern age when it appears to proliferate in Hungarian literature, the artist becomes visible in the mirror as the self-preserving individual. During the era of the cult of individuality such self-reflection is understandable, since the age of modernity above all struggle with the effects of alienation and believed that when "everything fell apart", only the artist-individual would be able to save human integrity. Later, for example with André Gide, the problems of fictional writing become dominant in the artistic novel. This train of thought leads to the necessity of self-reflection in the postmodern novel. If the moderns and the postmoderns have

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p.118.

a common denominator then it is the desire for the autonomy of art. And if there is a shift in the model of values between the two, then it takes place in the struggle against the notion of mimesis. The characteristic postmodern novel is about itself, in other words it introduces the consciousness associated with itself as form while it works through the process of composition.

The Hungarian artistic novels of the early twentieth century are still far from self-reflection and still refer the fate of the writer to the documentation depicting the age. The description of the age, however, is squeezed into them within the framework of the genre's conventions and fictionalization. It will eventually find an adequate genre only in the documentary novel.

Therefore, it is not surprising that in the great novel, which closed out the era, *The Village That Was Swept Away*, Dezső Szabó already places urbanization and the populist interpretation of the Hungarian tragedy at the focal point. In this novel, built with valuable materials and involving many characters, capitalism appears as the instrument of foreigners for the mass destruction of the Hungarian race. According to Dezső Szabó, the other great cause of the Hungarian tragedy is the inner predisposition of the race and the disintegration of the traditional village order. Consequently the swept-away village is a symbol of a Romantic mythology of the peasantry, which now suggests that it can become the source of social revival.

The effects of the First World War and the revolutions manifest themselves in *The Village That Was Swept Away*. When these are combined with the staggering experience of Trianon, the entire Hungarian modern spirit is forced to provide an account of itself. Mihály Babits, who along with the Ady of *Nyugat* was the personality with the greatest influence on the period, struggled for almost a decade with this reckoning and the problems of its genre. His novel *The Sons of Death*, appearing in 1927, constituted an enormous and simultaneously epoch-ending effort of the *Zeitroman* genre, as well as a dual approach to the age of Hungarian modernization.