

CONSERVATISM, MODERNITY, AND POPULISM IN HUNGARIAN CULTURE

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Sing we for love and idleness,
Naught else is worth the having.

Though I have been in many a land,
There is naught else in living.

And I would rather have my sweet,
Though rose-leaves die of grieving,

Than do high deeds in Hungary
To pass all men's believing.

(Ezra Pound: *An Immorality*, 1912)

To celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the unification of the cities of Buda, Pest, and Óbuda, a concert was given by the Budapest Philharmonic Orchestra, on November 19, 1923. The three works written for this occasion were a *Festive Overture* by Ernő Dohnányi, *Psalm 55* by Zoltán Kodály, and *Dance Suite* by Béla Bartók. The first composition could be called Conservative in the sense that it was written in a tonal idiom, the aesthetics of the second anticipated the interpretation of the past developed by the Populists, the third opus was admired mainly by the supporters of the Modernist movement. The goal of this essay is to examine the interrelations among these three trends in Hungarian culture.

Between 1867 and 1914 Budapest was the fastest growing city in Europe. Its drawing power increased over this period – a drawing power that attracted not only people from elsewhere but also pulled intellectuals into urban groups and coteries. It had now become the outright point of concentration for Hungarian culture, overtaking the role of the provincial cities. Its technological face made for a sense of excitement and stimulus. Despite periodic threats of

political, social, and ethnic conflicts, not only the upper but also the middle classes enjoyed freedom and security. With light taxation, hardly any inflation, cheap food and labour, and a plentiful supply of domestic servants, many middle class families had comfortable and sheltered lives. Intellectuals were being urbanized, feeling those emotions of stability and alienation that characterize city life. By 1910 the majority of the Hungarian bourgeoisie and working class lived in Budapest; understandably, therefore, after the end of World War I, it was in the capital city where both the bourgeois and the Communist revolution had started. In view of this, it might be surprising that the hero of the most imaginative works of fiction written in this period is a Conservative aristocrat. Although he spends much of his time in Budapest, Eduárd Alvinczy, a highly respectable gentleman, ignores the twentieth century. There might be a slight touch of irony in the way the narrator treats him, but more important is the storyteller's almost unqualified admiration for this "impossibility," as a minor character calls him in *A vörös postakocsi* (The Red Stage-Coach, 1913) by Gyula Krúdy, one of the first Hungarian novels to break with the narrative conventions of the nineteenth century, by questioning the idea that the self has an intrinsic nature.

In 1919, Krúdy published *Pesti Album*, a collection devoted to the life of the capital. One of the chapters ends with the following statement made by Alvinczy:

"I am suffering from indigestion", he thought. "Salmon is no longer enjoyable."¹

It is not quite impossible to read these words as the writer's response to the contemporary situation. In any case, they indicate a distance from political and social events and might be considered a warning against assuming that the socio-economic process of modernization ran parallel with artistic evolution. While the Naturalistic *tranche de vie Budapest* (1901) – by Tamás Kóbor, a Jewish novelist now almost forgotten – was enthusiastic about urbanization, the most innovative prose writer of the same period harboured strong reservations about the loss of intimacy in the modern city. Krúdy hardly ever ceases to identify himself with the ethos of Eduárd Alvinczy, an aristocrat whose ambition is to live according to the principles of Count István Széchenyi (1791–1860), the greatest representative of his class in the nineteenth century. In the act of paying tribute to the values of the man whose ambition was to transform his country from a stronghold of feudalism into a modern democracy, he voices his own nostalgic awareness of the distance that separates him from the beliefs of pre-industrial Hungary. The past is available to him not in its continuity into the present, not as a living tradition, but as the reconstructed object of his imagination. The fall of feudalism is thus counterpointed by another story: as the wordly and vital powers of the nobility decline, so its

consciousness grows. Industrialization seems at odds with an understanding of world and self.

Linguistic isolation can be the only possible reason why the conflicts between the supporters of urbanization and some representatives of artistic modernity have been ignored by Western scholars. By way of example, I may quote the following remark from one of the best works on the intellectual trends in Central Europe in the early twentieth century: "the first vernacular poetry in Hungarian was produced among the sons of the Hungarian nobility at the leading Habsburg *Gymnasium*, the *Theresianum*."² This statement would suggest that poetry had not been written in Hungarian before Viennese influence made itself felt in the second half of the eighteenth century. The authors seem not to know that from the late thirteenth century there is an unbroken continuity in the history of Hungarian written verse. Accordingly, their idea of the Hungarian contribution to what represented "modernity" in the Dual Monarchy is based on insufficient evidence.

It might distort the picture if we view Hungarian culture from a Viennese perspective or assume that a scholar interested in the Habsburg Empire "can interpret the culture of these areas provided he is fluent in German," to quote an American publication that gives a one-sided treatment of Hungarian intellectual life in the early twentieth century by identifying it with the activity of a very small group of writers who were born in Budapest, but left Hungary at an early age, or at least wrote most, if not all, of their works in German.³

In some cases even a historian who is familiar with the language may seem to be unable to see the complexity of the interrelationships between urbanization and artistic innovation. My last example is taken from a recently published monograph aimed at analyzing the activity of György Lukács and his circle in the context of intellectual life in Budapest:

Lukács and his friends were correct to see themselves radically out of touch with the cultural realities of Hungary, where the majority of the population still lived in conditions of rural backwardness, insulated from the benefits, as well as the discontents, of modernity. But they were almost equally estranged from the progressive artistic and intellectual circles of Budapest, which were too closely associated with a complacent liberalism and a superficial eclecticism to constitute a congenial intellectual world for them.⁴

No indication is given by the author as to the meaning of "progressive" in her book, but it is safe to assume that she may have the poet and journalist Endre Ady in mind, since the term was often applied to his activity at the time she wrote her monograph. Neither complacent liberalism nor superficial eclecticism characterized the social prophecy or the tragic vision expressed in his writings.

Before attempting to examine the complex relation of modernization to literary modernity, I cannot bypass a terminological issue. The term "modern"

has been used in too many different ways. Some cultural historians, including the author of the monograph on Lukács and his circle quoted above, have drawn upon the distinction made by Stephen Spender between "modern" and "contemporary",⁵ although the English poet's book-length essay is mainly about British literature and does not claim to have theoretical value.

In any case, it is far from self-evident what Modernism denotes. I am inclined to agree with those who maintain that unlike "the terms Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Mannerist, Romantic or Neo-Classical, it designates no describable object in its own right at all", because it is a "portmanteau concept" whose referent is a wide variety of very diverse aesthetic practices.⁶ What is more, it is doubtful whether it can be regarded as a term denoting exclusively artistic phenomena. Rather, it represents a broader cultural response to pressing issues which were the consequences of industrialization. According to one critic, four variables: "secularism, individualism, bureaucracy, and pluralism" have formed the core of modernity.⁷

The idea of the modern is closely tied to a teleological concept of history. As is well-known, it was developed in the course of the "querelle des anciens et des modernes," and was defined as the last stage in the succession of Classical antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern times. In contrast to the two other members of the triad, it implied the primacy of novelty and was based on the assumption that there were more and less advanced forms of consciousness. It became inseparable from a monolithic conception of world history and a canonical view of culture. Some followers of Hegel developed a normative interpretation of modernity. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the concept became problematic, largely due to the influence of Nietzsche. Rival conceptions of modernity were formulated. Broadly speaking, such is the context in which the Hungarian culture of the early twentieth century has to be examined.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, four new trends emerged in Hungarian intellectual life. Each was characterized by a specific attitude towards urbanization. Only two of them, the movement centered around the journal *Nyugat* and the somewhat later avant-garde led by Lajos Kassák, could be called artistic in the strict sense of the word. The journal *Huszadik Század*, started in 1900, was the organ of sociologists and political scientists, whereas the primary interest of what was to become the Sunday Circle in 1915 was metaphysics. If modernity has any sense in Hungary in the early years of the twentieth century, it must be viewed as a complex of interrelationships among these four trends. Each claimed to represent modernity, but their definitions of the goals the country should achieve were different. In 1911 György Lukács won a competition with a two-volume monograph entitled *A*

modern dráma fejlődésének története (The History of the Evolution of Modern Drama), in 1914 Dezső Kosztolányi published a collection of translations with the title *Modern Költők* (Modern Poets), and both authors published books in the series called *Modern Könyvtár* (Modern Library) edited by Jenő Gömöri, but their views on modernity were far from the same.

Although all these trends were opposed to some form of establishment, the representatives of each had a different notion of conservatism. The contributors of *Nyugat*, whose first issue came out in the last days of 1907, were creative writers. Born in the province, most of them drew inspiration from their early years spent in the country-side. Their poetry and fiction were dominated by a backward glance. To be of one's own time, as far as they were concerned, was a measure of failure rather than an achievement. Endre Ady made significant returns to his village, both in a physical and in a psychological sense, Mihály Babits evoked memories of his native Transdanubia in numerous poems and in his long novel *Halálfiái* (Sons of Death, 1927), and Dezső Kosztolányi's major works from the verse cycle *A szegény kisgyermek panaszai* (The Complaints of the Poor Little Child, 1910) to the novels *Pacsirta* (Skylark, 1924) and *Aranysárkány* (Golden Kite/Dragon, 1925) were imaginative recreations of his childhood in Szabadka (today Subotica). In Budapest they were newcomers who never felt at home in the metropolis. This may have been one of the reasons why few of them tried to experiment with dramatic genres.

The Hungarian capital had a vigorous theatrical activity, dominated by Ferenc Herczeg and Ferenc Molnár. Herczeg became a member of the House of Representatives in 1896, the year in which the country celebrated the thousandth year of its creation, and supported the prominent conservative statesman Count István Tisza, during his second term in the Hungarian parliament, between 1910 and 1918. Aesthetically, both Herczeg and Molnár were conservative, although they came from the same bourgeoisie which was the social background of most of the contributors of *Huszadik Század* and of the members of the Sunday Circle, in sharp contrast to the majority of those writers who made *Nyugat* the organ of artistic and intellectual modernity.

Oszkár Jászi, the founder and editor of *Huszadik Század*, had a better knowledge of, and a greater respect for, the past of Hungary than György Lukács, but to criticize that past was no self-torture for him, as it was for Ady, Krúdy, Babits, or Kosztolányi, who were proud of their social origin and insisted on their continuity with old, i.e. pre-capitalistic Hungary. The authors of *Huszadik Század* were convinced that they were the true representatives of modernity, yet they often found the poetry, fiction, and essays published in *Nyugat* obscure. The aesthetics of evocation and suggestion, as represented by

such poems as *A fekete zongora* (The Black Piano) by Ady or *Fekete ország* (Black Country) by Babits, was a far cry from the Positivistic ideals of the intellectuals of *Huszadik Század*. The interests and values of the two groups were different: while the sociologists and the political scientists believed that modernity meant a faith in the scientific claims to total explanation, the creative writers discarded both scientism and functionalism, and were attracted to Symbolism, *Jugendstil* (*Sezessionismus*), psychoanalysis, and other trends representing a reaction against Positivism. The philosophers of what was to be called the Sunday Circle occasionally published in *Huszadik Század* and in *Nyugat*, but they spoke contemptuously of Positivism, and their understanding of the new poetry and fiction was rather limited: Lukács, for instance, never came to appreciate the novelty of Krúdy's fiction. With the publication of *A Tett*, Kassák's first avant-garde periodical founded in 1915, the gap became even wider.

Undeniably, there were overlaps among the activities of the different groups. Béla Balázs, a close friend of Lukács, was also a poet, and Emma Ritoók, another member of the Sunday Circle, published several novels. Occasionally their work appeared in *Nyugat*, but their creative writing was far more conservative in the aesthetic sense than that of the major representatives of *Nyugat*. Some poets of *Nyugat*, including Ady, took a serious interest in *Huszadik Század*. The first issue of *A Tett* was introduced by Dezső Szabó, who at that time joined the first generation of *Nyugat*, and Kosztolányi wrote a favourable review of Kassák's first published volume of poetry, *Éposz Wagner maszkjában* (Epic Poem in Wagner's Mask, 1915). Still, the overlaps were of secondary importance in comparison with the fundamental clashes among the four movements.

For a long time the bourgeois radicals of *Huszadik Század* sought to define the purity of scientific discourse in the spirit of Herbert Spencer. This effort made Oszkár Jászi and his associates seem pedestrian and old-fashioned in the eyes of the members of the Sunday Circle, who aspired to discover a new metaphysics. *Művészet és erkölcs* (Art and Morals, 1904), Jászi's early book which had brought him a prize of the Hungarian Academy of Letters and Sciences, was a far cry from the essays of the young György Lukács and Lajos Fülep, and even from the aesthetic principles of Ady, Babits, and Kosztolányi, who had a similar admiration for Nietzsche. From another perspective, however, the bourgeois radicals of *Huszadik Század* seemed to be less conservative: they approved of industrialization, whereas the philosophers were spokesmen of what in his later Marxist years Lukács was to call Romantic anti-capitalism. With the emergence of the avant-garde, this backward orientation had become obvious even in the sphere of art. While Babits, Kosz-

tolányi, and even Ady were moving from the cult of intentional obscurity of Symbolism and the decorative, adjectival writing of *Sezessionismus* towards a greater emphasis on the verbal elements of syntax, a more Expressionistic style (Kosztolányi translated Imagist verse and discovered the paintings of János Nagy-Balogh, a working-class artist whose work resembled Cubism; and Kassák made more and more works of the international avant-garde accessible to the Hungarian public); Lukács lost his touch with contemporary art. Up to 1911 Leo Popper and Irma Seidler helped Lukács understand paintings, but after the death of these two friends, he seemed to take no interest in the visual arts. Paintings became a pretext for him to develop ideological arguments.

A telling example of his growing alienation from the art of recent decades is the value-judgement attached to Cézanne's name in his later essays. My first quotation is from an article originally published in 1918:

Simmel's historical position could be summarized the following way: he was the Monet of philosophy who has not yet been followed by a Cézanne.⁸

In 1918 Lukács may have been unaware of Monet's later work, the magnificent water lilies painted at Giverny, in which he abandoned the fundamental principle of Impressionism – the accurate transcription of observed phenomena – in favour of an emphasis on tonal harmonies. For him Monet stood for superficiality, whereas Cézanne represented profundity. Less than two decades later he made the following statement:

Die Porträts von Cézanne sind ebenso blosse Stilleben, verglichen mit der menschlich-seelischen Totalität der Porträts von Tizian oder Rembrandt, wie die Menschen Goncourts oder Zolas im Vergleich zu Balzac oder Tolstoi.⁹

It would be an error to assume that Lukács turned conservative after his conversion to the Hungarian Party of the Communists, in late 1918. The first issue of *A Tett* came out in the same year when the Sunday Circle was established. The characteristic features of the activity of the group centered around Lukács: the speculations about the nature of mysticism, the cult of erotic love, and the neo-Romantic stylization of folklore were all manifestations of an *Art Nouveau* culture. Lukács praised the poetry of Balázs, written in a style reminiscent of Maeterlinck's diction of prefabricated suggestiveness, at a time when Kassák was writing free verse in an idiom comparable to the activist language of August Stramm. The conservative taste of Lukács may have been at least partly responsible for the later conflicts between Marxist aesthetics and twentieth-century art. In any case, it was the basis of the

development of the concept of "critical realism," an ideal that made East-European theoreticians and artists reject innovations which are generally associated with aesthetic modernity.

One of the most violent clashes between the Sunday Circle and the Hungarian avant-garde occurred in 1919. Béla Kun, the leader of the Commune, called *Ma*, Kassák's second journal "a product of bourgeois culture," at a party conference. His statement appeared in print, in *Vörös Újság*, on June 14. In his response published in *Ma*, on July 1, Kassák questioned Kun's competence in art and denied that art had to serve the party and the working class. As a result, the Communist leaders withdrew the permission which made the publication of *Ma* possible. The incident underscored the fundamental disagreement between such Communists as Balázs and Lukács, who tacitly accepted the view that art cannot be autonomous in socialism, and Kassák, who insisted that human creativity was a source rather than a product of social revolution.

At the same time, two friends of Lukács departed from the path he followed. In 1920 Emma Ritoók published a small collection of verse, *Sötét hónapok* (Dark Months), expressing her strong disapproval of the Commune, and Lajos Fülep became a Protestant clergyman in a small village. There may have been personal motives behind their decisions, but their departure also expressed their feeling that the Sunday Circle alienated itself from the traditions of Hungarian culture. In the 1930s Fülep went as far as agreeing with some of the Populist writers' objections to industrial capitalism.

Since Ritoók and Fülep had been the only non-Jewish members of the group, it is possible that their attitude was also motivated by their conviction that the cultural assimilation of their friends had been somewhat imperfect. As is well-known, Lukács's father often emphasized his Hungarian nationalism, but a quotation from a book written by the son of another industrial magnate of Jewish origin may suggest that this attitude cannot be called general. In this autobiographical novel the prosperous father gives the following instruction to the Hungarian tutor of his son:

You must allow my son, Mr. Szalkay, to remain what he was born, a Jew. And if you must teach him something, then teach him to deal in business and how to make it profitable. Teach him to live here as if he were in a province where one goes to make a profit. Do you know what a *koved* is? It is the Yiddish word for a sinecure, an honourable post for which one gets no pay, or very little. I want no parliamentary representatives, judges, or professors in my family. My son should buy and sell here, but he should not sell himself, for no good will come of it... For have you ever seen a Jew who has gone after *koved* and has ended up well in this country?¹⁰

It should be noted that the position taken by this father is rejected in this novel. The author himself had chosen another path: as a critic he insisted on the continuity of Hungarian culture and joined the *Nyugat* movement. Several others followed his example: industrialists Miksa Fenyő and Baron Móric Kornfeld, for instance, made the publication of the same journal possible with their financial support.

Needless to say, what is at issue here is not ethnic, but cultural and linguistic assimilation. Another quotation may shed light on the distinction. One of the most original composers of the twentieth century made the following remark: "my music; produced on German soil, without foreign influences, is a living example of an art able most effectively to oppose Latin and Slav hopes of hegemony and derived through and through from the traditions of German music."¹¹ Schoenberg was Austrian and considered himself a Jew, but never hesitated to call his work German and even national.

One of the charges levelled at the Jewish capitalists who lived in Hungary around and after 1900 was their reluctance to learn about national traditions. It cannot be denied that Jewish capitalists and intellectuals brought up in the large cities of the Dual Monarchy had a German culture. Not only the Wittgensteins or the Schoenbergs, but also the Kornfeld and Weiss families spoke German at home. This cultural milieu may have contributed to the decision Lukács made around 1911 to stop writing in Hungarian and switch almost exclusively to German. Fülep, on the other hand, never distanced himself from his mother tongue. Their later disagreement may have been rooted in their different attitudes towards language.

When Lukács published his first book of essays, *A lélek és a formák* (Soul and Forms) in 1910, Mihály Babits reviewed it in *Nyugat*. Babits was well-read in philosophy and shared Lukács's interest in metaphysics, but his review cannot be called favourable. The young poet's main concern was the purity of diction, and as a creative artist, he found the philosopher's use of the Hungarian language abusive. Both Babits and Lukács wanted to liberate Hungary from provincialism, yet their intellectual positions were poles apart: for the poet, national tradition was a precondition of culture, and language a precondition of thought; whereas for the philosopher, tradition was international, and language a means to an end, a medium at the service of intellectual activity. In view of the fact that Lukács never made any attempt at the close reading or stylistic analysis of a lyric poem, the charge levelled at him by Babits cannot be dismissed as superficial. What the poet suggested was that the tradition behind the activity of the Lukács circle was not international but German.

For most of the writers of *Nyugat* modernity was closely tied to an escape from the influence of the German culture which dominated Hungarian culture

throughout the nineteenth century. Budapest was in competition with Vienna, so the artists living in the Hungarian capital looked for models outside the German-speaking countries. Ady translated Baudelaire and Verlaine, Krúdy drew inspiration from Pushkin and Turgenev, Babits admired Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. The reaction against German models was also felt in the other arts: the Gödöllő school of the Hungarian *Art Nouveau* was modelled on the Arts and Crafts Movement, the painter Rippl-Rónai joined the Post-Impressionist group called "*Les Nabis*" in Paris, and Bartók discovered an antidote to the dominance of German culture in the music of Debussy.

Although the superficiality of rapid assimilation and the reaction against Germanic cultural models may have intensified the conflict between different forms of modernity, they cannot be regarded as the only causes of the tension between urban development and cultural innovation.

Capitalism led to inevitable consequences in the cultural life of Hungary. During the Napoleonic wars the country house of Ferenc Kazinczy at Széphalom, a small village in the North-East of the country, had been the centre of literary life; a century later a coffeehouse in Budapest was the meeting place where writers came to discuss politics and culture. Ironically, institutional changes and transformations in the social context of literature were not always complementary. While the consumers of art may have changed, the creative talents continued to come from the traditional classes. In the early twentieth century Hungarian art was sponsored by *nouveau riche* families, but produced by members of what had been the lesser nobility before the revolution of 1848. Many Jewish intellectuals looked upon art as a social equalizer, but with the exception of the poet, novelist, and playwright Milán Füst, none of the major Hungarian writers of modernity came from the Jewish community. The influence of capitalism may have been strong on literary institutions, but the social background of Ady, Krúdy, Babits, and Kosztolányi was not different from that of Berzsenyi, Vörösmarty, Arany, or Madách – to mention but a few poets who dominated the nineteenth century. In contrast to some of their predecessors, all the members of the first *Nyugat* generation had to earn their living, but they often felt ill at ease in the new situation. Major novelists and poets were forced to write *Feuilletons* and *Feuilletonnovellen*. These relatively new genres required a skill at extemporizing. Ady, Krúdy, Kosztolányi, and even Sándor Márai, a younger writer whose first book was published in 1918, had to devote several hours per day to journalism, which often made it impossible for them to concentrate their efforts on writing poetry or narrative fiction.

Cultural preferences were often motivated by a sense of belonging. This *Heimatsgefühl* is inseparable from the evolution of Hungarian literary modern-

ity: the works of Ady, Krúdy, Babits, and Kosztolányi had been conditioned by strong local traditions, and the art of the novelist Zsigmond Móricz was no less deeply rooted in the culture of the peasantry, another traditional class of Hungarian society.

Recent literary scholarship is marked by a growing disenchantment with certain socio-historical clichés. Paradoxically, some Western publications reiterate value-judgements which have been partly invalidated by studies revealing novel, hitherto unexplored or neglected aspects of Hungarian culture. A characteristic example is the interpretation of the role of the gentry given in a book published in the United States:

The gentry played cards, gambled away its land and fortune, drank to excess, sobbed to gipsy music, and entertained lavishly even after it could no longer afford to do so.¹²

Although there is more than an element of truth in this generalization, it is worth remembering that the devastatingly critical picture of the gentry on which the critic relies was almost entirely drawn by artists who themselves belonged to this class. Just as academic art was represented mainly by Munkácsy, a painter of German petty bourgeois origin, whereas Impressionism was started by Szinyei Merse, and Expressionism was developed by Mednyánszky and Csontváry Kosztká – three painters coming from the nobility – literary modernity was established by members of a class which often resisted modernization. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the gap between bourgeois and artist, *Kulturträger* and *Kunstträger* had widened, making it almost impossible to draw a clear-cut distinction between the anti-social attitude of innovative artists and the anachronistic values of the gentry. These facts gain added significance, because no similar opposition between artistic and social modernity can be observed in the “Austrian” half of the Dual Monarchy.

I am almost tempted to speak of the co-existence of originality and provincialism in Hungarian culture, provided the latter term is not taken in a pejorative sense. Although Ady’s poetry had been called immoral, obscure, and cosmopolitan by some of his right-wing contemporaries, a conservative literary historian, János Horváth, wrote the first book about it. In retrospect, the main thesis of *Ady és a legújabb magyar líra* (Ady and Recent Hungarian Poetry, 1910) is absolutely correct: there is an undeniable continuity between earlier national traditions and Ady’s work. The indebtedness of Babits and Kosztolányi to János Arany, the most outstanding poet of the Post-Romantic third quarter of the nineteenth century, is even more obvious; both regarded him as their master from the beginning of their careers. Instead of rejecting the

past, they reinterpreted it: while the nineteenth century viewed Arany as an epic poet, a national classic; for Babits and Kosztolányi he was the author of elegiac and ironic lyrics who anticipated modernity by a rejection of subjective sentimentalism.

Before Kassák made his presence felt in Hungarian culture, Ady had been the only major poet who sympathized with socialist ideas. Yet even his work reveals traces of a nostalgia for preindustrial values. *Hazamegyek a falumba* (I Shall Return to My Village) is only one of those poems which suggest a rejection of urban civilization. Bartók viewed peasant culture as an antidote to the *kitsch* of city life. In *Halálfiái* (Sons of Death), an autobiographical novel by Babits, the hero moves from a rural and cohesive *Gemeinschaft* to the achievement-oriented *Gesellschaft* of industrial capitalism. The local values of the writer's native Szekszárd, a small Transdanubian town, are replaced by the internationalism of Budapest. The narrator's perspective is ambiguous: the hero's spiritual education is portrayed as an inexorable process, but the organic community of his early years is presented as superior to the chaotic world of the modern city. Both *Pacsirta* (Skylark) and *Aranysárkány* (Golden Kite/Dragon), probably the best novels by Kosztolányi, are about provinciality. While the real name of the author's native town has positive connotations (the first part of the compound word "Szabadka" means "free," the second part is a diminutive), the name of the place in the above-mentioned books suggests hopeless parochialism ("Sárszeg" literally means "a site of mud"). There is much irony in these novels, but the final message is that cosmopolitanism may lead to civilization but cannot create culture. Kosztolányi was a close friend of the analyst Sándor Ferenczi and the first cousin of Géza Csáth – the author of *Az elmebetegségek pszichikai mechanizmusa* (The Psychic Mechanism of Mental Illnesses, 1912), a remarkable early study of complexes – and he relied upon the works of Freud in his sustained and consistent critique of industrialization.

As early as 1913 Kosztolányi made the following confession:

What interests me is the Hungarian country-side (...). It is the land of miracles. Those who are born there will have a wider horizon than anybody brought up in a highly industrialized capital. (...) In a world where nothing happens and life is dominated by drinking wine, playing cards, sadness, and solitude, the soul will have an inner dimension, a strange compression and intensity of emotions. Provincial life is always of purely psychic character.¹³

The correspondence with the definition of the gentry quoted above is striking enough to suggest some ambiguity in the role played by this class in the evolution of Hungarian literary and artistic modernity. It is significant that

almost no writer of any distinction was born in Budapest. One of the very few exceptions was Cécile Tormay, a conservative middle-class novelist whose ancestors belonged partly to the Hungarian nobility and partly to the German bourgeoisie. Her second novel, *A régi ház* (The Old House, 1914), suggested that the traditions of the German cities of Ofen (Buda) and Pesth could make a significant contribution to Hungarian culture only after they were combined with the rural legacy of the Hungarian nobility. Márai, one of the few writers of the next generation with a purely bourgeois background, had even more serious reservations about the relevance of the life of Budapest for Hungarian culture when he distinguished between the living law of his native Kassa and the state-made law of the capital, in his autobiographical work *Egy polgár vallomásai* (The Confessions of a Citizen, 1934–35). The contrast between the constitutive rules of a gradually developing community and the regulative formulae which serve to conceal the anarchy of a suddenly emerging metropolis is further evidence of the Hungarian writers' reluctance to accept Budapest as an organic part of their country.

In view of this, it becomes clear that Kassák's avant-garde stands in sharp contrast to both the Sunday Circle and the *Nyugat* movement. As a self-made man, Kassák could have none of the advantages of provincial traditions. For him the cosmopolitan metropolis was not a source of cultural estrangement, but the basis of transforming culture as a whole. While Ady, Krúdy, Móricz, Babits, and Kosztolányi had a feeling of not quite fitting into the age of industrialization, Kassák was in harmony with his times. His disagreement with the Sunday Circle was partly aesthetic. If we compare the connotative pseudo-symbolism of *A kékszakállú herceg vára* (Bluebeard's Castle, 1911) – the one-act verse play by Béla Balázs which Bartók set to music – with the denotative, conspicuously prosaic diction of Kassák's free-verse poem *Mesteremberek* (Craftsmen, 1914), we can understand why the leader of the Hungarian avant-garde regarded the works of Balázs as mediocre and old-fashioned. The poetry of the solitary ego conflicted with the voice of collectivity, decorative art with functionalism, Romantic anti-capitalism with a utopian belief in the unity of art and industry.

It is far more difficult to situate the Hungarian avant-garde in relation to the writers of *Nyugat*. Ady reacted with indignation when he received Kassák's first collection of verse, and Babits attacked the new movement in a long review article. No analysis can do justice to the complexity of the picture which tries to underestimate the conflict between the members of the two alternatives of Hungarian literary modernity. Although Kassák had considerable respect for Ady's messianic prophecies, he wished to distance himself from the cult of hidden meaning. For the younger poet the traditional role of the adjective had become suspect.

Kassák's approach to poetic diction was also in conflict with the intentional artificiality of the style of Babits. Both poets insisted on the internationalism of culture, but their attitudes were radically different. Babits adhered to the ideal of a Catholic tradition and spoke of *sui generis* European values, whereas the development of Kassák's Activism implied an attack on an academic, canonical view of culture, and anticipated the *Bauhaus* movement, "a Protestant Reformation putting faith in the liberating aspects of industrialization and mass democracy."¹⁴ In the 1910s Kassák's movement seemed similar to German Expressionism. It had grown of the immense shock which the war produced in the minds, and pleaded with those 'brothers' who felt that a 'new man' and a 'new society' would emerge from the war. After the fall of the Commune, Kassák's activity as a visual artist, the creation of the genre he called *Bildarchitektur* may have affected his poetic style. The Expressionistic pathos of *Máglyák énekelnek* (Bonfires Are Singing, 1920) was soon replaced by the functionalism of *Tisztaság könyve* (The Book of Purity, 1926), emphasizing the strongly moral connotations of his art. The untitled poems he composed in Vienna in the 1920s manifest an affinity with the German *Dinggedicht* (object-poem) and a preoccupation with a denotative "hardness" that is opposed to the connotative "softness" of Symbolism, decadent Aestheticism, and Secessionism. In his later years, Kassák translated Whitman and Cendrars, expressed reservations about the Romantic lyricism in some of Apollinaire's poems, and preferred the early Imagist work of William Carlos Williams to the poetry of T. S. Eliot, in sharp contrast to Babits, who towards the end of his life felt a great attraction to the Neoclassicism of the American-born British master. Kassák represented a strong reaction not only against the literature of nuance and allusion but also against the Secessionist cult of beauty. He did not seek to please; in his autobiographical poem *A ló meghal a madarak kirepülnek* (The Horse Dies the Birds Fly Out, 1922) he repeatedly used inarticulate utterances. He liked meaningless words because they were free of the associations inherited from the past. He attempted to liberate those energies of language which in his view had been repressed by poets dominated by the legacy of Classical antiquity.

Krúdy and Kosztolányi wished to raise narrative prose to the level of lyric poetry: the former made metaphor the structural principle of his style; the latter aimed at the textural terseness of the short poem. By contrast, Kassák's goal was to destroy the very concept of the "poetic", desacralize art, abolish the autonomy and institutional identity of the aesthetic sphere, and end the alienation of the various spheres of human activity from each other. These two attitudes towards the Romantic legacy were irreconcilable.

What united Krúdy and Kassák was a prevailing sense of dislocation from the past. The difference, however, was more important than the similarity

between them. Krúdy and Kosztolányi had a nostalgic view of the past, and after 1920 Babits spoke in a similarly elegiac tone about the world lost with World War I. What is more, even Ady was tempted to regard himself as belonging to the old order he often criticized. The triumph over time was conceived by Krúdy, Babits, or Kosztolányi not as a leap into the future, as for the Hungarian Activists, but as a movement into the past. Somehow or other, all the major members of the *Nyugat* circle were attached to the heritage of nineteenth-century Liberal nationalism. By contrast, Kassák preferred to call himself a European poet, reminding his readers that he saw a fundamental difference between European art as represented by Bartók and a reliance upon Hungarian traditions advocated by Kodály. Most representatives of the earlier movement supported the bourgeois revolution of 1918 but became alienated from the Republic of Councils in 1919. After the fall of the latter regime, they distanced themselves from any kind of socialism and interpreted the Treaty of Trianon as a national tragedy. Kassák, on the other hand, moved to Vienna, and never lost his belief in socialism, despite the fact that the leaders of the Hungarian Party of the Communists banned his journal in July 1919.

Kassák felt no polar opposition between the needs of the creative artist and the values of mass industrial society. He felt at home in a working-class suburb of the Hungarian capital and later wrote his most successful novel about it (*Angyalföld*, 1929), whereas Ady, Krúdy, Móricz, Babits, and Kosztolányi were less pleased with the transformation of Budapest into an industrial metropolis. Ady returned to his village Érmindszent at regular intervals. Krúdy had nostalgic feelings for the *Nyírség*, one of the most backward agricultural regions of the country. Feeling that the past was slipping away from him, Babits turned his back on the present and escaped from the capital to a house on the top of a hill, on the outskirts of Esztergom, a small town in northern Hungary. As for Kosztolányi and Márai, both lived in a district of Buda whose closed community reminded them of the intimacy of Szabadka and Kassa, towns which had been transferred to Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia after World War I. *Anna Édes* (1926), the last of Kosztolányi's novels, and *Csutora* (1930), an autobiographical novel by Márai, present this district as almost cut off from the rest of the capital.

What distinguished both the major writers of *Nyugat* and the chief representatives of Hungarian Activism from the members of the Sunday Circle was their critique of the language. Kassák's efforts, however, ran counter to the Symbolist exploration of the allusive and associative powers of language. While Kosztolányi's main interest was a kind of *Sprachkritik* and Kassák's goal was to liberate language from the overlays of literary tradition, Lukács ignored the verbal aspect of literary works. The difference between the

positions taken by the two Hungarian poets was in their attitudes towards the legacy of Symbolism and in their approaches to literary genres. Kosztolányi's ideal had links with Mallarmé's dictum that poems were made not with ideas but with words. For Kosztolányi language became a human bastion against chaos and nothingness. The world is out there, he maintained, but descriptions of the world are human creations. Where there is no language there is no truth; and we are nothing save the words we use. Viewing himself as a servant and not a master of language, he broke with the idea that language was a medium, and considered a novel to be a work of verbal art, whereas Kassák was convinced that language could be regarded as a medium of expression and style was of no great importance in narrative prose. Because of this, the older writer's fiction has more affinity with the inventions of twentieth-century fiction than Kassák's more conventional narrative works. Kosztolányi's meta-fictional stories about Kornél Esti, written in the last decade of his life, represent a form of narrative which is "about" its own making, questioning its own practices and presuppositions, and suggesting that any idea we may have of enjoying a shared meaning is sheer delusion. Because of this, they are much closer to the mainstream of the experimental prose of the first third of the twentieth century than any of the Naturalistic novels of Kassák.

As I indicated earlier, World War I, the fall of the Commune and the Peace Treaty of Trianon brought radical changes to Hungarian culture. The impact of these historical events persuaded many that the values of the national past had been touched in their very foundations. A large number of urban centres (Kassa, Pozsony, Nagyvárad, Kolozsvár, Marosvásárhely, Brassó) were cut off from Budapest. Hungary had become not only smaller, but also less open to cross-cultural influences. The character of the country had changed; the rural areas of the Great Hungarian Plain gained significance. Three of the four modern movements lost their influence after their leaders left Hungary: *Huszadik Század* ceased to appear, the Sunday Circle was dissolved, and Kassák moved to Vienna. A political and social crisis shook the middle class, which turned inward and blamed itself for the failures of the recent past. The supporters of the avant-garde movement were viewed as the adherents of a future that had not materialized. Some felt that the war had made of Modernism a spent force. The very model of urban man had become the basis of a profound ideological cultural dissent, and the belief spread that the lasting forms of culture belonged outside urban civilization. In the summer of 1919 Dezső Szabó published *Az elsodort falu* (The Village Swept Away), a parable directed against both capitalism and socialism. Since its author had published essays both in *Huszadik Század* and in *Nyugat*, and supported Kassák's Activism in the early stage of its development, his novel represented a decisive

change of direction and thus anticipated the rise of a new generation. Three years later a collection of poems, *Ibolyalévíl* (Violet Leaf), came out. Its author, József Erdélyi, was of peasant origin, and his inspiration came from the oral traditions of his class. Within a few years a Populist movement was organized which involved a strong reaction both against the *Nyugat* movement and against the avant-garde. What is more, it was bound up with a reevaluation of the past which made urbanization and artistic modernity seem to be mere episodes in the history of Hungarian culture. While *Nyugat* represented a mixture of cosmopolitanism and provincialism, and Activism a decisive turn toward internationalism, the movement that arose in the 1920s and became a decisive factor in Hungarian culture in the 1930s was bound up with a cult of local traditions.

Needless to say, there were various factors which may have helped the rise of Populism. A few of these had international implications. One of the consequences of World War I was that the belief in progress entered a crisis. Aesthetic modernity seemed to disintegrate soon after it was established. Some of the artists who were among the innovators in the first decade of the twentieth century turned more conservative in the 1910s, whereas others continued to experiment. "Die Moderne spaltet sich, formelhaft gesprochen, in Neue Musik and Klassizismus," as a musicologist wrote about the years in which Richard Strauss stepped backwards from the style of *Elektra* (1908) to the far more tonal writing of *Der Rosenkavalier* (1911), whereas Schoenberg moved further from the less radical language of *Erwartung* (1909) in the direction of atonal music by composing *Pierrot lunaire* (1912).¹⁵ As is well-known, at the beginning of their careers Bartók and Kodály worked together, but by the 1910s it became obvious that Kodály did not want to break with the traditions of tonal music. Considering the important role Kodály was to play in the Populism of the 1930s, it is important to realize that his aesthetic conservatism may have given support to the Populists who dismissed the legacy of the avant-garde.

Although it would be misleading to overemphasize the connection between the Neoclassicism of the 1920s and the rise of Hungarian Populism, there can be no doubt that the success of such poets as Erdélyi or Sinka was at least partly due to some urban intellectuals' disillusionment with the avant-garde. Babits, who was rather critical of Kassák's internationalism from the very outset, turned more conservative both in a political and in an aesthetic sense after the Peace Treaty of Trianon. Finding the ground giving beneath his feet, feeling the burden of responsibility and detachment, he gave active support to the Populist movement by giving the prize of the Baumgarten Foundation three times to Erdélyi and four times to Gyula Illyés. In his later years Babits

realized that he could be a medium rather than a charismatic leader. He was inclined to view art as recreation rather than creation – his *Jónás könyve* (The Book of Jonah, 1939) is a personal adaptation of one of the books of the Old Testament. From a Neoclassical perspective art heavily dependent upon peasant culture seemed to be more acceptable than the subversive, anarchistic spirit of the avant-garde. By the 1920s the reviews published in *Nyugat* were no more favourable to the international avant-garde than *Napkelet*, a conservative journal founded by Tormay in 1923. *Az európai irodalom története* (The History of European Literature, 1934–35), the most sustained effort of Babits as essayist, is an epitome of Neoclassical ideals, an outline of European literary traditions, with a heavy emphasis on Classical Antiquity and the Latin Middle Ages. The last chapters of this highly impressive work make almost no mention of such movements as Futurism, Expressionism, Dada, or Surrealism.

Before World War I Ady, Babits, and Kosztolányi reacted against Positivism. Later Babits and Kosztolányi went as far as rejecting the project of the Enlightenment. They had two different things to say about the way the Western world was after 1920. For Babits it seemed belated, for Kosztolányi it turned out to be contingent. Modernity involved teleology, so Kosztolányi's distrust of history led to a rejection of the idea of modernity. It is no accident that the author of the stories about Kornél Esti was to exert such a profound influence on the Postmodern writers of the late twentieth century.

Besides the reaction against the avant-garde, the reinterpretation of Hungarian past also paved the way for the Populist movement. The starting hypothesis of some was that at the time of the Turkish occupation the Hungarian inhabitants had been forced to flee the capital, and Germans and German-speaking Jews came to live in Pest-Buda after the end of the Ottoman rule, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Writers who felt estranged from the foreign culture of the city had a revival in the 1930s. Literary historians supporting the Populist cause reminded the public that as early as 1790 József Gvadányi, the author of *Egy falusi nótáriusnak budai utazása* (A Village Notary's Journey to Buda), contrasted the Hungarian cowboys, shepherds, and horseherds of the lowland with the fashionable cosmopolitans of the capital. Bourgeois liberals dismissed Gvadányi as a provincial opponent of the Enlightenment, but László Arany's declarations of hostility to the rapidly changing society of the capital in his verse novel *A délibábok hőse* (The Hero of Mirages, 1873) could not be called superficial.

There is no doubt that the origins of the Populist movement go back to the nineteenth century. In 1897 a small collection of patriotic poems was published by Géza Lampérth, a poet of no distinction. The book's preface was written

by the conservative novelist and literary historian Zsolt Beöthy, who distinguished between rural and urban poetry, and insisted that only the former was acceptable as the expression of national values. One of the last members of the old Liberal generation, the seventy-one-year-old Pál Gyulai was quick to point out that folk culture "may be one of the main sources of national poetry, but should not be identified with it."¹⁶

In the first two decades of the twentieth century *Nyugat* and Kassák's Activism seemed to invalidate Populistic efforts, but soon an undercurrent in favour of rural values had set in. In some cases the advocates of the resurrection of the Hungarian village could find support from anti-Semites who lived in the neighbouring countries. Karl Lueger allowed to deliver himself of the word "Judapest" on occasion, and the Romanian Octavian Goga made the following remark in 1913: "Die ungarische Nationalliteratur hat in der Dichtung mit Petöfi und Johannes Arany, in der Prosa mit Mikszáth ihre Ende gefunden und hat der Budapester jüdischen Nationalliteratur Platz gemacht, die in unseren Tagen herrscht."¹⁷

Although the Hungarian Populism of the interwar period was inseparable from an occasional distrust of foreign influences, it would be a gross simplification to associate the movement with anti-Semitism. Its definition must be made on a much more general basis. The Commune of 1919 and the Peace Treaty of Trianon represented not only a historical break but also a cultural rupture. The rise of Populism was possible only because the legacy of bourgeois Liberalism became discredited when it proved to be weak to resist totalitarian dictatorship. The consequences of this crisis were not only a highly convincing critique of the superficially international mass culture of Budapest and a reassessment of folklore, but also a disturbance in the continuity of artistic modernity and an unfortunate dichotomy between the values of urban and peasant culture.

The growing discrepancy between the aesthetics and the style of Bartók and Kodály is symptomatic of the state of Hungarian culture after World War I. While the composer of *Music for Strings, Percussion, and Celesta* (1936) "se situe parmi les 'cinq grands' de la musique contemporaine aux cotés de Stravinsky, Webern, Schönberg et Berg",¹⁸ as a major composer of the second half of the twentieth century wrote; Kodály could be considered a late Romantic whose works could serve as a pretext for the justification of various forms of conservatism.

The political significance of Populism cannot be questioned. In the aesthetic sense, it accompanied a revival of nineteenth-century ideals, but it had also some continuity with the developments of the early twentieth century. Three of its immediate antecedents are of special significance.

The first among these is bound up with the fact that the modernity of *Nyugat* was closely tied to the traditions of preindustrial classes. In the case of Móricz, these traditions belonged to the peasantry, so for him it was easy to turn towards a Populistic interpretation of culture in his later years. His best short story, *Barbárok* (Barbarians, 1931) is reminiscent of the style of folk ballads, and *A boldog ember* (The Happy Man, 1935) is based on interviews with a poor peasant, so it represents an attempt to make documentary acceptable as literature, an effort characteristic of interwar Populism.

The difference between the social backgrounds of the creators and consumers of early-twentieth-century modernity also involved a contradiction between the values of the bourgeois and the artist. For Ady this tension involved occasional clashes with his sponsors. The post-war generation of the 1920s viewed the problem as unsolvable. Sándor Márai's best work, *The Confessions of a Citizen*, presents the anarchism of a *Kunstträger* and the civilized attitude of the *Kulturträger* as irreconcilable alternatives.

The third of the phenomena that made the rise of Populism possible was the proliferation of cheap journalism, fiction, and drama which alienated many artists from the mass culture of Budapest. László Németh, who started his career with essays assessing the achievement of Proust and Joyce and emphasizing the artistic flaws in the novels of Móricz and the aesthetic conservatism underlying the verse of Erdélyi, soon became the most violent critic of the superficiality of the values of the Hungarian bourgeoisie. His long pamphlet *Kisebbségben* (In Minority, 1939) is an attempt to present urbanization as alien to Hungarian culture.

Populism made an undeniable contribution to Hungarian culture by its criticism of mass culture. It raised folklore to the status of high art and modified the concept of literature by making non-fiction a canonical genre. It also changed the wider context of Hungarian culture by calling attention to its similarities with the cultures of other nations in Eastern Europe. Németh reproached Babits for his exclusively Western concept to culture, in his review of *The History of European Literature*. His criticism was absolutely justifiable. The modernity of *Nyugat* was inseparable from the idea that Hungary belonged to Western Europe. Ady occasionally spoke of common sorrows of Slavs, Romanians, and Hungarians, but for Babits tradition meant mainly the legacy of Western Europe. The Peace Treaty of Trianon, the loss of more than two thirds of the country, and the emergence of Czechoslovakia, the Southern Slav state, and a greater Romania that included Transylvania made intellectuals aware of the Eastern neighbours of the country.

Yet the new focus proved to be not only broader but also narrower. None of the Populists could compete with Kosztolányi's polylingualism; for them

the usable past was much more local, both in time and space. The loss of old illusions also involved the creation of new ones. Some Populists were inclined to believe that Eastern Europe could follow a path different from that of Western urbanization. Among the models to be rejected were the legacy of the avant-garde. Having returned to Budapest in 1926, Kassák found himself in a changed world. After some unsuccessful attempts at continuing his activity, even he made a compromise with the spirit of the times. His more traditional verse, written in the 1930s and later, represents not only a stylistic change but also an artistic decline.

Undeniably, there were some attempts at a synthesis of modernity and Populism. Attila József learned not only from Kosztolányi and Kassák but also from Erdélyi, but he was an exceptional and even solitary figure. No other major literary talent followed his suit. In music, the decline was conspicuous: hardly any original composer emerged until Communism outruled the very possibility of innovation. In the visual arts discontinuity may have been somewhat less obvious, although the institutionalization of the avant-garde was delayed by almost half a century. First the Neoclassicism of the "Roman School," after 1945 the eclectic style called "Socialist Realism" was supported by the political Establishment, so continuity with Kassák's Activism could be reasserted only in the form of a counterculture.

Although the Populism of the 1920s and 1930s was not without antecedents and significant achievements, it led to a fatal division between urban and rural values, high art and popular culture. By the time of World War II Hungarian culture seemed to be more archaic than it had been before World War I. In poetry and in the visual arts there was some continuity, but culture as a whole had stopped on its way towards becoming an institution supported by the bourgeoisie. Bartók had no successor in music, and the initiatives of Krúdy and Kosztolányi were not taken seriously by other prose writers, so that the representative Hungarian novel of the twentieth century remained unwritten. *Tündérbert* (A Garden of Fairies, 1922), by Móricz, or *Iszony* (Revulsion, 1947), by László Németh, are fine works but are marked by Conservatism in the aesthetic sense. The former is an attempt to revive the tradition of nineteenth-century Realism, whereas the latter is a somewhat belated example of the psychological novel. The narrative prose of the avant-garde and the Populist movement is second-rate by comparison. Kassák's Expressionistic novel *Tragédiás figurák* (Tragic Characters, 1919) or Sinka's autobiography *Fekete bojtár vallomásai* (The Confessions of a Black Shepherd, 1944) represent the outmoded view that language plays a far less important role in prose than in verse.

After 1945 Communism increased the gap between Hungary and Western culture. The artists active in the decades following 1956 could not rely on a

consistent tradition of modernity; their task was not only the restoration but also the creation of the tradition of the modern. Péter Esterházy, the most significant literary talent born in the Communist era, is not only a representative of the Postmodern condition but also a follower of Kosztolányi, the best Hungarian writer of the early twentieth century. The distance between these two writers is smaller than that between the significant artists of the early and late twentieth century in France, Britain, Germany, or the United States. This would suggest that notwithstanding the significant achievements of the early twentieth century, it is hardly possible to speak about a consistent tradition of modernity in Hungarian culture.

Notes

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