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LITERARY HISTORY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

A case study is usually presented cherishing the hope that it can serve as a starting point for generalizations. My original plan was to include “Eastern Europe” in the title. The reason for my decision to avoid this term is rather simple: it has often been used without paying attention to historical changes. It is a dangerous misconception to assume that the entire modern history of Europe can be presented in terms of an opposition between East and West. To take one example, the assumption that the iron curtain could be viewed as a logical consequence of an earlier division underlies the following declaration: “The optimism of the Enlightenment, its faith in human nature, had failed the test of Eastern Europe.”¹ Such a one-sided interpretation of the Enlightenment and its impact on the Eastern half of Europe is linked to a value judgment that has been discredited by such recent changes as the dissolution of the Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. “Their advocacy in the remaking of the map and the delineation of borders at Versailles,” the same historian writes about R. W. Seton-Watson (“Scotus Viator”) and Harold Nicolson, “marked a high point in the modern history of academic engagement with Eastern Europe.”²

In most imagined communities canonized texts and “great narratives” guarantee continuity. The self-image of Hungarians was at least partly created by Ferenc Kölcsey (1790–1838), the author of *Nemzeti hagyományok* (National Traditions, 1826), a work that has exerted a decisive influence on the interpretation of Hungarian identity.³ The starting hypothesis in this long essay is that poetry represents the highest form of culture, and the highest form of poetry is “deeply rooted in national traditions” and “stands close to the nation.”⁴ Kölcsey was well-versed in the philosophy of the French Enlightenment. His essay has to be read in the context of the ideas on cultural universalism and relativism formulated by such authors as Montesquieu, Vol-

¹ Larry Wolff: *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1994, 73.

² *Ibid.*, 367.

³ For an interpretation of the influence of Kölcsey’s work see my essay “Framing Texts as the Representations of National Character,” in *Literary Canons: National and International*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2001, 82–94.

⁴ Ferenc Kölcsey: *Összes művei*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1960, vol. 1, 505–506.

taire, Buffon, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Diderot, Condillac, Helvétius, and Condorcet. One of the possible readings of *National Traditions* was given by the literary historian János Horváth (1878–1961). According to the hypothesis underlying his early programmatic work *Irodalmunk fejlődésének fő mozzanatai* (The Main Features of the Evolution of Our Literature, 1908), Hungarian literature had passed through four stages in its history, represented by works written in Hungary, those composed in the Hungarian language, literature with Hungarian content, and works of artistic value. This periodization is inseparable from the idea that the identity of national literatures is the result of their liberation from the influence of the legacy of the Latin Middle Ages. On another level Horváth distinguished between two phases. The second is marked by a self-awareness that involves two factors: a) writers are aware of their predecessors, b) they are aware of their public. In the case of Hungarian culture the dividing line is 1772, the end of the Baroque and the beginning of the Enlightenment. In the first phase one cannot speak of the identity of a national literature, but the origins of a self-reflexive tradition can be traced back to the period prior to the rise of nationalism. In Horváth's works foreign influences are often underestimated. Local traditions, provincialism, and folklore are regarded as the main sources of inspiration for the Romantics, who are characterized as the founding fathers of the culture of the second phase, proving that the emphasis on art goes together with the cult of originality.

Horváth was a member of the Reformed Church, which had been affected by Puritanism in the seventeenth century. This may explain his somewhat ambivalent views on the relations between ethics and aesthetics: he associated the rise of artistic literature with the decline of didacticism but insisted that artistic greatness could never be in conflict with the readers' moral sense. While Goethe associated *Weltliteratur* with the future, Horváth assumed that literature had broken free from internationalism before it reached the status of aesthetic autonomy. It is worth noting that in contrast to populist nationalists, he regarded national identity not as an awakening of some dormant ethnicity but as the consequence of institutionalised, education-dependent high culture.

Although interwar Hungary is often characterized by Western commentators as a nationalistic state, the definition of national identity that Antal Szerb (1901–1945) gave in *Magyar irodalomtörténet* (A History of Hungarian Literature, 1934) is quite different from Horváth's conception.

Some background information may be necessary for a valid assessment of the historical significance of this work. Till the end of the World War I Transylvania was part of the Hungarian half of the Dual Monarchy. In 1920 the Peace Treaty of Trianon gave this region as well as some neighbouring territories to Romania. As a result, the status of Transylvanian Hungarians had changed: they became a minority. Numerous cultural institutions were set up in response to the new conditions. Among these was a monthly called *Erdélyi Helikon* (Transylvanian Helicon). In 1930 the editors and sponsors of this journal announced a competition. The goal was to commission a scholar to write a history of Hungarian literature that would emphasize the unity of Hungarian culture, its distinctness from other cultures, and the interrelations between Hungarian literature and the intellectual life of the rest of the world. Each of the eleven

competitors submitted the required chapters with an introduction as well as the table of contents of the prospective work. Mihály Babits (1883–1941), a major poet and critic, was on the committee that in 1932 decided to commission Szerb to write the work.

Some of the weaknesses of *A History of Hungarian Literature* were pointed out by its first reviewers and others by later critics, but generations read it with great delight. Today its *Geistesgeschichte* method seems dated, yet few would deny that it has become an integral part of intellectual history. The most obvious reason for its lasting influence is its success in keeping a delicate balance between local and supranational values. On the one hand, national identity is defined as “a specific mode of feeling and thinking,”⁵ on the other hand, the criteria of comparative literature are strictly and consistently observed. The nationalism of previous generations is treated as a reaction against the absolutism of the Habsburgs. With the disappearance of the Dual Monarchy, the author argued, this introspective nationalism had lost its legitimacy.

Szerb’s literary history owes much to the ideas of Babits, who in a long essay entitled *Magyar irodalom* (Hungarian Literature), written in 1913, attempted to revise the definition of the relations between literature and national identity. Although the conception of Babits differed considerably from that of Horváth, simplifications can be avoided only if three factors are taken into consideration. 1) As a Roman Catholic, Babits viewed the Reformation as a turning-point in the history of European literature. In contrast to Horváth, he regarded the rise of national literatures as a disintegration of values and a decline in intellectual standards, but he seemed to agree with Horváth insofar as he associated *Weltliteratur* with the past. 2) Babits criticized those authors who lived in Hungary but borrowed their ideals from German culture. That explains his attack on *A lélek és a formák* (Soul and Form), a collection of essays by György Lukács, published in 1910. 3) Although Babits expressed serious reservations about nationalism, his supranational ideals were those of a Neoclassicist and had nothing in common with the internationalism of the avant-garde, as his article *Futurizmus* (Futurism, 1910) testifies.

If Babits was a retrospective internationalist, something similar could be said of Szerb. Although he may have read more of so-called Modernist works, he had not much understanding for the avant-garde. In his late work, *A világirodalom története* (A History of World Literature, 1941), he called *Ulysses* a “bluff” and characterized Aldous Huxley as the most important English writer of the interwar period.

Although Szerb followed the example of Babits in his condemnation of provincial nationalism, the ostensible purpose of his book was not to reject but to re-define national identity. For him the concept stood for a complex of mental habits. His standpoint was different not only from the preconceptions of populist nationalism but also from the language-based interpretation of Hungarian culture developed by the major novelist, poet, and essayist Dezső Kosztolányi (1885–1936) and adopted by his younger colleague Sándor Márai (1900–1989). These two writers stood for the values

⁵ Antal Szerb: *Magyar irodalomtörténet*. 2nd edition. Budapest: Révai, 1935, 7.

of the urban middle class and defined Hungarian literature as literature written in the Hungarian language. Szerb detected a contradiction between this approach and aesthetic considerations. He may go down in history as someone whose position represented a compromise that was full of ambiguities. His idea that “language is not created by the poet; the poet is created by language”⁶ is compatible with both Kosztolányi’s ideas on language and the hermeneutics of Heidegger and Gadamer, but his distinction between linguistic and national identity is in conflict with the tradition that may have started with Wilhelm von Humboldt and continued with such linguists as Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, and such thinkers as Heidegger and the later Wittgenstein.

No analysis of Szerb’s attempt to re-define national identity can be made without some reference to his family background and to the political crisis that followed World War I. Szerb was a child when his father decided to convert to the Roman Catholic faith and asked Ottokár Prohászka, a highly influential bishop, to become the young Antal’s godfather. On 21 March 1919 a group of Communists and left-wing Social Democrats declared Hungary a Soviet Republic. The totalitarian dictatorship did not last long; on the first day of August 1919 the Revolutionary Governing Soviet resigned and its members left the country. Since most of the Communist leaders were of Jewish parentage, some anti-Communists combined their ideology with anti-Semitism. The young Szerb must have suffered because of this; that is why at the beginning of 1921 he described himself in his diary in the following manner: “if I have any self-awareness, I can think of a single militant truth: I am a Jew, one of the elect; the enemies of my people are my enemies, and it is necessary for me to hate these enemies without asking why.”⁷ In his maturity, however, he came to the conclusion that national identity did not depend on ethnic origin but was a matter of personal choice and shared cultural traditions. *A History of Hungarian Literature* reveals its author’s sensitivity to the ethnic background of the writers discussed. Throughout the book, the works of those are highlighted who were not of Hungarian origin. This accounts for the great emphasis on the seventeenth-century epic poem composed by Miklós Zrínyi, whose brother wrote in Croatian, or on the verse of Petőfi, the son of a Slovak mother and a Serbian father. The autobiographical component is quite obvious in a passage such as follows: “A true-born Hungarian has no desire to stress his being Hungarian, since he has a natural identity. Those who are of foreign origin wish to offer evidence of their belonging to the nation, both for others’ and their own sake. In Hungary it was always the foreigner who insisted on defending the race (...); paradoxically, extreme nationalists always depended on foreign models.”⁸ Although this conclusion is far-fetched and Szerb was certainly not an extreme nationalist, there is no denying that his own novels are skilful and witty imitations of the works of such writers as Stefan Zweig, Aldous Huxley, and David Garnett rather than truly original creations.

⁶ Ibid., 36.

⁷ Antal Szerb: *Naplójegyzetek (1914–1943)*. Budapest: Magvető, 2001, 93.

⁸ Antal Szerb: *Magyar irodalomtörténet*, 211–212.

The reader of *A History of Hungarian Literature* can gain an insight into the complexities of ethnic assimilation in the Dual Monarchy. Opinions are sharply divided on this thorny issue. Szerb's argument may be controversial for historians, but its subjectivity has sad connotations, especially if we remember that he was to die in a labour camp in 1945. "At the beginning of the twentieth century," he argues, "the unbridgeable gap between Hungarians and Jews was advantageous for evolution. Hungarians respected everything that was old, whereas Jews respected everything new. The meeting of the two life rhythms was fortunate in the sense that they led to happily moderate changes. Later the difference became a drawback for both races."⁹

Szerb's concept of national identity cannot be described without reference to *A vándor és a bujdosó* (The Wanderer and the Fugitive), a book by the philosopher Lajos Prohászka (1897–1963), first published in instalments in 1932–33 in *Minerva*, the organ of the Hungarian *Geistesgeschichte* school. (Szerb's long essay *Kölcsey* appeared in the same journal in 1926.) The title of this work formulates an opposition between the national characters of Germans and Hungarians. Prohászka was a disciple of Eduard Spranger. He defined Hungarian identity in sharp contrast to German character, thus setting an example for intellectuals who came to represent a resistance to the growing influence of Nazi Germany. If Lajos Prohászka's outlook can be called retrospective in the sense that he borrowed some of his ideas from the German Romantics, something similar characterized Szerb's approach to national identity. His statement that the dividing line between East and West was drawn in the sixteenth century derives from the essays of Zsigmond Kemény (1814–1875), a Transylvanian-born writer whose novels Szerb praised in his history of Hungarian literature. East of the Carpathians people remained largely unaffected by the Reformation, and this absence can be taken as a distinguishing feature of the culture of Eastern Europe. This hypothesis suggests that the origin of the division of the continent can be traced back to the difference between the Western and Eastern legacies of Christianity. In the West secular and religious authority were separate, whereas in the East they were often combined with each other.

"Hungarian literature is a miniature copy of European literature. (...) The most European writers were always the best Hungarians."¹⁰ In Szerb's work this premise is coupled with the questionable assumption about the intellectual superiority of the Western orientation of most Hungarians over the Eastern orientation of their Slavic neighbours. Following Babits's lead, Szerb firmly believed that "the birth of Hungarian culture coincided with the adoption of the Christian faith."¹¹ Over and over, Szerb insisted that "Hungarian literature had no pre-Christian traditions."¹² While this declaration may be at odds with the results of folklorists, Szerb can take credit for an emphasis on unbroken continuity between the Latin Middle Ages and the cult of the vernacular represented by the Reformation.

⁹ Ibid., 428.

¹⁰ Ibid., 16.

¹¹ Ibid., 23.

¹² Ibid., 25.

As mentioned above, Szerb drew inspiration from the works of Babits. Still, his views on the Reformation were somewhat more nuanced than those of his master. “The force of Catholicism,” he observed, “consisted in a faith in stability that resisted history, whereas Protestantism was driven by the dynamism of evolution.”¹³ In comparison with Babits, Szerb seems to have done justice to the role of Protestantism in the formation of Hungarian identity. It is symptomatic that in his historical survey of Hungarian literature he respectfully quoted not only Horváth, the most important literary historian of the previous, but also László Németh (1901–1975), the most influential Protestant author of his own generation, a novelist, playwright, and essayist who is usually regarded as the most many-sided Hungarian writer of the twentieth century.

In 1939 Németh published a short book entitled *Kisebbségben* (In Minority). Its immediate source of inspiration was *Az asszimiláció kora a magyar irodalomban 1867–1914* (The Age of Assimilation in Hungarian Literature, Budapest: Magyar Történelmi Társulat, n. d.), a sociological study of the ethnic aspects of Hungarian culture in the Dual Monarchy that was also published in a German version as *Der Freiheitskampf des ungarischen Geistes 1867–1914* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1940). Its author Gyula Farkas (1894–1958) was a literary historian who became professor in Berlin in 1928. Németh’s work can be read both as an elaboration on some theses formulated by Farkas and as an implicit critique of Szerb’s interpretation of national identity. *In Minority* immediately sparked a controversy. It unleashed a debate about the contribution of the bourgeoisie to national culture. Németh is sometimes discussed together with the spokesmen of the so-called Populist movement that prevailed in several, if not most, countries of Central and Eastern Europe between the two world wars, despite the fact that he was a well-educated intellectual, in contrast to most representatives of the trend in question. His works have been translated into numerous languages, and his novel *Guilt* is one of the three pieces of Hungarian literature included in the list that appeared as an appendix to Harold Bloom’s *The Western Canon*.

In Minority is a well-written and highly provocative work. One of its hypotheses is an opposition between organic and imitative cultures, a distinction borrowed from Kölcsey’s *National Traditions*. Németh considers the culture of the bourgeoisie to be imitative. In his view the identity of a nation is continuously put into question. As is well-known, Marxists also attack bourgeois culture, but Németh was a non-Marxist. In 1934 he wrote a perceptive essay on Stalin that anticipated later interpretations of totalitarianism. On one level, *In Minority* can be taken as an attack on both Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s Russia. Yet some have detected anti-Semitism in the analysis of the “foreign,” that is, German culture of the bourgeoisie of Central Europe. Still others insisted that Németh was right to point out that both Babits and Szerb ignored the distinct nature of society and culture in Eastern Europe and neglected the literatures of this region. Németh visited Romania in the 1930s, at a time when relations between that country and his own were not friendly, and called for a comparative history of the cultures of Eastern Europe.

¹³ Ibid., 55.

History is full of unexpected turns. During the Communist decades *In Minority* was virtually banned, although the Soviet occupation and the Warsaw Pact forced intellectuals to rethink national identity in an East-European context. In 1989, shortly after the collapse of the Communist systems, *In Minority* was re-published. The once controversial work lost much of its attraction almost overnight. In the late 1990s Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary joined NATO. These three countries look forward to becoming member states of the European Union. Hungarian literary historians have been urged to contribute to a re-phrasing of national identity in terms of European integration. It remains to be seen when and how this goal can be reached.

