

”CULTURE CONSISTS OF POSTHUMOUS CORRECTIONS”. THE LESSONS OF ”THE GREAT LITERARY WAR” FOR THE PRESENT

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Abstract

Some 120 years ago, at the dawn of the modern era, Hungarian culture underwent the same profound changes as today. New ideas, modern economy, and social assimilation transformed the inclusive environment. Nowadays, the new endeavours bring fundamental changes to the country and alter the national culture as well. The old dilemmas are still relevant today: Is it possible to control the evolution of high culture through cultural policy? Or does everything happen rather irrespective of media-driven ideological debates? Do ideologies really go beyond the surface? Digital databases offer the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the dispute. The hitherto hidden factors can clarify the old questions, and help us understand the trends of the 21st century. I will not always draw direct parallels between the past and the present in this paper, but I believe the cases I will analyze speak for themselves and provide valuable insights.

Keywords

liberal-conservative dispute, cultural policy, digitization, data-bases

INTRODUCTION

There is no question that the significant liberal and conservative groups within present-day Hungarian culture have existed for many decades. While I do not believe that this division will disappear in the future, I aim to demonstrate in this paper that we should not regard this divide as conclusive evidence. In other words, I question whether the liberal-conservative dispute, which emerged in Hungarian culture around 120 years ago, reflected pre-existing needs and demands. At least, that is not what the texts of the discussion indicate.

Studying the past – and I am obviously not stating anything new here – helps us understand the trends of the present. I will not always draw direct parallels between the past and the present in this paper, but I believe the cases I will analyze speak for themselves and provide valuable insights.

1.

In the fifty years following the Second World War, Hungarian literary history generally interpreted the first decade of the 20th century as a period of struggle for artistic and literary freedom [1–3]. According to various handbooks and analyses, a fight for freedom began in Hungarian literature in the early 1890s. As per this narrative, the writers who declared themselves independent of the artistic norms of the previous generation had to struggle to express their

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opinions freely. As Ignotus stated in his memoirs, political conservatives and old-fashioned literary institutions tried to impede the development of the new literature. The subsequent literary generation that emerged in the first years of the new century also had to break through old artistic directives in order to reach their audiences. Newspapers, conservative literary forums, and members of the academy pressured the young to adhere to the artistic rules of the old and forbade them to follow their own creative drive [4].

Modern writers played a major role in highlighting and solidifying this warlike concept – along with the terminology associated with it – by creating a mythological aura around their own endeavours, interpreting their venture as “a deadly freedom struggle”. Endre Ady’s notion of “the revolution of the Hungarian souls” remained prevalent for many decades [5]. According to the memoirs of the editors of *Nyugat* – Ignotus, Miksa Fenyő, and Oszkár Gellért –, their periodical served as one of the foremost forums for bringing about radical changes to the cultural hierarchy and breaking conservative hegemony. However, in their effort to emphasize the significance of the debates, these notable writers inadvertently contributed valuable input to Marxist theory which posited that the triumphant artistic revolution around the turn of the century foreshadowed and paved the way for the otherwise unsuccessful social revolution of 1919 and the political takeover in the late 1940s.

The great literary war thus became self-evident.

In fact, Hungarian law provided liberal regulation for the press during the period between 1867 and 1914, allowing for a wide range of opportunities to publish fictional works. Until 1914, anyone could start a magazine simply by notifying the local mayor. The most influential publishing houses gladly accepted the books of modern writers. For example, Endre Ady’s *Új versek (New Poems)* was published by Pallas in 1906, *Vér és arany (Blood and Gold)* by Franklin in 1907, and the subsequent collection, entitled *Az Illés szekeren (On Elijah’s Chariot)* – as we will see – by Singer and Wolfner in 1908. The Franklin publishing house also had a weekly illustrated magazine called *Vasárnapi Újság*, which frequently featured works by modern writers. In fact, *Vasárnapi Újság* was edited by Aladár Schöpflin, a close friend of Ady, and Schöpflin published essays and reviews in *Nyugat* on a regular basis.

More subtle and realistic concepts of the early 20th century were rarely expressed until the 1980s when scholars initiated the reconstruction of diverse – both individual and group – efforts during the early years of *Nyugat*. Despite this, warlike terminology continues to be commonly used when discussing the early 20th century, and the era is often depicted as a time of intense conflict between modern and conservative writers [6–7].

2.

It is certainly undeniable that from the 1890s onwards, conservative literary theorists, like Professor Zsolt Beöthy, the secretary of the Kisfaludy Társaság, who maintained a lifelong connection to Komárom, defined national literature in a rather exclusive manner. According to Beöthy, the majority of significant works in Hungarian literature had been the products of strong national sentiment for centuries. Furthermore, Hungarian literature was primarily concerned with the national sphere of experience, and if a given work fit into this theme, its success was more assured.

In his book, *A magyar irodalom kis-tükre (A Small Mirror of Hungarian Literature)*, Beöthy depicted the allegoric image of the “Volga horseman”, using it to trace the fundamental features of Hungarian spirituality back to the “ancient living conditions”. According to Beöthy, the Hungarians were known for their strong sense of solidarity, keen power of observation, willingness to contemplate, clarity of insight, as well as their vividness and certainty

in perception and judgment. Their imagination and thinking were entirely driven by national sentiments. He contended that the Hungarians, to serve their national interests, consistently adapted and adjusted the ideas and forms they took from others. In other words, despite the amalgamation of several ethnic groups, the "thousand-year-old characteristics of the Hungarian soul" endured [8].

Beöthy viewed Hungarian urban literature as entirely unconventional and believed that the only way to "rectify" it was to ensure that the life and poetry of the Hungarian countryside had substantial impact on it. Beöthy encouraged artists to integrate their works into existing traditions; nevertheless, his ideas did not evolve into an official ideology [9].

It is important to emphasize that both Beöthy and Ignóty embraced Hyppolite Taine's theory of art, which posits that an artist's creative power is impacted by hereditary factors and the social environment. Consequently, modern writers also acknowledged that Hungary had a *singular* socio-cultural tradition, but they believed that modern ideas, modern economy, and social assimilation would transform the inclusive environment. These new endeavours would bring fundamental changes to the country and alter the national culture as well [10–12]. In my view, the conclusion reached by modern writers also remains relevant today. An artist's inherent determination *always* differs from the overall tradition, leading to the creation of different forms of art. In other cases, there could be elements of repetition, but a true artist cannot alter his unconscious motivations. It is therefore impossible to predict the exact appearance of a new type of art in advance.

On the other hand, an artist's work is essentially the continuation of tradition, and tradition is extended and altered by the creation of every new work of art. We can anticipate that anything written by a Hungarian individual or by someone who has embraced a Hungarian identity as an expression of their soul and individuality, is *eo ipso* Hungarian. Art, as seen by early modernity, is an intellectual product stemming from individuality, or more precisely, from man's creative capacities. Art is autonomous, free, and quality-driven [13].

3.

The differences between the positions occupied by the conservatives and the moderns became evident as early as the late 1890s, however, the dialogue between these opposing views ceased around the turn of the century. The conservatives simply reiterated the metaphors mirroring the brilliant old world's unsoiled atmosphere, the solid traditions, and the national spirit's capacity to integrate new cultural trends. Additionally, they revised the criteria for determining how and when modern writers could be included in the national canon. On the other hand, the modern writers could contribute little to the arguments they previously used to refute conservative allegations. The positions occupied by the two sides were incommensurate; fear, anger, and hatred dominated their statements.

According to the theory of the extreme left, Endre Ady's *New Poems* marked the beginning of the intense struggle in literary politics. Ady's affiliation with *Nyugat* in 1908 was of extraordinary importance, since it was his "responsibility" to reshape the middle-class humanism of *Nyugat* into social progression. The proponents of the political far left supported the latter theses with carefully chosen and seemingly persuasive quotations. It cannot be denied that during the annual general meetings of the Kisfaludy Society, speakers often voiced concerns regarding the fate of Hungarian poetry. Satirical papers mocked new writers and parodied their "incomprehensible" works repeatedly, however, it is worth noting that the same papers directed much harsher criticism towards political leaders. Certain publicists of right-wing dailies and periodicals accused the modern writers of deliberate destruction, moral nihil-

ism, and conscious [!] insanity [14–17]. However, *Nyugat* and Ady faced only rare attacks, which were usually common for newcomers entering the literary market. Overall, the lack of the new ideas was apparent, and poor intellectual ammunition was conspicuous.

The critical editions of correspondences, the databases, and bibliographies from the period do not support the claim of large-scale literary conflicts. For example, Endre Ady's name appeared in the *Budapesti Hirlap* between January 1 and June 30 only three times, while Ignotus's name appeared twice. In November, when the duk-duk scandal broke out (to be explained later), Ady's name was mentioned once, and in December, when Jenő Rákosi published his infamous review of modern literature, apart from Rákosi's article itself [18], his name was mentioned one more time.

Nevertheless, Ignotus tried to revive the old polemics in *Nyugat* as well. As part of his combative strategy, he depicted *Nyugat* as a threatened mission and new literature as endangered. However, this approach, proved to be less effective, as he used their *own* journal to explain their threatened situation. [19–20] What is more, Ignotus's strategy was discredited because he had already been instilling fear in his readers *for almost two decades*, warning them about the forces conspiring against modern literature. Ironically, it would have been most convincing for his readership, if *Nyugat* was banned. Nevertheless, the majority of the elite did not even consider such a drastic action and they lacked any kind of legal basis for such measures. Conservative extremists also benefited from *Nyugat*'s existence, as it provided them a platform to write about something they considered "horrible" while demonizing the modern writer's way of thinking. Nevertheless, the polemics reinforced the camps' unity and sense of belonging on both sides. Meanwhile, some authors, who sounded the alarms of war in daytime, played cards in the evening in the same club, enjoying themselves.

4.

The first significant press discussion regarding *Nyugat* and Ady did not begin until November 1908. However, we should not view this discussion particularly serious either, since Ady initiated the polemics with an incredibly ambiguous text in *Új Idők*, a weekly paper published by Singer and Wolfner, which could be considered the counterpart of *Nyugat*. As Ady wrote, "I have nothing to do with the so-called Hungarian modern, and my alleged literary rebellion is not even a rebellion. Since I am patient and inept, small, crafty people can cling to me, but that is not my fault. Apparently, I have nothing to do with the revolution happening in my name" [21]. Ady later considered the text "moronic", nevertheless, the leading figures of *Nyugat* felt that Ady had satirized them. It was also painful for Ady's allies, who felt ashamed, especially the members and sympathizers of the Holnap Literary Society in Nagyvárad, who could not understand what had happened to their idol.

Ady's article that sparked the scandal did not make anything explicit, but the text gave the impression that he might switch sides and turn from the moderns to the conservatives. In addition, the fact that he published his new book, entitled *On Elijah's Chariot* with Singer and Wolfner, only intensified the suspicion. Ady kept his readers uncertain about his literary political position and centred the attention on his own personality. Therefore, the new book sold well, and the whole case can be viewed a classical and well-executed example of guerrilla marketing.

As a next step, Ady apologized and explained his motivation in lengthy letters until he managed to reconcile with his patron Lajos Hatvany and the editors of *Nyugat*. Afterwards, he insulted conservative writers in his subsequent articles. *Nyugat* regarded these publications as a renewed declaration of loyalty to modernism.

Ady's scandal had both a literary and a political message, and it also evoked strong emotions. In cafés, casinos, parties, and teachers' rooms, several people discussed the new literature, but its readers, based on how many copies were sold, were probably far fewer. The keywords loyalty, betrayal, and offense were understood even by those who had not read a single line by Ady before. Having achieved what he had been striving for, Ady found himself in the spotlight. Elemér Bányai, Ady's friend played an important role in escalating the controversy surrounding the poet. In the *Almanac of the Budapest Journalists*, published in 1909 and edited by Bányai, an entire section was devoted to the conflict between new and old literature, and especially the role Ady played in it. Bányai wrote a bombastic, combative preface to the *Almanac* [22]. However, many of the articles published in the *Almanac* reflected mood swings and were harmless recitations of the past or rather substandard apologetics of the journalistic profession, full of verbose, commonplace idealism. Similarly, the section discussing the activity of the new literature could not demonstrate a large-scale war, but rather the raids, skirmishes, and the coordinated efforts of concurrent periodicals. As for literary policy, only a few characteristic statements were published. The best written and, at the same time, most entertaining contribution to the *Almanac* was Kálmán Mikszáth's. In this piece, Mikszáth outlined three [!] different models of literary evolution that could hardly be synchronous to each other; in general, he understated the entire literary struggle [23]. Of course, Ignóty immediately initiated a polemic with Mikszáth [24].

5.

Twenty years ago, having suspected that the *Almanac's* editor had extended the time limits and presented older writings as newer, I had limited tools at my disposal to verify these suspicions. All the periodicals from this era were accessible at only one place, the Országos Széchényi Könyvtár (National Széchényi Library) in Budapest. As journals could only be researched on microfilm, it was impossible to accurately measure the scale of the so-called literary war. By now, the method of searching and selecting texts have been transformed by digital databases in an amazing and fundamental way. A turnaround was achieved by modernizing and improving scanning procedures. In digitization, OCR or optical character recognition allows for the automated searching, editing, and cropping of scanned and photographed materials.

It is also essential for further research and for comparative literary studies that, from the late nineteenth century, not only Hungarian sources are accessible but, via foreign platforms, also the periodicals that served as reference for Hungarian writers, or in which some of them published their works (for example *Simplicissimus*, an illustrated satirical German weekly magazine, or *Pan*, one of the most important forums of the European Art Nouveau). Thanks to digitization projects, it is now possible to publish extensive correspondences that were almost impossible to publish in the traditional book format, for example the correspondence of Zsigmond Móricz between 1892 and 1913 [25].

Digital interfaces immediately reveal relationships between people and events, which previously had to be searched in the indexes of separate volumes. By searching millions of pages, we can obtain up to thousands of results in seconds. However, not anyone could become a researcher simply by making use of digital innovations. Research via these methods still requires serious background knowledge. It is still necessary to delimit the research question precisely, and we also must have a well-defined purpose of what we want to explore in comparison to previous studies. Researchers today need to define more clearly what they are looking for, otherwise, the abundance of data can be overwhelming.

What is more, digital databases offer the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding the creation of literary works. The hitherto hidden factors in artists' biographies can be revealed and iconography can be enriched by newly discovered images. However, there is a misleading trend where rewritten literary biographies are much more appealing to the readers than primary sources. In some cases, the writers' oeuvres serve solely as illustrations of their life-stories. Furthermore, from a professional point of view, the omission of references in such biographies must be disapproved, since it is unclear whether their authors did use their imagination to fill in the gaps between the facts or relied on trustworthy sources. This authorial practice can introduce elements with a tabloid flavour into the public consciousness misrepresented as factual information.

The availability of digital databases, such as Arcanum, has made it possible to test the validity of the old, "unquestionable" theories. By using these digital databases, I was able to find several previous releases of the *Almanac's* articles. For example, a conclusion from Zsolt Beöthy's speech to the Kisfaludy Society on February 9, 1908, was reprinted in the *Almanac* [26]. Jenő Rákosi commented on a longer passage from his article about the modern [27]. Ferenc Herczeg also formulated his views earlier in *Új Idők*, as Károly Porzsolc published his essay in *Pesti Hírlap* in December 1908 [28]. However, the "champion" was certainly Gyula Szini, whose essay was published originally in Ernő Osvát's *Figyelő* in 1905 and was reprinted twice in the same year. Meanwhile some other opinions were compilations of older and current views [29].

Based on the sources it seems that Bányai had taken out the texts from their original contexts and the statements reinforced each other's effect to demonstrate "the music of the intellectual cannons" of 1908 [30]. It is clear that strong-looking evidence supporting the large-scale literary war that Ady, Bányai, Ignotus (and many others) talked about has now been called into question. Furthermore, the opposing sides taking part in the debates were not homogeneous, and Ady was not entirely committed to the *Nyugat* either, as his relationship with Hatvany and the editors was contradictory.

SUMMARY

In my opinion, the tension in literature at the turn of the century was primarily driven by generational conflicts among the artists. Among other factors, the editors of well-known magazines perceived that the new writers meant a threat to the circulation of their publications. On the other hand, the newcomers might have believed that escalating their attacks would bring them commercial benefit. Re-reading the polemics reveals that the opposing sides frequently exaggerated or misinterpreted the opponent's viewpoint. The positions, one might believe, had scientific basis, but instead, they were occasionally influenced by personal animosity and, at times, by individual need for self-assertion. However, if the accusations and insinuations were made loud enough, they could take a life of their own. It is usually easier to assign blame than to refute insinuations convincingly.

Therefore, Ernő Osvát's aphorism quoted in the title applies in this case as well.

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