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Role-Player and Scholar: The Historical Essays of Miklós Gáspár Tamás

Miklós Gáspár Tamás is undoubtedly one among our authors who needs not fear complete and infinite death. He can be sure that his reputation and legacy will long outlive him. His works, though not carved from stone, are certainly enduring enough to ensure that they will live on in two countries. And this is how it should be. In the case of Miklós Gáspár Tamás, we must acknowledge both the body of work and the author's personality. Miklós Gáspár Tamás was capable of – sometimes spontaneously – renewing the image of the Hungarian citizen, and he plays this out with his sympathetic gestures to the arts. His walking stick, salon-jacket, “Sir, Friend, Member of Parliament” style is not an image to laugh at, but a consciously adopted example. This was how a liberal representative was supposed to be in the times of Andrásy and Kálmán Tisza, and, following the British tradition, it is how one ought to be these days. So the role was given. Miklós Gáspár Tamás's historical essays must be understood and interpreted in light of this, acknowledging that they are a verification of the picture of the ideal politician. Thus, we are not dealing with the works of a professional historian, but with parables. They are parables concerning how Magyar citizens in Central Europe should understand their historically-rooted role in contemporary days. This is a commendable position, given that at present, Miklós Gáspár Tamás is the only liberal author who does not acknowledge the intellectual livestock pen, which was established in and around 1992 by the governing intellectual elite of the time, according to which only they

can authentically comment on the history of the nation. Liberals thus have two options: they can either deny the existence of the nation, or they can accept the language of the other group.

In his volume called *Törzsi fogalmak* [Tribal Terms], the author is admittedly searching for values. Every line of his writing drips of the dignity of one who takes responsibility for his values. This is a great honor in a time when, to quote Miklós Gáspár Tamás, “every assistant director with any self-worth is beyond good and bad.”¹ Miklós Gáspár Tamás does not hide which values he is seeking. In his work he appears as the supporter of a liberal national state, the conservative, the liberal, the Protestant believer. In his own words, we are reading the work of a Christian thinker when we read his essays. The fact that this attitude does not seem to acknowledge that the leftist neophytes who lost in 1998 pay little attention to Miklós Gáspár Tamás’s opinions is largely beside the point. The prefaces to his works show that his positions are part of a debate, which the author is continuing with himself – even if he does not always make this perfectly clear. His changing positions regarding daily political events – even if these are a little too regular for my taste – are not the result of being a coat-turn, but of the close examination of his own positions. Whether this should lead the author to hold back a little from his nearly daily editorial writing is another question altogether. Admittedly, it can be a little painful to see how, with consistent moral positioning and detail, Miklós Gáspár Tamás opens fire against all that which only yesterday seemed to be the key to reaching his goal. But we must note that the author’s commitment to solid national-state values was already made clear when he was sympathizing with liberalism and was openly overturning the postmodern canon. He was practically the first author in the liberal camp to warn that culture (and especially public education) which was not based on strict value preferences would result not in a hundred blooming flowers, but instead in chaos. Miklós Gáspár Tamás’s intellectual position – which is often unfortunately somewhat hidden by the sudden temper of the publicist in him, in which he, in the manner of youths arguing in the beer garden, begins to throw open insults at Fidesz and Csurka (even though he was the one that told us that a gentlemen does not do such things, even on the gallows pole!) – is that of a scholar, and not a publicist. This is evidenced by his knowledge of the classical canon, which up to the 1950s was a mandatory condition for par-

ticipation in European cultural discourse, and whose golden age was precisely the middle and latter half of the 19th century, when acceptance of the canon was considered the basic condition for membership in the civilized (Western) world. One of Miklós Gáspár Tamás's basic virtues is his constant – though not overly repeated – reminding of this absence. One of the great values of his work is not just the attempt to speak in the language of lost tradition, but the fact that he draws attention to blemishes in the Hungarian cultural past. In other words, it would be good to go beyond the bankruptcy of postmodernism by trying to find points of reference through rediscovering (in his words, re-instating) our own cultural heritage. The breaking with this tradition was in the air since the 1920s (its foreshadows were apparent in the last decades of the 19th century), but the true break occurred in the cultural and social movements of the 1960s, which appeared revolutionary at the time. All this is summarized, along with a wide critique of 1989 Eastern Europe, in his essay entitled *Értekezés a civil társadalomról* [A Study on Civil Society].² This short paper pointedly shows that “As long as we do not believe in the independence of the mind or spirit, we are doomed to return to Communism again and again. What is certain is that in ‘civil society’, as it is imagined today, communism will seem proper, and liberalism will seem improper.”³

Miklós Gáspár Tamás's texts can be divided into two groups. The first consists of those pieces where he sticks to his own profession, where he writes as a philosopher. These are generally short and brilliant pieces. The second group is made of those long, stylistically difficult pieces, which the author dedicates to examining the past. It is a general misconception that historical writing is prose concerning the past, and not story writing. The realization of both these circumstances is a necessary but insufficient condition for executing the tasks of the guilded historian. At this point it is worth distinguishing the crafts of the storywriter and the historian. The storywriter hopes to summarize the lessons of his day, or turns to days gone by in order to speak about the questions of his day. There is nothing exceptional about this. Since Huizinga we've known that “history is always formation facing the past,” and in the fact that the past is being discussed, there is no difference between the storywriter and the historian. The *style of speaking* is what makes for the difference. Recently I had a chance to speak with a kind, attractive, and young female philosopher, who happens to write in

the same journal as I do, and thus it was little wonder that we began to talk about the difference between the craft of the historian and that of the philosopher. She claimed that all that interested her in the works of Plato were those things that were absolutes. I claimed that bringing to light the details of the past was the issue that concerned me. It was hardly more than a decade ago that I too sat in on the long lectures of middle-ages historians – lectures which lacked rhetorical bravado – where I experienced, with hardly withering intellectual excitedness, that the detailed texts of the past were rather different than the superficiality-filled ‘grand narratives’ explaining the same things. Boring historical discourses are bad historical discourses, while the excitement of good historical discourses is never attributable to the style of discourse, but to drawing out and making visible the fabric of the past. Given this, the principle of *historia est magistra vitae* is not, or is only rarely, valid for the historian. The past is not a pile of moral lessons which, presented properly, can be utilized in the present. Instead it is a past, antecedental reality which we hope to reconstruct – perhaps in order to understand our own days. But in any event, this is a backward process. The issues of my day may provide the idea as to where and how to begin questioning the past. But if I attempt to adjust myself to the past, I am committing the crime of historicization. One of Gyula Illyés’ most damaging statements – and with this he precisely exhausted Miklós Gáspár Tamás’s cloudily described oracle concept – was that in Hungary it is the right (and responsibility) of writers to write history. Few people these days remember, but those who do remember will never forget that in the 1970s the Hungarian history profession (and literary historians) had to fight a war of independence against the oracle. The only problem is that Miklós Gáspár Tamás visibly wanted to put on the robe of the oracle, and he decided that the only way he would take up the fight against the right-wing oracle of the 1990s was by playing an opposing myth.

‘Nothing but a myth?’ we might ask. The answer is clear. Over 60 years ago Károly Kerényi drew our attention to the fact that the difference between the myth and the story is not the content, but the attitude of the audience. In the case of the myth, I accept that I am facing a unique view of the world, which offers an example to follow. We are dealing with the processing of a real question transposed onto a story. The great Central-European plains (and its extensions into the Balkans) offer myths today not

for history's sake, but because they are faced with challenges which can only be answered through myths. (And in this way the region attempts to find its own imagined calling.) The modern fable is constructed of the coming to life of the individual calling, which springs from myths. If I think of Linda Degh's latest fable theory, then it becomes apparent that the Western man, who is so proud of his rationality, actually lives in a rather primitive fable world, full of UFO-s, monsters, people running amok, and bank robbers. And what is quite disturbing is that he sometimes tries to play out these roles. This is what makes for scattered teenagers and rivaling street gangs. The parallel playing out of fables and myths (in the worst case) is found in Bosnia and Kosovo, where, in the condition-system of myths, everyone can play their own fable part.

If not to such a tragic degree, this is exactly what happened in Hungarian intellectual life after 1992. It is well known that the trauma of birth causes a stoppage in the oxygen supply to the brain of the newborn. If a brain does not receive enough oxygen, a unique trance condition follows, in which sub-conscious images appear. This is the state in which Hungarian intellectual life found itself in the third year after the regime change, when after leaving the caul and the ever increasingly burdensome womb of socialism, it did not know what to do in the fresh air. In a paradoxical manner, this feeling was increased to the level of ecstasy by the euphoria of just having learned to breathe. This is how those myth and the fable roles, which made up their background, came to life. The language of Hungarian public life came up with a rather dirty expression for this: the media war. New myths were built around symbols of the past, which were hardly understood. Miklós Gáspár Tamás's virtue lies precisely in the fact that he picked up the glove, which was left behind by the opponents, and he tried to take them standing on their own playing field. Stepping into the role of a fabled hero, the author hoped to oppose two historical myths (which he thought were both imagined) right at the point when they were attacking one another. The only problem was that the science of history knew nothing of these myths.

When Miklós Gáspár Tamás crashed into Hungarian intellectual life, his first successes were attributable to his style. Finally, here was someone who could be, and actually wanted to be, quite articulate! And this is precisely what makes the reading of his historical essays disappointing. He cap-

tures the reader with his labored style, and then immediately lets the reader go. It is more difficult to follow the author's style and read through his texts than it is to understand the thoughts hiding within them. Moreover, the author's occasional affected use of words is painful. Although he has a right to be proud of his Transylvanian Calvinist roots, the words *kereszttyénség* [a vernacular for Christianity] and *evangéliom* [a vernacular for Gospel] are not part of the scientific language of Hungarian public life, unless we are reading the pages of *Confessio*. And these terms should especially be avoided when analyzing the *Catholicism* of Eötvös! This is not an exceptional observation. Mistakes in style – as almost always – are mistakes of the profession. They show that the author is not aware of the subtleties of the fabric of the past he is proposing to examine. This is especially disappointing, because when he takes off the forced disguise of the oracle, then Miklós Gáspár Tamás once again becomes the fine and well-styled philosopher, who is a joy to read. The small pieces in which he analyses the 'delegated nationalism' of the Western Left, or in which he examines the relation between pluralism and relativism, are splendid.⁴ But I encounter these often, as an occupational hazard. The (at best) half-educated nature of European culture today, and the loss of the traditional canon (i.e., relativism) are the reasons that the European is looking for the prison of being uncultured rather than for the freedom of education. When it dresses in ancient Magyar romanticism, or when it joins the students of wondergurus, then it is searching for imprisonment. More precisely, it is hoping for an instant, just-add-water intellectual orientation whose forced isolationism eases existence in societal chaos. It is just this situation which is examined in the author's (possibly) most brilliant study – which completely saves him from the pose of the liberal oracle – called *Etnarichia és etnoanarchizmus* [Ethnarchy and Ethno-anarchism], which, as it was in control of its topic, uses a splendid language and style.⁵ We can perfectly agree that the existence of modern (East European) nationalism is perfectly dependent on the nationalisms of 19th century liberal nation-builders. Chechnya serves as an example, where, as opposed to our legends, we do not have the case of a freedom-loving little nation fighting its war of independence against the Russian bear, but just the opposite – we have a postmodern ethnic thief war, or liquidation thereof, and this is excellently analyzed by the author. That the outer world is perfectly indifferent in the eyes of postmodern

nationalism is well illustrated by the fact that the Chechnyans committed acts of violence against the very foreigners who were arriving to help them. Here we can see the difference between the Chechnya and Kosovo crises, i.e., the extent to which the international community really had no idea as to what was going on. Elsewhere, Miklós Gáspár Tamás not only repeats his previous theory, but uses it to examine Chechnya.⁶

We do not need to believe that this phenomenon concerns only our unfortunate world. Western Europe is not exempt. The nationalisms which threaten the nation state are perhaps more dangerous there, even if the curtain of welfare manages to hide them. The example of Belgium is well known. In Switzerland, the social system is to this day merely a *simulacrum* of civic democracy. What kind of civic democracy is it where governmental positions, *regardless of election results*, are distributed on the basis of ethnic parities in a way where all political groups are represented? This situation is well examined in the short piece called *Philosophical Post-Script to Nationalism*.⁷ I thought I was going to pop open a bottle of champagne in celebration when I read: “Philosophical nationalism is necessarily relativistic. One does not need to be bloodthirsty or intolerant – we need only think of the newfangled theories of multiculturalism or postmodernism, under whose misleading titles, a new form of brain-dead nationalism is hiding in the West.”⁸ African-American racism and the fundamentalism of British Muslims are naturally threats, but a much larger threat is the possible collapse of the republican principle. The new, multicultural view of society is not that of free citizens proclaiming common values, but an outwardly closed, inwardly authoritarian pile of communities, where one can only be a member of society insofar as he/she is a member of the tribal association or caste system of one of these communities.

Our author, although he could take them on, avoids contemporary Hungarian examples. We must consider this a mistake of his, as he could do otherwise, and do so explicitly. (Perhaps this makes up for the otherwise unacceptable historical part.) He could explicitly state that the Carpathian Basin is, at present, threatened by the development of post-modern tribal association. One who thinks that the policies of Hungarian nationalist (mistakenly called right-wing) parties can simply be put into the categories of nationalism, or anti-Semitism is mistaken. The question is not the exclusion of Jews, as demanded by traditional anti-Semitism.

The ethics of tribal association is based on the acceptance of an authority ordering, derived from a myth, which is accepted by members when in contact with one another. From the examples of Central Asia and the Urals, one is not simply an Uzbek, a Turkmen, a Kyrgyz, a Baskir, or a Kazhak (or possibly, but exceptionally, a Tadjik), but one must necessarily be a member of some sub-ethnic group as well. These sub-ethnic groups allow for overlap and transfer among the numerous present-day ethnicities in the region. A Baskir *Qypsaq* will obviously show solidarity with his Baskir peers, but will show solidarity with the members of a *Qypsaq* tribe in Kazhakstan as well, or, if we stretch the example, with a Hungarian Cunnian. (Ad notum: American-Hungarians, American-Poles, American-Italians... etc.) At the same time, when in the circle of one's own ethnic group, one instinctively knows and follows the authority ordering which was set up among sub-ethnic groups through tradition. A *Teke*-Turkmein in Ashabad will never marry a *Jomud*-Turkmein from Nebit-dagi, never mind an oasis dweller. But even the oasis dwelling *Ajnallu* can be proud of being Turkmein, as opposed to Russian or Persian. Naturally, if the mother is Russian or Persian, then the child is still Turkmein, but only *Gul* [servant], and will remain so not just alone, but her offspring will always be so as well. They are defended from the outside, but inside they will always be subordinate. This strict system can be broken only by going in one of two directions: going 'Soviet', or going Islam.

In a somewhat more postmodern form, we can see the vision of society held by the deep-Magyars. If those 'who claim to be so' are Magyar, then the Magyars are those who accept OUR myth. He/she takes his/her place where WE tell them to (the myth itself exempts us from the question of who defines 'WE'). In this way, the nation is made of a tribal association within the borders, which is constructed of (pseudo-) ethnicities and regions, which are organically connected to the parts of the nation found across the borders, with their own oracles. Miklós Gáspár Tamás's position deserves even more respect when we take into consideration those party colleagues who – without realizing they were walking into a trap – lightly began to participate in the newest anti-semitism discourse of the current governing parties. The aim of this discourse is not to see pogroms on every street corner in this country – that is unimaginable – but in effect to exclude liberals from discourse on the nation.

Miklós Gáspár Tamás's historical essays are available in a single volume published by Atlantisz. For the most part these studies were not written for a Hungarian audience, but instead were first published abroad, mostly in the United States, and were then translated into Hungarian. Many of the essays in the volume were published in a volume a decade ago, entitled *Idola tribus*. The titles in the new collection show a clear allusion. That the texts and notes are not the responsibility of the translator, but of the author himself, is clearly stated by the publisher.⁹

The author himself is especially responsible for the content mistakes. Miklós Gáspár Tamás's historical illustrations are full of minor mistakes. Perhaps this does not negatively affect the philosophical elements, but for the historian, such mistakes make the credibility of the text questionable. The small mistakes are all rooted in a larger one. Our author is not interested in the past for its own sake, but – as we have already noted – tries to wear the costumes of his heroes by historicizing. Miklós Gáspár Tamás is just as ahistorical when writing about the 19th century as were those in the 18-19th century tradition who ahistorically idealized the Roman *res publica* image and tried to make it their own. The intellectual liberation of the middle and the second half of the 19th century is attributable to shaking the misconceptions regarding the Classical Age (although Marxism brought these back to life in Eastern Europe). Having given up the search for a *res publica* in the heavens, there was finally the freedom to be self-reflective, and this led to the rediscovery of the Classical Age. And the rediscovered Classical Age consisted not only of the eloquence of Cicero and Seneca, but also of public latrines and the stench of dirty markets. And we were able to realize what was common knowledge since Morgan, though it was reinforced by Andras Alföldi, that the newly expanding *res publica* was not a democracy in the modern sense, but was a rather closed alliance of settled agricultural tribes based on a market. And this is how we view the leading principles of the 19th century today. In the way that period attempted to make itself classical, Miklós Gáspár Tamás attempts to dress in the robes of his heroes. This is more than a crime: it is a mistake. The fundamental mistake in the historical essays of Miklós Gáspár Tamás is that the author simply does not realize how he should approach the subject. He not only lacks in informing the reader of the historical literature on the period, but he makes mistakes in his knowledge and interpretation of the entire period.

This is how it was possible for the fiasco to come to be, whereby the author, who considers himself a believer in the liberal nation-state – as if he hopes to be the József Eötvös of our times – leapfrogs somewhere into the *Gesammtmonarchie* of the Austrian liberals, and then slides deep into the boots of Metternich. I do not wish to repeat the secretive gospel of the author, therefore I will not draw on the fact that too many people sacrificed their lives for Hungarian independence over the 19th century for us not to consider such independence an unwanted burden. Obviously Miklós Gáspár Tamás captured the spirit of early 1990s Hungarian liberals, which sought to lead the small nations of East-Central Europe out of misery through the revival of *Gesammtmonarchie* – which never really existed anyway. The inherent mistake of the monarchy-fever which ruled Hungarian liberalism at the beginning of the 1990s was that despite facts to the contrary, it accepted the Austrian liberal picture of a black-yellow empire stretching from South Tyrol to Bukovina and from Galicia to Dalmatia. This of course would have been a useful oppositional block to grand German imperialism and to the selfishness of small nations – had it come to exist. But it never did! In a legal sense, it was precisely the Hungarian Compromise that obstructed its establishment, and in a political sense no one living in the territory considered it his/her home. (This despite the efforts of Prince Rudolf and Jókai.)

The real tension is thus not between Miklós Gáspár Tamás's proposed pair of *freedom* and *independence*, but between the concepts of homeland and empire. More precisely, the tension was between *homelands* and the poorly organized empire's two perfectly divergent notions. This was like a bad marriage. The empire was something which – beyond the hardly existent two sets of elites – no one wanted, but whose interests everyone feared would not be represented when dividing it among homelands. To use the words of Ignotus, it was a pile of colonies – without a motherland. The motherland was the dynasty, or more precisely the physical person of the ruler. (Legally, this was two persons.) The Austrian political elite consistently claimed that the countries of the Hungarian Holy Crown construed merely a *corpus separatum* within the united empire, while the Hungarians would recognize only the principle of two independent states connected through one dynasty. The Hungarian position won, and thus, by the 1900s, there was virtually no remaining connection between the two halves of the

empire, beyond deep and consistent mutual hatred, the result of which was that when the empire fell apart, Hungary paid the higher price. I am not referring to Trianon. Trianon was just an act of mercy. The populations of provinces represented in the Imperial Council, through the right to vote, could elect an inoperational parliament, behind which the good, old, quite permissive *aufklärista* absolutism continued. The likewise *aufklärista* Hungarian elite (which claimed to be liberal) took its parliamentocracy very seriously, i.e., it used its minority authority, which was based on voting rights, to reign above the majority it felt was undeveloped. (And to show this, it often pointed to beyond the Lajta River.) But when the empire dissolved, the elites of the provinces beyond the Lajta appeared almost immediately and stood their ground. The three-way political playing field of contemporary Austria, for example, was already present at the turn of the century, with the existence of social democrats, social Christians, and great Germans. A similar thing happened among the minorities of Hungary. Nations appeared from under the cloak of the empire, with the Hungarians being the possible exception.

The essay on Eötvös is where the cat jumps out of the bag. In Eötvös, Miklós Gáspár Tamás obviously want to see his own shadow and predecessor, i.e., the liberal-*aufklärista* reformer who, in the interest of modernization, argues with his own party colleagues. The problem is that – based on his own examples – in struggling against the new-styled nationalism of our day, he, through writing on Eötvös, attacks what Eötvös would never have touched: the traditions of the Hungarian enlightenment and reform age. This is what is most disturbing about the tendentious misunderstandings in *Eötvös: a nyugat-keleti liberális* [Eötvös: The West-Eastern Liberal]. The basic premise of the article is one with which we may agree. The ethnicist Magyar nationalism which flared up in the first third of the 19th century, the precedent to postmodern tribal association, was not a result of the tradition of 19th century Hungarian liberalism. But this does not mean that Magyar nationalism across the entire 19th century can be attacked through Eötvös, especially given that Miklós Gáspár Tamás had once taught us that we are dealing with two unconnected phenomena. The assumption that Eötvös was an enlightened believer in the *Gesamttmonarchie* is also debatable. Although the flaring up of ethnicist Magyar nationalism leads us to gather that the mistake can be traced back to the reform age, or that the age

of linguistic renewal sparked the process which led all the way to the euphoria of the 40s, it is a shaky proposition. Independence in itself did not mean the end of a free and cultured Hungary.

Miklós Gáspár Tamás's fundamental misunderstanding is that Hungarian modernization was Austria's doing.¹⁰ The situation is that Hungarian modernization was a Hungarian creation of all the significant legal-public actors! Even if it was the result of necessity. This is all the more sad when I encounter Miklós Gáspár Tamás's writings regarding the current situation. The picture of today's East-Central Europe, where 'European' actually means North American, hits the mark. But why should this require the distortion of Hungarian history? This same thought is basically repeated in another historical vision of his, whereby he tries, through examining the Balkan conflicts, to simplify the history of our region as a fight between a two-hundred year old enlightening authority and local nationalisms.

Miklós Gáspár Tamás the philosopher and statesman deserves all our respect. But the liberal oracle, who is attempting to replace misunderstood historical myths with new myths on the political playing field, does not deserve such respect. There is no need for it. Hungarian politics will not become healthy from our telling ourselves that Hungarian independence and Hungarian modernization are bad. It will improve when we accept that something different is going to happen now.

NOTES

- ¹ Miklós Gáspár Tamás, "A nemzeti érzés erkölcsi lényege," in Miklós Gáspár Tamás, *Törzsi fogalmak I.*, p. 72.
- ² *Törzsi fogalmak II.*, pp. 367-84.
- ³ "Értekezés a civil társadalomról," in *Törzsi fogalmak II.*, p. 384.
- ⁴ "A nemzeti érzés erkölcsi lényege," in *Törzsi fogalmak I.*, pp. 234-36, 259-63.
- ⁵ *Törzsi fogalmak I.*, pp. 303-46.
- ⁶ "Filozófiai utóirat a nacionalizmushoz," in *Törzsi fogalmak I.*, pp. 94-296.
- ⁷ *Törzsi fogalmak I.*, pp. 275-302.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 289.
- ⁹ *Törzsi fogalmak II.*, p. 439.
- ¹⁰ "Kétszáz éves háború," *Beszélő*, 1999. július-augusztus.