

Mario D. Fenyo
Literature and Political Change: Budapest, 1908–1918
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This well-documented study concerns itself with the literary review *Nyugat* and its association with the whole modern movement in Hungarian arts and letters (particularly, of course, the latter) which, because of the review's leading role in it as both sponsor and propagator, is referred to by Fenyo – not originally – as the *Nyugat* movement. (Following Mr. Fenyo's usage, I will italicize "Nyugat" only when it stands for the periodical itself.) The subject alone would make the book interesting, but it is made doubly interesting by the fact that the author is, as he himself is quick to tell us, the son of one of *Nyugat's* founders and editors, Miksa Fenyo.

As can be gleaned from the title, the study concentrates on the decade 1908–1918, or the first decade of the journal's existence – a momentous period in Hungarian history by any reckoning. Fenyo states as his dual objective "to", on the one hand, "formulate a methodology, a theory of the political function of literature", and, on the other, to present a "case study" of literature as agent of political change. Hence, presumably, the emphasis on the *Nyugat* which, despite its on the average small circulation, is generally acknowledged as the most important and influential literary review of the period.

The case study, fail though it ultimately does to demonstrate the connection which is posited between literature and political change, does meet with partial success. Unfortunately, not much light is shed on the larger issue of the political function of literature, a failing which Fenyo himself acknowledges. It must be added, however, that, the impressive results of the sociology of literature notwithstanding, the common-sense notion that literature must generally have some impact upon political events has the appeal (if not the self-evidential quality) of an axiom; and like an axiom, it is not really susceptible of proof. There can be no harder task than to explain how and through what channels literature exercises its political function, when the reality of that function, let alone its nature, has yet to be established.

Insofar as literature does have a political function, it can only be inferred, never proven. The literary statement, even one which is exhortatory and overtly political, is inert and basically a phenomenon of the printed page. By the time this peculiarly literary phenomenon can have any impact on the world of affairs and politics, it has crossed boundaries and become something other than what it was; it has, so to speak, metastasized. György Bölöni, a Socialist and contemporary of Ady, is quoted by Fenyo as saying that it was "to the *Nyugat* that Hungarians owed the renaissance of their literature, but it had nothing to do with the fermentation of Hungarian political life. What's more, it even kept aloof from the revolutions the sources of which it actually fed..." Fenyo, characteristically, is puzzled how Bölöni can deny that the *Nyugat* had any political significance when, at the same time, he credits it with having fed the sources of the revolution (presumably the 1918 bourgeois – "Chrysanthemum" – revolution, without which, however, there would scarcely have been the "proletarian" revolution which followed). This evidently self-contradictory analysis, though not the paragon of logic we might wish for, does derive from an altogether likable quality: an undogmatic approach in which both intuition and the critical eye are interjected. Based on no mean circumstantial evidence, Bölöni makes the plausible assumption that the *Nyugat* did have political clout, but upon closer examination we cannot see how the revolutions (or for that matter any of the political events ensuing) necessarily followed from the *Nyugat's* literary endeavors. The metastasis which transforms the written word into action, assuming of course there is such a thing, escapes his attention, as indeed it must everybody's.

The language of literature – the various ways in which it manifests itself – is different in kind from the visible and audible deeds of politics. Fenyo himself points out that Ady's poetic landscape, revolutionary though he calls it, may or may not have anything to do with the unrest and revolutions that followed. Indeed, exhort or even incite though a poem may, neither in its aural nor visual form can it have any immediate effect upon the political landscape. Before it can operate there it must undergo any number of transformations. It must, in a word, become what Leonard Mayer calls the "scuttlebutt" of the age, distilled and integrated in a prevailing

The fact is, Fenyo's approach is too earthbound and reads too much like a chronical to have any real chance of illuminating a subject so difficult as the political function of literature. Fortunately, however, this turns out to be only a pretext for his "case study", which, fail though it must in its primary aim, is nevertheless well worth the reader's trouble. It is, essentially, a political profile of the *Nyugat* editors and writers: their political beliefs, their affiliation with radical or progressive organizations whose existence largely coincided with that of the *Nyugat*, and their somewhat ambiguous place in the social hierarchy of the Hungary of 1908-1918. It offers a portrait of the *Nyugat* that rightly emphasises the review's central role in the Second Reform Age, and it does so with gusto and in abundant detail.

Given the brevity of the period with which he deals, Fenyo has quite rightly organized the book around certain dominant themes or aspects of the journal cum movement. For example, one chapter is devoted to situating the *Nyugat* in time and space ("The Historical Context"), another to the journal's literary precedents, yet another to its finances, and so on. Each chapter in turn reads chronologically. However, while the portrait is remarkable for its considerable breadth, it is not particularly deep, offering relatively few insights or penetrating analyses.

The study naturally contains a discussion of the cultural inheritance of the *Nyugat*. The picture it paints is not only detailed, it is for the most part also accurate. The importance of foreign influences, those of "Zola, Nietzsche, Anatole France, Baudelaire, Freud, the symbolists, the naturalists, the impressionists" is rightly emphasized. (Personally I would leave out the so-called impressionists, who upon closer examination turn out to be essentially the same figures who are generally and best regarded as symbolists; indeed, impressionism in literature turns out to be rather a phantom category.) The phenomenon of "combined development", in which Hungary, like Central and Eastern European countries in general, ventured to "catch up" with the West by adopting - belatedly and out of sequence - middle and late nineteenth-century artistic currents, is concisely and vividly depicted. On the other hand, the retarding influence of the patriotic or "folk-national" style, by which I mean not only such uninspired poets as Lajos Pósa and Mihály Szabolcska but also critics like Pál Gyulai and Zsolt Beöthy (particularly the latter), wedded to and supported by such conservative organizations as the Kisfaludy Society and the Academy of Sciences, is not given the consideration it deserves.

For all its audaciousness and originality, the *Nyugat* was not without its forerunners. Fenyo mentions quite a few, including of course the seminal *A Hét*, launched in 1890 under the editorship of József Kiss. The emphasis, however, falls on a few reviews in which Osvát, one of the chief architects of the *Nyugat* in its middle as well as early years, played a principal role. One such review was *Magyar Gênioz* edited only for a brief term by Osvát. Of much greater importance was the *Figyelő*, launched on January 1, 1905, again under the editorship of Osvát. It had a meager lifespan of eleven issues, but during that time it had concentrated the same talents which would make up the shortly-to-emerge *Nyugat* movement. Indeed, the very first issue of the *Nyugat* (which appeared on the stands in late December 1907) bore the inscription "the new series of the *Figyelő*".

Given the study's emphasis on the *Nyugat's* political function, it should be no surprise that Fenyo has situated the periodical, and the writers and artists loosely associated with it, in the socio-economic hierarchy of Hungary in 1908-1918. The Jewish connection has of course long been known, but Fenyo's discussion of it is all the same impressive for its many-sidedness and comprehensiveness. The great triumvirate of Ignóty, Osvát, and Fenyo was Jewish, as was Lajos Hatvany, whose early contribution to the journal as writer and particularly as financier was absolutely essential.

The *Nyugat* was by no means unique. Fenyo offers a profile of virtually every organization and movement "to which the progressive intellectuals belonged", and which was active during all or at least some of the first decade of the *Nyugat's* existence. There were the review *Huszadik Század* and the group that would adopt it as its official organ, the Society of Social Scientists (founded in January 1900 and January 1901, respectively); the Free School (established by the Society for the benefit of workers); the Thália dramatic company, the Martinovics Lodge of the Freemasons; the Galilei Circle of the University of Budapest; the Endre Nagy cabaret; the Bourgeois Radical Party; the Free Union of Teachers in Hungary; the Sunday Circle; and many others.

According to Fenyo, an examination of the rosters of these organizations "reveals that their membership was likewise predominantly Jewish..." Fenyo, who amply shows the "interdependence and interassociations between the *Nyugat* and the above listed organizations", supposes, plausibly, that, "by and large, the subscribers and readers of the periodical came from their ranks". Circumstantial evidence for this claim is provided by Ala-

dár Schöpflin's recollection, cited by Fenyo, namely that the *Nyugat* was read mostly by Jews. Echoing this assertion is Miksa Fenyo, who as part-time bookkeeper and fundraiser "knew his constituents very well", and who asserted that two-thirds of the *Nyugat's* readers were Jewish.

These Jewish intellectuals were for the most part petty bourgeois (a celebrated exception to this being the Sunday Circle's György Lukács). They – and of course the outnumbered non-Jews who filled out the rosters of these organizations – were radical and, in one way or another, modernists. But the *Nyugat* also had the support of the big bourgeoisie (also in the main Jews). Among those investing in the Nyugat Literary and Printing Co. (a book publishing venture begun by the founders of the periodical) were Leó Lánczy, the Director of the Hungarian Bank of Commerce, and powerful industrialists like Ferenc Chorin and Moritz Kornfeld.

It is unlikely, Fenyo argues, that such experienced businessmen joined the venture in expectation of a profit. Their financial (and occasionally even "literary") involvement probably owed itself instead to their wish in general to "promote assimilation, integration, pro-Semitism". This wish, Fenyo might have added, was by this time peculiarly Jewish upper and upper-middle class, a remnant of the relatively liberal climate in the Hungary of the early dual Monarchy, and was yet another thing that distinguished them from such young Jewish intellectuals as Béla Balázs, Karl Mannheim, and (despite his upper class background) György Lukács, for whom such optimism seemed hopelessly anachronistic.

The prominent role of Jews in the intellectual (and professional) life of Hungary was, of course, symptomatic of a more general tendency. In all three centers of the Monarchy – Vienna, Prague, and Budapest – it was Jews who by the *fin-de-siècle* controlled the levers of culture. It was they who ran the press, they who bought and sold paintings, they who put on and attended concerts. But this tendency was given to variations which distinguished the imperial centers one from the other. In the Bohemian capital, the German Jews had a culture all their own and were very far indeed from relinquishing their distinctive identity; moreover, their impact on Czech culture was negligible. In Vienna (where the supremacy of German culture was of course undisputed), not only the intellectuals and entrepreneurs, but the writers and artists also came from the ranks of Jews. Budapest, meanwhile, differed from Prague in that it was essentially the home of a single culture – Magyar – in which Jews, only recently assimilated, not merely participated but played the predominant role. Budapest also differed from Vienna in that, for reasons not entirely clear, Jews there did not abound in the sphere of imaginative writing; indeed, if anything, they were underrepresented. The *Nyugat*, with its Jewish financiers and editors on the one hand, and its gentile literary artists on the other, not only mirrored the trend but was an extreme example of it.

According to Mihály Babits, historically speaking as important a figure as any in the *Nyugat*, the early years of the review could be summarized as the story of the gentry and bourgeoisie in revolt against itself. This rather straightforward interpretation is taken exception to by Fenyo, who insists that most of the *Nyugat* writers were in fact either petty-bourgeois or working-class. This objection seems rather off the mark for at least two reasons. In the first place, "bourgeois", in everyday parlance, does not necessarily mean the modern-day upper class, let alone the sub-class of capitalist moguls; the petite-bourgeoisie is not only not excluded, it may be the very group the word is (however, imprecisely) intended to denote. Second, the comparatively minor role of the working class is here decidedly overemphasized.

It is probably not of much significance that Mr. Fenyo does not mention – in this context at least – the gentry. After all, it is largely a matter of point of view whether one in early twentieth-century Hungary is considered gentry or bourgeois, because the specific situation of the gentry (as opposed to that of the landed noble) owed not a little to the process of bourgeois transformation. Also, the middle class was comprised of petty-bourgeois and gentry elements alike, the former more often than not acculturating to the latter. On the other hand, the important role which Fenyo assigns to the working class is puzzling and misleading. The sole writer discussed at any length with a proletarian "pedigree" is Lajos Kassák, and he of course was not primarily a *Nyugat* writer.

Moreover, according to this scenario one might suppose that the *Nyugat* had a fairly sizable proletarian constituency, yet Fenyo himself begins his chapter "The *Nyugat* and the Working Class" with the words "It should be clear from what precedes that the *Nyugat* was not designed for the 'working-class'..." Aiming as he does to demonstrate that the review prepared the way for the 1918 and 1919 revolution – and assuming, too, as he

does, that revolutions are the culmination of genuine popular sentiment, not the result of manipulation and demagoguery – Fenyo must have come to this conclusion with some reluctance.

But, understandably, he is loath to ignore his data after such painstaking work in gathering it. To begin with, there is the simple fact that the periodical was expensive, costing in the beginning one crown, by the decade's end two – “the equivalent of two balcony tickets to the theater”, Fenyo quotes Gyula Juhász. It was, in other words, an extravagance that the average workingman can hardly have allowed himself (in the unlikely event that he would have liked to purchase a copy). Also, the *Nyugat*, even at the height of its popularity, had relatively few readers. In its first decade the review had no better years than 1917 and 1918, when, according to Fenyo's own figures, it had a readership of 4000. This number, dwarf though it does the figure of 500 given by Fenyo for the *Nyugat's* readership in 1908 – accounts mostly for the industrialist and banker subscribers, and the members of those radical organizations already mentioned, who presumably either subscribed or purchased issues as they came out. In brief, only a very few workers can ever have read the *Nyugat*.

It is clear from the foregoing that the *Nyugat* occupied a unique place in the social and cultural map of Hungary. Jewish and gentile, *l'art pour l'art* and (in the person at least of Ady) *engagé*, it was comprised mainly of petty-bourgeois and gentry elements, while also representing, if marginally, the proletariat and (still less) the peasantry. Aladár Schöpflin characterized this political and cultural eclecticism (or pluralism) as proof of the *Nyugat's* essentially classless and universal nature. After Ágnes Heller, Fenyo brands this and all such sentiments as typically bourgeois; reflecting as it does the bourgeoisie's belief that it is the “party of humanity”. Of course, there is a great deal of truth in this, but surely Fenyo does not want to deny the possibility of altruism. Granted that one cannot escape entirely class-bound influences, it is nevertheless true that people, in a vast array of circumstances – class is not the sole determining factor – can and do adopt deliefs which have little in common with those of other members, perhaps even the majority, of their own class. For how else to distinguish the *Nyugat* writers and their constituency from much of the bourgeoisie who certainly did not share their radical-liberal ideology?

Though the *Nyugat* served as a kind of bridge spanning the gulf between the Right and the Left, it was nevertheless generally regarded as being squarely on one side or the other. As Fenyo notes, the *Nyugat* was for the first several years popularly identified with Ady. Indeed, adds the author, “A monograph similar in theme and scope to this one might have been written with Ady as the protagonist: the political function of Ady”. A slight exaggeration though this may be, it is a fact that the criticism heaped upon the *Nyugat* had already been heard many times over in the excoriation of Ady. Fenyo lists the faults which were commonly attributed to both, as summarized by Dezső Szabó. These were 1) cosmopolitanism (at the expense of characteristically Hungarian traditions); 2) moral decadence (an import from the West); 3) serving as a “front” for the “subversive activities of the Jews”; and 4) freedom of form and language and the concomitant neglect of “healthy Hungarian traditions”. This general perception tended to flatten out and minimize differences, so that even a distinctive stylist like Babits could be, and was, taken for an Ady-disciple. Ironically, this lack of discrimination eventually itself became a contributing factor in the real and actual melting away of some, though by no means all, of those differences.

The attacks from the Left, meanwhile, tended to overemphasize the breach separating Ady, the *engagé*, and those popularly (and to some extent justly) regarded as aestheticists and scribes of the ivory tower. The Socialist Ernő Bresztovszky, an early contributor of the *Nyugat*, came increasingly to criticize the periodical for its *l'art pour l'art* stuffiness and reluctance to deal with social issues. At the same time, he had mostly praise for Ady – in the *Nyugat*, perhaps, but not of it – for his indefatigable advocacy of progressive and even radical views. On the other hand there was also, as Fenyo reminds us, the curious case of Sándor Csizmadia, a working-class poet and Socialist of high standing, who claimed, in a series of writings in the Social Democrats' own *Népszava*, that Ady's poetry labored too much after aesthetic effects to be considered genuinely radical. A few years later, Ady, while singled out as the worthiest of all the *Nyugat* writers, was again criticized by a group which at least considered itself to be much to his left. Kassák and his group of self-proclaimed avant-gardists, which gathered itself around the periodical *Tett* (and after its demise, the *Ma*), found Ady much too romantic to be anything like the revolutionary he was sometimes touted as. (It might be noted that Ady thought even less of Kassák.)

Although I can only re-emphasise the value of Mr. Fenyo's study, I must reluctantly add that it is strewn

with facile or skewed judgments, and even some inconsistencies and errors. At the end, Fenyo sums up the achievements of the *Nyugat*. Besides undermining the prevailing ideology of conservative nationalism and helping to disseminate notions of democracy and civil liberty – two achievements had to dispute – Fenyo goes on to credit the *Nyugat* with still one more, namely its persistent and unswerving support of Ady. But, surely, this “achievement” is not on the same order as the others. It would make more sense to regard it as an outgrowth, or a manifestation, of the other listed – one cannot help but add, “genuine” – achievements.

But the author's evident fondness for Ady more than once leads him astray. Though he may not overestimate Ady's historical significance, which appears impregnable, he most certainly does his present-day popularity. “Today Ady is still among the three most popular Hungarian poets, although he is most appreciated, as he was in his lifetime, by the urban professional stratum.” If Fenyo means by “the urban professional stratum” those academics who turn out more volumes on Ady than anyone can possibly, or cares to read, then he is probably half right. Otherwise, however, he could not be further from the truth. Ady is not among today's favorite poets; in fact, so far has his popularity declined that it is fast becoming problematic to speak of him as a “living poet”.

Fenyo's neo- or semi-Marxist approach has both its advantages and drawbacks. Among its drawbacks is the tendency to caricature conservative groups and spokesmen. It seems to me questionable to exclude all those affiliated with the university from the intelligentsia simply because they do not qualify as “progressive”. What is more, Fenyo's “proof” of the university's conservatism, namely that “It was unusual for professors in the Hungarian Department even to refer to contemporary literature”, is not very compelling. Not of course because the failure to deal with contemporary literature is not conservative. Rather, because universities in modern times are by their very nature conservative. There has always been, and always will be, a certain lag between the time a literary work appears and the time it is incorporated – if it is incorporated – in the curriculum of a university. Moreover, this is as it should be. A work that marks a departure from the norm, aesthetically or otherwise, or distinguishes itself as iconoclastic or rebellious, loses any or all of those qualities – and with them the ability to change society – if it is immediately coopted, absorbed at once into the mainstream of institutionalized learning.

Fenyo rues the fact that the average English-speaking reader is not likely to be familiar with the celebrated names of the *Nyugat*, and therefore he would like “to bring these worthwhile writers, if not their writings, into the mainstream of international consciousness”. But certainly a prerequisite for familiarizing readers with new names is to present them as they are in fact spelled. There are a number of misprints, annoyingly conspicuous, which somehow escaped the proof reader's attention. To name only two: “Kariuthy” for “Karinthy” (on the “List of illustrations”), and “Igestus” for “Ignotus” (on the “List of illustrations” and on Figure 12).

There are other curiosities. It is difficult to understand why the author, who had access to much archival material and old periodicals by no means easy to come by, had to settle for the German translation of Zoltán Horváth's *Magyar századforduló (Die Jahrhundertwege in Ungarn)*, not the original Hungarian version. Next perhaps a more serious complaint. In one of his footnotes, Fenyo refers to an as yet unpublished manuscript of Ferenc Kiss, but it soon becomes apparent that the work in question is Kiss's *Az érett Kosztolányi*, which was published as early as 1979, a good ten years before Fenyo's study. One cannot help but ponder how old Fenyo's text is, in full or in part, not to mention his research.

But for all its faults, this is a fabulously detailed, well-documented account of the *Nyugat*, and of the modern movement in literature it helped to generate. It is well-structured; each chapter covers a relatively discrete theme or subject, but with just enough overlap to allow for illuminative resonance. It is, in short, a most valuable addition to the growing literature on the *Nyugat*.

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