ARTICLES

MARIO D. FENYŐ (New York, U.S.A.)

Nyugat versus the Establishment*

The literary review Nyugat and the movement pertaining to it swept through and lifted the intellectual life of turn-of-the-century Hungary. Such intellectual fermentation was to be expected: the country was undergoing profound socio-economic change, a modernization process that transformed its economy from one predominantly agricultural into one partly industrial, and its largely feudal society into one that was semi-feudal, semi-capitalist. Then, in the aftermath of World War I, Hungary was rocked by two political revolutions, the first in late 1918 and the second in early 1919, paralleling closely Russian events of 1917.

The questions arise: was there any relationship between the literary fermentation around 1908, the year Nyugat was launched, and the political revolutions of 1918-19? Did Nyugat contribute to the political upheaval? More specifically, how did the government and the part-aristocratic, part-gentry ruling class react to the ostensibly literary revolution fomented and fostered by Nyugat and by its poet-comet, Endre Ady?

In 1908 and 1909 most academicians found it beneath their dignity to take cognizance of modern literature. Most contemporary writers upon whom they bestowed praise and prizes were simply not modern. Yet the silence of the academicians did not achieve its manifest end: because it was so evidently deliberate, it alerted the reading public. And, inevitably, the attention of the public and of the critics led in turn to explicit condemnation by the regime and its conservative supporters, i.e., the establishment. The conspiracy of silence had failed; after 1909 the establishment fought Ady and Nyugat along several fronts, tooth and nail.

The attacks against Ady however, had begun earlier; a separate essay would be needed to analyse the reception of Ady and his poetry from his years as a small-town journalist in Nagyvárad to his appearance in the first issue of Nyugat. Suffice it to say that the antagonisms aroused by Ady neces-

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sarily rubbed off on the review with which he identified from the start. The
degree of this identification between the poet and the review varied according
to the critic, from season to season, or even according to the moods of Ady
himself. As for the moods of Ady, subsequent criticism, especially in the per-
iod between 1945 and 1956, sought to exploit the so-called “contradiction”
between the radical or “nearly” Socialist Ady, and the bourgeois Nyugat. But
the contradiction was mostly, if not entirely, in the minds of the critics: it
would, however, serve no purpose to elaborate on the strange workings of
literary Stalinism within the framework of this essay.
Contemporary critics did not perceive contradictions but, on the contrary,
gradually identified Ady with Nyugat, and Nyugat with Ady. As I have sug-
gested, there were variations as to the degree of this identification. One varia-
tion consisted in condemning Nyugat for a variety of sins, including that of
mediocrity, while sparing Ady. A curious example of this variation can be
found in a comment by the brothers Tharaud, who acquired some fame as
novelists in France and notoriety because of their anti-Semitism. Jérôme
Tharaud had had occasion to familiarize himself with Hungarian conditions
during his years as instructor of French at the University of Budapest, from
1899 to 1903. In a post World War I issue of the Revue des Deux Mondes—
ironically, the literary review the editors of Nyugat had held in such high
esteem—the Tharaud brothers referred to Nyugat and to Huszadik Század
(Twentieth Century), a progressive periodical of the social sciences, as forums
that had prepared the ground for the revolutions of 1918 and 1919; they
added that Nyugat “was worthless except for the great poet Ady.”
Other variations consisted in describing Nyugat as “Ady and company,”
or the Nyugat poets as “the Adys.” The friendlier critics recognized differ-
ences in style, or at least certain nuances, whereas others only differences in
degree of degeneracy. They were soon joined by the chorus of academicians.
What were the most common accusations levelled against the new litera-
ture? Dezső Szabó, one of the most outspoken of the young writers, summarized the charges as follows:
1) The new literature is not Hungarian, but cosmopolitan. It is based on
Western models rather than on traditions set by the great nineteenth-century
poets Petőfi and Arany.
2) The new literature brings to the Hungarian public the decadent morals
of the West.
3) The new literature is a “front” for the destructive or subversive activities
of the Jews.
4) The new literature is too free in form and language; it denies pure and
healthy Hungarian traditions in these respects.
ment of the issue in Jérôme and Jean Tharaud’s Quand Israël est roi (Paris: Pion-Nourrit,
1921).
3. Dezső Szabó, Életeim (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Kiadó, 1965), II, 244.