

5 AUGUST 1960

REF EVALUATION AND ANALYSIS DEPARTMENT

Background ReportHungarian Unit
(Urban)SHAPING OF REVISIONISM IN HUNGARIAN LITERARY THINKING

"Partisnost", like virtue, is an inherently dull and difficult subject to advertise. Evil, by contrast, has a strange fascination for the scholastic mind, providing, as in the case of revisionism, a dialectically sound counterpoint to an otherwise grossly unKafkaesque comedy. Where Dante and Swallow excel in their description of the torments of the damned in *Inferno*, their Paradise is snug, Victorian and big with the tidiness of those condemned to live in eternal happiness.

With "partisnost" and, particularly, its literary program socialist realism being as elusive and ill-understood (even by Communist writers) as it is, the best the Party's literary agents can hope to do in the way of putting a face to this non-descript notion is to say something about it by way of contrast and a process of elimination. Getting "partisnost" against a sufficiently abstract background of revisionism and allied vices seems to guarantee for regime writers its compulsive rightness. But does it?

Can an antithesis of this kind produce a more satisfactory synthesis in 1960 than did those earlier and admittedly greater efforts in black-and-white which Stalinist historiography foisted on literary scholarship? Are the wrongs castigated not so very exciting trends in the eyes of the broad public, or at least insufficiently bleak to invite anything but amused curiosity?

There is no reason to suppose that the traditional trends and values of Hungarian letters -- a robust and naive patriotism, Magyar socialism and a melancholy lyricism of a distinctly non-Western order -- are remoter from Hungarians today than they were 20 or 30 years ago. On the contrary, there is much to support the view that literary interest continues to revolve around the national and international obsessions, many of whom are again freely published, and that the regime's official poets and writers find their most attentive reading public among Western analysts of Soviet affairs.

Having said this, however, one still has to remember that in a society in which the entire mechanism of publishing and distribution is in state hands, censors and tremors in the national psyche have only one way of reaching the outside world: through the graphs and tables of government telegraphs. There,

on a small scale and within the regime's own technical jargon, words of fear and shock, of compromise, generalization and dogmatism can be read and, one hopes, followed back to their sources.

It is as true today as it was in 1935-35 that behind a shifting veneer or an unorthodox compound way lies hidden unexpected (or often too slightly expected) convulsions both on the regime's and the nation's intellectual and spiritual life. If, discussed below, "modernism" deserves to be crushed, it is obviously powerful enough to warrant such treatment. If the ideologues complain that Hungarian critics are reluctant to have the tenets of the class struggle spelt out in their writings, it is safe to assume that there is such a reluctance and usually more than a reluctance.

Two Interpretations

It is, therefore, highly interesting to note how a literary administrator such as Dezso Totó (1) uses the title and style besetting Hungary's recent historiography of literature. His basic complaint is a familiar one: it is wrong and (from the "partisan" point of view) untrue to say that the national liberalistic movements of the 19th Century were driven forward by national rather than class considerations. Since is the determining factor -- nationalism is an accretion. Not to perceive this leads to insufferable abuse and can, as in 1934-35, help the growth of an insidious philosophy. He writes that:

"The completely unwarranted, large-scale celebration of the 50th anniversary of the death of Jókai led at least as much to do with the year 1934 as with the actual occasion. This was the time when counter-revolutionary ideas were entering in the minds of some people, and an outlook that gave the notion of nationhood a romantic slant was welcome to them. Here the fiction of "national unity" came in handy... The intention was clearly to revive a feeling of national pride, setting Jókai against the revolutionaries and class-alienated traditions of Petöfi. (2)

For Totó all common denominators other than those accepted by Marxist analysis are interestingly absent. Thus he argues against such non-class concepts as James Burnham's (3) "Authoritarian by Synthetic Inequalities" (4) -- the idea that (in the 19th Century) the superior strata of truth and beauty, rather than class, dominated the best minds into a national elite. The revival of this thought has produced the obstinate view:

- (1) "Tudománytörténet", 1960 1 No - 3-4.0.)
 (2) *Ibid*
 (3) *Present pre-war schooling and critics*
 (4) "Estetikus Magyarság"

"... that the poetry of Petöfi or Arany can be associated with any particular class, can no longer be seriously entertained... Today we can confidently say that great poets and artists stand above parties."(5)

Toth's diagnosis of what went wrong with the Socialist reading of Hungarian letters of the 20s and 30s is equally revealing: voices have been raised for the rehabilitation of Dezso Szabó on mainly nationalistic grounds. Critics tended to underline what was allegedly soft and decadent in Artúr József rather than what was "revolutionary". The Test and Westernism were being increasingly pushed into the limelight of literary attention, bourgeois humanism usurping the place of warthier ideas.

Having got so far Toth turns to his real subject -- revisionism with all its attendant evils. So many false trends and misconceptions have produced a climate of opinion where even the basic truths of Marxist literary theory were no longer sacrosanct. "Revisionism", he writes, "questioned the very existence of socialist realism. Objective (i.e. "partisan") aesthetic theory was gradually replaced by a subjective one; the quest for a realistic portrayal of life was abandoned, the artist's focus of attention shifting to the secret mood of things rather than their practical significance, to the justification of lyricism as an irrational phenomenon rather than its accountability on a rational and social plane.

In short, poets preferred to be poets rather than party hacks; critics saw greater value in writing about men who had risen to eminence because they were different from their "class", and not because they had sprung from it.

Toth's strictures would carry little weight were it not for the fact that his real target is larger than "revisionism". It is clear from his writing (in so far as anything is clear in a language so impregnated with the fog of dialectical thinking) that revisionism as such, i.e. a rival philosophy within the Communist Party, is not his real problem. What would suppose an interest in engender, and the requisite courage to put forward, heretical interpretations of the Marxist view on historiography. Of this we have little evidence. Toth challenges, and appears to be challenged by, the whole climate, tone, style and assumptions of Hungarian letters.

One is almost tempted to say that a live revisionism within the party would, in a sense, be a blessing for the cause of Communism as a whole in Hungary, for that would, at least, attest to an acceptance of the Marxist-Leninist fundamentals and an interest in bending them to local needs and traditions. As it is, the battle against "revisionism" is a battle against most of what is being written and read in Hungary today.

That the main trends of literary thinking continue to be outside the confines of official theory even among the very young transpires convincingly from an article by one of the Party's intellectual adjudicators, Andras Biacsogi. (6) That he says amounts to a confession that after 10 years of Socialist Hungary's young writers are more removed from Socialist ideas than were their predecessors in the 30s. He complains that whilst short-story writers between the two world wars had, broadly speaking, set their sights on Socialism, the new generation has fallen prey to "materialism". That exactly this pejorative term is meant to convey is not made quite clear, but it seems to be the cumulative product of evils such as immaturity, lack of social responsibility, snobbery, l'art pour l'art-ism, and spicing of all things Western etc. It is particularly revealing that in Biacsogi's view young writers

"find much to attract them in the morbid, pathological tendencies of Western literature. They are particularly interested in fear and uncertainty... they are more interested in understanding, justifying and even propagating these things than in overcoming them." (7)

It would appear that the regime's (alleged) successes in industry and agriculture have not convinced the young generation that such achievements are really important, or if they have, that they are sufficient to inspire that happy and socialist mood of things in which, as Toti concluded in his article, "heroes and giants are born". In any case the discussion is carried on on a wave-length with which the Party has little effective contact. Tastes in Hungarian reading and writing are neither for nor against the Communist Party - they are away from it.

Kadar's real problem would appear to be not that there is too much, but that there is too little revisionism in his Party.

End

(6) "Irodalomtörténet", 1960, 1. Sz.

(7) *Ibid*