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POWER AND LETTERS IN HUNGARY

Summary: During the past decade, Hungarian writers and the Budapest regime have established a *modus vivendi* which has given the writers a greater degree of freedom than that enjoyed by their fellow authors in the other Warsaw Pact countries and in the USSR. These writers are conscious of the advantages this situation provides and try to exploit it to obtain as much freedom as possible without upsetting the applecart and bringing down upon their own heads a return to the repressive controls of former years.

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Some years ago, a British author wrote in notes on his travels in Hungary, that the Hungarian author plays a role in his homeland similar to that of Cardinal Wyszyński in Poland. That is, the Hungarian writer embodies, exactly as does the Polish primate, many of the popular wishes and yearnings. And authors in Hungary enjoy as great a reputation and as broad a popularity as does the prince of the church in Warsaw. Janos Kadar can as readily get along without the writers as Gomulka can without the cardinal. Each must accept the other, must recognize one another's existence, must take each other's power into account, and in fact, must engage in controversy. 1)

This comparison is a pertinent one and one which is still valid for the present day as well. Yet it would be wrong to believe that the Hungarian men and women of letters represent a compact entity, and that the above parallel applies to all Hungarian writers. The Hungarian authors not only differ in

1) Anthony Rhodes, *Encounter*, London, October, 1961.

their artistic expression, their style, their working methods, but also differ in their attitude to the given social structure, and in their views about the government's cultural-political decisions.

Nevertheless, observations show us that, in spite of this qualification, there is a common denominator uniting them all. Those who are prominent and talented in Hungarian literature, the big names in present day Hungarian cultural life, as well as the young artists, all, taken as a whole, share a comparable approach to the basic problems of the Nation. All, taken together, offer a significant opposite pole, as it were, to power. This is not so much because all the writers necessarily find themselves in opposition to the government on all issues. Rather it is this way because they, perhaps without wishing it themselves, offer an alternative. That is, at critical moments, when the so-called average citizen seeks orientation and guidance, the writers are there to offer just this to the people, to their public, the readers and followers of their work. In that way, they constitute an alternative to power.

More than once in the history of Hungary have the writers fulfilled this function of guide. Perhaps it is an indication of the unhealthy political life of a country when its writers must come to grips with problems that actually are the province of the politicians, economic experts and journalists. The fact is, however, that many a Hungarian writer and poet continually offers a more pertinent, realistic, persuasive and understandable answer to important political, sociological, economic and cultural-political questions than do some experts in the craft of politics. To this very day, this situation has hardly changed. Accordingly, the people have from time immemorial tended to trust men of letters more than men of politics. The old tradition of the engaged, committed poet is still alive today, and is evident in many areas. One expects the writers to offer an alternative to an official policy that the popular will rejects. The writers are expected to come up with an understandable, sympathetic and convincing solution and to suggest it to the people at large. Rightly or wrongly, it has become the custom to grant among the attributes that are called those of a "good" author a concern about the future, and a degree of social and of political engagement. The nation expects of its poets what it does not get from its politicians. The writer is to be a prophet rather than an entertainer. He is supposed to concern himself more with right thinking and acting than with beauty of expression. Now this situation leads many writers to choose the easier way, that is, to involve themselves more deeply with the message than with its form. That is why there were, and are, so many literary works that, in fact, have no serious artistic

merit, yet evokes considerable repercussions and ensure their author widespread esteem. There are only a few writers who can combine significant and profound messages with a high artistic level of presentation.

The general literary climate in today's Hungary is determined by two factors. One is concerned with the ideological and literary-political attitude of the Communist Party and of the state which it governs. The other factor is the effort of the writers to attain freer expression for their personal talents.

The role of the Hungarian writers during the 1956 revolution is universally known. They were held responsible for the intellectual preparation that preceded the popular uprising, and some of them had to go to prison, were interned, or suffered other penalties for their attitudes and deeds. But the Party and the government soon saw that, without the co-operation of the intellectuals, nothing could be done and the restoration process would have come to a halt. Then, during the process of the general liberalization and relaxation, the intellectual climate, too, became milder. Once all the writers had regained their freedom, literary life came back to normal. The Writers' Union, disbanded after the uprising, was organized anew. The Hungarian branch of PEN resumed its activity, and the literary journals, too, were able to appear once more. The decisive year, the turning point, was 1962. It is from this year that one can date the start of a new literary era. More important than the activity of the Workers' Union and the PEN Club is the high level maintained and the popularity enjoyed, by the leading journals. There have never been so many and such varied literary periodicals in Hungary as there are today, and never before have their circulations been as large as are those of the contemporary cultural journals. 2) These journals have gained new circles of readers and have awakened the interest of both the older and younger generations in men of letters.

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- 2) The two largest literary periodicals appearing in Budapest are called Korlat (Contemporaries) and Új Írás (New Writing). Korlat specializes in publishing literary-historical discussions (as does Magvetés) and reviews. Magvetés (The Wide World) concerns itself with world literature, and publishes significant Western works in the Hungarian language. Valóság (Reality) is a sociological journal, but prints interesting literary material. Vigilia is a Catholic literary and religious journal. In the provinces, Alföld (Depth), Magvetés (The Thresh Area), and Iskolák (Now), are published, all specializing in presenting local interests.

The Communist Party and the government remain as true today as ever to the basic idea of socialist realism. But the concept has undergone further alteration during the 1960s. It has been adjusted to the changing ideology and to general political developments. The officials in charge of formulating policies governing literature and the arts have constantly tried so to word the requirements that there would be a place for everybody under the umbrella called socialist realism -- that is, a place for everyone for whom one wanted, for strategic or tactical reasons, to ensure a place. The arguments about socialist realism that churned up waves in some "socialist" lands, and also in the West, never took place in Hungary. 3) Georgy Lukacs, the one person who would have had something basic to say about socialist realism, uttered his ideas -- as he has not been able to do at home for a long time -- principally in publications abroad. The reason why there was no discussion worth mentioning in Hungary was largely because nobody attached much importance to arguing about socialist realism or would have expected much to come of such a discussion. One simply set socialist realism to one side and worried about other things.

But the literary and artistic authorities also continue to demand that the authors write socialist realistic poems, novels and plays. So socialist realism remains the basic ground rule for literature, although, in fact, it is rejected by the overwhelming majority of writers. That is, socialist realism is indeed insisted upon, but not considered as an absolute prerequisite for publication. In Party statements, an author's "socialist" attitude is valued more highly than the degree to which he sticks to the regulations about form and content. Today, indeed, the authorities are satisfied if the author proclaims no anti-socialist ideas, and if his work is not openly hostile to the regime.

The new declarations and theoretical writings on the matter of literary directions are concerned less with the demand for socialist realism, and more with the correct and most favorable form of orienting Hungarian literature. At the Writers' Union Congress in November, 1965, the officials present summarized the results of the deliberations with the declaration that "between power and the individual, between power and ethics, conflicts can develop, today as ever, and socialist realism has no other possibility than to confront these questions." 4)

Two years later, Jozsef Darvas, chairman of the Hungarian Writers' Union, said that the Party and the government regard responsibility for the creative artists as a very serious thing, and depend on the regulatory role of the critic, as well as of the ideological-aesthetic discussions." 5)

3) The Kafka debate evoked only a slight echo.

4) Nepszabadsag, 7 November 1965.

5) IBid., 24 December 1967.

In other words, the authorities do not take administrative action, but instead seek to implement their views and intentions in the course of discussions. As early as in 1956, the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party stated, as part of its principles regarding cultural policy, that the Party had no thought of playing the referee's role in questions of style. A stand was also taken in this context by the cultural theory working committee of the Party: its analyses and studies have taken over, although with lessened consequences, the role formerly played by Party decisions. The working committee declared that guidance of literature was to be effected above all "by means of ideological persuasion and discussion." 6) This same Party paper argued for a fine differentiation regarding partisanship in a Party sense: engagement; and decadence. For Party members, partisanship in a Leninistic sense remains the first law. 7) Of non-Party members, it is simply expected that there be support of "socialism" and the existing order. As for everything lumped under the term "decadence," battle is to be waged against it. In theory, it is true, this battle is carried on by means of persuasion and discussion; in practice, however, administrative measures are also employed. 8)

It is easy to recognize that the authorities, in their rejection of, and battle against, so-called decadent and "anti-socialist" ideas or movements, couple ideological persuasion and conviction on the one hand, with administrative measures on the other hand. More precisely, the effort is made to use "discussions" and "debates" to create a climate within which it is believed it will later be easier to proceed by means of administrative orders. This procedure found clear expression in a statement by a leading Party literary figure. He stated that "the intentions and measures which come from above are only effective if they are based on a strong general cultural opinion." 9)

6) Parasztalmi Szemle, No. 7-8/1966, p. 55.

7) Ibid., p. 34.

8) Among these administrative measures are a prohibition against writing, limited right of publication, reduced fee or royalty, limitation of activity to specified media, e.g., only radio or only the provincial press, and in the case of leading editors, transfer or dismissal.

9) Dezso Totk in Parasztalmi Szemle, No. 9/1969.

Georgy Acsel, the Central Committee secretary who is responsible for ideological and cultural affairs, has spoken of the permanent and of the changing elements in Party guidance. In his view, the changing elements are an important part of the guidance. 10) In practice, it would appear that, although it is true the principles do not change, the methods of applying these principles do change, and so do the methods of interpreting various Party and government regulations. At one point, these rules will be enforced strictly, dogmatically, rigorously; at another time, more mildly, liberally.

To this circumstance we can attribute the fact that Hungarian literary works representing the most varied trends appear. Official announcements constantly emphasize that even authors may be published whose views are remote from Marxist-Leninist philosophy; moreover, that even writers may be printed whose works have nothing to do with the government's aesthetic and cultural ideas -- in both cases, provided that the works are not politically "hostile." In the statement of the Party's cultural-theory working committee quoted above the formulation appears:

Moreover, works which are politically not hostile but which do possess humanistic values, yet at the same time are ideologically debatable, and are more or less in opposition to Marxism, or to socialist realism, may appear and may be distributed. 11)

This commitment to a liberally applied system of guidance emerges even more remarkably in an interview with the above-mentioned Georgy Acsel that appeared last autumn in the Soviet literary weekly Literaturnaya Gazeta. 12) The Central Committee secretary frankly contended that, in Hungary, Marxism claims no monopoly in the realms of ideology and of culture. The mission of the Party, he continued, consists in ensuring the preservation of Marxism's existing hegemony and will to lead. "Whether Marxism holds a monopoly or not, is not a question of subjective decision, but rather an objective consideration." 13)

And, Georgy Acsel continued, the key idea behind the Hungarian Party's concept of freedom is to foster broader

10) Georgy Acsel, lecture to the Political Academy of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party, 1968.

11) Társadalmi Szemle, No. 7-8/1966, p. 33.

12) In Hungarian: Acsel Georgy válaszol a Literaturnaya Gazeta kérdésekre (Georgy Acsel's answers to questions of Literaturnaya Gazeta). Társadalmi Szemle, October, 1968.

13) Acsel, op.cit., p. 35.

freedom for artistic initiative that serves "socialism." In his opinion, it is accordingly necessary to let bourgeois-humanistic artists do creative work. First, because these artists, too, are in a position to produce valuable work that could become part of "socialist" culture. Secondly, because the authorities cannot wage ideological battle against silent dissenters. 14) It is clear that the Hungarian Party leadership here defends its standpoint with common sense arguments; nor does it shrink from advancing such "heretical" attitudes in, of all places, Moscow -- and what is more, in a journal that in no sense could be described as "liberal."

These utterances alone show that Hungary today pursues a far more lax and understanding policy toward literature than do the other Warsaw Pact states. There is no pre-censorship, as for example in the Soviet Union, in Poland, or in Czechoslovakia. Every editor, head of a publishing house or stage director is personally responsible for what appears in his journal, is printed by his company, or is played on his stage. Moreover, censorship is not exercised by officials assigned to the job, but by the leaders of the cultural institutions. Here we have the reason why, since 1956, there have been no protests on the part of the authors in Hungary, as there have been in Poland and Czechoslovakia, against institutionalized censorship.

It is indicative of the situation in present-day Hungary that, for some time, no Party resolutions about literary or artistic matters have been issued. Until about the beginning of the 1960s, the system still operated via Party decisions. Since then, the Party has been content to make do with "analyses" and "statements," which can be discussed. This new way offers the writer the advantage that he may argue about such policy lines, and need not recognize them as binding. On the other hand, these favorable and advantageous innovations are not anchored in the Party constitution, so that they can far more easily be withdrawn than if they were integral parts of the Party program.

During the past decade, the Hungarian state has been more generous than previously in matters involving artistic forms and methods. Writers enjoy a relative degree of creative freedom, provided that they conduct themselves as loyal citizens of the state, and do not bring into question the basic elements of the existing system. This does not mean, however, that authors must avoid making any criticisms. In today's Hungarian literary world, there is a strong stream of social and contemporary criticism. But the criticism may challenge no taboo matters. One such taboo subject, for example, is the presence of Soviet troops; another, the "socialist" system of society; again, Hungary's international alliances; the country's uranium deposits; the top leadership of Party and government.

14) Arndt, op.cit., p. 34.

Nor are men and women of letters allowed the freedom to organize. What is tolerated is the existence of various stylistic trends, the use of varying methods of creative work, the championship of non-Communist ideas and movements. But a union of like-minded writers -- unless they are of a school that has been approved by the government -- is strictly forbidden. Neither the Populists, nor the Catholics, nor the fans of modern Western currents, nor the younger generation may coalesce and appear on the literary scene as a group. These taboos in regard to choice of theme and to freedom to join together indicate where the borders of artistic freedom lie; or, respectively, where compulsion and obstacles begin.

In the past decade, Hungarian writers have been very cautious and restrained. They do not want to endanger the small freedoms and possibilities they have won, and they do not wish to end their peace with the regime. The liberalization and the thaw in literature have the same limits as the same phenomena have in political life. The liberalization and the thaw dare not be extended so far that the authority of the ruling group and of party ideology -- however these are interpreted -- are called into question. The writers seek, however, to exploit the existing situation for their own purposes, and to obtain as much freedom for themselves as the given possibilities permit.

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