

Literature and fright

(Response to Imre KENYERES)

1

A quote from the article by Imre Kenyeres: “Marxist esthetics does not know of the principle of *l'art pour l'art*; and when everyone, without exception, must consider the goals of Marxism, there is a justified worry that literary freedom will once again be put in fetters, and once again in political ones.”

Let us divide up this peculiar, realistic and illogical sentence. “Marxist esthetics does not know of the principle of *l'art pour l'art*.” The statement is of course a correct, declarative reminder to a fact – if we take it verbatim. However, it is not correct if we consider that the reader might legitimately interpret the above to mean that only orthodox Marxist esthetics rejects the idea of *l'art pour l'art*. “[...] when everyone, without exception, must consider the goals of Marxism, *there is a justified worry that literary freedom will once again be put in fetters, and once again in political ones.*” Why is the fear for literary freedom justified against political fetters? Because everyone, without exception, must consider the goals of Marxism. In itself, this peculiar conclusion is not logical; but its peculiarity stems precisely from the fact that it depicts the psychological situation of our cultural life with an artistic brevity. At first one thinks how illogical it is to state that a consideration of the goals of Marxism means political fetters. But then one shortly realizes that beyond the seemingly illogical worry, there lies a realm of severe realities. That is where literature is accompanied by fright.

In certain cases, the cause for the fright is the assumption that I must not only consider the goals of Marxism, but regardless of the result of this consideration and of my own discretion, I must also accept them in every important aspect. This psychologically realistic worry is unrealistic from an intellectual and societal perspective: there has been no news or any sign of any one of our writers being forced to commit to a Marxist stance. If the Marxists pass judgment on our writers by the requirements of their own orthodox Marxist conscience and conduct, the defenders of religious and literary freedom of conscience can hardly take exception at them for that. In turn, our writers and men of letters have every right to judge our Marxists by their own deepest intellectual conscience. It is easier said than done: the actual fright of literature begins where the leading and atmosphere-defining men of letters are the kind who cannot imagine – or indeed exercise – any other form of intellectual and social commitment besides the irresponsible duality of thoughtless acceptance or thoughtless rejection. That is a true difficulty in our days. Acceptance, rejection, but even transfer of ideas, demands thinking, research and wholehearted deliberation.

Thus, prior to invoking our actual, particular topic here, we must say a couple of things about that research, which causes fright in a number of directions, and which must serve as our compass throughout addressing all the problems that arise.

2

Research is research of detail. And research has its own severe prerequisites, regardless of whether it orients toward the problems of the divine personality or investigates the laws of the structure of matter. Research is specification of detail. Research turns toward the foggy patches of reality through whose detail-analysis and zoom-in view it expects to enlighten and positively to transform our entire life.

To which foggy patch of reality that research, that analytic detail-work, is focused is a matter of worldview, of conduct, of the phase of one's individual fate, and of character. All research of detail is both fueled and governed by a concrete, stance-taking pre-evaluation. This pre-evaluation is what determines the order issues are brought up and thus the order of business. The order of mention, order of business, and the proportions and distribution of weight over details account for all essential points of our actions. The specification of detail is evaluation. Research is always directed at new details. The last statement may seem tautological. To quote Plato, the researcher seeks truth, but how could he seek it if he did not know already it in some way? If he knew nothing of it, he would gain nothing by finding it because he would not be able to identify it and would drop it, and thus research, the most purposive action (also known as faith, humility and measure-consciousness), would turn out to be nothing more than Sisyphean effort, and suffering a purposeless, meaningless and inhumane cycle.

Literature and art are research too. They are integral parts of our religious lives – which is to say, of our entire lives – today. Literature, art and science (including the criticism of philosophy) are all research. Their life-forming weight and authority reaches and lasts as far and as long as they remain aware of their commonality stemming from their internal task of research; as long as their personal representatives – individuals, elites and generations – *remain faithful* to their fate as pioneers.

3

“The crisis is uncertainty, purposelessness. There are no works, the muses yawn left and right, and – what is the same – literature is going through a crisis. The only thing going on is idle chatter; one can read all the subtle evasions and tactful equivocation every day. Not one word about the disease, about the crisis. Even though speak of that is what we ought to do. ... But the writers rather are silent, picking the wizened grapes of the crisis.”

So speaks Imre Kenyeres about the crisis of our writers and literature. The description of the symptoms is accurate; but I do not believe the crisis of our literature to be understandable confined to the current symptoms. The symptoms may carry the marks of current politics but the literary crisis is not a product of the recent political situation. To understand it, we must reach from the plane of current politics into one of historical politics; not only into the psychological atmosphere of the Hungary placed under a bubble for the last twenty-five years, but also into the psychological atmosphere of the Hungary of the Compromise¹ prior to that twenty-five-year bubble.

As we are speaking of literature, let us not forget the most striking literary phenomenon: that what characterizes the literature of the twenty-five-year bubble the most is the *live burial* of Ady² and of the Hungarian style-revolution of his time. Our task, therefore, above all is to balance and heal the quarter century long tear in the continuity of our spiritual life, and to comb through, evaluate and bring to daylight all the spiritual and intellectual trends which sprung up in the vacuous bubble of a quarter century of fascist reaction, and whose innermost form and sensibility was born out of this self-conscious, reactionary and provincial hotbed. Until this clarifying process of strife is not started, it is impossible to take a breath of clean air in our cultural life.

The task is a dual one because the world from which fascist reaction disconnected our official and semi-official intellectual life more than a quarter century ago had itself been a world falling into

¹ The Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867 – a partial re-establishment of the sovereignty of Hungary after the failed Hungarian Revolution of 1848 against the Austrian Empire, and the strict measures of state control which followed.

² Endre Ady – valamit írni kell róla!

crisis. Thus, the world which we are now able to reconnect differs from the quarter-century-old one in this respect only in that it can confront its crisis with somewhat more self-awareness and honesty.

The shared third step of that dual task is the liberation of the positive spiritual and intellectual arsenal which Hungarian poets, artists and thinkers had organized for diagnosing and curing our lives today. Hungarian poets like Vörösmarty, Petőfi, Arany, Vajda, Ady, József Attila – from the “Old gypsy” to “It hurts too much” – formed a congenially resonant sequence with the crisis-theoreticians of modern thought (with Kierkegaard, Marx, Dostoevsky...). The situation is similar regarding our artists and thinkers.

We can establish that semi-official representatives of our cultural life are to this day *afraid* to approach these radium treasures of our spirit. The curative powers of those spiritual radium treasures remain untapped because our spiritual and intellectual radiologists are, as it were, unprepared for the vast job of converting those dangerous treasures to medicinal currency. In their lack of preparation, they are afraid – admittedly not without reason – of burning themselves should the Hungarian people lay their hands on those healing treasures, which were after all born for that treatment. Those treasures used to be kept away from the Hungarian people by reactionaries and fascism, and is kept away today by the timidity of our intelligentsia, which is but a cultural and societal, psychopathological consequence of and reverberation to that original reactionary response.

4

“Today, Ady and Petőfi play a greater role in raising problem-awareness than many other poets, yet I think it is an irredeemable mistake to chip away at the value which, say, Arany, Babits or Kosztolányi represent.” (I. K.)

Let us confront this judgement. However, before we could confront it, we must find the *measure* of the judgement. That search shall force us on a detour. If we want to have the requisite presence of mind to evaluate Ady, it is advisable slightly to step outside the atmosphere of the Ady-question, which is a burning one for us for many reasons, and approach it through the example of another, analogous, problem of world literature. That analogous example finds its place with the modern novel’s problems.

Modern positivism categorizes judgements as correct, incorrect and meaningless. That discrimination was born in the struggle against pseudo-problems – and that is a good omen! Let us try to apply it.

It is meaningless.

It is meaningless to talk about the modern novel if we do not speak of Tolstoy and Stendhal, of Proust and Joyce appropriately to their weight.

But that is not enough. All my judgements and analyses, even the ones which would be “correct in themselves”, turn incorrect and *meaningless* if what we say in them is not given sufficient grounds by what we know about *the birth* of the novel as a genre, and if we do not top that off with what is granted us to say in relation to Dostoevsky’s novels from the perspectives of form and content.

These are big questions – big chances to be wrong.

Nevertheless, if I evade those tasks for whatever reason, I can be certain that whoever reads me will *not* know who I am, and will not know what I want and not see the *meaning* of what I have to say.

Why would they not see it?

The answer appears to be very stern, although it is only logical and dialectical:

In the described case, the wise reader would not see the meaning of what I have to say, because the meaning of what I would say *would be missing, it would not yet exist!*

If I want to speak about the novel, I can investigate its origins, I can juxtapose Tolstoy, the Homer of the 19th century, with that of the Greeks, but if I want to reach for the fundaments, I must start with Dostoevsky. A strict criterion, sure – but worthy of the task; and worthy of the threat: “It is meaningless!”

The examination needs a standard, and the standard in novel literature is Dostoevsky.

Why Dostoevsky?

Because the prevalent way of life is that of the bourgeoisie.

And because the most complete and classical artistic manifestation of the bourgeois way of life is the novel.

And because Dostoevsky and his characters have broken through the boundaries of the bourgeois way of life and of its artistic manifestation, the novel. And yet Dostoevsky writes novels, and his protagonists are modern novel characters.

That is what has happened.

This dual fact – breaking through the framework of a bourgeois life, and the novel having been reborn from this breakthrough and remaining a novel – is the most important *specific difference* of Dostoevsky, of his novels and of his characters. In their deep realism and specter-like flutter, Dostoevsky’s characters bear the stigmata of breaking through and not defeating the bourgeois way of life.

In one study, György Lukács put this as the lives of Tolstoy-characters ending where the lives of Dostoevsky-characters begin.

Then there is an expression in the catholic Guardini’s Dostoevsky-analysis which places the character of Dostoevsky’s protagonists and events in the appropriate light they deserve; that expression is *Christ-transparency*.

Dostoevsky’s heroes have broken through the boundaries of the bourgeois way of life – that is why they are *healthy* and that is why they are sick. The whole specter-like realism of Dostoevsky’s world rests on that *order of evaluation*.

At this point the highway of the Dostoevsky-problem joins into the highway of the Ady-problem. The two run as one road from here: that of the *worldwide crisis* of the bourgeois way of life.

What Guardini said about Dostoevsky and his protagonists can be repeated without change about Ady’s language: his language bears Christ-transparency. And what we said about the *health* and sickness of Dostoevsky’s characters, also holds for Ady’s lyrical poetry.

Dostoevsky’s heroes broke out of the framework of the classical Balzacian bourgeois life-story novel into a new realm. Ady and his language broke out of the language and the world of the Hungary of the Compromise into a new language and into the vision of a new world. But they all arrived there shaken in both body and soul and rather lonely. That is exactly how the sickness and solitude of the characters and poets who have broken through and stepped over the bourgeois way of life differs

from the sickness and solitude of even the noblest of ivory towers. We may express that axiomatically analyzable difference with its emotional option-like character in one sentence: if one encounters a person who does not yet see the epileptic Dostoevsky's and his eerily sick protagonists' great proximity to the realization of health in body and soul – as opposed to the Balzacian classicism of the thoroughbred bourgeois way of struggle – it is advisable not to discuss anything with them before clarifying this one point. Everything else would prove a vain and superfluous effort. These are the *two extreme viewpoints*: it is either Dostoevsky – with his eerily sick protagonists – who stands closer to the secret canon of health in body and soul, or (*and that's the other extreme*) one might still seem able to argue for the “hearty middle class fare” of health in the Balzacian realism.

The standard only serves its purpose if it is itself a value. If it is the greatest value. Only then is it a *just* measure, only then can it be a *standard*. That is why neither Tolstoy, nor Balzac or Proust can be the standard. *They cannot be just*. If it is only then that it is the standard, then there is no inner hindrance completely to assimilate what Tolstoy had said of the 19th century's Homer, then we can go forth to meet Balzac's torrent of words, and remain open to Proust's psychological wonders. If it were *not* only then that it is the standard, then we would have betrayed not only Dostoevsky, but also Tolstoy, Balzac and Proust, and the vast scale of values which the modern novel represents. Only the greatest value is not jealous. Only the existence of the greatest value and the greatest standard warrants that it need not be jealous of its sister-values. Only the greatest value that exists can secure us against all distorting jealousy, because – by right of its very existence – it has *no need* for that jealousy. It is us who must jealously guard our standard so as not to lose our bearing.

It would be a pleonasm to write out all of that about Ady as well. It is more important to examine why and how did Prince Myshkin, Ivan, Alyosha and Ady break through the boundaries of the bourgeois life.

By dint of being *researchers*. And they know that. These allegedly passive heroes who perish tragically in the act of breaking through the bourgeois way of life, which stands, as of now, invincible against them – they know, they must know. That is why the modern tragedy's forms and elements of content are all present and latent in Dostoevsky's novels. The framework of the bourgeois way of life does not tolerate the tensions and prerequisites of a searching life. Research is a fundamental, human act of life. Research is *humanism, radicalism and freedom!* In this ultimate perspective and prospect do such real personal *opposites* as *Marx and Dostoevsky coincide*.

That is why it is not mere happenstance, and that is the point from which it can be understood, that – in the tension between two stages of life, as a bit of rest, as it were – these heroes unravel the fundamental concepts of Freudian psychology, then – like someone who has just had a light excursion of telling a punchy anecdote – they turn back to face the more weightily significant foggy patches in the research of life. As did Hamlet, to whom they are the rightful heirs.

5

We can finally confront the Ady-question face to face.

What Dostoevsky meant in the 19th century is what Ady, his life, his poetry and language mean in the 20th century.

A few decades ago György Lukács thought to have discovered the matured grandchildren of Dostoevsky's characters in the tragedies of Béla Balázs. We do not know what modifications or reversal of polarity Lukács might have affected on his prior judgement of value, so we cannot rely on his authority for our train of thought. We can only record our gratitude to him, as his analyses

helped us in many ways to find the matured grandchildren of Dostoevsky's characters in *Ady's lyrical poetry*. What we have said above about the health and sickness of Dostoevsky's characters, we can repeat with the appropriate changes about Ady. Moreover, Ady's poetry is in fact more mature in two respects (by which we do not intend to say it is more mature in all respects). First, it is more mature because in Ady's works, through the deadly struggle against the prevailing way of life, the life lessons of the fellow pioneers, so scattered across the world and history, accumulate and mature into a full form. György Lukács considers Ady the poet of revolutionless Hungarian revolutionaries; and maintains even today that "Endre Ady's position in literature is best described by the paradox that in the literary transformation which started at the beginning of the 20th century, he stood as its most popular representative, its best beloved and most hated leader, and at the same time he stood isolated and not understood even at the center of the new literature."

It has not been possible to transplant Ady into other languages (the historical prerequisites are missing), but it has been equally impossible to translate him to Hungarian life, as has been amply demonstrated by the last twenty-five years of cultural politics along the lines of Nyugat, Babits or Magyar Csillag³.

Then there is another aspect in which Ady's poetry is more mature than Dostoevsky's heroes: his *language*. In Ady's revolution of lyrical style, it was not just the Hungarian language to which something happened – it was language itself. Because in the lyrical poetry of the man who has grown, who has broken through the bourgeois way of life, of the person of community, he brought previously unspoken mysteries and flavors of human fate and language to the surface. Yes: it is the Christ-transparency of Ady's language that gives Ady's poetry, his Hungarianness and his revolutionary humanism their *global historic significance*.

Generally: without unraveling the interconnections within the *global crisis* following the two world wars from a distinctly Hungarian perspective, it is not possible to understand the literary crisis of our days. No productive discussion is possible without an attempt at defining our current *historical* situation. Without such an attempt, we simply exclude ourselves from history.

It does not seem like a utopia to expect that clarification to stem from the shared effort of believers, socialists and the bourgeois middle class, because we live during a stage in history from which faith, socialism and the bourgeoisie each seem to pick out the signs of their own ways of existence growing stronger.

³ Valamit mondani kell.