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A Missed Opportunity? Transylvania as a Virtual Central Europe

Forms of Transylvanism and Their Potentials between the Two World Wars

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ABSTRACT

The article focuses on the analysis of the ideas of Aladár Kuncz, a writer, literary critic and editor who defined Transylvanian Hungarian literature after 1918 in a European context. The concept of Transylvanism is discussed through the debates of the interwar period, and is situated within the context of Hungarian literary modernism. In the light of the Transylvanian literary ideas of the 1920s and 1930s, minority / regional literatures would have been directly related to a new concept of European and world literature beyond national literatures, along a line of thought that acknowledged the deterministic character of regionalism, and prioritized it also at the level of cultural memory, considering it to be primary over linguistic, national, and the changing geographical boundaries. These endeavours sought to revive an emphatic idea of Central Europe with its strict ideals of quality besides strong local, decentralized, yet transnational aspirations, while making them compatible with the preservation of linguistic and cultural ties with the three traditional Transylvanian nations. The article also discusses the reasons why, in the midst of the 1930s, facing political restrictions, the literary form of Transylvanism became outdated in the eye of the younger generations of the Hungarian community.

Keywords: Aladár Kuncz, Central Europe, contexts of deverged state and nation, reconciliation, regional literature, Transylvanism

'The wise and intelligent balancing of nations, religions, worldviews, ethnic traditions, social classes and external political interests – this is what we call Transylvanism in history.' (Kuncz 2019, 294) The above lines were written by Aladár Kuncz, who, after giving up his career as an academic and writer in Budapest, in 1923 decided to move back to the place of his youth, Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca, Romania), and become one of the most important intellectual leaders of the marginalised

Hungarian intelligentsia and the local literary life that was taking shape. In the following I cannot undertake a comprehensive presentation of the changing and diversified idea of Transylvanism of different periods and eras in its historical context,[1] partly because of lack of space and partly because we are talking about a complex *set* of phenomena and its variants that have been under formation over the centuries, and not about a singular, stable and uniform phenomenon. I can only approach the one of the undoubtedly significant school of thought in the history of ideas and intellectual tradition of the time, in a new, post-Trianon period[2], along the lines of the ideas of Kuncz, who belonged to the first generation of *Nyugat*[3] and defined Transylvanian Hungarian literature in a period when this was forced to become independent and partly autonomous. Along this I will try to shape the progressive, European vision and concept of regional/minority literature of some Hungarian intellectuals who, like him, worked in Transylvania or moved back there after the First World War (and to give some insight into its important role in the efforts of the so-called synthesizing literary modernity[4] of the Hungarian history of literature in the interwar period). In the two decades in question, a new, stable 'theory of Transylvanism' had become dominant, which, in addition to its specific roles in minority policy, remained emphasized in its legal, moral and religious aspects, but primarily manifested itself in its literary and cultural impact.[5] Moreover, the new Transylvanist ideas of the 1920s led to such concept of art and literature according to which the new minority/regional literatures would transcend the national border(s) and be more directly linked to

1 Of course, within the framework of this study I cannot go into the so-called early or pre-Transylvanian ideas before 1920, nor into the forms of political Transylvanism within Romania, such as *federalistic* or *decentralizationist* concepts (mainly along the lines of Zsolt K. Lengyel's research), especially since they can only be discussed in the light of the so-called internal relations between Hungarians and Transylvanian Hungarians, or in the political context of the Romanian state system and regionalisms. See for more Zsolt K. Lengyel 2007, 2017.

2 The Treaty of Trianon was prepared at the Paris Peace Conference and signed in Versailles on 4 June 1920. It formally put an end to the First World War and defined the new borders of Hungary, which lost more than two-thirds of its former territories. These borders had been set already from the end of 1918 on, when the so-called ceasefire lines were established. Though the areas allocated to neighbouring countries (the principal beneficiaries were the Kingdom of Romania, the newly founded Czechoslovak Republic and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes) had a majority of non-Hungarians, in them still lived 3.3 million Hungarians – 31% – who found themselves in a minority status.

3 Hungarian for 'West', the most important modernist literary journal issued in Budapest, a two-weekly periodical of the time, that existed between 1908–1941.

4 The history of Hungarian literature discusses the different forms and phenomena of Hungarian literary modernity within the first decades of the 20th century in three succeeding phases, according to which differentiates the so-called Early or Aestheticizing Modernity, the Avant-garde Modernity and the Synthesizing Modernity.

5 According to Nándor Bárdi, there were at least three aspects (ethical, political and aesthetic) of Transylvanism in that period. (Bárdi 2013)

the universal, to a new concept of European and world literature, along a line of thought that considered the deterministic origins of regionality to be primary at the level of cultural memory, even in relation to linguistic and (changing) geographical borders.

'We are destined to serve only the purest literary aspirations and to reflect the spirit which seeks to create a world order of artistic and moral values under the protection of ethnicities who are united along cultural relations. We must start from Transylvania and, with one leap, rise to a height from which the fate of Transylvania will become a world problem. Transylvania is our homeland. From the outside, this may seem a narrow framework, but it expands when the rays of minority thinking that are spreading all over Europe penetrate through this framework.' (Kuncz 2019, 304) Kuncz presented a kind of finished programme along these principles, from the mid-twenties onwards, giving the main characteristics and qualities of the Transylvanian literary culture born of necessity. He was not alone in his endeavours. At the beginning of the decade, a pamphlet entitled *Kiáltó Szó* [Shouting word] (often wrongly associated only with the name of Károly Kós) was published,[6] which could be considered a kind of hymnal formulation of Transylvanism, since it can be described primarily as a desperate attempt to awake the Transylvanian Hungarians to survive the trauma of the Trianon-treaty, that of becoming a minority in their homelands. By the end of the decade Kós – in his work *Erdély (Kultúrtörténeti vázlat)* [Transylvania (Cultural history outline)], also published as a separate volume – considered the triad of Transylvanian land, Transylvanian destiny and Transylvanian psyche to be the defining factor through historical, religious and cultural events, emphasising that the region has been an economically 'predestined territory for individuality' for a thousand years, since – as he put it – it has always been a 'threshold' located 'between the East and the West of Europe'. (Kós 1934) Thus, beyond the territories of the former, historical Transylvania (after 1920 supplemented by the also annexed territories of Partium, Banat and Southern Bukovina), he sought to form a new kind of Transylvanism, which for several reasons started with the open claim to revive a formerly viable and even prosperous historical region, (Kós 1920, 5–6) in which both liberal and conservative historical segments were equally included. In these, Kós 'extended the image of a single space to the other territories', which the concept of Transylvania 'encompasses as a synecdoche'. (Vincze 23–24) The essence of this concept formulated by Kós (and his colleagues) is that in the land of Transylvania, under the combined influence of historical changes and geographical conditions (the somehow geographic isolation of the region and the characteristic landscape), such a particular spirit took shape which can be found in all the peoples living there (Hungarians, Romanians, Saxons, Swabians,

6 Besides Kós, it can also be credited to Árpád Paál and István Zágoni, the latters enriching it with their thorough analyses and professional studies, thus providing a kind of political action programme. Cf. Kós 1921.

Armenians, Jews, Gypsies, Rusyns, etc.) and which (might) bind them into a unity that distinguishes them from all others. Transylvanism, a wise and pragmatic concept of Transylvanian ideology was based on the historical common destiny and interests of these ethnicities, it considered the mutual appreciation of each other's humanistic and spiritual values fully compatible with the preservation of national consciousness and the linguistic and cultural memory of each of the three largest ethnic groups.[7] In the state of affairs that developed after 1918/1920, apart from characteristics that were seen in the architectural style and folklore, it was of course more important that this idea emphasized, from the Hungarian point of view, both in relation to Budapest and Bucharest, the liberal traditions of historical Transylvania, its openness, tolerance and agreement in worldviews for centuries, instead of nationalism and radical ethnic approaches. All this happened in an era – after a lost 'Great War' from a Hungarian perspective – when a new European perspective and, closely related to this, the values of local specificities (thus somewhat independent from the national) could be presented as pieces of a broken mirror or new foundations of universal values and humanism to be transferred. Transylvanism – although its form at the time was best represented by contemporary fiction, which performed additional functions and social tasks – can be regarded as a fundamentally *regional social action programme*, which most Transylvanian Hungarian artists (writers, journalists, visual artists, etc.) had adopted by the mid-twenties. Beyond its literary dimensions an emphasized new humanist vision was also underlying, which corresponded to the intellectual trends of an Interwar Neoclassicism, a turn back to the classical or antique ideals, and which, after the system of values being dissolved or mocked in the aftermath of the War, was seeking for a reliable set of new values, a kind of new European cultural literacy which still 'contains the whole past'. As Mihály Babits put it in his well-known 1925 essay: 'The writer has to choose between time and eternity, between modern statements and the eternal human: compromise is increasingly impossible. […] we take refuge in works whose truth is deeper than the changing truths of the Age.' (Babits 1925, 17) In it, he wanted to present inherently authentic small worlds, more ancient ties, not entirely corrupted by politics, or at least other than the nationalisms that had been growing since the 19th century and which had caused the stratified European crises of the time. On the other hand, the question of Transylvania – in terms of value preferences and ideals – was intended to realise, at a smaller scale, a whole idea of Central Europe in the region it had formed, i.e. it also had the potential to create a more sublime intellectual framework that projected decades ahead the transnational spirit of democratic

7 In the 103,000 square kilometres of territory annexed to Romania – even after the considerable number of Hungarian refugees and 'repatriated' residents – a population of over one and a half million Hungarians came under the new state power. In terms of mother tongue, 54% of the population of the annexed territory was Romanian, 32% Hungarian and 11% German.

cooperation, even along the Danube, or even in pan-European countries. Its ambition was to be in harmony with the best European traditions, to be open rather than closed, to have a perspective on world literature rather than provincialism, and to have the necessary critical standing and rigorous quality standards in the primary literary and artistic world. At the same time, it was imbued with a sense of responsibility towards minority communities (Hungarian and other), a commitment to and respect for daily (individual) sacrifice instead of simple assimilation, and thus the formulation of a new kind of collective morality, as well as the need to transcend the ideological interests of the moment. Besides all these, looking back in time, the idea also emphasized the increasing need for national self-criticism, primarily drawing on the intellectual heritage of István Széchenyi and that of Endre Ady.

The message of the promoters of this comprehensive concept might be considered out of date or somehow ahead of its time in that it proclaimed reconciliation and tolerance between ethnicities, a new kind of humanism at a time when the other nations of the Carpathian Basin, surrounding the Hungarians were triumphing in their nationality. Kós and his followers' basic idea of preserving the Hungarian national community, which some would say was romantic or even naive, developed however in the following years into a comprehensive world of ideas that actually determined all levels of life in the region. Although it was later subjected to much criticism, its inclusive and hospitable nature meant that it neither became the solely dominant nor homogenous, but rather existed as a kind of 'guiding principle of the times' (Szász) in a combination with other political, ideological and literary or cultural intentions. In this sense, it intended to create a sovereign entity from the traditions of Transylvania – now in a new form of state – which sought to realize its uniqueness through cooperation with the Romanians (mostly unsuccessfully) and Saxon communities on the one hand, and through products that were different from those of the disintegrated Hungary of the 1920's, but enriched the overall Hungarian culture, on the other. Of course, this also meant a forced trajectory, also because of the former institutional system of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, which had been dismantled as a result of the change of the supreme power, so the censored press became its almost exclusive medium, and fiction remained its main form of expression. This is why the literary and artistic manifestation of Transylvanism did not have a precise definition (and for certain censorial reasons, perhaps deliberately, could not have a fixed ideology). (K. Lengyel 2007, 2017) Its first serious institutions for articulating a programme – beyond some press organs and ecclesiastical and then political bodies – only emerged around the middle of the decade. In the case of the literary aspects of Transylvanism, moreover, – as Béla Pomogáts has noted – the users of the term have always poured their own opinions and feelings into the supposed melting pot of the broader idea. (Pomogáts 204) They agreed on certain basic assumptions (such as the spirituality they hoped to have at least in part in common among

the Transylvanian nations, the regional traits derived from the region's geographic isolation and history), and in general they were looking for stable, immovable, unchangeable elements of local forms of identity that transcended languages. From a Hungarian perspective, in the general post-1920 narrative of loss, the fact that the homeland, the landscape and the historical past are unchanging and therefore *inalienable*, proved to be a fundamental spiritual-religious-intellectual resource in the eyes of the Hungarian readership. In any case, beyond the ethical, the 'aesthetical representation' of Transylvanism 'in the poems of the so called »Helikon triad« (Lajos Áprily, Sándor Reményik, László Tompa) was quite different from that in Károly Kós's novels or Áron Tamási's short stories'. (Vallasek 4) 'Its shorelessness can also be explained by the fact that the aesthetics of the literature of Helikon (although it avoided certain political or more radical social content) was quite open – it embraced a wide range of trends'. (RMIL 5/2, 924) Its propagators thus spoke of it with clear enthusiasm, but with little conceptual accuracy, while they had to prove – later towards several directions – the real content and intention of their claims, the value preference that sought to create and promote the idea of a virtual Central Europe through the example of Transylvania. This mostly enthusiastic use of words, but sometimes vague terminology, nevertheless gave rise to the internal criticisms which, from the mid-1930s onwards, sparked generational debates within the creative community of minority Hungarian literature. But even before that, at the very end of the twenties, they had already led to a reserved reception from two directions: from the Romanian government policy and its increasing censorship, which was striving for rapid assimilation and open deprivation of rights, and from the advocates of a Hungarian high politics that was offended by the nationalist outlook and was seeking revision.

The framework – even if we approach it only from the perspective of the overall Hungarian intellectual chart – is of course much broader. The key role of literature and the press in the period, the boom in Hungarian publishing,[8] the increased number of literate audiences and the inversely proportional decline in taste, the era of 'penny dreadfuls', (Szerb 1991, 499) and then the new expansion of the role of literature, and, after the early aestheticising forms of modernity, the social principles and, as a central idea of the 1920s, neoconservatism and its tendencies towards the past, are all inescapable in this field. In addition, given the key role of this medium, the mutual transfer of literary texts between Transylvania and the so-called 'truncated Hungary',[9] which took place despite the economic difficulties of the period and the new borders set up after the Treaty of Trianon, and which was not

8 'While a number of 1882 newspapers and magazines were published in Hungary (within the Monarchy) in 1910, 1934 periodicals were issued in 1938'. (Romsics 537)

9 This includes the distribution of the Transylvania Art Guild's publications in Hungary and government support for the review *Erdélyi Helikon* in Budapest, in addition to financial support for other literary and cultural events.

independent of ideological forces, can also be included here, as can the fact that the critical approaches from Budapest aimed at equating the differences which could be derived from the emotional range of the works coming from the annexed territories. In addition to this, the development of the self-evaluation and self-promotion strategies of these new 'literary segments', the continuous questioning and doubt of their right to exist, or even their position as a secretly hoped-for transitional one, have become the subject of dozens of debates. While from the 1920s, in a pronounced crisis of artistic values – to use Antal Szerb's expression – the move away from 'toothless l'art pour l'art' became a noticeable trend throughout Europe, (Szerb 1981, 678) within the annexed, but formerly Hungarian territories – mainly due to the lack of Hungarian political representation –, the necessarily expanded roles and additional tasks of literature (Szentimrei 537) were discussed in a natural manner. All this was also published in an accepted manner on the pages of the most aesthetically oriented Hungarian periodical, *Nyugat*. This brief outline seems to support Antal Szerb's statement that in the 1920s 'nowhere was there so much debate about the purpose, essence, role and place of literature', (Szerb 1991, 504) or the clarification of these, as in the new Transylvanian Hungarian literature, which naturally forced the Transylvanist ideas and their adherents to constantly update and reformulate their principles more and more accurately.

'This *Transsylvanism* is the exact opposite of the irredentist defiance of politics and public law which, in the spirit of the ideology of the old Hungary, would seem to be the literary attitude appropriate to the new fate and condition. Perhaps this is why Hungary looked upon it at first with a certain distrust: […] we listened to every notion like »Transylvanian spirit« and »Transylvanian thought« with secret disapproval. And if we spoke of the »Transylvanian spirit«, then by this word we want to understand something old and not something new, something recalling the ages of Gábor Bethlen and Zsigmond Kemény; however, the spirit of the new Transylvanian literature takes hold not of the past but of the future, and it does not look at the future through the eyes of the past, instead examines the past from the point of view of the future.' (Babits 1931, 482) Writing about Géza Tabéry's *Emlékkönyv* [Memorial book] in *Nyugat*, Babits explained this, looking back on the development and the commendable writings of literary life over a period of ten years. By the time these lines were written, Aladár Kuncz, who had a friendly relationship with Babits and had previously asked him to write a programme (on the relations between Europeanism and literature, and regionalism and literary modernity) as editor of *Erdélyi Helikon*, was no longer alive. Babits referred to him and to his tragically premature death when he said of Transylvanian literature: 'It has not only great hopes, but also serious works, even a *chef-d'oeuvre* and famous representative, who have passed away, and, perhaps even more in this respect, a unified spirit and a thought-provoking history of ideas.' (Babits 1931, 482)

Kuncz's entire critical, editorial and organizing activities regarding the Transylvanian literary life from 1923 on, the 'essence of his life' and his 'silent leadership' served this renewed transcendental ideal and freedom of thought, what Babits called 'a unified idea, a community of worldviews and strength.' In fact, Kuncz proclaimed this throughout the decade, as he expressed in the very first issue of *Erdélyi Helikon* in 1928, in his summarizing article entitled *Tíz év* [Ten years]. In this sense, after 1918, Transylvanian Hungarian literature grew out of the two, often contradictory conceptions of the former vision of literature, (Kuncz 2019, 256–262) as a strongly decentralized, regionally traditional, yet constantly renewing, ideologically independent, intellectually freer than that of Hungary, a self-validating concept with ambitious goals. Among these, the following five, which can also be read in the minutes of the meetings in Marosvécs (today Brâncovenești) after 1926, were given special emphasis. 1. The necessity to transcend ideological sides, intellectual platforms and separate groups; 2. to replace the previous literary centralisation (to Budapest) with an emphatic decentralisation and the search for the antecedents from Transylvania and Partium that point to this, and to form a 'regional consciousness'; 3. the promotion of the Transylvanian brotherhood of ethnicities instead of various forms of nationalisms in a literary guise, which aimed to strengthen rapprochement at the practical level through concrete translation programmes and joint events, as well as through the transfer of texts (including a Hungarian-Hungarian book exchange programme); 4. indirectly, the representation of a new European concept of humanism and Christian ethics; 5. the maintenance of critical prestige and the highest aesthetic standards, the application of the earlier achievements of literary modernity, a kind of its synthesis with local traditions and the historical challenges of the time.

If we look at the Hungarian intellectuals of the time who supported these aims and stood behind these initiatives, it can be clearly seen that the prominent figures of Transylvanism were not chasing dreams out of thin air, and did not think it impossible to reconcile the values of local culture with European quality standards. First among them – as we have seen – is the eternally humanist Kuncz, a former student of the Eötvös College in Budapest, a lover of French culture and a colleague of *Nyugat*, who returned from the French internment camps of the First World War, and who was preoccupied with the inner freedom of ethics and the ballast of the inner prisons in individuals even after the horrors of the war. And then there is in the background Count Miklós Bánffy, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, a truly Renaissance personality of enormous erudition, who was also a renowned playwright, novelist, graphic artist and scenographer, a versatile creator and an experienced diplomat, who returned home in 1926 to lead the Helicon group; the young Baron János Kemény, born to an American mother, who studied in Vienna from 1921 and came into contact with Hungarian emigrant authors, a lover and patron of literature and theatre, who, together

with his Scottish-Greek wife, invited the best authors to his castle in Marosvécs; and Áron Tamási, a Szekler who had also travelled to the United States; Károly Kós, writer and architect of German ancestry, born in Temesvár (today Timișoara), who, alongside Bánffy, also took part in the preparation of the royal coronation celebrations of 1916 in Budapest; the cosmopolitan, Jewish-Hungarian journalist Ernő Ligeti, who called himself an 'urban Transylvanist'; Géza Tabéry, who once studied in Switzerland and, like Ligeti, was a follower of Endre Ady, moreover, as a young man had already been following the literary decentralisation efforts of the modernist group around the famous anthologies of *A Holnap* (Tomorrow) in Nagyvárad (today Oradea); Elek Benedek, a great storyteller committed to the education of children and the youth, a former member of Hungarian parliament, who also decided to return home during these years; and Sándor Makkai, a young theologian and essayist, who became a Protestant bishop in 1926 in Kolozsvár (today Cluj-Napoca) and who was one of the most influential spokesmen for the Transylvanian ideology even as an author of historical novels, but who also wrote the famous *Magyar fa sorsa* (The fate of the Hungarian tree) about the role and importance of Endre Ady's poetry, which provoked fierce controversy in conservative circles. Among the representatives of different cultural fields was the painter Sándor Szolnay, who in 1927, the year of the publication of the aforementioned volume, decided to move to the intellectual centre of Transylvania, Kolozsvár, and there together with Károly Kós, he organized series of Transylvanian contemporary art exhibitions, and in 1929 established the Miklós Barabás Guild. All of these people were committed to a kind of predestined, ideal Transylvanism, to the emerging Central European democracy, and they were raising a new generation of Transylvanian writers and artists who will remind their nation's intellectuals of their own responsibility, while at the same time believe in the need to be internationally informed at all times. They consistently combat the real dangers of provincialism as well as the political influence that makes reconciliation between nations difficult, albeit with less success.

This is why the group of Helikon was going to give priority to cooperating with other minorities, including the Transylvanian Saxon intellectuals. The relationship with the Transylvanian Saxon periodical *Klingsor*, founded in 1924, initially meant a close creative cooperation, both because of the ideology it promoted and because it was the most important forum for modern German bourgeois literature in Transylvania. It tried to stand in the middle and reject, for example, the openly class-oriented concept of literature proclaimed by Gábor Gaál's 'world-view periodical' *Korunk* (Our Age) which was also a frequent polemic with the representatives of *Erdélyi Helikon*. In the second half of the twenties and the first years of the thirties, this cooperation was

embodied in a series of specific literary events and productive translation programmes.[10]

The emphasis on regionality and Transylvanian consciousness in this concept above is just as important as the underlying ethical attitude, which was primarily based on the relationship between minority and majority, and the mutual responsibility of the individual and the community, and above all, focused attention on universal human values. The former, i.e. the idea of a local specificity necessarily superseding the national, the idea of a closed geographical region forming identity, did not mean a separation from the culture and national literature of the individual authors' 'mother nation,' (Kuncz 2019, 259) nor a decline in quality, or even a descent into provincialism, but rather the opposite. Mihály Babits, Aladár Schöpflin and other thinkers, essayists from Budapest also spoke of the so-called 'swamp' danger rather early on, in terms of the Hungarian literary life and its works in the annexed territories. By the turn of the decade, however, the same writers had already emphasized that 'of the rivers that have been cut off', the Transylvanian one 'is actually triumphantly breaking out' of this feared, hypothetical swamp, and this also shows the vitality of the local Hungarian spirit. (Babits 1931, 483) But the other accentuated feature, the literary ethic that emerges here, according to Babits, was *'Transsylvanism* itself: an elevated, unified world view that inspires all writers to a greater or lesser extent, and transcends the frustrations of parties as well as the aimlessness of the individual. And the *freedom*. The greater literary and intellectual freedom that this worldview represents.' (Babits 1931, 483) Aladár Schöpflin, when referring to this freedom factor a few years later, said that in Transylvania, 'a certain liberation also took place, a liberation from the pressure that the official authorities and the social powers that relied on them had applied against the new literature. The decline and almost total annihilation of the conservative forces, which went hand in hand with the transfer of state power into foreign hands, unleashed the progressive spirit.' (Schöpflin 109–110)

The *Kiáltó Szó* was intended by Kós to be the source from the very beginning of separate and independent schemes of new Transylvanism (both in content and in scope), what László Szabédi aptly called years later *Country Transylvanism*. Szabédi distinguished the concept of *Landscape Transylvanism*, which was more strongly prevalent among the Helikon group, from this concept of a figuratively independent, autonomous Transylvania, and within it a hypothetically independent cultural life (which was represented in the literary works and novels by Kós alone). The latter discussed the inspiring colours of Transylvania

10 However, a very different historical situation was the result of the fraught period of the 1930s, a decade of global political and economic crises. Unfortunately, the second half of the 1930s – for several reasons – was already a time of a deterioration in these relations. The fact that the new decade Heinrich Zillich, the editor of the paper, was drawn into the circles of the German imperialist ideal, certainly played a role in this.

– in Kuncz's apt expression 'Transylvanian colouring' in the field of literature and art – as specific features and enriching regional phenomena within the Hungarian culture and literature as a whole. The vast majority of Transylvanian Hungarian artists were convinced that 'we are a separate constellation in the Hungarian sky.'[11] Both adjectives of the statement – its quality of being specific and at the same time having clear integrity – remained prominent and important.

In 1928 Kuncz, in addition to his categorical response to the unfounded accusations of schism from Budapest, also spoke of the relationship between minority literatures and European literatures as a vital necessity. 'Even with all its regional character, Transylvanian Hungarian literature, by virtue of its historical purpose, cannot lose its links with Hungarian and European literature in general, because its main characteristic is that it is the literature of a minority group. A minority group's only form of existence compared to other peoples' is its language, its culture and its literature, and it would be an act of suicide to reduce these to separatist isolation.' (Kuncz 2019, 260) A year later, already as editor, he launched the *Kisebbségi irodalom – világirodalom* [Minority Literature – World Literature] column in *Erdélyi Helikon*, studying the intellectual life of other European minorities (Provençal, Irish, Catalan, Sudeten German, Jewish) at the time. Sándor Makkai also confirmed the original intention of the launch with similar thoughts, i.e. the cultural image of minorities, which was always valued, the necessity of intellectual outlooks (and the indirect condemnation to death in their possible self-exclusion), but also emphasising a higher moral and religious value system. 'The many millions of minority people scattered across Europe are faced with a double challenge. […] In the absence of political autonomy and power, the only way for it to maintain itself is culture, an intellectual and moral life based on its own national traditions, but which must develop independently in relation to its own circumstances; on the other hand, it must also realise that this culture cannot be closed off and shrank, and therefore doomed to death […] but must be a more universal culture, approaching the eternal heights of humanism and more deeply human'. (Makkai 1929, 227) Kuncz, in agreement with Makkai and Bánffy (and of course with Babits' famous concept of a *cultural nation* dating back to 1919), explained that, in a virtual Central Europe, this circle of ideas is 'the main touchstone of our future', 'on which the most diverse Transylvanian minds and concepts can be polished into a unified harmony.' (Kuncz 2019, 294) This is why he wrote confidently but with great hope of the Helikon community, which according to him was putting this into practice, as it is 'perhaps the most coherent and united of all the intellectual groupings in Europe', which 'will one day be called upon to introduce the purely

11 The thesis was written in this form by Sándor Reményik, and Kuncz, like him, used a spectacular 'park simile' in connection with Transylvanian Hungarian literature: 'Before it was only a part of a beautiful park, now it had to meet the needs of a whole park at a small scale.' See Kuncz 2019, 166.

artistic and pacifist ideals of minority literature into the European public consciousness.' (Kuncz 2019, 294)

Kuncz, of course, was not talking about a ready-made aptitude, but about an opportunity, a goal to be achieved with hard work, a difficult and bumpy road, which is lined with angry nationalism and distrust, fuelled by politics on the one hand, and can be jeopardised by excessive provincialism on the other. It was for this reason that he repeatedly formulated his emphatic and necessarily apolitical thesis on the relationship between literature and politics, in an article written in 1923, immediately after his arrival to Kolozsvár. 'Whatever political spirit we may imagine,' he wrote, 'it is always in direct opposition to the literary approach. Politics simplifies and uniformizes life, while literature emphasizes its diversity and complexity. Politics, if it wants to lead the people, is forced to turn them into abstractions; literature can only give back even conceptualism by sensitizing it. Politics always serves interests; literature fails if it cannot rise above interests…' (Kuncz 2019, 63) In 1928, he confirmed the same in an interview in Budapest, published in *Literatúra*: 'literature can only fulfil its cultural mission if it is free to pursue its own specific objectives and is not bound by any political or religious doctrine'. (Kuncz 2019, 245) He was an excellent diplomat, a person who could reconcile sides, a real 'literary gentleman' of refined manners, whose role – also because of his erudition and his analytical skills – ranged from a good pragmatic situation awareness to a conscious literary canonizer. He knew the interests of big politics, he had experienced it first hand, yet he knew little about its spineless games. He firmly believed that the key to survival for all minorities lays in culture and sophistication, in creative freedom capable of renewing earlier values, in an international openness and the preservation of a specific national colour, and at the same time in a new kind of humanism that must be built up by and depend on education. He had a decisive role in uniting the various groups of Transylvanian artists of different styles and worldviews within *Erdélyi Helikon*, which existed from 1928 to 1944, and his early death in 1931 marks the beginning of the disintegration of this unity. His ideas influenced his contemporaries, such as Áprily, Bánffy, Ligeti, János Bartalis, László Tompa, as well as the younger ones, the young 'angelic poet' Jenő Dsida or Zoltán Jékely, the son of Áprily, who considered Kuncz his paternal mentor and role model. Until his unexpected death, the European opportunity and cooperation outlined by him and his colleagues was partially taken up by the representatives of the Saxon intelligentsia, and almost not at all by the Romanian intelligentsia, for several reasons. Dsida, who sought to use the talents of faith and reason to counter nationalist blindness and obscurantism, or Makkai also invoked the words of his ally, namely that the preservation of minority consciousness is not incompatible with tolerance towards other nations, that these two values do not exclude but presuppose each other.

Of course, many of the members of the new generation of Transylvanian Hungarian artists of the 1930s, who were already socialised predominantly among minority conditions, also realised that the internal, collective expectations of their own readership could become a burden, a ballast for art, although, as Dsida wrote: 'The task of the poet is not to lament, but to celebrate life' (*Szabad-e nekem énekelni* [May I Sing]). In accordance with the third generation of poets of *Nyugat*, Dsida or Jékely, remaining in the inner circle of the creative personality, already felt a certain suspicion of great historical events and movements, and wanted to participate less in the struggles of public life. Although Dsida's idea of patriotism was also primarily about his narrower region, Transylvania, he avoided to exaggerate or empty out the Transylvanian epithet in his poetry (*Kerülöm a neved – Erdély* [I avoid your name – Transylvania]), not wishing to degrade it into a commonplace or battle-cry. 'The pines have debauched into Christmas trees, / Their needles prick themselves,' he wrote in his late autobiographical poem, continuing: 'They say, it's our fathers' fault, what happened. / Whatever. Fate and destiny are ours. / They still look into the past like a mirror, / we see our faces and the law / in the mirror of the drifting water: / To endure – the pepper on the food of the wise, / to learn – a necessity, to forgive – a kindness, / to work – the most complex reality.' The obvious Attila József parallel, the idea from his poem *A Dunánál* [By the Danube] (1936) ('And to settle at last our communal affairs'), appears frequently in Dsida's work, even when he was primarily struggling with the moral and cultural tasks of poetry. The poet, who also proclaimed a programme of tolerance, mutual respect between peoples and real, inner Christian freedom, and who built up friendly relations with several Romanian artists, translated Eminescu and corresponded with Attila József, could therefore write in exemplary lines the moral thesis of minority intellectuals that could be taken up alone: 'This is how we prepare for a gentle war, / always for ourselves, never against others, / we steam salt and weave canvases / and while we are being diminished, we slowly grow.'

Along with the aforementioned, a group emerged who had a strong sociographic interest in the everyday life of minority society and its unresolved problems, and who were mostly left-wing or critical of the mythical Transylvanian programme of the 'Transylvanist forefathers', their literary organising practices and their mostly unrealised hopes of a brotherhood of ethnicities. At the beginning of the decade, the majority of this generation – including Ferenc Szemlér, who provoked the debate that became famous in 1937 under the title *Jelszó és mítosz* [Slogan and myth] (Szemlér 1937, Balázs 2004) – still wanted to believe in the practicality and feasibility of Transylvanian principles, but in the meantime, political leaders responded with a series of laws preparing open deprivations of minority rights, and the democratic deficit of the time finally blindsided the mutual aspirations of the intellectuals.

In 1935, Mihály Babits was invited by the Kemény Zsigmond Society in Marosvásárhely (today Târgu Mureș) to take part in a literary tour in Transylvania, but the Romanian authorities banned his visit. Jenő Dsida's lines published in *Nyugat* vividly reflect the mood of the Hungarians in minority: 'they offer us the bitter medicine of disappointment, to heal ourselves once and for all from the timeless desire for spiritual reconciliation and cultural rapprochement. It would be difficult to pass by this misconceived rigour without a comment, even if the ministerial ban were to apply to someone who had been in politics or had ever offended national sensibilities through certain gestures. […] But we are talking about Mihály Babits, whose name has become identical not only to Hungarian literature, but also in the eyes of many to European literature. In the raging noise of the world war, he proclaimed peace […]. He gave Europe to Hungarians and gave Hungarians to Europe. It is as if narrow-minded prejudice were saying: Why do we need Europe? Why do we need culture? It is impossible not to come to the uncomfortable conclusion from the staggering fact of the ban that the idea of a Romanian-Hungarian cultural rapprochement was a very one-sided, very pathetic and naive attempt by the weaker party. It never found any serious support on the side from which this initiative should have emerged. As long as political motives were interwoven into the problem of cultural rapprochement, there was still hope for those in good faith that a meeting in the field of pure literature and art could take place. What has just happened has destroyed not only the «bridges» that had been built, but also the well-meant hopes and illusions about the future. Disappointment is bitter, but also useful and instructive.' (Dsida 1935, 392)

Barely a year later, in 1936, the authorities restricted even more basic human rights, banning the use of Hungarian place names or even the centuries-old names of Hungarian historical regions in the printed press and publishing. In a personal letter to his fiancée, Dsida complained that 'yesterday they banned us from writing «Erdély, erdélyi, Bánság, Székelyföld, etc.» One must write the name *Ardeal*. Now we are trying to find a way around it: we write Transsylvania, our part of the country, in the Hungarian-inhabited counties of the country, among the Szeklers, the Hungarians in Romania – and so on. What do you say to that? I can't even write that I am from Erdély anymore, because instead we have become people from *Ardeal*.' (Dsida 1980, 8)

The shattering of illusions also entails the ultimate disillusionment with the new post-Trianon idea of Transylvania, at least those that, in an elevated vision, had been articulating a local spirit and regional identity that was hoped to be common. It was partly as a result of this that Babits, in his retrospective writing of 1935 distinguished between Transylvanian literary consciousness and Transylvanism, claiming of the latter that it was 'essentially not a literary concept'. (Babits 1935) By the time the above-mentioned political decision was taken, Sándor Makkai – resigning from his episcopate – was already preparing his 'repatriation'

to Hungary. His decision caused the greatest possible consternation among the Hungarians of Transylvania, and shook the foundations of the ideology of Transylvanism. (Makkai 1937) From then on, it was mostly regarded as an outdated, almost idealistic vision of aspiration or a survival strategy that could only be applied to Hungarians, a kind of ideology of consolation, and lived on as an 'ethos' that hoped to achieve some kind of inner catharsis through collective suffering and daily sacrifice. From this point onwards, the emphasis shifted from the coexistence of brother nations and mutual value principles, extended regionalism principles and the joint exploration of literary factors (alongside cooperation between theatrical, artistic and musical workshops) to the elements of distrust and closure among intellectuals. By the end of the 1930s, the advocates of the new generation, who had already been arguing as debaters that Transylvanism had run its course and had become an empty slogan, were apparently right. (They also accused their fathers' generation of political blindness, almost dilettantism). In Hungary, the idea of the *common homeland* of the Danube peoples, which was marked by the name of László Németh, also became an illusion from around the same time, after 1934.

In Transylvania, there were still attempts to unify public and literary tasks at the end of the decade (thus the unrelenting confrontation with the manifold problems of reality as an intellectual attitude will be called, in László Szenczei's term, 'minority empiricism' or 'Transylvanian realism'), but this mostly sought to replace and restore the earlier Transylvanian approaches. Ernő Ligeti, however, in 1937 (in a public reply to the above mentioned paper by Ferenc Szemlér) encouraged a more nuanced viewpoint: 'We have to agree with Szemlér that Transylvanism, as a didactic proposition, as a political principle, has not been fully realised – and maybe it never will be. But there is no harm in pushing in the direction of this idea. However, it is also true that if we understand the Transylvanian character of Transylvanian literature not as a programme, not as a basic idea, not as an inner core, but as an atmosphere, as a particular segment of the European intellectual landscape, then we can observe real facts that do exist. […] It has never harmed us to claim to be Transylvanian, the problem is to claim to be only Transylvanian!' (Ligeti 1937)

The pervasive idea of Transylvanism outlined above, which dominated through a decade and a half more than any other, sought to be a counter-reaction to increasingly darker images of nationalism before a new world war, even if this was not its original, primary aim. The emphatic apoliticism that Aladár Kuncz consistently practiced in the literary aspects of the new, post-1920 Transylvanism, and which, in Babits' words, also contained a liberating 'literary ethic', was also clearly evident in the shocked and sad reply of Sándor Reményik to Makkai, who had now left for Hungary, which, in addition to the elevated ideal of the cultural nation, also sheds faithful light on the original intentions of Transylvanism. 'We have learned from the old Makkai that life, in

spite of all circumstances, is not a mere reality but a quality that can be realized, […] not only a capability but a categorical imperative. […] our entire Transylvanism rested on the cornerstone, stated or unstated, that state and nation are not necessarily one, and that the stateless form of the nation may be deeper, purer, more intimate, more Christian, more ethical than […] its political form.' (Reményik 1937)

Transylvanism's hoped-for exemplary values, i.e. the clever and patient balancing of nations, religions, worldviews and social classes, and its encouraging programme of action, were mostly emphasised as a missed opportunity. By 1938, however, its actuality had been lost, and it was not helped by the foreshadows of a new world war and the accelerating series of historical and political events. In 1938, Carol II of Romania introduced a royal dictatorship and established the National Renaissance Front, which, instead of the bourgeois parliamentarism he had abolished, would mark the beginning of the overtly fascist regime in Romania's history.

Nevertheless, in the interwar ideological framework of Transylvanism, it is worth recalling the consistency, sincerity of conviction and fidelity to principles of its adherents. The essence of the Transylvanian idea, which also pervades fiction, and at the same time its credibility, is well illustrated by the fact that after 1940, when Northern Transylvania was again part of Hungary, thus the 'plein-air parliaments of Transylvanists' – as once Babits has called them – in Marosvécs made their voice heard no longer from a minority perspective, its organisers and leaders consistently stood up for the values and goals they had formulated in the 1920s, instead of the politics of revenge. In August 1942, in the suggestive lines of the *Nyilatkozat* [Declaration] of the fifteenth meeting in Vécs, the following was stated:

'We have to choose between two options for the future of our working community.

The first would be that now, when the building work of the Transylvanian Hungarian soul and spirit is no longer threatened by the danger of the enemy's destruction […], the Erdélyi Helikon considers its community's work as finished, discontinues it and dissolves its community.

The other possibility would be for the Erdélyi Helikon to continue its community work in the future, namely in strengthening, enriching and defending those spiritual and cultural values, forces and traditions which have more than anything else kept the Hungarian identity in Transylvania alive and secure.

Of the two options, the writing community of Erdélyi Helikon chooses the latter.'

(*English translation by* Zsófia Kincső HUTAI)

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