

Denominational Reception of Literary Modernity in Hungary Before 1920

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Abstract: Christian denominations generally viewed the social and ideological changes that occurred throughout the nineteenth century as crises and therefore perceived modern literature as a manifestation of decadence. Due to their diverse rootedness within Hungary's social and political life, each denomination reacted distinctively to the phenomena of the modern. This paper describes the different reactions of the Catholic and Protestant Churches and examines their social background by analyzing the denominational and literary conditions of Hungary at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Obviously, both the Catholic and Protestant Churches needed to modernize their social and cultural institutions in order to regain their former social bases: until 1920, however, this effort yielded no valuable results, primarily because their attempts to create a denominational version of modern literature was subordinated to the requirements of religious morality and thus was not capable of achieving artistic autonomy.

Keywords: *Religious denomination, modernity, Christian culture, Protestant literature, Catholic literature, Magyar Protestáns Irodalmi Társaság* ['The Hungarian Protestant Literary Society'], *Protestáns Szemle* ['The Protestant Review'], *Ottokár Prohászka*

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The development of modernity in European culture has frequently manifested itself via confrontations with tradition, a circumstance which has affected each constituent element of Western civilization, including Christianity. In the nineteenth century religious denominations reacted distinctively to the secularization that occurred in every sphere of social life, influencing both the western way of thinking and the challenges of nineteenth-century social and intellectual modernization. However, several similarities between the Protestant and Catholic reception of literary modernism can be observed. At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Churches' growing need to modernize was a determining factor in cultural history which also imparted a major role upon literature. To create a "modern" Protestant or



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Catholic literature was, however, significantly influenced by the Churches' fundamental attitude to literary modernism, just as the success of their attempts at renewal hinged on their ability to accept new literary phenomena.

Protestantism's attitude toward the fundamental transformations European social and political structures were undergoing—including the new forms of world views and lifestyles evolving parallel to or simultaneously alongside these—essentially diverged from the answers to the developments of the new era offered by Catholicism. From the sixteenth century on Protestantism (particularly the Reformed Church which is based on Calvin's teachings) was able to provide constructive answers to early capitalist economic, social and political movements (Weber 2003). In contrast, due to its rootedness in medieval society, the Catholic Church was late in attempting to reinterpret its own mission in the world. Moreover, the ability of the Catholic concept of engaging in discourse within its own time remained limited due to countless internal factors. The most salient among these was the conservative reaction to the social and political changes following the French and the Industrial Revolutions. Generally speaking, Catholic support of the factors opposed to modern thought placed a dogmatic emphasis on papal authority, which—in contrast to the democratic mindset—strengthened the authoritarian foundation of church hierarchy. Still another reason for this limited discourse lay in the Church's support of neo-Thomism and its denunciation of modernism in theology that took place at the beginning of the twentieth century.

According to certain interpretations, the sixteenth-century Reformation had a significant influence on the history of art as well. While the Catholic Church preserved its earlier understanding of art (in the area of cult images, for examples) and its relation to the arts during the baroque and later periods, the ban Protestantism (and particularly Calvinism) placed on paintings brought about cardinal effects in art history. Hans Belting sees the crisis of images at the beginning of the new era as the influence yielded by the Reformation in the history of religion and states that, after the "era of images" was over, images needed a new foundation in the "era of art" (Belting 1994). Belting's reasoning is in accord with the main idea of *Reformáció és művészet* ['Reformation and Art'], a study by the twentieth-century art historian and Calvinist minister, Lajos Fülep. According to Fülep, since Protestantism, and Calvinism in particular, took the form of a pure and absolute intellectual religion, this circumstance inevitably brought about the separation of non-religious endeavors from religious ones, thereby leading to the single, radical differentiation brought about by the Reformation.

Despite this differentiation, Protestantism had not relinquished its connection to art for one second: instead, its connection was completely different from the medieval one in that it was a free, independent, non-limiting and purely intellectual relationship (Fülep 1974: 592). To refute the concept of Protestantism as possessing a hostile attitude towards aesthetics or art, it is enough to refer to Rembrandt or Bach, as Fülep does, or to the choral evolving from Protestant church music. The fact, however, still remains that the effects of Calvinist iconophobia were not only evident in the destruction of cult images and relics in churches, but also made their influence felt in other branches of art. In contrast to Fülep's opinion, Owen Chadwick emphasizes that the Puritan branch of Christianity brought to life or supported by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation viewed music with as much suspicion as it did superfluous ornamentation in churches (Chadwick 1998).

In Hungary, Protestantism possessed a crucial political position within the European context as well. While it must be noted that several Protestant Churches existed in Hungary —

and exist to this date—due to its political influence and large number of believers, the Calvinist Church emerged as the most significant among these Churches. This analysis subsequently refers mainly to the Calvinist Church in its discussion of Protestantism, but retains the plural form of “Protestant Churches” in recognition of the presence of additional denominations. From the seventeenth century on, Protestantism was often strongly linked to the struggle for national independence. For a Catholic dynasty, such as the Habsburgs, preserving religious differences therefore represented an essential element to both religious and national interests; for a long time, the political efforts conducted by Hungarian Protestantism preserved the denomination’s nature of presenting a means of “protest” against the mundane and Catholic power. Before 1848, during Hungary’s Reform Era, the ultimate aim for Hungarian politicians was to modernize the nation, a goal that focused on developing the country’s social and economic structure and improving its national culture. Thus, on the one hand, the religious and historical-political sense of mission held by many Hungarian Protestants was enhanced by the political atmosphere; on the other hand, in the realm of literature, the concept of building a modernized nation blurred the lines drawn by denominational distinctions as a greater emphasis was placed on creating a modernized national culture. During the era of neo-absolutism that followed in the wake of Habsburg suppression of the 1848 War of Independence, religious and legal equality between Protestants and Catholics was genuinely realized as several of Hungary’s leading politicians during this Dualist Era were Protestants who led or participated in various activities sponsored by Protestant associations.

It cannot be forgotten, however, that Catholics as well as Protestants were active in different walks of society throughout the nineteenth century. Several priests could be found among scientists and poets and bishops—by virtue of their position and title—were members of the Upper House of legislation. Despite this presence, by the final decades of the century both Churches had lost some of their believers as a result of society’s gradual secularization, a process which led to a diminishing social influence. The Church movements which were initiated in the final decades of the nineteenth century as a response to this change were all formed on a denominational basis and with the purpose of increasing social activity in order to regain spiritual and social influence over their believers. Following the Compromise of 1867, the aim to revitalize Protestant religious life also gathered renewed momentum in an effort whose basic goals and devices were not very different from those employed by the Catholic revival of the time. The first step was to break the intelligentsia’s indifference to religion by founding various associations, dailies and journals. In 1871, the Magyarországi Protestáns Egylet [‘Protestant Association of Hungary’] was established. While this association fell victim to the theological debate between liberal and orthodox Protestants and was terminated merely a few years after it had been formed, the work it had begun to perform with the aim of stopping the alienation of the intelligentsia from the Church and harmonizing Protestant evangelization with the latest knowledge was continued by the Magyar Protestáns Irodalmi Társaság [‘Hungarian Protestant Literary Society’].

Founded in 1889, the Magyar Protestáns Irodalmi Társaság also laid claim to a monthly periodical called the *Protestáns Szemle* [‘The Protestant Review’] which published scholarly monographs and “popular publications” in a book series entitled *Koszorú* [‘Wreath’]. Although these attempts were not entirely unsuccessful, the process of self-examination conducted during the following decades mainly discussed arrears and were of little interest compared to similar foreign societies or the (Catholic) Szent István Társaság [‘Saint Stephen Society’], founded in

1848. Also, a Protestant literary paper that could have competed with the Catholic *Magyar Szemle* ['Hungarian Review'] or later *Élet* ['Life'] was not published, even though the presence of denominationally-backed periodicals was increasingly important following the emergence of modern literature.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the Catholic revival achieved remarkable success in comparison to the partial results achieved by Protestant Churches. In objection to the "church laws" passed in 1894–95 which (among other issues) accomplished the separation of church and state, the Catholic clergy's primary reaction was to organize the Katolikus Néppárt ['Catholic Popular Party'] based on an explicitly conservative platform. In turn-of-the-century Hungary, this age saw the booming development of the press and the Catholic Church also joined in by founding several Catholic papers. Even though this type of paper remained far fewer in comparison to the number of liberal papers up until the end of the First World War, these publications spread a combative, political brand of Catholicism that transformed culture into a weapon and literature into the scene of this struggle, similar to the German example of *Kulturkampf* ['cultural war']. The intellectual and spiritual leader of Hungarian Catholicism was Ottokár Prohászka, whose—as well as his followers'—nationalistic and anti-Semitic rhetoric (Hanebrink 2006: 35–36) significantly limited the Catholic reception of modernity. Nevertheless, this development is closely related to the processes that were unfolding within the Catholic Church at the time, such as heightened public and political activity, the embracing of modern forms of social organizations in the form of associations or political parties and the adoption of the devices used in modern mass communication.

The Attitudes Held by Religious Denominations toward Modernity before 1920

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the development of modern arts and literature placed the relationship between Protestant and Catholic denominations into a new context. In the 1880s and 1890s, even Protestants considered the reviving Catholic Church their arch enemy (Szász 1889: 4). Soon, however, Protestants at least recognized that—due to their destructive or skeptical attitude toward traditional values—the new, artistic and literary phenomena represented a far greater threat to Protestantism and the social position and prestige of the Churches in general compared to the presence of other denominations. The following conclusion was also drawn by Protestants by 1912:

Amid such circumstances, as Hungarian society is already torn apart both ethnically and denominationally, we see a new clamor of battle rising as world views clash. The new enemies, however, are not Protestantism and Roman Catholicism now: neither is it the Christian denominations amongst themselves, nor differing philosophical systems, but rather universal Christianity on the one side and the new paganism on the other (Sebestyén 1912: 578. All quotations translated by the author).

To a much lesser extent, Catholics were open to joining an alliance with Protestantism for the sake of defending the religious world view and Christian culture. As a positive example, the openness of Prohászka's activities to ecumenism can be mentioned or the fact that the Catholic *Élet* published not only Catholic authors, but—contrary to its own agenda—also accepted works by Zsigmond Móricz (to name just one author), one of the most prominent representatives of modern Hungarian prose who was additionally Protestant. Nevertheless, the perspective held by Catholicism at the time was much rather characterized by the fact that when works by the bishop

of Székesfehérvár were placed on the List of Banned Books in 1911, one of the charges leveled against him was that of ecumenism.

One explanation for the visible differences between the Catholic or Protestant attitude regarding the opposite denomination is the liberal attitude of Hungarian Protestantism, which not only promoted the freedom of theological research, but was also more open in connection to its views of society compared to Catholicism. This tolerance toward diversity in religion and religious world views may also be the reason why Protestants reacted to the challenges posed by literary modernity later and with less determination than Catholics did, albeit the Churches, as will be discussed later, viewed several literary movements (such as naturalism) from the same religious and ethical perspective. Literary critiques written by reviewers from diverse denominations reveal that—in examining “the moral fiber” of literary works—conservative approaches to literary criticism were already in place by the start of literary modernity in Hungary, a phenomenon generally dated according to the release of Endre Ady’s *Új versek* [‘New Poems’] in 1906, in other words before the start of modernism’s most significant literary periodical, *Nyugat* [‘West’] in 1908.

What elements defined the common moral and aesthetic perspective held by both Catholic and Protestant critics were primarily typified by an emphasis on the idealizing role of the arts, a view that determined the Protestant and the Catholic understanding of literature. The basic assumption underlying György Székely’s study, *A művészet és a vallás egymáshoz való viszonya* [‘The Relation of Art and Religion to One Another’], published in 1900) is that religion and art were becoming independent, a state the author attributes to the Renaissance. In spite of this opinion, Székely felt that art—with the exception of contemporary naturalism—had never completely broken away either from religion or the depiction of religious emotions and thoughts; in his estimation, art primarily represented the cultivation of the ideal beauty. According to this interpretation, art had two major motivators: nation and religion. The loss of ideal goals—which, for Székely, is found in naturalism—also resulted in the decline of humanity as a whole: “In our view, it will lead to the degradation of humanity if art too ceases to cultivate the ideal” (Székely, Dr. 1900: 2). In his analysis’s continuation, Székely defines three points of connection between art and religion: the feeling of the sublime (psychological motif), the effect on human morality (ethical motif) and the reinforcement of the feeling of human and social togetherness (social motif). In another of his papers, *A művészi és erkölcsi alkotásról* [‘On Artistic and Moral Creation’], Székely presupposes a spiritual affinity between the religious ethical-genius (prophet) and the artist-genius. He is also inclined to separate the biographical-self (“real-self”) from the fictitious-self created in the work (“mock-self”); in the end, however, it is the personal authenticity of the religious ethical basis of the work of art (whether a work of epic poetry or prose) that, he thinks, necessitates the sustenance of the close connection between the two, thereby engendering the enhancement of the necessary religious and ethical features of the artistic individual (Székely 1902).

A similar, Catholic view can be detected in Ottokár Prohászka’s case. According to Prohászka, in a work of art the artist’s soul reflects the world; the artist’s task is therefore to take apart “the tumultuous multitude, the diverse world of the universe, the infinity of life, of feeling, of struggling” and make it into a “unified and harmonic world” (Prohászka 1928a: 18). Prohászka illustrates the difference between good and bad arts (i.e. the arts deemed with acceptable or unacceptable according to his estimation) with the metaphor of flat mirrors versus convex or concave mirrors. Similar to flat mirrors, creative souls are able to reflect the world and

life in their undiminished beauty, whereas those whose souls have deformed—the convex or concave mirrors in this metaphor refer to the latter type of artist—can only show the devastation and suffering, thus distorting the image of the world and consigning the “beautiful world” to the torture rack. Consequently, Prohászka does not accept any manifestation of decadence, pessimism or a sceptic world view in art. Based on this principle, he rejects Ibsen, Bjørnson, or Gerard Hauptmann, Zola’s naturalism and also forms his critique of one of the most influential representatives of literary modernity in Hungary, Endre Ady (Prohászka, 1924). It must also be mentioned that, for Prohászka, when the childlike, naive artist merely portrays beauty while ignoring the tragic nature of human existence, this also poses a false depiction. In his work, *A diadalmas világnézet* [‘The Triumphant Worldview’], Prohászka discusses these artists in more detail as:

wheeling with the butterflies, chirping with the crickets, tweeting with the sparrows, happy for sunshine, heartless in their carelessness and cruel pleasures because they are deaf to the questions of the yearning souls wishing to immortalize life. If their souls yearn and suffer and search and long in them, they only point to the sunshine and the flowers and leave their souls gravitating into the depth, ploughing itself into the heaven of the universe alone, alone in the dump and misty environment of temporary, decaying life (Prohászka 1928a: 21).

Other than art’s idealizing function, the need for a realistic portrayal of reality also plays a role in Prohászka’s interpretation of aesthetics. When weighing the reasons behind modernity’s reception (or lack thereof), the fact that modern authors placed greater emphasis on an idealized version of aesthetics—one which denies the depiction of the ugly, contrary to the approach favored by naturalism—is an essential distinction. Literary criticism founded on the former, Catholic type of approach was only able to perceive moral crisis (Prohászka 1924), “sick content” (Harsányi 2007: 296), or aberration (Pintér 2007: 164) in modern literature. The Catholic Church’s reception of modern literature was therefore *a priori* a stigmatizing one, a factor that can be found in Protestant critiques as well (Makkai 1916: 50–59; Omega 1910: 383–387; Sz. 1911: 104–108). Another common feature in the approaches adopted by Catholic and Protestant denominations is that—despite viewing their own time (especially Protestants) and the state of their churches as an example of crisis—a flowering of Protestant or Catholic literature was seen as the way out of the moral crisis created by modern decadence.

In his 1916 discussion of the religious poetry written by the Calvinist minister and author, Mihály Szabolcska, György Kristóf elaborates on how Szabolcska’s “significance” lay in the way he took up a position against modern literature and the critiques published in *Nyugat* (Kristóf 1916). Kristóf, however, also voices the doubt of whether it was possible or not to talk about a Protestant lyrical poetry based on Szabolcska’s work in the same sense as could be done in connection to Catholic poets. At the time, works by the young Catholic priests, Lajos Harsányi and Sándor Sík, were already gaining recognition as “modern” Catholic literature. In the same year that Kristóf commented on Szabolcska’s religious poetry, another paper bearing the title of *Magyar protestáns szépirodalom* [‘Hungarian Protestant Literature’] and written by Sándor Makkai was published in the journal, *Protestáns Szemle*. Even more telling was the study’s subtitle of *Komoly szó valamiről, ami nincs, de aminek lennie kell* [‘A Serious Word on Something There Is Not but Must Be’]. The central question in Makkai’s paper considers whether Protestant literature can exist and, if so, what this would be like. The young author

begins his argument by stating that art (just like Protestantism in general) cannot be tendentious. At the same time, art and literature—surmounting current events and presenting general human ideals—have to be guided and inspired if they want to align with the triple ideal of Beauty, Good and True: “In every work of art, beginning from pure lyrical poetry up to the highest peak of drama, some world view and perspective on life appear as perceived in human symbols; the work of art gives flesh, bone and blood, that is a body, to some ideal of life. It depicts the ideal which already exists in the world of reasoning and sensation in the plane of logic and ethics” (Makkai 1916: 52).

No matter the gravity with which Makkai tried to address this issue in his paper, he got no further than explaining his own conservative view on literature while harshly condemning modern literature and pronouncing the need for a Protestant type of literature. Other than the exemplary list of primarily (but not only) Protestant predecessors including the Hungarian poets and authors from Hungary’s Reform Era such as János Arany, Sándor Petőfi, Mihály Tompa, Mihály Vörösmarty, Imre Madách, János Vajda and Zsigmond Kemény, he also mentions Sándor Baksay, Ferenc Herczeg, Géza Gárdonyi and Géza Gyóni among the following generations. For modern Protestant writers, Makkai defined their task as the creation of a Protestant literature which would fulfill the following function:

to bring a breath of innocent, sublime and ideal air, eternity, spirit, human dignity into this [i.e. modern literature – Z. Sz.]. The Protestant world view must break the servitude of the gown of aesthetics, the artistic form. For modern Hungarian literature made the artistic form the whore of worthless thoughts and immoral urges; it must be restored by making the aesthetic form—through its logical and ethic intrinsic value—beautiful, independent, superior to people and trends! (Makkai 1916: 54)

Similar to Makkai, Catholics expected the expansion and flourishing of a Catholic literature, mindset and morality to be the solution for escaping the moral and literary crises of the time. Lajos Harsányi, for instance, wrote the following in 1913: “Well, the awakening Catholic spirit, which had been able to employ all the products of time, is to replace this sick content and dress the eternally wholesome, victorious and pure ideals of Catholicism in a glittering robe. And we will have such a modern, symbolic Catholic poetry we could not have dreamed of ten years ago” (Harsányi 2007: 296). Influenced by Prohászka, the conservative Catholic understanding of literature favored reflecting the ideas primary to literature and did not exclude—similarly to Taine the French literary scholar—the art-shaping role of social relations. While this latter thought may seem to resemble similar concepts expressed by the French literary scholar, Taine, for Catholic critics it principally means a kind of ideal realism in contrast to the naturalist mode of representation.

On the surface, Catholicism had a different attitude to the phenomena of the modern. Formally speaking, modernity meant a new discourse and a new set of devices for *Kulturkampf*, the acquisition of which formed the indispensable condition of victory. The literary critical projection of these new devices is evident in the appreciative opinions expressed in several Catholic critiques of the time regarding technological innovations in the versification and enrichment of language of modern Hungarian lyrical poetry. In 1910, for instance, Ányos Tordai writes that “Unconditional praise must be given to the poetic diction and versification techniques of modern lyrical poetry.... [S]uch a beauty had been discovered in our language, its musical and artistic effects utilized so much that their poetry in this sense is a turning point indeed” (Tordai

2007: 287–288). The following is from József Nagy's critique of the volume, *Újabb magyar költők* ['New Hungarian Poets'] (1911): "For a very long time Hungarian poetic language has not been enriched with so many new turns of phrase, adjectives, correlations in ideas and images. Nor have versification techniques evinced so much energy in rhythm, due to Ady's and, in particular, Babits's works in recent years" (Nagy 2007: 291).

When trying to summarize Catholic and Protestant literature and the literary outlook expressed by critics in denominationally-based journals before 1920, it can be concluded that Protestant and Catholic literary criticism—based on their similar understanding of literature—belongs within the category of the era's nationalist conservative criticism. Protestant critics, however, recognized the need for a denominational (or Christian in general) literature, one that would impeccably present a religious moral view for the devout reader, as opposed to the content found in modern literature. Any other long-lasting result cannot be said to have been achieved by Protestant Churches in their attempt to stave off the moral crisis that modernity represented to them. The Catholic Church achieved slightly more in the first decade of the twentieth century, as a modern, yet distinctly Catholic type of lyric poetry began to develop with a dynamism that drew upon Catholicism's spiritual revival in Hungary, a movement that was already rooted in politics by the end of the nineteenth century. Catholic literature, however, was not able to attain any higher literary achievement than that of updating the poetic language to a certain extent. In contrast, the development of the image of Hungarian literary modernism was greatly influenced by the poetry of the Protestant Endre Ady and the poetry of the Catholic, Mihály Babits (Szolláth 2017: 150), whose works did not evolve within the framework of denominational culture, but were rather born in accordance with the autonomous aesthetic principles held by modernity. Within this framework, Ady and Babits did succeed in rewriting—in ways sometimes deemed as scandalous according to the views held by Christian denominations—the Christian textual tradition. Whereas modernity was seen by Hungary's Christian churches as deepening the crisis of European culture, in connection to certain representatives of literary modernism it was also viewed as a formative tension (Tonning 2014: 6–13) by means of which new, significant works were born.

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