

Preface

Endre Ady and Fin de Siècle Literature

Endre Ady (1877-1919), the renowned poet, writer, and journalist, worked for the papers all his life. In this he was not alone among his contemporaries; the progressive men of letters who in 1908 rallied around the new periodical pointedly called *Nyugat* (West) and who almost overnight shook Hungarian provincialism out of its self-contented slumber were, almost to the last man, contributors to the liberal newspapers.

In Hungary, where a burgeoning free middle class press played a formative role in the political and social life of the nation, belles lettres and journalism had long gone hand in hand. The papers gave generously of their pages to literature; most of Ady's poetry, too, first appeared in the dailies.

These dailies had another highly popular feature, the *tárca* or feuilleton story, so called to distinguish it from other forms of the genre, such as the longer novella. These were run at the bottom of the page every day, under the regular news articles. With just a couple of exceptions such as *The Kiss* (1908), which

appeared in *Nyugat*, Ady's short stories, too, were written for the press. In one of his early pieces, *Ten Forints' Bridegroom* (1905), he describes one painful, personal aspect of this journal-dependent storytelling. But in the preface to the short story anthology *It Can Happen Like This* (1910), their author confesses that his stories were born of the urgency of thought and feeling that "wished to rid themselves of the jail house of verse." The Preface is here quoted in part.

This book is the chance meeting place of budding little histories, and I am beginning to regard it now as very much my own. (...) I gleaned its contents at random and as a sample from the skein of almost three-hundred of my newspaper novelettes. For sometimes it happened not merely from crude necessity or pecuniary imperative that my poems grew dissatisfied and wished to rid themselves of the jail house of verse, to see distant field through others' eyes – or at least with that intention. Besides, I wanted to show off, to prove that I can manage these too if I will. But now that they're together, I see only that I have gleaned a volume full from the many in a fortunate manner, and I feel only that this time I stand before those who read me, love me, loathe me or have grown accustomed to me, with poems in another guise... I believe that true music, true song, takes flight from where Death has his dominion. May those who respect Ady the poet hear issue from this book the song of reapers ambling home from the realm of Death. May they look kindly upon

these [stories]... for after all, nothing happens in the world except what we feel, but that – that can happen like this.

In another place (a letter written from Paris to Antal Radó, editor of the series in which Ady's story anthology *Pale Men and Stories*, 1907, was to appear) he wrote:

I believe that a portion of my little feuilletons are, to a degree, documentary. I have treated new subjects... I have made attempts to enrich the form of the newspaper story or novelette, which has attained to such popularity in Hungary. To use a French word, I wished to add new frissons, to make this widely read, fashionable genre richer and more replete with ideas. Of course, I am perfectly aware of the serious shortcomings of these little novelettes. Write it down to my bent for over lyricizing on the one hand, and to the troublesome task of trailblazing on the other.

What makes Endre Ady's short stories so fascinating? Where lies their appeal?

Thanks partly to French (Zola and Maupassant) and partly to Russian (especially Turgenyev and Pushkin) inspiration, by the 1880s Naturalism and Symbolism began to appear in the works of Zoltán Ambrus, Sándor Bródy, Elek Gozsdú, Károly Lovik and others. And yet, in comparison to the writings of his predecessors and even contemporaries, Ady's

novelettes stand apart. This uniqueness owes a great deal to the felicitous conjoining of a predetermined disposition and sensibility, symbolic and lyrical, with a very special city – Paris, and an exciting new literature – the French, which gave it encouragement.

Between 1904 and 1911 Ady spent part of each year in the French capital, to be near his mistress. Léda, as Ady called her, was a well-educated woman of great personal charm, acquainted with many people of note in cultural life, and well versed in the new French literature. With her guidance Ady learned French and translated poems by Baudelaire and Verlaine. He also admired Mallarmé, Rimbaud and the other Symbolists in whose works he recognized a kindred spirit to the Secession, the Austro-Hungarian variant of art nouveau which he had first defended against the abuse of his provincialistic compatriots in an article back in 1899:

History has taught us [he wrote] that the bloodiest of transformations were born of the attempt of the self to free itself... Right now, this battle is waged ... in art and literature. The advocates of the old constraints hurl abuse at the apostles, misunderstand their efforts, and misunderstand, above all, what is at the heart of these efforts. The masses regard it as a fashion, whereas it is the first humble skirmish of a great universal transformation. Leave the Secession alone...! The Gibbons of the next century shall look back at this age from the new, transformed world of the Secession.

In Paris, Ady came face to face with a culture in which the struggle for unfettered individualism in the arts went hand in hand with long standing democratic tradition. For Ady, Paris was the city of light and of enlightenment, the breeding ground of revolutionary thought against which the near feudal conditions of his own homeland stood out in all the more glaring and painful relief. *Ten Forints' Bridgeroom* may have thought that he was merely courting the ten forints with the obligatory stories thrown down the insatiable gullet of whichever newspaper he happened to be working for. But even his earliest stories evidenced deep concern for the social contradictions of a country backward yet undergoing rapid development in its economic and political structure, a country where all this had little influence on the feudal conditions of the small towns and villages, and where, despite the growing proletarian movement and intellectual unrest, the lumbering state bureaucracy could not be stirred into action.

The other great catalyst for Ady's writings was his acquaintance with modern French literature, of which precious little was available in Hungarian translation. As he wrote in an article of 1906, "The new watchword is out: our artists must be kept away from accursed foreign parts, especially the West." But Ady, who by temperament had shared in the universal current of art nouveau even before he went to Paris, soon learned French and discovered

the moderns for himself. Of course, this is not to imply sources and influences, but what is much more exciting, a shared spirit, sensibility and world view. For once the prose works of Ady, Géza Csáth, Victor Csolnoky, Dezső Szomori, Ernő Szép and others will be discovered abroad (and rediscovered at home), it will be seen that by the early years of the twentieth century Hungarian literature was very much part of a coherent Western tradition and that through its greatest representatives such as Ady, it shared in a core of common values. It is this background which helped create the special Ady prose that was once referred to as a revolt turned into a style. It is a prose expressing new themes through a sometimes high strung, ecstatic and symbolic manner, the recourse to unexpected metaphors and linguistic neologisms, all so characteristic of the fin de siècle feuilleton. The erotic fuses with the political, the personal with the social; there is an uncompromising drive to take words by the throat, the bold and scathing clashing with the almost embarrassingly frank and personal.

For Ady, this power of the word to create new worlds and meanings went hand in hand with the preoccupation of the Symbolists to obliterate the abyss separating life and art. The last decades of the 19th century found themselves face to face with the discovery of subjectivity and its consequence, a world become fragmented, knowable only in parts. In this fragmented universe, the artist appeared as a sovereign creator who, as Oscar Wilde said, could make Life imitate Art.

Endre Ady's feeling, too, in his short stories at least, was that life follows art, which in turn seems so real and intense that it leads to madness, or worse, as in *Neighbours of the Night* and *The Blinded Muse*. In another story, to me one of this most remarkable, he addressed himself to the unresolved and unresolvable conflict between the sexes, another prominent Symbolist preoccupation. Entitled *Bond and the Spider of Old Age* (1905), it raises the popular art nouveau theme to tragic heights as the cult of the self calls for the kind of in-depth scrutiny that drags deep-rooted instincts into the blinding light of consciousness. Ady probed within his own self with the boldness and acumen that anticipated the discoveries of psychoanalysis.

As in all his stories, words are used in unexpected ways and in unexpected juxtapositions, thus commanding our attention and lending new authenticity to meaning, while the at times ambiguous syntax contributes to the sense of unity that pervades the whole. Images jostle each other for room, then flit away. We feel as though we could catch the act of creation and self-absorption in the making. We feel a hidden, more essential reality behind the appearances, whether we think of Ady's wildest and most self-indulgent art nouveau pieces such as *Thomas in the Red Garden*, *The Mute Couple* and *Flora*, or such subtle, Thomas Mann like works as *The Ghost of Rachel Szelezsán* and *The Sensitive Lieutenant*. Like Rimbaud, Ady filled nature with new meaning, using symbols to unveil the underlying mystery of life.

But unlike Rimbaud, Ady made no effort to escape from the limits of Self, nor did he see the human condition as quite so fleeting. Yet for him, too, the turn of the century style we call Decadence, Symbolism or Secession was synonymous with non-conformity. It was not only a style, but a liberation from style, not only a style, a sensibility, a way of life or a movement, but all of these at once.

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