



Personal Affinities and Professional Issues: Antal Szerb's *History of World Literature* (1941)

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Abstract: Antal Szerb published his book *A világirodalom története* (The History of World Literature) in 1941. My paper shows that many elements of the "world literature discourse" that started with Goethe and continues to this day can be detected in Szerb's understanding of world literature. Following Goethe, he emphasized the fading significance of national literatures, the proleptic character of world literature, and the importance of the international circulation of ideas, works, and goods. The question of "Great Books" also appears in his book. In his view, only the greatest classics, the great works of the "Western canon," can belong to the realm of world literature. According to Szerb, canonical works are, on one hand, consensual, their exceptional significance being surrounded by public agreement, and on the other hand, they have universal significance and a message that is valid for all of Mankind. As a literary historian, he was influenced by German intellectual history, above all by Friedrich Gundolf and Fritz Strich, as well as by Tivadar Thienemann. His history of world literature should be read as a work shaped by his personal literary biases and the categories of comparative literature of his time (influence, adoption, success, transmission, reception). Szerb supplemented the perspectives of academic literary scholarship with the views of his favoured contemporary thinkers. Influenced by Oswald Spengler and Johan Huizinga, he regarded the movements of modern literature as an expression of the "European crisis," no doubt sensing the threat of the approaching Second World War. Although Szerb considered the history of world literature to be fundamentally the history of European literature, and within that, the history of the great Western literatures, he also paid attention to the periphery, investigating the factors by which the periphery could break into world literature. He saw Polish, Russian, and Scandinavian literature as the best examples of this, and believed that the conditions for a breakthrough were a fortunate combination of the demands of the *Zeitgeist* of the age and the national character of the literatures in question.

Keywords: Comparative literature, German *Geistesgeschichte* (intellectual history), Hungarian *Geistesgeschichte*, European crisis, Great Books, Western Canon, globalisation, center and periphery

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1. Globalization and world literature studies

Parallel to the increasingly intense discourse on globalization, there is also a growing academic interest in the concepts and phenomena of world literature. It even appears as if globalization studies and (comparative) literary studies were representing analogous or related phenomena and processes.¹ Each discipline pays particular attention to the processes of transnational information flow, interaction, and exchange, and the ways these determine our cultural, political, and economic relations, as well as our everyday lives. These studies no longer focus on internal political, economic, and cultural movements in Europe, but rather on the increasingly significant global presence of former colonies and cultures outside Europe in general, the politicization of debates surrounding the Western literary canon, and the growing sensitivity towards subaltern groups and communities. These movements go hand in hand with the processes that have been examined by comparative literature, the main repository of world literature research to date. As Sandra Bermann notes, "the history of comparative literature, then, is also to some degree a history of globalization."² Some researchers, however, believe that the concept of "world literature" offers a much more effective and productive approach than comparative literature. Following this concept of world

1. Sandra Bermann, "World literature and comparative literature," in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, ed. Theo D'haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir (Routledge, 2011), 169-179, 170; Eric Hayot, "World literature and globalization," in *The Routledge Companion*, 123-231, 224; Vilashini Cooppan, "World Literature and Global Theory: Comparative Literature for the New Millennium," in *World Literature. A Reader*, ed. Theo D'haen, César Domínguez, and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (Routledge, 2013), 176-197, 179.

2. Bermann, "World literature....," 170; Cooppan, "World Literature and Global Theory....," 179.

literature, it means "the replacement of fixed [national] spaces and definitions with open or perspectivist space, where proportions are not established and must always be observed anew."³ However, this has not only resulted in changes, but also in *challenges*. These challenges are aimed at radically changing the conception of literature defined by the hegemonic position of Western culture and the Eurocentricity of traditional comparative studies, in contrast to the previous Eurocentric approach to world literature.⁴

As Edward Said has noted, "Academic work in comparative literature carried with it the notion that Europe and the United States together were the center of the world, not simply by virtue of their political positions, but also because their literatures were the ones most worth studying."⁵ These changes and challenges are not unrelated to various political and scientific historical reasons. After World War II, alongside French and German comparative literature departments, universities in the United States gained increasing importance, partly thanks to the activities of European (Eastern European) literary scholars who had been forced into exile.⁶ These researchers (Roman Jakobson, René Wellek, Erich Auerbach, Leo Spitzer) were multilingual and cosmopolitan, with a very broad European education, and thus brought with them the pre-war European-centricity of literary studies. Partly as a reaction to this, efforts were made to expand the scope of comparative literary studies and world literature history to include literatures and cultures outside Europe, especially postcolonial endeavors.⁷

Comparative literature, which has been one of the leading trends in literary studies since the second half of the 19th century,⁸ has been criticized since its emergence, both from a conceptual and methodological point of view. We are not just talking about Eurocentrism. The current state of comparative literary studies is well illustrated and summarized by Dragan Kujundžić, who, referring to the title of Erich Auerbach's famous book published in 1946, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (originally: *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*), noted that every single word (the West, reality, representation) is now obsolete.

"If we were to read Auerbach only literally, on the promise of the title, his work would probably come short today. The teleology of its historicism, the correspondence of representation and reality, the notion of the West, and above all of literature, have all undergone radical contestations in the last several decades, for such concepts to be taken naively, literally or at face value."⁹

The most significant changes within the discipline took place after World War II, due to the wave of emigration among European scientists, the independence of colonies, the temporary setback of nationalism, the emerging role of the Third World, the spreading of multiculturalism, and the increasingly dominant role of American universities, urging for a transformation of the discipline. Over time, the process of transformation (and the self-examination that accompanied it) was followed by challenges and (often very radical) criticism of the Western-centric conception of literature.¹⁰

As is widely known, interest in the concept and phenomenon of world literature emerged in the first half of the 19th century, though not without predecessors. Among the founding fathers of the discourse, the writings of Goethe¹¹ and Marx and Engels¹² emphasized the crossing of national borders and the free flow of goods and ideas.

3. John Pizer, *The Idea of World Literature. History and Pedagogical Practice* (Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 32.

4. Both world literature studies and comparative literary studies have been surrounded by criticism and heated debates from the outset, ranging from prosaic remarks such as that world literature is too vast to be adequately covered by a single author, to more sophisticated questions such as what is meant by influence, reception, and circulation. Or even, what is the world? See: Fritz Strich, "World Literature and Comparative Literary History (1930)", in *World Literature. A Reader*, 36-49, 38; Eric Hayot, "World literature and globalization," 227; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Planetarity," in *World Literature. A Reader*, 207-217; Robert Stockhammer, "Welt- oder Erdliteratur? Hinweis auf einen Unterschied," *Poetica* 47, no. 3-4 (2015): 135-150.

5. Quoted: John Pizer, *The Idea of World Literature*, 97.

6. Galin Tihanov, *The Birth and Death of Literary Theory. Regimes of Relevance in Russia and Beyond* (Stanford University Press, 2019), 9-25.

7. 'I shall not rehearse here the many arguments, historical and other, mounted against the resolutely European focus of earlier comparative studies. For over a decade now, the discipline has been facing head-on the need to go beyond its roots and to broaden the linguistic and cultural scope of its work to include the rest of the world: the East as well as the West, the South as well as the North'. Linda Hutcheon, "Comparative Literature: Congenitally Contrarian," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Haun Saussy (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) 224-230, 225.

8. For its history, see: Ulrich Weisstein, *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory. Survey and Introduction*, (Indiana University Press, 1973) 167-254; Susan Basnett, *Comparative Literature. A Critical Introduction* (Blackwell, 1993) 12-31.

9. Dragan Kujundžić, "Beyond Comparison: Auerbach's Comparative Literature as a Diasporic Experience," in *Rebuilding the Profession. Comparative Literature, Intercultural Studies and the Humanities in the Age of Globalization*, ed. Dorothy Figueira (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2020), 231-238, 232.

10. For one of the most radical critiques, see: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (Columbia University Press, 2003).

11. Goethe made twenty-one remarks on world literature, published in: Johann Wolfgang (von) Goethe, "On World Literature," in *World Literature. A Reader*, 9-15; cp. Fritz Strich, *Goethe and World Literature* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 349-351.

12. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Communist Manifesto," in *World Literature. A Reader*, 16-17.



The economic terminology they used to describe the economic and commercial nature of world literature links their views to contemporary discourses on globalization.¹³ Their statements were echoed in new disciplinary approaches that are relevant to both globalization studies and world literature studies: colonial studies, postcolonial studies, area studies, ethnic studies, and diaspora studies. These disciplines brought new areas and topics into research and radically reorganized the professional landscape of comparative literature and world literature studies.¹⁴ After World War II, views emerged within comparative literary studies that lamented the unification of world literature and the decline of cultural diversity, as Erich Auerbach did in his famous work *Philologie der Weltliteratur*.¹⁵ According to Auerbach, unification, standardization, and the increasingly dominant position of the English language simultaneously destroy the concept (and ideals) of world literature and bring about its fulfillment.¹⁶ Whether we consider the topic of globalization or world literature, we can see that the controversial issues are linked to a few main problem areas, both in professional circles and in the broader public discourse. These include, on the one hand, the global unification of culture and literature and, on the other hand, the multiplication of national literatures. These include, on the one hand, the standardization (formulaic nature) of (literary) culture and, on the other hand, the increase in cultural diversity.

These processes open up new possibilities, such as a more flexible, inclusive, and sensitive approach to world literature, and more successful self-representation in the global arena for cultures of peoples and nations that have been suppressed or ignored until now. At the same time, they present dangers or difficult challenges, such as unification or (from another perspective) the collapse of the "Western Canon."¹⁷ It is a matter of perspective whether cultural diversity is increasing or decreasing, whether world literature is becoming more unified or fragmented, depending on whether one considers the free flow of information, ideas, and texts (Goethe's role of *Verkehrung*) or the unification that necessarily follows to be more decisive.

2. Antal Szerb's approach to world literature

Antal Szerb Hungarian literary historian, writer, and essayist published his three-volume work *A világirodalom története* [The History of World Literature] in 1941.¹⁸ The concept of world literature his book articulates is quite eclectic, reflecting most of the elements of the two-century-long discourse that had formed around the concept. His views were primarily influenced by Goethe. In the introduction to his book, Szerb (almost obligatorily) referred to Goethe's famous statements on the advent of the era of world literature.¹⁹ Drawing on Goethe, Szerb emphasized the fading significance of national literatures and the proleptic, emerging character of world literature, which was open to the future, and the importance of the international circulation of ideas, works, and goods, supplementing this with the statement that world literature was written for "the whole world."²⁰

The question of "Great Books" also appears in Szerb's work.²¹ When he wrote that "world literature" was not as large as we might think, and could fit on the shelves of a well-curated private library,²² he also implied that only the greatest classics deserved a place there, referring to them with the term that would later become common: the great works of the "Western canon." On this point, Szerb adopted an arbitrary approach, trying to compile a comprehensive (though still selective) overview of European literature, and simply omitting works from outside Europe, except for the Bible and classical Arabic and Persian literature. As Dionyz Ďurišin notes:

13. Cooppan, "World Literature and Global Theory...", 179. Goethe expressed similar thoughts on the role of literary translations. See: George Steiner, "A Footnote to Weltliteratur," in *World Literature. A Reader*, 114-121, 116.

14. Cooppan, "World Literature and Global Theory...", 180.

15. Erich Auerbach, "Philology and Weltliteratur," trans. Maire Said and Edward Said, in *World Literature. A Reader*, 65-73. cp.: Aamir R. Mufti, "Erich Auerbach and the death and life of world literature," in *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*, 71-80.

16. Auerbach, "Philology and Weltliteratur," 65.

17. Hayot, "World literature and globalization," 224. A typical document expressing fears related to this challenge is Harold Bloom's writing, which lists the rise of literature based on representations of gender, race, and class, as well as the disciplines specializing in their study, above all cultural studies, as disruptive symptoms of the "chaotic age" of world literature. Harold Bloom, "Elegiac Conclusion," in Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon. The Books and School of the Ages* (Papermac, 1996) 517-528.

18. Antal Szerb, *A világirodalom története* [The History of World Literature], 1-3 (Révai, 1941). All further citations are from the next edition: Szerb Antal, *A világirodalom története* [The History of World Literature], ed. Eszter Pálffy (Magvető, 2021). German translation: Antal Szerb, *Geschichte der Weltliteratur*, trans. András Horn (Schwabe, 2016).

19. According to research, Goethe said something about world literature on twenty-one occasions, which are published: Johan Wolfgang (von) Goethe, "On World Literature," in *World Literature. A Reader*, 10-15.; cp.: Fritz Strich, *Goethe and World Literature*, 349-351.

20. Szerb, *A világirodalom története* [The History of World Literature], 5.

21. John T. Kirby, "The Great Books," in *The Routledge Companion...*, 271-282. The term "Great Books" was originally used to refer to the reading list for world literature courses which established at American universities between the two world wars with the aim of democratizing education and developing a value-preserving humanistic attitude. See also: Theo D'haen, *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature*, (Routledge, 2012), 82-83. The humanistic pedagogical aims of Szerb's book are consistent with this idea.

22. Szerb, *A világirodalom története*, 5.

"The value-selective concept of the history of world literature is represented by numerous syntheses in European and other literatures. This is a concept which, by its nature, suits practice and also authors' pragmatic aspirations. A case in point is *A világirodalom története* (History of World Literature) by the Hungarian literary historian Antal Szerb. This work is a typical compendium of the old type, as evidenced by the evaluative criteria and the method of explanation."²³

Of course, this is not just a question of quantity. For Szerb, it was more important that the great classics, the canonical works, were consensual, surrounded by public agreement about their exceptional importance, and that they had universal significance with a message valid for all of mankind. For that matter, this humanistic and universalistic value perspective, i.e., that world literature speaks virtually to all of Mankind, or with Szerb's own words, "world literature is written for the whole world," had been emphasized in some form by most authors concerned with the nature and study of world literature. In view of the trends in literary studies at the time, Antal Szerb's book was based on the conceptual frame proposed by French and German comparative literary studies, and later adopted by Hungarian scholars as well, and include the concepts of influence, adoption, success, transmission, and reception. On the one hand, he did not rigorously adhere to the professional norms of literary history. He employed a consciously elaborate, witty and ironic *essayistic* style, which was considered Szerb's trademark by the Hungarian literary public of the time. On the other hand, he often refers to scholars who are dear to his heart but considered "outsiders" from a literary studies perspective, such as historian of religion Károly Kerényi, cultural historian Johan Huizinga, and philosopher of history Oswald Spengler. As has been previously indicated, Szerb's views on world literature are of an eclectic and contradictory nature.²⁴ The starting point for his book was one of Goethe's often quoted statements:

"It is becoming more and more obvious to me that poetry is the common property of all mankind and that it is manifest everywhere and in all ages in hundreds and hundreds of people. The only difference is that some express themselves a little better and are on top a little longer. [...] But of course, when we Germans do not look beyond the narrow confines of our immediate surroundings, we easily develop this pedantic pride. I therefore like to keep informed about foreign productions, and I advise to do the same. National literature means little now, the age of Weltliteratur has begun; and everyone should further its course."²⁵

Several (otherwise quite obvious) critical comments can be made about Szerb's conceptual approach. Problematic aspects of Szerb's book regard its title and focus. Szerb did not deal with world literature, only with the history of *European literature*. Goethe, incidentally, made his famous remark to his secretary Eckermann while reading a *Chinese* novel:

"Goethe's most famous pronouncement on world literature also came in the course of a conversation with Eckermann, this one dated 31 January 1827. Here he announced that national literature now signified very little, that the epoch of world literature is dawning and all individuals must work to speed up ('beschleunigen') the arrival of this period [...]. The brief passage provided by Strich occurs in the course of a rather long entry in the *Gespräche* which begins with Goethe's observation that his reading of a Chinese novel, contrary to Eckermann's supposition that this work must have seemed odd and strange ('fremdartig') to him, led him to the insight that the characters think, feel, and act much like we do. One feels oneself among equals, only that everything proceeds more ethically and clearly among them [...]. While the circumstance that a Chinese novel inspired one of his most widely cited enunciations concerning world literature does not by itself absolve Goethe of the charge that his paradigm is informed by a Eurocentric perspective, his remark does indicate that a truly global perspective of the literary scene is sometimes to be found in his articulations of the concept."²⁶

Szerb's book, of course, *says nothing* about Chinese literature or its influence on European literature. In his preface, he states that he is concerned exclusively with the literature of European peoples as "world literature," supplemented by the Bible and Arabic-Persian literature. He explains this as follows:

23. Dionyz Ďurišin, "World Literature as a Target Category," in *World Literature. A Reader*, 150-159, 156.

24. See: Eszter Pálffy, "Afterword. Antal Szerb's History of World Literature," in Szerb, *A világirodalom története* [The History of World Literature], 899-915.; cp. Eszter Pálffy, "1941. Megjelenik Szerb Antal *A világirodalom története* című könyve" [1941. Antal Szerb's book *A History of World Literature* is published] in *Magyarország globális története*, ed. Ferenc Laczó and Bálint Varga (Corvina, 2022), 226-230.

25. Johan Wolfgang (von) Goethe, "On World Literature," 11.

26. John Pizer, "Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: Origins and Relevance of Weltliteratur," in *The Routledge Companion*, 3-11, 5. Cp. Fritz Strich, *Goethe and World Literature* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), 397.



"Nem szorul bővebb magyarázatra, hogy könyvemben nem szerepel a régi és új keleti népek irodalma sem. Bármilyen csodálatos kincseket is rejtgetnek a nagyon kevesek számára, akiknek módjukban áll megismerni azokat, a nyugati kultúrkör irodalmára semmi befolyással nem voltak, nem léptek be a világirodalomba, nagy alkotásaik nem közös tulajdonai az emberiségnek. Kivétel az arabok és perzsák irodalma, amelynek legkiemelkedőbb művei megbízható fordításokban mindenkinek rendelkezésére állnak, és hatásukkal hozzájárultak a nyugati irodalmak kialakulásához." ("It goes without saying that my book does not include the literature of the ancient and modern Eastern peoples. No matter what wonderful treasures they may hide for the very few who have the opportunity to discover them, they have had no influence on *Western cultural circle* [Szerb consciously uses Oswald Spengler's words], have not entered world literature, and their great works are not the common property of humanity. The exception is the literature of the Arabs and Persians, whose most outstanding works are available to everyone in reliable translations and whose influence contributed to the development of Western literature").²⁷

Szerb's position was controversial even at the time, but in light of *today's debates* surrounding the concept of world literature, it seems completely reductionist and arbitrary. As for the focus of the book, it would certainly have been more fortunate to title it *The History of European Literature*, but a few years earlier, his mentor, the highly respected literary scholar of the era, Mihály Babits, had published a book with precisely this title²⁸, and Szerb did not want to create literary concurrence with Babits's work.²⁹

3. Personal preferences, arbitrary gestures

Beyond the exclusion of non-European literatures, it can also be observed that Szerb's book contains numerous preconceptions that sometimes border on arbitrariness. One such example is his interpretation of European literature (and European culture in general) as a process of decline. He borrowed this idea from Oswald Spengler's book *The Decline of the West*.³⁰ Spengler also interpreted modernity as a symptom of decline and considered certain historical periods to be simultaneous (homologous).³¹ An excellent example of the latter idea in Szerb's book is his comparison of "Alexandrianism" and modernity:

"A mai ember számára a késői görög irodalom különösen azért érdekes, mert kísértetiesen hasonlít a XIX. századi és a mai irodalomra. Megtaláljuk benne irodalmunk úgyszólván valamennyi irányának megfelelőjét: a romantikát, a realizmust, az impresszionizmust, az expresszionizmust és a népiességet, a dráma csődjét és a regény fokozatos térhódítását, az életrajz és útleírás divatját, az irodalom megosztását elit- és közönségi irodalomra." ("Contemporary readers find late Greek literature particularly interesting because it bears an astonishing resemblance to 19th-century and modern literature. We find it as counterparts to virtually all the trends in our literature: romanticism, realism, impressionism, expressionism, and populism; the decline of drama and the gradual rise of the novel; the fashion for biography and travel writing; and the division of literature into elite and popular literature").³²

Within the logic of Szerb's book (and following Spengler), the "simultaneity" of the beginnings and ends of epochs is one of the logical and conceptual links that make it possible to see the parts of world literature (distant in space and time) as a unified whole, and thanks to this, individual national literatures are given a world-literary scale and perspective.³³ It is irrelevant whether Spengler's views are correct or how authentically Szerb interpreted them; from the point of view of historical investigation, what is essential is that Spengler's perspectives and concepts ensure (at least in part) the coherence of the process of world literature reconstructed by Szerb, which is also supported by historical-philosophical arguments.

By following Spengler, Szerb maneuvered himself into a contradictory position. On the one hand, we can assume that he was personally involved: Spengler's dramatic portrayal of the decline of the West was in accordance with

27. Szerb, *A világirodalom története*, 6-7.

28. Babits Mihály, *Az európai irodalom története* [The History of European Literature] (Nyugat Irodalmi Rt., 1934).

29. He also expressed his worries about Babits's possible reaction in one of his letters: letter to Sándor Sík, Budapest, November 7, 1939. in Szerb Antal *Levelei* [Letters], ed. Csaba Nagy (Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, 2000), 105-106, 105.

30. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol. 1-2. trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, (Alfred A. Knopf, 1945).

31. "I designate as contemporary two historical facts that occur in exactly the same relative positions in their respective cultures and therefore possess exactly equivalent importance." Spengler, *The Decline...*, vol. 1. 102.

32. Szerb, *A világirodalom története*, 60. Cp. Spengler, *The Decline...*, vol. 1. 294.

33. The application of Spengler's concept of simultaneity was also proposed by Julius Petersen, a leading figure in German literary studies at the time; see Julius Petersen, "Nationale oder vergleichende Literaturgeschichte?," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 6 (1928): 36-61, 54.

Szerb's own situation, his personal experiences, and the alarming historical and political processes unfolding before his eyes: the threat of war, the persecution of the Jews, and the collapse of old Europe. However, Tivadar Thienemann (Szerb's older friend and, like Szerb, himself a prominent scholar of comparative literary history) had pointed out much earlier that Spengler's book (if taken seriously) necessarily led to a dramatic conclusion, the realization that "literature is dead" (certainly a shocking conclusion for a literary scholar),³⁴ while Szerb seemed to be fascinated by the phenomenon of the decline of European culture as an inspiring factor (a quasi-artistic "possibility") and an aesthetic problem. In this conception, we can also detect the influence of Johan Huizinga's book *The Decline of the Middle Ages*, which, alongside Spengler, was another important source of inspiration for Szerb's view of world literature. It is important to note that the books by Spengler, Huizinga, and Szerb are, on the one hand, extensive theoretical reflections on the crisis in Europe and, on the other hand, specific literary products of that crisis.³⁵

An equally important part of Szerb's thinking is the idea that literary development represents the "psychogenetic" process within Western culture from the reign of wild instincts and barbarism to the emergence of humanity, and, at the same time, performs this process with its own tools. According to his view of literature, barbarism, savagery, and cruelty are opposed to civilization, refinement, and humanitarian behavior. This idea runs through Szerb's Hungarian literary history and world literary history. From a historical perspective, his views resemble the theory of civilization developed by his contemporary, German sociologist Norbert Elias, although Elias's 1939 book *The Civilizing Process* remained practically unknown before World War II.³⁶

We have no information indicating that Szerb ever read Elias's pioneering work, but throughout his career he showed a strong interest in the works of the most important authors who inspired Elias, Sigmund Freud and Johan Huizinga. Following Freud and Huizinga's works, especially *The Discontent in Culture* and Huizinga's *The Decline of the Middle Ages* and *Erasmus*, he may have developed his concept completely independently of Elias. The significance of this line of thought is unquestionable from Szerb's point of view. The idea that literature is a "product of civilization" and the function of literature in civilizing savagery, instincts and raw emotions played a significant role in his early writings, in his 1934 history of Hungarian literature, in his 1939 history of world literature, and in his book *A királyné nyaklánc* [The Queen's Necklace],³⁷ which was strongly influenced by Huizinga. However, we must draw attention to a semantic distinction, namely that Szerb understood "civilized" to mean refined, humane, and pacified, while on the other hand he used the term "civilization" in the Spenglerian sense, understanding it as the final (mechanical, rigid, declining) period in the history of individual culture circles. Typologies of style played an important role in contemporary German literary scholarship, especially the question of fundamental concepts arranged into polarities. Szerb's complete view of literature, as well as the entire text of *A History of World Literature*, is imbued with polarization, a dualistic description and interpretation of literary, historical, and cultural phenomena.

These polarities can be stylistic categories (Renaissance and Baroque, Romanticism and Realism, Romanticism and Classicism, style and counter-style), types of national character (Latin and Germanic), psychological concepts (conscious and unconscious, life instinct and death instinct), philosophical categories (Dionysian and Apollonian, irrational and rational). These polarities and the categories associated with them constitute a coherent discursive order in Szerb's thinking, in which, for example, the poles of romanticism, the death instinct, the unconscious, and the Dionysian principle belong together and refer to related or similar phenomena. Behind the century-long steps of world literary history, we can observe a regular succession of styles and epochs dominated by such categories. From this point of view, Szerb's views were in line with the contemporary theories of style: he saw the periods of literary history as a succession of Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism, Pre-Romanticism, Romanticism, Realism (and then Modernism). All this, especially with regard to the opposition between the Renaissance and the Baroque, and between Classicism and Romanticism, was in line with the style concept of German intellectual history,³⁸ of which Szerb was also a follower.

The priority of Romanticism permeates Szerb's complete oeuvre—psychological-metaphysical depths, a mythological worldview, spiritual exaltation, the cult of infinity and desire are consistently presented as positive

34. "In this construction of literary history [that which follows Spengler's ideas], the notion of the decline and death of literature is already inherent. [...] Literature is dead." Thienemann Tivadar, *Irodalomtörténeti alapfogalmak* [Basic concepts of literary history] (Danubia, 1931) 21-22.

35. Antal Szerb, who had always idealized the romantic worldview, reacted positively to the tragic overtones of Spengler's book, which had its roots in German Romanticism, while Huizinga rejected them categorically. See: Johan Huizinga, *In the Shadow of Tomorrow*, trans. Johan Huizinga, (W. W. Norton, 1936), 218-219.

36. Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, Bd. 1-2. (Haus zum Falken, 1939). On the reception of Elias's work, see: Hermann Korte, *Über Norbert Elias. Das Werden eines Menschenwissenschaftlers* (Suhrkamp, 1988), 13-34.

37. Szerb Antal, *A királyné nyaklánc* [The Queen's Necklace] (Budapest: Bibliotheca, 1943); in English: Antal Szerb, *The Queen's Necklace*, trans. Leonard Rix (London: Pushkin Press, 2010).

38. See: Fritz Strich, *Deutsche Klassik und Romantik oder Vollendung und Unendlichkeit* (Meyer und Jensen, 1922).



values.³⁹ As a result, he often discussed literary phenomena (whether works or periods) that were incompatible with the “irrational” and the “romantic” in a dismissive, distanced, or overcritical tone.

“This principle of antagonistic duality, very much part and parcel of the analytical toolkit of art history and literary studies at the time [...] informs Szerb’s discussion of Romanticism, which he places at the centre of his history. Romanticism is prepared by the growth of the Gothic and Baroque, and it then exfoliates itself to give rise to Symbolism, various Modernisms, and a whole plethora of other post-Romantic *écritures*. At the other end of the spectrum, one finds Realism, which Szerb takes as evidence of European literatures having entered a phase of decline. Realism, like Romanticism, is only the end product of the evolution of an entire stylistic formation that mirrors a certain outlook and system of values; it is comprised of Classicism and the Enlightenment, with their allegedly homogenizing and trivializing insistence on the supremacy of the rational, proportionate, and decorous.”⁴⁰

His intense interest in “non-realistic” tendencies had also appeared in an earlier comparative study, his 1935 book *Hétköznapiak és csodák* [Everyday Life and Wonders]. This book reviewed European novel writing in the 1920s and 1930s, constructing a sharp opposition between the world of wonders represented by the modern novel and the banality and prosaic nature of realism and naturalism.⁴¹ The use of the word “wonder” in Szerb’s work is highly polysemic (or even more so, vague) it can refer to the “irruption” of archaic myths and mythical worlds into modern European novel writing, as well as phenomena such as divine or sacred epiphanies, magical transformations, or what can be described as “marvelous” or the presence of some kind of “irrational element.”

Szerb’s book was strongly influenced by the views of Károly Kerényi. Kerényi was an internationally recognized historian of religion who proclaimed the relevance (and even the rebirth) of archaic myths in the modern world. Szerb researched and analyzed the signs and traces of this mythical “rebirth” in the works of contemporary novelists such as James Joyce, Thomas Mann, John Cowper Powys, D. H. Lawrence, Thornton Wilder, and Aldous Huxley. In this book, Antal Szerb makes numerous arbitrary gestures, as he would later do in his world literature history. Many of the novels discussed had little to do with the revival of myths; Szerb celebrated them simply as *counter-discourses* to the realist and naturalist tendencies that he did not hold in high regard. In the introduction to his work, he also stated that he dealt exclusively with German, French, and English novels because those were the languages he read. However, it is important to note that Antal Szerb’s seemingly arbitrary decisions and choices, his astonishing gestures that deliberately provoked the rigidity of contemporary Hungarian academic literary scholarship, were based primarily on his high awareness of his own competence, his superior cultural authority and cultural capital, and the self-assurance he had developed through his extraordinary erudition. These are psychological and habitual factors, but they help to shed better light on many of Szerb’s decisions that are controversial from the point of view of academic rigour.

And finally: Antal Szerb was very interested in theories of national character, and this influenced both his works of fiction and his critical writings. He tended (following the Romantic philosophical tradition) to see literature as an expression of what he liked to call the national *eidos*, or essence. At the same time, he was not only concerned with the typical characteristics of Germans, French, Americans, English, Irish, Scandinavians, Hungarians, Russians, Poles (and “Slavs” in general), but also with how specific national traits influenced other national literatures in certain cases.

Incidentally, as far as the role of national characterology is concerned, we find ideas emphasizing its relevance even within German scholarship. Fritz Strich, for example, justified the chances of achieving world literary status, success, and recognition (at least in part) on the basis of considerations of national characterology. In his view, French literature is more significant in world literature than German literature because the French view humans as universal and cosmopolitan beings and part of universal connections, whereas the Germans view them as isolated individuals and part of the nation. Referring to this, Strich considered French literature to have a better chance of achieving recognition at the level of world literature.⁴²

39. All these aspects are expressed with almost programmatic awareness in Antal Szerb’s novel *Utas és holdvilág* [Traveller and Moonlight] (Révai, 1937). It has been published in German, English, and French.

40. Galin Tihanov, “The Location of World Literature,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 44, no. 3. (2017): 468–481, 471.

41. Szerb Antal, *Hétköznapiak és csodák. Francia, angol, amerikai, német regények a világháború után* [Everyday Life and Wonders. French, English, American, and German Novels after the World War] (Révai, 1935). From the perspective of the present analysis, it is perhaps worth noting that the volume was published in the Révai publishing house’s “World Library” series. See also the German edition: Antal Szerb, *Die Suche nach dem Wunder. Umschau und Problematik in der modernen Romanliteratur*, (Panthéon, 1938).

42. Fritz Strich, “World Literature and Comparative Literary History,” 42–44. Madame Staël’s famous books (*De la Littérature*, 1800; *De l’Allemagne*, 1813), to which both Strich and (nota bene) Szerb referred, played an important role in the contrast between the German and French characters. Fritz Strich, “World Literature,” 43; Szerb, *A világirodalom története* [The History of World Literature], 477–478. On Madame Staël’s significance in the history of comparative literature, see: V. Cooppan, “World Literature and Global Theory,” 178.; U. Weisstein, *Comparative Literature*, 169–179.

4. The network of interactions and circulations in world literature in Antal Szerb's book

Comparative literary history constituted a significant part of Szerb's work. His early studies interpreted the classical poets of 19th-century Hungarian literature in the context of German, French and English literary and cultural movements. During this early period of his career, Szerb was influenced by German intellectual history, above all by Friedrich Gundolf and Fritz Strich, as well as by Tivadar Thienemann, who worked in Hungary but considered himself a German imperial citizen and published in both Hungarian and German. As far as Szerb's world literary history is concerned, his work should be read as being determined by his personal and subjective literary biases and the conceptual categories characteristic of comparative literature at the time (influence, adoption, reception, etc.). Following the theses of Friedrich Gundolf's book *Shakespeare and the German Spirit*,⁴³ he argued that influence and reception⁴⁴ are never mechanical, because the receiving literature must have some kind of inner disposition in order to accept some kind of external, foreign influence. What is interesting, is not the simple fact of influence, but what the receiving literature does with it, as Szerb repeatedly stated.⁴⁵

"Az összehasonlító irodalomtörténet a hatásokkal foglalkozik, amelyeket egy író vagy egy nemzet irodalma egy másik íróra vagy nemzetre tesz. A pozitivizmus korában ezt a hatást gépies, mennyiségbeli dolognak fogták fel. [...] Gundolf ráeszmélt, hogy a szellemi átvételnél nem az a fontos, akitől átvesznek, hanem az, aki átvesz, mert ő fejt ki teremtő munkát és ő változik meg; nem az az érdekes, hogy mit vesz át egy alkotó, hanem hogy mit csinál belőle." ("Comparative literary history deals with the influences that the literature of one writer or nation exerts on another writer or nation. In the age of positivism, this influence was regarded as something mechanical and quantitative. [...] Gundolf realized that in intellectual appropriation what is important is not the emitter, but the recipient, because it is the latter who performs the creative work and undergoes change. What is interesting is not what a writer takes from another, but what he does with it").⁴⁶

The connections and interactions examined in his works were defined by the unity and continuity of world literature, as opposed to spatial and temporal fragmentation. His approach, which aimed to harmonise local and regional tendencies with the European whole, was already present in the concept of his *History of Hungarian Literature*, published in 1934. According to his often-quoted statement, "Hungarian literature is a miniature mirror image of European literature".⁴⁷ This statement reflects, on the one hand, the desire for harmony with Europe, on the other hand, the acceptance of external influences and the clear rejection of the principle of autochthonous development, and thirdly, the presence of a kind of compensatory effort to counterbalance the marginal status.

Szerb interpreted the movements and relationships within European literature as a set of exchanges and interactions, with a dual perspective of system and circulation. With a structural and comprehensive (holistic) approach, Szerb's book presents the movements of world literature on three levels. The *first* is the dimension of "abstract intertextuality": the coexistence and constellation of texts, whether in a synchronic or diachronic sense. We could even call this global intertextuality, but as we have seen, Szerb wrote and thought primarily within a European framework. This dimension, or level of interpretation, is not only abstract, but also total: it is the sum total of the texts that make up the entire corpus of world literature. As Galin Tihanov states: "...the capacity of literature to weave its own dense intertextual network across time and space, thus demonstrating its own reproductive power *qua* 'world literature'".⁴⁸ In this case, we consider the network of texts and the intertextual relations between literary works to be the basis of world literary connections, regardless of the (empirically graspable) channels through which they were realized or the institutional environment in which they are embedded. The *second* level is the totality of empirically interpretable concrete influences and exchanges. This is where the role of mediators (translators, translations, critics, travels, journals, salons) between emitters and receivers comes into play. Various factors that can be attributed to the "foreign relations" of literature also come into play here: market movements, wars, conquests, or intellectual fashions (exoticism, folklorism, Ossianism, Byronism, Werther fever, etc.). The *third* level is that of relevance, which goes beyond influence and success and is based on temporal durability and integration into the deep structure of literary culture. The work in question embodies universally recognized

43. Friedrich Gundolf, *Shakespeare and the Deutsche Geist* (Georg Bondi, 1920).

44. The question of influences has always been one of the fundamental problems of comparative literature. For a summary, see U. Weisstein, *Comparative Literature*, 29-47; 48-65.

45. As a representative figure of the *Geistesgeschichte* of his time, Szerb was averse to explanatory models based on mechanical or causal effects, and instead advocated the use of analogy, coexistence, constellation, and elective affinity.

46. Szerb, *A világirodalom története*, 826.

47. Szerb Antal, *Magyar irodalomtörténet* [History of Hungarian Literature], ed. Eszter Pálffy (Magvető, 2019), 19.

48. Tihanov, "The Location of World Literature," 475.



"eternal values," supranational importance and universal humanity.⁴⁹ Interpreted in terms of relevance, the influence of world literature is no longer merely empirical data, but a phenomenon saturated with values, thanks to which an author or text is incorporated (over time) into the ranks of Great Books, world literary classics, and canonical works.

Significant literary awards can be indicators and promoters of the influence and success of world literature.⁵⁰ Szerb's book already hints at the "Nobel Prize problem" and the vicious circle associated with it: on the one hand, the Nobel Prize is awarded to those who are already internationally renowned, and on the other hand, the awarding of the prize lifts authors out of the sphere of national literature, enabling them to step onto the world stage thanks to the prize.⁵¹ An illustrative example is the case of Rabindranath Tagore (the first non-European author to win the Nobel Prize), about whom Szerb wrote in quite a cold voice in his book, describing his works as sophisticated kitsch and emphasizing that he was ultimately completely "forgotten" (as he somewhat maliciously suggests: quite rightly).⁵² Tagore's example is also interesting from Szerb's point of view because it was an *Indian* (i.e. non-European) author who was actually included in his book, on account of the fact that Tagore's works had entered world literature *in English translation*. However, we can also assume that if Tagore had not been a Nobel Prize winner, Szerb (regardless of his success in English) would have left him unmentioned.

5. Scandinavians, Poles, Russians

One of the lessons of Antal Szerb's book is that it is very difficult for peripheral, small peoples, small nations and small languages to break into world literature. The periphery must either fight for (critical, market, cultural) recognition or patiently wait for that exceptional moment when a favorable constellation of circumstances (the fateful convergence of national characteristics and the demands of the spirit of the age, as Szerb emphasized) propels the literature of the periphery into the center. According to his book, the big breakthrough was primarily possible in Scandinavian and Polish literature. Russian literature can also be mentioned here, of course, although it did not start from the position of a "small nation", but from the European periphery, from a socio-cultural setting that (according to Szerb) was almost incomparable with European conditions and European development. Russia is, on the one hand, an "exception" and, on the other, almost an "anomaly". In the case of small peoples and peripheral nations, Szerb attributed the possibility of a breakthrough in world literature to a favorable *constellation* of certain factors.⁵³ Such factors included the affinities between the *Zeitgeist* and the national character of the nations in question, as well as the occasional appearance of geniuses whose exceptional creative powers broke through all barriers.

Polish, Russian and Scandinavian literature contributed to the great literatures of the last century through the combined influence of brilliant minds and unique historical constellations; only these have an impact on universal literature, only these are members of the living network we have been discussing. An example of this in Szerb's book is the Western reception of Polish Romanticism. In his view, the entry of Polish literature into world literature is due to Romanticism, in whose atmosphere the West has become (quasi) open and receptive to factors such as the "tragic Polish destiny" and the national heroism of the Polish people. Furthermore, Szerb (typically) draws attention to national character traits: he claims that Poles are romantic *ab ovo*, even more than other European nations.

"A közös-európai romantika bizonyos oldalát ők tudták legszebben szavakba foglalni, annak oka egyrészt az, hogy a lengyel közismerten hasonlít a romantikus emberideálhoz, szenvedélyes és bánatos, gavalléros és zenei, dionüszikus fajta, a józan meggondolás kevésbé uralkodik rajta, mint más embernél." ("They were able to express certain aspects of pan-European romanticism most beautifully, partly because Poles are known to resemble the romantic ideal: they are passionate and melancholic, gallant and musical, Dionysian, and less ruled by cold reason than other people").⁵⁴

The breakthrough of *Scandinavian literature*, in Szerb's perception, was also due to a favourable constellation of circumstances. In their case, it was not Romanticism that defined the spirit of the age, but rather the cult of isolation and

49. Strich, "World Literature...", 41-42.

50. Analyses consistently point out that *world literary significance* and *international success* are not necessarily the same thing. A frequently cited example of the latter (perhaps because he was a contemporary of Goethe) is the international reception of August von Kotzebue, an incredibly popular playwright of the era. See: Fritz Strich, "World Literature", 40-41.

51. On the role of the Nobel Prize in world literary movements (and canonisation), see: Horace Engdahl, "Canonization and World Literature: The Nobel Experience," in: *World Literature. A Reader...*, 316-328.

52. Szerb, *A világirodalom története*, 739-740.

53. Although the term "constellation" may bring astrology to mind, it is important to note that at this time, it was also an essential component of Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. See: "Such interpretation does not claim causal necessity for the relationships it uncovers: the interpreter's movement between the cultural object and the social configuration yields an understanding of the social factors as a 'constellation' (almost in the astrological sense) which renders the cultural formation 'possible'." David Kettler, Volker Meja and Nico Stehr, "Introduction: Karl Mannheim's early writings on cultural sociology," in Karl Mannheim, *Structures of Thinking* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 11-29, 17.

54. Szerb, *A világirodalom története*, 500.

intimacy at the turn of the century and the profound depiction of the soul's vibrations that characterized the naturalism of the period.

"A világirodalom, amint könyvünk bevezetésében elmondtuk, körülbelül a XIX. század közepéig a két klasszikus nyelv, a három nagy modern latin és a két nagy germán nyelv irodalma. De a XIX. században, amikor a 'kultúra' átmegy a 'civilizációba', és az addigi zárt világkép minden tekintetben meglazul, kinyílik, az irodalmi oikumené határai is megnyílnak és kitolódnak, a Nyugat és a Közép után az Észak is hozzácsatlózik a világirodalomhoz. [...] A skandináv országok élete külső eseményekben szegény, nagy átalakulásait vértelenül intézik el; ehhez hozzájárul az északi éghajlat és a szigorú protestantizmus szűrítő, hangfogó hatása; mindez arra indítja az északi embert, hogy egyszerű, mindennapi életében, az intim szférában találja meg önmagát és művészetét. Minden a józan, aprólékos *realizmus*ra predesztinálja, arra a művészi látásra, amely a századközép és a századvég emberének kedves." ("As we said in the introduction to our book, world literature until about the middle of the 19th century consisted of the literature of the two classical languages, the three great modern Latin languages and the two great Germanic languages. But in the 19th century, when 'culture' gave way to 'civilization',⁵⁵ and the hitherto closed world view loosened and opened up in every respect, the boundaries of the literary oikumené also opened and expanded, and after the West and the Middle of Europe, the North also joined world literature. [...] The life of the Scandinavian countries is poor in external events, and their great transformations are managed without bloodshed; this is due to the greying, voice-dampening effect of the northern climate and strict Protestantism; all this inspires the northern man to find himself and his art in his own simple, everyday life, in the intimate sphere. Everything predestines them for down-to-earth, meticulous *realism*, for the artistic vision that was dear to people in the middle and at the end of the century").⁵⁶

The status of *Russian literature*, both in the context of Szerb's book and in his book's afterlife and publishing history, is quite unique. Since the works of Pushkin, Turgenev, Chekhov, Gogol, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Gorky were fundamental parts of the "Western canon" (or, in other words, the pantheon of Great Books), there is no reason to investigate why Antal Szerb attributed such significance to them in world literature.

More instructive is his treatment of *Soviet-Russian literature* in his book. Soviet literature emerged and developed in a social environment that was completely unique in the 1930s: it was the only communist country on Earth, and in terms of its geographical extent and geopolitical ambitions, it was a world empire. Furthermore, as Szerb pointed out, even before the revolution, Russia differed from the European order in terms of its low level of bourgeois development and political culture (tsarist autocracy): "Before Peter the Great's reforms, Russia had no connection not only with European literature, but with Europe in general, and with world history as a whole".⁵⁷

Szerb considered Soviet proletarian literature to be primitive, and due to the isolation of the Soviet Union, he had no access to reliable information about literary life there. He regarded the Sovietization of Russian literature, the centralized cultural policy and the enforcement of planned economy on literary life as counterproductive; he also disliked the voluntaristic spirit of Soviet literature. Similarly, he rejected the idea that literature should have a direct socio-political utility. Finally, he deeply disliked the mechanistic and formulaic production methods implied by Soviet literature. As a result, this chapter of his book became highly anti-Soviet. Therefore, after World War II, when Hungary came under the influence of the Soviet Union, the Soviet-Russian chapter was removed from his book and replaced with a Soviet-compliant section written by a loyal communist writer, Sarolta Lányi, with Stalin's famous words ('the writer is the engineer of the soul') as its motto.⁵⁸ It should be noted here that although Antal Szerb could not have counted on Soviet-style globalization at the time, his analyses anticipated the developments that would define the culture and literature of the Eastern Block after the Second World War.⁵⁹

55. Here, Szerb refers to the opposition between "culture" and "civilisation" as it appears in Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*.

56. Szerb, *A világirodalom története* [The History of World Literature], 775. Szerb's views on Scandinavian literature are comprehensively analysed by Gábor Attila Csűr, "Szerb Antal és Skandinávia. Irodalmi élmények, források, képzetek és hatások" [Antal Szerb and Scandinavia. Literary experiences, sources, ideas and influences], *Filológiai Közlemények* 65, no. 4 (2019): 71-91. Cp.: Gábor Attila Csűr, Skandinávien som imago i det ungarske litterære tidsskrift Nyugat (1907/1908–1941): En kritisk læsning af nogle nationale stereotyper og deres efterliv, *Scandinavistica Vilnensis* 17, no. 1 (2023): 119-136.

57. Szerb, *A világirodalom története*, 614.

58. Sarolta Lányi, "Mai orosz irodalom" [Contemporary Russian Literature], in Antal Szerb, *A világirodalom története* [The History of World Literature] (Budapest: Révai, 1947), vol. 3, pp. 395–408, 395. Cp. Eszter Pálffy, "Afterword...", 901–902. In his conversation with Maxim Gorky, Stalin originally used a more detailed formulation: "writers, the engineers of the human soul." Katerina Clark, "Utopian Anthropology as a Context for Stalinian Literature," in *Stalinism. Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (W. W. Tucker & Co., 1977) 180–198, 184.

59. This had decisive significance for Eastern Europe: the forced unification of a region with a high degree of cultural diversity and the violent elimination of differences was coming to an end. In the words of Milan Kundera: "the region distinguished by the 'greatest variety within the smallest space'; swallowed and flattened by Soviet Russia, whose ideal was 'the smallest variety in the greatest space'." Quoted by Caryl Emerson, "Answering for Central and Eastern Europe," in *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, 203-211, 204.



Ultimately, of course, Soviet literature (despite all its anomalies) became significant in world literature in every sense of the word, thanks to its major authors, the enormous geographical extent of the region, and Soviet imperialism. Antal Szerb's history of world literature features not only the Soviet Union but also the literature of other European countries that were considered "exceptions" or "anomalies" in the twentieth century. One such example is National Socialist Germany, where totalitarian political systems, extreme nationalism and racial theory elevated to the status of state philosophy radically diverted literature from the norms of world literature. The official literature of Nazi Germany was written only for Germans, did not proclaim universal humanist ideals, and adhered to the myth of its own supposed national superiority and exceptionalism. Although Szerb (albeit in a rather forced tone) mentioned them in his history of world literature, it was clear that he viewed the literature of the Third Reich as part of world literature with serious reservations. In his book on novel theory, he expressed this much more decisively and with bitter irony. On the one hand:

"A legtöbb író, akiről a német fejezetben szó esett, ma már emigrációban van és párizsi kávéházak teraszán, olcsó londoni penziók drawing roomjában elmélkedhetik a regényírás legfőbb problémájáról, a szabadságról. Könyveiket elégették, nevüket nemsokára el fogják felejtetni." ("Most of the writers mentioned in the German chapter live in exile today, contemplating the ultimate problem of novel writing, freedom, from the terraces of Parisian cafés and the drawing rooms of cheap London pensions. Their books have been burned, and their names will soon be forgotten").

On the other hand:

Ezek [a hivatalos német] írók sosem fogják áttörni a német határokat. Metafizikai beállítottságuk, könyvük nehéz atmoszférája, a kérdések, amelyek érdeklik őket, oly speciálisan németek, hogy a nem-német számára idegenek maradnak. Hiányzik belőlük a humor, az ironia, az elbeszélő szent könnyelműsége. [...] A szólásszabadság nem feltétlen kelléke a regényirodalomnak, a nagy orosz regény a cárizmus legsötétebb napjaiban jött létre és az elnyomás nagyban hozzájárul befelé forduló tökéletességéhez. Talán a német irodalmat sem fogja megölni a parancsuralom. ("These [official German] writers will never break through the German borders. Their metaphysical disposition, the gloomy atmosphere of their books, the questions that interest them are so specifically German that they remain alien to the non-German reader. They are lacking in humor, irony, and narrative playfulness. [...] Freedom of speech is not an absolute necessity for the novel; the great Russian novel was born in the darkest days of tsarism, and repression contributed greatly to its inward-looking perfection. Perhaps German literature will not be killed by authoritarianism either").⁶⁰

Speaking about the literature of the Third Reich, Szerb explained that the writers of the Third Reich were so "uniquely German" that they could not be considered of international interest. The totalitarian political will separated part of contemporary German literature from Europe and isolated it from world literature. In this case, real literature, whether national or world literature, was represented by *emigration*: "As a result of the great political upheaval in Germany, some writers went into exile." All this indirectly and directly draws attention to the fact that *emigration* and *exile* themselves (and, of course, even today) can be a specific problem of world literature and a catalyst for literary developments and movements on a world-literary scale. Looking at the bigger picture, Szerb considered the contemporary aspirations of three major nations to be a threat to the unity and ideals of world literature. On the one hand, German and Soviet-Russian literature based on totalitarian regimes, and on the other hand, American literature, which he saw as promoting a bleak spirit of "Americanism," a cult of money and materialism, and, like Soviet-Russian literature, threatening with the danger of *industrialized cultural production*.⁶¹

6. Conclusion

Antal Szerb's work can be placed in the middle of a nearly two-hundred-year process that began with the Goethe era and continues to the present day. One pole of this process is represented by Goethe's remarks: the concept of world literature is proleptic, the true era of world literature lies ahead of us, and the importance of national literatures is declining. The other pole is our world, the 2020s. The latter is characterized by neo-nationalism, the multiplication of national literatures, the celebration of diversity, the chaos of diversity, and the elimination of diversity, as well as trends toward global uniformity, which now permeate not only popular culture but also high culture. Viewed in this context, Szerb's conception of world literature presents a rather outdated picture. At the same time, what remains appealing about Szerb's book today is his impressive ability to organize literary and cultural history into a coherent whole. Galin Tihanov's writing compares Szerb's work to that of his greatest

60. Szerb, *Hétköznapiak és csodák* [Everyday Life and Wonders], 228-229.

61. Regarding the danger of the elimination of diversity, Erich Auerbach also pointed out that global standardization could take place in accordance with both the European-American and Russian-Bolshevik paradigms. E. Auerbach, "Philology and Weltliteratur," 66.

master, Mihály Babits, in European literary history. He emphasizes that Babits considered classical Greek and Roman literature to be the standard of world literature, compared to which the literature of modern nation states was a decline: "the advent of nation states and nationalism marked the end of the era of world literature".⁶² Szerb, on the other hand, assumed that the universal and humanistic dimensions of world literature necessarily develop *within* the framework of national literatures. Tihanov summarized the lessons of their works as follows: "Babits's and Szerb's work on world literature is an insightful and stimulating exercise in cultural and intellectual history; at the same time, it serves as a cautionary tale about the difficulties we are bound to face when trying to ponder the scope of world literature today and the extent to which it lends itself to historical conceptualization."⁶³

It is also obvious that the moral and humanistic messages encoded in Szerb's work have not become outdated, but now seem perhaps overly optimistic, even naive at times. Szerb's decisions were not based solely on professional considerations. By the end of the 1930s, Szerb, who was subject to anti-Jewish laws in Hungary, was excluded from the official literary-historical institutional system. Forced to give up his academic career because of his Jewish origins, he committed himself to the essay as a genre and to an essayistic style of writing. His book should be read as a work shaped by his personal affinities (such as romantic fantasy, deep psychology, and the idealization of the irrational) as well as by the categories characteristic of comparative literature at the time.

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