East, West, Star, Moon: Semantic Implications of Journal Titles in the Self-Positioning of Hungarian Literature

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Abstract: The role of journals, including literary and cultural ones, in the modernization process was well understood by contemporaries. From the late 18th century onward, such representations appeared with increasing frequency in Hungarian literature, alongside similar initiatives aimed at promoting the development of other regional cultures. The emergence of vernacular culture as a marker of nationhood and identity in the 19th century brought new significance to the institutions that engaged with it. However, the titles and programs of prominent journals from the first half of the 20th century, regarded as the flagships of Hungarian literary modernism, again underscore the issue of the regional and geocultural positioning of Hungarian culture. Traditionally seen as the symbolic starting point of Hungarian literary modernism, the magazine was called Nyugat [West], though the first issue of its program was titled "Kelet népe" [People of the East]. Launched in the mid-1920s as part of neo-conservative cultural policy, the counter-periodical was named Napkelet [Sunrise], a title that encapsulates the broader context of the emerging debate and the political ramifications of the national identity narrative. The East-West dichotomy in a fascistizing Central Europe is further loaded with overtones that are both crucial and contradictory. The titles of Nyugat's successors, shifting from terrestrial geographical metaphors to the cosmic (Magyar Csillag [Hungarian Star], Újhold [New Moon], Csillag [Star]), again signify a distinct positioning of (national) culture. The exploration of magazine titles and their metaphorical implications may initially seem like a somewhat particular or niche investigation. However, such an analysis can reveal profound insights into how culture, identity, and literature were conceptualized during pivotal moments in history. Given the complexity of the period, particularly in Hungary, the role of literature and culture went through a significant transformation—one that reflected national self-identity, Western modernity, and the politicization of artistic expression. The titles of periodicals themselves often encapsulated these tensions, offering a glimpse into how intellectuals grappled with both the internal dynamics of Hungarian culture and the external pressures exerted by political ideologies.

Keywords: literary modernism, media history, nationalism, collective identity narratives, 20th century history, Central Europe

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1. The role of literary journals in (literary) modernity

My starting point may seem marginal and arbitrary, but the special characteristic of the titles of mainstream Hungarian literary journals—where the issue of modernity is highlighted—may offer valuable insights when viewed through the lens of three key questions. First, during the process of social modernization from the late 18th century, specifically the development of enlightened absolutism in the Habsburg Empire, literature in the Hungarian-speaking region consistently assumed a symbolic role that transcended its own boundaries, thereby elevating the significance of everything associated with it to a crucial level for the community's existence. Secondly, this appears to be a typical feature of the development of Central and Eastern European cultures in the 19th and 20th centuries. Finally, we can ask what possible similarities exist between cultures in this regard.

The narrative thread woven through the competing metaphors in the journal titles also unveils the struggles over the rightful bearer and heir of literary modernity, a central issue in 20th-century Hungarian literary historiography. Since the publishing license for *Nyugat* was tied to its last editor-in-chief, Mihály Babits, it was revoked following his death in 1941. During World War II, obtaining a license under that name became impossible. Consequently, until its banning under the Arrow Cross regime in 1944, the journal was published under the symbolically charged title *Magyar Csillag*, with a new editor-in-chief. The semantic field of this new title came to shape subsequent efforts—sometimes oriented toward continuity, other times toward appropriation—to carry forward *Nyugat*'s intellectual

legacy in the postwar period. In this peculiar struggle for inheritance, the periodical press played a significant role: as workshops and forums for like-minded colleagues and their audiences, they served as social spaces capable of continuing various literary conceptions, even in the mid-20th century, after the communist takeover. The preservation of these cultural continuities, the dialogue with them, and even the attempts at political appropriation directed toward them, can be traced by examining the semantic implications of literary and cultural journals.

There is a peculiar connection between titling trends and specific social dynamics and structures. While the titles of early printed mass periodicals typically reference the medium's communicative or mediating function, this practice gradually evolved in tandem with the transformation and increasing differentiation of culture—and literature within it—under the conditions of social modernity.[1] Alongside the various Messengers, Heralds, Couriers, Reviews, Mirrors, and Conversations, the second half of the eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of titles denoting fictive or virtual spaces—journals with names like Musarions, Museums, Parnassuses, or invoking mythological figures such as Athena, Hebe, Urania, and others. These titles evoke the boundaries of refined, elevated, and divine realms under the patronage of the classical Muses.[2] Literary yearbooks and journals function as gateways to these realms—portals through which only readers of cultivated taste and heightened sensibility can pass, to encounter souls akin to their own. Although this may seem to represent a form of democratization—Brian Maidment, for example, notes that between 1780 and 1830, serial publications emerged that blurred the boundaries between periodicals and books, reflecting the democratization of print culture and the expansion of literary domains[3] (Maidment 2010)—a new kind of boundary began to emerge, one based on readers' aesthetic competencies. For the pre-Romantic and classicist critics of the era, the boundary lies between true culture—defined by a modern aesthetic of sensibility—and outdated 'pedantry' that remains incapable of rising to the world of the Muses and thus, in essence, cannot truly cross the threshold of culture.[4]

In the nineteenth century, culture became more closely tied to the national language, and in Central Europe—above all under the influence of Herder's ideas—it was regarded as the highest expression of a nation's essence and distinctive characteristics. Cultural differentiation no longer relied on the opposition between the 'sensitive' and the 'dull' or uneducated, but rather on the differences among languages and cultural traditions. In the context of nineteenth-century Hungarian literary history, this tendency gained particular prominence: the purity of the national language and the cultivation and protection of a specifically Hungarian style—whether in literature, poetics, music, or the visual arts—emerged as central critical principles. As the century progressed, engagement with language and literature took on an overtly political dimension, and after the defeat of the 1848–49 revolution, certain literary circles began to regard such activity as a political act in itself—imbued with cultic or quasi-religious significance. At this stage, the concept of the nation was still perceived as unified. Initially, it defined itself in contrast to the German-speaking culture of the Habsburg imperial court—which was seen as the enemy of the War of Independence and a sovereign power by mid-century. By the final decades of the century, however, this oppositional stance was increasingly directed against the modernizing forces of capitalism and the worldview known at the time as cosmopolitanism.

As the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century approached, the cultural landscape underwent significant transformations—driven largely by rapid economic and social change. The cultural sphere became increasingly socially diverse, with greater visibility given to assimilating ethnic minorities, the urban Neolog Jewish population, and a rural populace from mixed social backgrounds. It was primarily the rapidly expanding mass press that provided a platform for these voices. For this modern society, shaped by a heterogeneous cultural background, the concept of the nation came to function as the inclusive framework that Romantic nationalism in the first half of the nineteenth century had envisioned—that is, a vision in which all those who spoke the national language and identified with the nation were considered part of it.[5] However, this notion increasingly contrasted with the institutionalized conception of national culture and literature, which by then had become thoroughly politicized. The cultural establishment harshly rejected and actively suppressed this emerging, modern understanding of culture and literature, which it increasingly viewed as un-Hungarian, alien, or even corrosive to the national spirit.

Yet even among the so-called "moderns," fundamental questions remained: What could constitute "Hungarianness"?

1. Stephen Botein, Jack R. Censer, and Harriet Ritvo, "The Periodical Press in Eighteenth-Century English and French Society: A Cross-Cultural Approach," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 3 (1981): 464–490.

2. Michael Ketcham, *Transparent Designs: Reading, Performance, and Form in the Spectator Papers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985); Ingemar Oscarsson, "For the Laity, as Well as for the Learned: Some Themes and Structures in the System of Early Modern Learned Periodicals," in *Eighteenth-Century Periodicals as Agents of Change: Perspectives on Northern Enlightenment*, eds. Ellen Krefting, Aina Nøding, and Mona Ringvej, 46–61 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

3. Brian Maidment, "Periodicals and Serial Publications, 1780–1830," in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. Michael F. Suarez, SJ, and Michael L. Turner, 55–75 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

4. Botein et al., "The Periodical Press…"; Thomas Munck, "Eighteenth-century Review Journals and the Internationalization of the European Book Market," *The International History Review* 32, no. 3 (2010): 415–435.

5. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006).

What is the essence and social function of literature and culture? And—especially during and after the cataclysms of the First World War—what future path might lie ahead for Hungarian identity, not only as a nation but also as a broader cultural, social, and political entity? A wide range of responses emerged, coalescing into networks and tightly knit group formations that asserted influence across various social domains. Literary magazines, in particular, gained renewed importance as key forums for these intellectual and cultural formations.

Although the contributors and readerships of individual magazines were not strictly delineated—there were numerous overlaps—both contemporary observers and later literary historians tended to identify these publications as strategically positioned, or even oppositional, 'camps' within the broader literary field. This perception was undoubtedly reinforced by the magazines' self-conceptions and differences in prestige, which facilitated such categorization. Within literary modernism, the magazine frequently functioned either as a "voice"—articulating the views of specific groups or ideological positions—or as a "space"—a platform for display, expression, and encounter among like-minded writers and audiences. Often, even the titles of these magazines made their self-positioning clearly legible, reflecting both explicit and implicit conceptions of the role of literature and culture. Culture thus appears as a contested field of symbolic power: it functions as a site for articulating positions on national identity, social values, political affiliations, and both the relation to mass culture and mass culture's relation to its audiences.[6]

Moreover, the image, perception, and symbolic positioning of magazines play a key role not only in structuring the literary field but also in shaping individual career trajectories and strategic planning. Authors often advance "magazine by magazine," gradually navigating toward the cultural center—an upward movement clearly observable, for instance, in the case of the Hungarian journals Napkelet [Sunrise] and Nyugat [West], which will be discussed in more detail later. Equally important in this context is the fact that, under the conditions of modernity, culture emerges as a stake in a series of symbolic and ideological struggles. If this stake is defined as 'national culture', then what we encounter are conflicting conceptions of the nation itself.[7] If it centers on competing systems of social values, then we find ourselves in the midst of political debates about the role, function, and legitimate claims of various social groups and classes.

After the First World War, an additional layer of complexity enters the picture: the question of mass culture and mass access to cultural goods—a shift that, as Walter Benjamin suggests, fundamentally transforms both the production and reception of art.[8] From this perspective, the self-positioning of literary and cultural magazines—their explicit or tacit assumptions about the role of culture—becomes especially significant. Their titling practices, editorial programs, and stylistic preferences can therefore offer valuable insights into these underlying cultural-political orientations.

Narratives of collective identity exhibit a curious persistence: as long as a given collectivity continues to assert its own existence, coherent identity narratives retain their potential to function as instruments of political mobilization and communicative social practice—again and again, across radically different historical moments. This, in itself, constitutes a compelling argument for their continued critical examination.

2. Hungarianness and Literature Between East and West

As in other Western European contexts, the role of language—and, by extension, literature—in the processes of social modernization occupies a central position in East Central Europe. Within this framework, literature emerges not merely as a vehicle of cultural transmission, but as a crucial site for articulating and reconfiguring national identity. This function aligns closely with insights from modernist nationalism studies, which emphasize the bundling of cultural, linguistic, and institutional innovations into coherent nation-building projects.[9]

One of the most compelling aspects of this process is the prevalence of paradoxical identity narratives. These narratives aim to assert national uniqueness and cultural originality, yet they do so by mimicking—or at least approximating—the aesthetic and discursive standards of those cultures already perceived as "modern" or "advanced." The underlying logic is a simultaneous claim to difference and sameness: a desire to be distinctive precisely by aligning with dominant models of modernity.[10]

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6. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed," in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 29–73.

7. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

8. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 101–133.

9. A. Ersoy, M. Górny, and V. Kechriotis, eds., *Modernism: The Creation of Nation-States* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2010); Balázs Trencsényi, *The Politics of "National Character": A Study in Interwar East European Thought* (London: Routledge, 2012).

10. Viktorija Šeina, "Nation-Building Canons: Historical and Methodological Considerations," in *Literary Canon Formation as Nation-Building in Central Europe and the Baltics*, ed. Aistė Kučinskienė, Viktorija Šeina, and Brigita Speičytė (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 1–20.

This paradox resonates with broader cultural patterns associated with modernity, particularly in the domain of mass culture. Much like early 20th-century fashion—where individuality was articulated through conformity to shared symbols of novelty, such as clothing, hairstyles, music, and consumer objects—the national subject constructs itself as "unique" by participating in collective modes of modern self-expression. Niklas Luhmann's sociological theory offers a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon: fashion, he argues, is a social system that communicates novelty and individuality precisely through its ability to standardize distinction.[11]

Such mechanisms support what might be termed a "nation-franchise" model: national identity is not forged in isolation but rather assembled through translatable modules of modernization that can be adapted across varying sociohistorical contexts. This may help explain why modernist theories of nationalism so often succeed in diagnosing the structural dynamics of nation-formation with remarkable precision, even in the absence of local empirical data or specific historical actors.[12]

From the perspective of the East–West binary, a key component of Hungarian national self-perception is the country's simultaneous identification as both a "stranger" and an "exotic Easterner." Since the eighteenth century, this identity construction has drawn upon the positive connotations historically associated with Orientalism—wealth, sovereignty, mystique, and cultural depth. These associations stood in contrast to an increasingly disenchanted and unstable West, particularly during the processes of modernization and capitalist transformation in the nineteenth century.[13]

This romanticized Eastern self-image was further reinforced by critiques of modernity within Hungarian public discourse. As early as the late eighteenth century, modernity was often described in Hungary as "unmanly"—a rhetoric closely linked to anxieties about social change, effeminacy, and luxury consumption. Literary and moral criticism of "luxury" became especially prominent at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reflecting broader resistance to Western consumerist values. A significant strand of Hungarian Enlightenment and Romantic thought sought to export this autochthonous, self-identical cultural feature to the international arena as a unique expression of national individuality. Unlike many other national movements that aimed to emulate Western models, Hungarian thinkers and writers often aspired to present themselves as a parallel and equally legitimate cultural reality. At the same time, however, they remained committed to economic and social progress, envisioning a regionally central role for Hungary. This dual ambition is vividly reflected in the evolving rhetoric of national "glory" in nineteenth-century Hungarian literature: a shift from feudal, genealogical nobility to a civilizational concept of *vera nobilitas*—one earned through literacy, moral virtue, or even national "fitness" in the Darwinian competition among nations.[14]

The concept of *vera nobilitas* in Hungarian discourse is deeply embedded in a genealogical understanding of national identity, wherein authenticity is equated with historical continuity. This notion is essential to understanding the tensions between traditional Hungarian identity and the forces of modernization. Within this framework, *vera nobilitas* can be critically examined through the lenses of modern scholarship on nationalism and modernity.

First, the concept of *vera nobilitas* parallels the arguments advanced by the above-mentioned Ernest Gellner, who emphasizes the importance of literacy and cultural production in the formation of modern national identities: nation-building involves the creation of a cultural elite that legitimizes the national project through the dissemination of literature, art, and other cultural artifacts. Reinhart Koselleck,[15] in his analysis of the historical semantics of "modernity," suggests that the valorization of noble lineage and the association of nobility with cultural advancement served as a form of resistance to the rapid social changes brought about by capitalism and industrialization. Similarly, Benedict Anderson introduces the concept of the "imagined community," in which national identity is constructed through shared symbols, language, and a collective sense of heritage.

The Hungarian adaptation of *vera nobilitas* from the late eighteenth century onward reflects a broader European pattern in which nobility was deeply intertwined with national culture and identity. In Hungary, however, this discourse also served as a critique of emerging capitalist, bourgeois, and "unmanly" aspects of Western modernity. In contrast, the idealized past of noble lineage and cultural authenticity—embodied by *vera nobilitas*—remained central to the Hungarian national myth, emphasizing a return to an imagined noble heritage in opposition to modernization and

11. Aurélie Van de Peer, "Niklas Luhmann: Fashion between the Fashionable and Old-Fashioned," in *Thinking Through Fashion: A Guide to Key Theorists*, ed. Agnès Rocamora and Anneke Smelik (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 200–214.

12. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

13. Ferenc Bíró, *A felvilágosodás korának magyar irodalma* [Hungarian Literature of the Age of Enlightenment] (Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 1994).

14. Béla G. Németh, "Létharc és nemzetiség: (Az 'irodalmi' értelmiség felső rétegének ideológiájához, 1876 után)" [Struggle for Existence and Nationality: On the Ideology of the Upper Layer of the 'Literary' Intelligentsia after 1876], in *Létharc és nemzetiség: Irodalom- és művelődéstörténeti tanulmányok* [Struggle for Existence and Nationality: Studies in Literary and Cultural History] (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1976), 7–41.

15. Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Presner et al. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

Western influence.[16]

The foundational myth of nineteenth-century Hungarian national identity—rooted in noble and feudal origins—suggested that Hungarians "belonged to the past." Because noble legitimacy was genealogical, the older one's lineage, the more authentic and valuable one's national identity was considered to be. Yet this narrative stood in direct contradiction to the lived realities of modernization: assimilation, emancipation, social mobility, and urbanization. This fundamental tension is perhaps best encapsulated in a striking observation by Ignotus, the founding editor-in-chief of *Nyugat*, Hungary's emblematic journal of literary modernism. In 1908, he delivered a scathing critique of what he called a "persecutor aesthetics," listing phenomena that nationalist traditionalists deemed alien or "not Hungarian":

> "Budapest is not Hungarian. The Hungarian spoken in Budapest is not Hungarian. Nationalizing the administration is not Hungarian. The stock exchange is not Hungarian. Socialism is not Hungarian. Internationalism is not Hungarian. Organizing the agricultural workers is not Hungarian. Mobile capital is not Hungarian. Secession and Symbolism are not Hungarian. Mocking is not Hungarian. A more tolerant sexual morality is not Hungarian. Universal suffrage is not Hungarian."[17]

This list is not merely a cultural provocation; it functions as an indictment of modernity itself, encapsulating the anxieties around national authenticity in a rapidly modernizing society. One of the most important metaphors of the liminal space between East and West in Hungarian discourse is that of *Komp-ország [*Ferry-country], a term famously explored by the Hungarian poet *Endre Ady*, who stands as an emblematic figure of Hungarian literary modernity. In his essay *"On the Margins of an Unknown Corvin Codex"* (1905), Ady reflects on the complexities of Hungarian identity in relation to its position between East and West. As one of the key texts in Hungarian literary modernism, Ady's work provides a poignant insight into the cultural and existential dilemmas faced by Hungary in the early twentieth century. Ady's portrayal of the *Ferry-country* is full of powerful imagery and metaphor, encapsulating the ambiguous position of Hungary within the European and global landscape. The author begins with a stark and evocative description:

> "Ferry-country, Ferry-country, Ferry-country: even in his most capable dreams he was only crawling between two coasts: from East to West, but preferably back. (...) We were chased forward, not allowed to look back, to see where we were going scooting from. To see that this country belongs to a few Pharaohs, that they keep millions of people in filthy animal life. The Pharaohs wanted there to be pyramids. The blood and nerve of a few blind fools: let them show it off."[18]

In these lines, Ady invokes a sense of dislocation, of being caught between competing temporal and spatial forces. His reference to the Pharaohs and the pyramids is not just a historical allusion but a metaphor for a society trapped in a cycle of exploitation and mythic ambitions. Ady paints a picture of a Hungary that is struggling with its own identity, in tension with both the past and the future, unable to find a stable position within Europe's shifting political and cultural landscape. Ady continues by describing a kind of historical rupture: the emergence of a new, more Europeanized man, one who, despite his modern characteristics, remains unmoored from the historical and social realities of the majority of Hungarian society. The *overdeveloped* man, according to Ady, is a figure who has outstripped Hungarian society by at least a century, and yet he is blind to the millions of people who remain disconnected from this progress: "Ten thousand men rushed forward, made European in nerve, in blood, in thought, in agony, in thirst. An overdeveloped type of man has been produced here, which had outrun Hungarian society by at least a hundred years." This *overdeveloped* man symbolizes the fragmentation of Hungarian society in the wake of modernization. Ady presents a tension between the promise of progress and the reality of social inequality, suggesting that Hungary is living a paradox: the progress of a few at the expense of the many. The poet-journalist's critique grows more intense as he reflects on Hungary's positioning within the broader European context, invoking mythical and historical imagery to suggest that Hungary is fated to remain at the crossroads of East and West, neither fully belonging to either side. This liminality is expressed in his metaphors of *Turul* birds circling in the sky and the rivers of Asia gushing forth to flood the Hungarian landscape. In this moment, Hungary's fate seems irrevocably tied to its position as both a gateway and a barrier, caught between competing civilizations: "Behold, all at once a roar, the veiled Asia washes its face off, its mouth gushes, and pours forth its rivers, whose flood is as terrible as that of the Yangtse." In these dramatic lines, Ady links Hungary's struggles with the broader historical forces of imperialism and nationalism. Hungary's historical position—situated between East and West—becomes an allegory for its broader cultural and existential crises. At the same time, however, Ady criticizes the resurgence of

16. Bíró, *A felvilágosodás korának magyar irodalma*, 69-73.

17. Ignotus, "Utóirat. A perzekútor-esztétikáról" [Postscript: On Persecutor Aesthetics] *Nyugat* 1908, vol. I, 227–228.

18. Endre Ady, "Ismeretlen Corvin-kódex margójára" [On the Margins of an Unknown Corvin Codex] in *Ady Endre összes prózai művei VII*, ed. András Kispéter and József Varga (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1968), 306–307.

nationalism that seeks to reanchor Hungary to an alien, conquering "Easternness," perceived as a threat to Western culture. This roaring "Eastern flood" is not detached from the prevailing public mood, which was shaped not only by contemporary developments in China and Russia but also by emerging esoteric doctrines and select elements of Eastern religions reframed in the language of positivist science—as well as by the increasingly influential race theories circulating in both English- and German-speaking contexts, which arbitrarily and reductively translated the concept of Darwinian evolution into the social sphere.

Ady's reflections on the "shouting shamans" and the "new sacrifice to Hadúr" further illustrate his concern with the emergence of a new, violent, and reactionary nationalism. These figures, emblematic of the new Hungarian society emerging in the early twentieth century, reject European ideals of rationalism and modernity in favor of a return to more primal, mythical notions of national identity and power.

> "I see the new sacrifice to Hadúr ['Warlord', fictional Hungarian mythical deity], the new Gellert-priests. At the forefront of the new Hungarian society are the shouting shamans. Sad people are dragged away. He on whose brow the Thought appears unwarily, from whose eyes shines a bonfire of new emotions, he who is found to have willingly sacrificed to the strange and eloquent gods of the Idea: he is lost."

Ady's lasting critique of Hungary's cultural trajectory highlights the deep ambivalence felt by intellectuals and writers in the early twentieth century. For Ady, both the West and the East were problematic and ambivalent, contributing to a sense of cultural isolation—not only in the Hungarian context but also within the broader region. The issue of Hungarian cultural identity during this period was compounded by these competing geopolitical and cultural forces, creating a sense of cultural in-betweenness that also finds expression in the fluctuating titles of Hungarian literary magazines at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These changes in magazine names reflect the ongoing struggle to define a coherent national culture in the midst of shifting political and social realities. As Hungary grappled with its place in Europe, its literature became a battleground for competing narratives of identity, history, and modernity.

3. Magazine Headlines: National Culture on the Earth – The Hungarian Discourse of East and West in Early 20th-Century Periodicals

The cultural and literary landscape of Hungary in the early 20th century was profoundly shaped by a distinct interplay between notions of East and West, a dichotomy that not only marked the intellectual climate of the time but also deeply influenced the nation's identity politics. Through the lens of periodicals such as *Nyugat*, *Napkelet*, and *Kelet Népe*, Hungarian discourse reflected the tension between modernity, nationalism, and the idea of a cultural self-consciousness that both embraced and rejected various conceptions of Eastern and Western heritage. These periodicals provide a window into the evolving national consciousness and the shifting contours of Hungarian cultural identity in a time of political and historical upheaval, particularly after the Treaty of Trianon.

3.1. *Nyugat* and the West/East Dichotomy

The magazine *Nyugat* (1908–1941) stands out as a key forum for the intellectual elites in Hungary, emerging during a period of intense cultural and political transformations. It was founded with the explicit mission to combat "the exalted national pride in Hungary's Eastern origins"[19], yet it did not seek to reject these origins outright. Rather, the publication sought a nuanced approach, exemplified by the lead article in its first issue, titled *Kelet népe [People of the East]*, which referred to the work of Hungarian aristocrat and political thinker István Széchenyi. In his 1841 book, Széchenyi argued that Eastern European nations, while rooted in their distinct cultural histories, should also embrace Western ideas and progress. This tension between embracing the East's cultural uniqueness and assimilating Western modernity became a central theme in *Nyuga*t, a magazine which aimed to synthesize these seemingly opposing cultural forces.

The cultural positioning of *Nyugat* was complex, especially in light of the influence of "Turanism," an ideology that sought a pan-Turanian alliance among peoples from Central Asia, including Hungary, and was sometimes associated with political and ethnic nationalism. József Szili describes Turanism as a movement that "dreamt of a great political alliance between the Turanic countries, including even China and Japan," linking it to broader geopolitical ambitions[20]. However, while *Nyugat* occasionally referenced Turanism between 1912 and 1914, its artistic and intellectual character sharply diverged from these nationalist sentiments. The publication's orientation was Modernist, marked by a post-

19. József Szili, "The Uncompromising Standards of Nyugat (1908-1941)," in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Vol. II: The Making and Remaking of Literary Institutions*, ed. M. Cornis-Pope and J. Neubauer (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company 2004), 70-77, 71.

20. Szili, "The Uncompromising Standards of Nyugat," 71.

symbolist and post-secessionist style, rejecting traditional, conservative notions of Hungarian literature and culture. As the Hungarian writer Ignotus famously quipped, "Art has a single rule: make whatever you want if you are able to make it,"[21] emphasizing artistic autonomy and individualism over nationalistic imperatives.

Ablonczy Balázs, in his work *Go East!: A History of Hungarian Turanism*, further contextualizes the significance of Turanism within Hungarian intellectual circles. He highlights how Turanism, a movement inspired by the geographic and cultural affinities between Turkic-speaking peoples and the Hungarians, was closely tied to the reassertion of national pride following Hungary's territorial losses after World War I. Ablonczy underscores that Turanism was not merely a geopolitical dream but also a cultural project that attempted to reframe Hungary's place in Europe through an ethnolinguistic lens, associating Hungarian identity with the broader Ural-Altaic cultural sphere[22]. Despite its occasional mention in *Nyugat*, the magazine's intellectual agenda remained fundamentally Modernist, rejecting these nationalistic visions in favor of a more cosmopolitan and progressive cultural identity.

Thus, the *Nyugat* movement represented a form of literary modernism that was far removed from the "Turanist" ambitions of Hungarian nationalism, positioning itself as a space where the values of modernity—freedom, artistic experimentation, and a rejection of authoritarianism—could flourish independently of nationalistic rhetoric. It was a cultural project that insisted on literature's autonomy from political agendas yet remained deeply engaged with the questions of collective identity, historical memory, and the role of culture in shaping the future of Hungary.

3.2. *Napkelet*: The East as a Counter-Narrative

In contrast to *Nyugat*, the periodical *Napkelet* (1923–1940) adopted a more explicitly conservative stance in its response to the socio-political climate in Hungary following the traumatic loss of territory in the aftermath of World War I and the Treaty of Trianon. Its title, meaning "Rise of the Sun," signaled a vision of the East as a fresh, new start—a symbolic counterpoint to the "decline" of the weakened, unmanly, decadent West, a theme also popularized by Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1918). This metaphorical reimagining of the East as a rejuvenating force served to articulate a cultural policy that counterbalanced the Western-oriented modernism promoted by *Nyugat*.

Under the editorship of Cécile Tormay, *Napkelet* sought to reclaim Hungarian identity by focusing on a nationalist and anti-modernist agenda, advocating for a rejection of what it deemed "Jewish modernity."[23] This cultural journal, established by the cultural authorities of the time and generously supported for years, positioned itself as the antithesis to the perceived foreignness of Western-influenced modernism, instead promoting a vision of national unity grounded in conservative and nationalist values. *Napkelet* became a key platform for those advocating for the revitalization of Hungarian literature and culture in a way that was aligned with an ethnic and religious conservatism that would later become deeply entangled with fascist ideologies in Hungary.

3.3. *Kelet Népe*: The East as Rural Identity

Another significant periodical that engaged with the East/West dichotomy was *Kelet Népe [People of the East]*, which ran from 1935 to 1942 and borrowed its title from the introductory article of Nyugat. However, in contrast to the earlier connotations of the East as a space of political or cultural rejuvenation, *Kelet Népe* adopted a more critical perspective on the East, focusing on the Hungarian peasantry as the "people of the East." Here, the concept of the East shifted from its typical association with exoticism or political idealism to a more grounded, socio-economic critique. The peasantry was portrayed as oppressed and marginalized, a symbol of backwardness and potential untapped power, separated from the West, which had "crudely and ungratefully left it behind."

In this sense, *Kelet Népe* distanced itself from the bourgeois, liberal modernity symbolized by the urban elites and embraced a more radical, often anti-Western, critique of the social and political systems that had dominated Hungary since the early 20th century. The magazine's emphasis on the rural underclass as the repository of authentic Hungarian identity reflected a form of cultural nationalism that rejected modern capitalist values and idealized a return to a simpler, more 'genuine' way of life—one ostensibly insulated from the corrupting influences of urbanization and Western liberalism. In an effort to overcome the perceived failures that had led to the world wars and the Great Depression, it advanced a vision of 'third way' modernization—one that positioned itself as neither Western capitalism nor Eastern communism.

The magazines *Nyugat*, *Napkelet*, and *Kelet Népe* each reflected the ways in which Hungarian intellectuals engaged with the cultural and political challenges of their time, particularly the tension between East and West. *Nyugat* represented a modernist break with traditional Hungarian culture, embracing Western ideas and artistic experimentation. In contrast, *Napkelet* articulated a nationalist and anti-modernist agenda, while *Kelet Népe* highlighted the tension between rural and urban identities. Together, these periodicals provide crucial insights into the changing cultural

21. Szili, "The Uncomprimising Standards of Nyugat," 77.
22. Balázs Ablonczy, *Go East!: A History of Hungarian Turanism* (Indiana University Press, 2022).
23. Szili, "The Uncomprimising Standards of Nyugat," 72.

landscape of Hungary, where the concept of the East—and its relationship to the West—served as a central motif in the formation of national identity during a period of profound historical and political upheaval.

4. Nation in the Sky, Literature Above the Worldly Dimensions:
The Burden of Identity and National Trauma in Hungarian Periodicals

The metaphoric frameworks employed by Hungarian periodicals during the Nazi era and after World War II provide a profound lens through which to examine the nation's struggles with identity, national trauma, and the social repercussions of historical events such as the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918 and 1919 and the Treaty of Trianon. These magazines often invoked imagery of transcendence and cultural elevation, positioning literature and national culture as forces capable of rising above the "earthly filth and chaos" of the political and social crises that shaped the period. Through titles like *Homeland on the Heights*, the nation's literary and cultural legacy was presented as a beacon that could guide the people toward higher, purer principles of identity, language, and culture.

4.1. National Trauma and the Identity Burden: Trianon and the Hungarian Crisis

The traumatic outcome of the Treaty of Trianon, signed in 1920, was foundational to much of the cultural discourse in Hungary during the interwar period and after World War II. This treaty resulted in the loss of two-thirds of Hungary's territory and a significant portion of its population. As József Szili notes, "the Trianon peace cost Hungary two thirds of her land and ten and a half million of her eighteen million population. More than seven million Hungarian-speaking people became Austrian, Czechoslovak, Romanian, and Yugoslavian subjects."[24] This territorial and demographic upheaval left a profound impact on the Hungarian collective consciousness, particularly in its cultural and literary domains.

Hungarian intellectuals of the period grappled with these national wounds, and the metaphor of "Homeland on the Heights" emerged originally as a response to this trauma. This title, drawn from a 1936 poem by Gyula Illyés, symbolizes the aspiration to reclaim and elevate Hungarian culture and identity, even in the face of immense loss. Literature, thus, was seen not only as a means of artistic expression but also as a vehicle for navigating and processing the aftermath of such historical calamities—somewhat reminiscent of the period following the 1848–49 revolution, though now devoid of any real hope for a strong, independent, and progressive homeland within the pre-Trianon borders. As these writers sought to transcend the immediate political chaos of the interwar years and the devastation wrought by Trianon, they turned to literature and culture as "shining above earthly filth and chaos"—a guiding force that could lead the Hungarian people back to their roots, to an idealized version of the (virtual) homeland.

In this sense, Hungarian intellectuals adhered to the belief that only through language and culture could the nation reclaim its lost identity and meaning. These "higher principles," which often intertwined with religious and nationalistic rhetoric, became crucial for navigating the political terrain of the era, especially as Hungary faced the dual pressures of rising fascism and the aftermath of war.

A number of Hungarian periodicals in the 1940s embodied this tension between the earthly and the transcendent, between the cultural aspirations of a devastated nation and the political realities of the time. One significant publication in this context was *Magyar Csillag [Hungarian Star]*, which ran from 1941 to 1944. Edited by Gyula Illyés, one of Hungary's leading literary figures, *Magyar Csillag* was the successor to the influential *Nyugat* (1908-1941). Although it was banned following the German occupation of Hungary in 1944, its legacy endured through its influence on post-World War II Hungarian literary magazines, several of which saw themselves as the inheritors of its intellectual and cultural aspirations. After the war, *Magyarok [Hungarians]* emerged as an important publication, running from 1945 to 1949. Founded on a proposal by the Ady Society in Debrecen, *Magyarok* sought to maintain a balanced approach to Hungarian culture, but its attempts to moderate between different political factions proved difficult in the turbulent post-war period. The magazine's struggle to maintain this balance reflects the broader conflict in Hungarian intellectual life during these years: whether to return to the "earth" of national identity and history or to remain in the cultural "sky" of higher ideals and intellectual purity.

In the same period, *Újhold [New Moon]*, which ran from 1946 to 1948 and published only seven issues, marked a distinct continuation of the *Nyugat* tradition. The opening essay in *Újhold* was titled "*After Babits,"* referring to the last editor of *Nyugat*, the renowned poet and critic Mihály Babits. The authors of *Újhold* were predominantly former contributors to *Nyugat*, many of whom had been active in the pre-World War II literary scene. Like *Magyar Csillag*, this magazine emphasized the transcendence of literature over the material and political realities of postwar Hungary, evoking the image of a new moon that appears on the darkest nights—one that, though faint, receives its light from the Sun, symbolically located in the West, more precisely from the setting Sun of *Nyugat*. However, the political upheaval of the time made it increasingly difficult for these intellectuals to sustain this idealistic vision, as the impending rise of Stalinist rule began to permeate the literary landscape.

24. Szili, "The Uncompromising Standards of *Nyugat*," 76.

4.2. From Lonely Stars to Red Stars: The Rise of Propaganda and the Political Instrumentalization of Culture

As the Cold War intensified and Soviet influence became increasingly dominant in Hungary, the role of culture became more overtly political. The periodical *Csillag [Star]*, published between 1947 and 1956, serves as a stark example of this transformation. Initially edited by Andor Németh, *Csillag* represented the Hungarian Writers' Union but after the communist takeover in 1949 functioned as a key platform for writers aligned with the emerging Stalinist regime. Németh, a close friend of Illyés, did not choose the title by accident; however, by this time, the adjective "Hungarian" was no longer in use. By 1950, *Csillag* had to become an explicit mouthpiece for the cultural policies of the Rákosi regime, particularly through its promotion of socialist realism and the politicization of artistic expression. Németh was eventually removed from his position as editor-in-chief—despite his earlier active role in the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic, which had led to his emigration, by the 1950s he was no longer considered sufficiently leftist by the increasingly radical dictatorship.

One of the most striking symbols of this shift was the magazine's December 1949 issue, which featured a prominent image of Stalin alongside a red star, signaling the magazine's complete submission to the political authority of the Soviet Union. This image encapsulated the transformation of the once-independent literary magazine into a tool of political propaganda, aligning cultural expression with state ideology. As the political climate became more repressive, the notion of "progressive culture" increasingly served as an overtly political tool, instrumentalized by the state to reinforce its ideological control over Hungarian intellectual life.

The metaphorical tension between the "earthly" and the "sky," between cultural purity and political engagement, defines much of the Hungarian literary landscape during the mid-20th century. Periodicals like *Magyar Csillag*, *Újhold*, and *Csillag* reveal the ways in which Hungarian intellectuals navigated the trauma of national loss, the aspiration for cultural transcendence, and the growing influence of political forces. While these magazines began with a lofty vision of literature as a means of elevating the nation above the chaos of historical and political struggles, they increasingly became enmeshed in the ideological battles of the time. Ultimately, they reflect the complex ways in which culture in Hungary—once a symbol of higher ideals—was gradually subordinated to the pressures of state politics in the postwar era. The metaphor of "homeland on the heights" by Illyés (who, notably, remained one of the prominent and respected authors of the era even after the communist takeover, demonstrating the complexity of the period) appears in two significant ways: first, through the literal reference to celestial bodies in the title itself, and second, by subtly alluding to the problematic and ambivalent relationship with national and autonomous culture. The culture is now illustrated solely by shining celestial bodies, but notably, the Sun—our very own star—is absent from this array, which can clearly be interpreted in various ways. This imagery of culture elevated above the petty struggles of earthly life also signals the radical separation of literature and politics. However, in an era that expected literature to take a firmly political stance, often framing that stance as a moral judgment, this vision represented a form of explicit political resistance.

The exploration of magazine titles and their metaphorical implications may initially seem like a somewhat particular or niche investigation. However, such an analysis can reveal profound insights into how culture, identity, and literature were conceptualized during pivotal moments in history. Given the complexity of the period, particularly in Hungary, the role of literature and culture went through a significant transformation—one that reflected national self-identity, Western modernity, and the politicization of artistic expression. The titles of periodicals themselves often encapsulated these tensions, offering a glimpse into how intellectuals grappled with both the internal dynamics of Hungarian culture and the external pressures exerted by political ideologies.

In this light, a comparative research question naturally arises: How did this transition unfold in other Central and Eastern European countries? Specifically, how was culture defined as national self-identity, as an expression of Western modernity, as an autonomous social space, and, in some cases, as a tool for political propaganda? What were the similarities and differences in how these nations' intellectuals and writers described the tasks of culture and literature, and how did they frame the external expectations placed on literature during these transformative decades?

Such a comparative approach can illuminate not only the particularities of the Hungarian experience but also offer broader insights into the shared intellectual and cultural struggles faced by countries in the region. This kind of analysis could lead to a richer understanding of the political and artistic evolution of Central and Eastern Europe, especially as these nations navigated the competing forces of tradition, modernization, and political oppression.

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