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Magyar Csillag and the Concerted Confession
abstract

„We also support that the writer’s convictions and his works are being examined from the point of view of nation building and social progress, however, in the protection of the universal interests of all Hungarians we reject all partisan judgments built on the protection of power rather than universal interests.”

In an atmosphere that grew ever more tense under the oppressive effect of World War II, in May 1943, the editors of the journal *Magyar Csillag* (Hungarian Star) published a statement signed by seven prominent writers, Endre Illés, Gyula Illyés, János Kodolányi, Sándor Márai, Áron Tamási Péter Veres and Lajos Zilahy. The text, entitled *Concerted Confession*, declares the intellectual independence of writers and artists, turning against the increasingly aggressive effects of war politics, which attempted to bring the activity of intellectuals into the service of its propaganda. The statement, although it emphasizes that it accepts the importance of the public role of literature, in the given situation it deems silence as the most adequate attitude.

At its founding, *Magyar Csillag* (1941-44) set itself a double task. On the one hand, its calling was the continuation of the mission of its predecessor *Nyugat*, the most significant Hungarian literary journal of the 20th century, offering space to the classics of contemporary writing and the unfolding new trends. At the same time, in the grave historical situation, its self-defined task was also to provide an asylum and a publishing channel to the writers who saw a their task upholding of the dignity of spirit and ethical behaviour. In its publishing policies, *Magyar Csillag* kept true to the principles of *Concerted Confession*, and as such it was to be regarded as a „watchtower and asylum” by the literary consciousness of posterity.

The meaning and significance of *Concerted Confession* can only be fully appreciated in the historical context. The restrictions imposed by wartime censorship, the increasingly oppressive mood of the time, the defeats suffered by the Hungarian Army, the plight of the intellectuals and friends recruited to work service battalions or threatened by other forms of discrimination – all these factors contributed to shape the mood and medium in which the *Confession* came into being.

The text proposal of the statement was circulated in a letter that has been in part preserved in the literary bequest of the Editor-in-Chief of *Magyar Csillag*, Gyula Illyés. In my lecture I will examine in detail the circumstances of the publication of *Concerted Confession*, its background and its reception. For this scrutiny I will use unpublished documents and letters from the Illyés bequest. These letters, compared with other sources published earlier, these events of literary history from a changed perspective. The scrutiny may offer a more nuanced view of the place of *Magyar Csillag* among the coordinates of the contemporary press, and of the place of the signatories in the literary life of the era, as well as those writers who declined the invitation to sign the document.

The Second World War, as one of the deepest crises of the 20th century, brought a seismic shock in all areas of life, including a universal crisis of values to which writers and artists sought an answer in different ways. The attitude of the *Magyar Csillag* circle, as demonstrated in *Concerted Confession* is a viable answer to that crisis. At the same time it is also a viable answer to the universal question that concerns the connection of culture and public life, and of culture and power. In this acute situation no writer could evade this question. The question and their responses are raised in the oeuvres, and the responses undergo reevaluation in the light of their letters and diaries and of their oeuvres. These repeatedly raised questions of the artist's vocation and the re-shaped responses will be repeated later, too, in the course of the new types of ethical tests of the post-war period. Examples are Illyés' famous metaphors of „the swan and the yuck”, in the reserved withdrawal of Márai, and in the peculiar paths the theories of László Németh delineate – one writer who had refused to sign *Concerted Confession*.

My talk presents *Concerted Confession* as the meeting point of ambivalent and differing attitudes and carriers of writers defined in the grip of critical times, and often fighting the inner crises that grew out of these definitions.