

The fight of the homo aestheticus with the homo moralis

The answer of Ernő Szép to moral, economic, political and cultural crises

Although Ernő Szép used to be appreciated throughout his life – a renowned author of the first generation of Nyugat with a wide audience, celebrated poet commended by the Baumgarten-prize – he was already sidelined from mainstream literature in an age whose streams of ideas, ideology, occurrences and historical events did not favour the poetry of Szép¹. The political left and the populists expected him to be more aggressive, while the extreme right saw the non-assimilating Jew in him, the café-literature, the simplistic poet striving to elevate the noise of the streets to literary heights.²

The exceptionally sensitive author was challenged by numerous failures: several times his works went bust on stage for them being perceived as overly emotional and old-fashioned. Then, after 1936 he suddenly found himself outside of the theatre programmes. Following the implementation of the Jewish laws, many newspapers ceased to maintain their orderly relationship; he got into existential troubles. Between 1939 and 1945 his career took another downturn, he was barely spoken about, and following 1945 only few of his books were published.

In August, 1944 he was deported to a star-signed house, he managed to escape only by an immunity passport from the Swedish Embassy. Between 20th October, 1944 and early November, 1944 the Arrow Cross forced him to labour service. „The more Hungarian politics and Hungarian life shifted to the right, the deeper the agio of the poetry of Ernő Szép sank. (...) Sadly, even the liberation did not provide immediate and worthy satisfaction to the poet. This mode of art was perceived as too smooth, feminine and not bellicose by the readers of the first decade, and around that time they would rather expect the horn sounds of momentum, solidity and raging passion.”³ In Vienna, where he provisionally fled from the constant defamations for two years, he wrote to his friend, Gyula Krúdy: „I don't even understand why I should be poor and Jewish, when neither of them is what I asked for, I merely wanted to sing as long as I live”⁴ After 1945, in the last period of his life, he introduces himself thus: „I used to be Ernő Szép.”

Contemporary criticism missed the „real conflict” from his works, under the label of which one was supposed to understand daily politics. Such attacks could be translated as: the story is not of interest, as it is far-fetched from everyday life. Ernő Szép was not sufficiently tough, gritty and emotional to the audience of his age. This critical voice has particularly strengthened in the post-world war years, when it seemed nonsense to holding back to the pre-war idyll. Even a close friend of Ernő Szép, Endre Ady would have preferred a different Ernő Szép: he would rather see the rebel in him, which was quite far from the spiritual temperament of the author. „Prepare for the long-awaited numerous and great, which Ernő Szép shall give, should his sadness become less cheerful or even more cheerful, and sometimes, many times, if it is needed and worth, or not, he would dare to revolt.” – as he puts it in Nyugat, under the title *The book of Ernő Szép*.

Today it is rather odd that for lacking political passion he was still in need for palliation by László Kardos, in 1983. „He lacks political passion, but it would be a mistake to believe that the poet stood far from human suffering. Even if the stream of his images does not flow to the rhythm of the rebellion, it still induces such passion, which is already almost a

¹ VIDA Lajos idézi Kardos Lászlót in *Uő.*, *Szép Ernő élet-és pályarajza*, Csokonai Kiadó, Debrecen, 2007, 249.

² VIDA *i.m.* 240.

³ KARDOS László, *Harminchárom arc*, Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1983, 208.

⁴ SZÉP Ernő levele Krúdy Gyulának, 1922. október 22., in KRÚDY Zsuzsa, *Apám, Szindbád*, Bp., 1975, 80.

revolt against fate, the inhumanity, as he does in his war poems.”⁵ At other places: „Only the smoother, more sensitive, ever more open poem-understanding of the ‘60s, ‘70s realised that there hides behind the sensitivity of Ernő Szép also a force of passions and momentums, even if not in traditional ways.”⁶ Lajos Vida is also quick on noting: „Ernő Szép did not live poetry as marble-clean aesthetics. Beside aesthetics, life and reality were also important to him.”⁷

The presentation tackles the forced reactions to crisis of an otherwise peaceful man. Although, Ernő Szép would really have had grounds to display critical attitudes towards the ever increasing inhumanity of his time, quite to the contrary, his artistic oeuvre was perceived to evolve in a slightly romantic way, tragic and comical at once. His humour and attitude are well preserved in this little anecdote, that after his necessary time at the military, he became an officer of the Austro-Hungarian Army. New officers tended to carve – mostly German – idioms onto the blade of their sword. Lieutenant Ernő Szép carved the next sentence in the blade: „Leben und leben lassen!” („Live and let to live!”)

In my presentation I argue that we ought to draw a more nuanced picture of the author, who reflects on world wars (e.g.: *May*, carvings, war poems), the persecution of Jews (e.g.: *Smell of Man*), the moral (e.g.: *Mr. Director*, *Fiancée*), the economic (e.g.: *Golden Watch*, *Little birds of God*) crises ever stronger. True, the gloominess of the pictures evoked, the outrage is tendered by his sweet-temper and humour; however, these texts are strengthened by the ease at which they are telling horrors.

Not even the sudden, many times not creditably happy endings given to plots can overwrite the melancholic mood surrounding the atmosphere of Ernő Szép-pieces. Contrary to appearance, the dating of his works do not and do not even attempt to annul history: disillusioned, miserable, lonely and terrifyingly credible figures stand before us, shouting over each other, who – though are not speaking about war all the time – implicitly provide us with an account of their misery, lack of will to live and their perpetually unfulfilled desires.

⁵ VIDA idézi Kardos Lászlót, *i.m.* 249.

⁶ KARDOS László, *Harminchárom arc*, Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1983, 208.

⁷ VIDA *i.m.* 252.