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Endre Ady and the „ferry country”

One of famous Hungarian poet Endre Ady's most important prosaic writings, titled 'Ismeretlen Korvin-kódex margójára' (in which he elaborates on the concept of Hungary being a „ferry country” travelling endlessly between East and West), describes a state of crisis and in it the seemingly impossible situation of the few people who believe in 'culture'. According to this article, the crisis (perceived by Ady as an almost apocalyptic danger) is threatening Hungary because of the weakness of the country's intelligentsia, the crisis sheds light on the weakness of 'culture' (meaning the ability of modernization). The crisis depicted was the 1905-6 political crisis of Hungary, but it had its origins in the unresolved social issues of the age such as the poverty and suffering of the working classes, the increasingly nationalist nature of leadership, the questions of suffrage and minorities etc.

The metaphor of „ferry country” (found in the first part of 'Ismeretlen Korvin-kódex margójára') not only presents a choice between the 'barbarian' East and the 'civilized' West, Asia or Europe, it is also a rewriting of the East/West opposition (a central topic of the area's intellectual history) and the Hungarian national character from a more provocative and tragic standpoint. As Tamás Hofer points out: East and West are important guiding points of national self- and future-representations, and the opposition can be intertwined with others such as ideal vs. material or village vs. city. Balázs Trencsényi's research concludes that the national liberalism of the 19th century emphasized the Hungarian character's ability to synthesize, assimilate and translate between points of view of the West and East, but this consensus ceased to exist by the turn of the century and a gap is dividing the radical democrats and the ethnoprotectionist nationalists. Ady's writing reflects on this social crisis and that the former group (where he obviously positions himself) is outnumbered by the latter.

Ady's many articles are heavily criticizing the political nationalism of his age, but at the same time he usually stays between the boundaries of the discourse of nationalism (described by theorists like Gellner, Hobsbawm and many others), characterized by the ideas considered to be ordinary or even up to date such as social Darwinism or social psychology. It's on these grounds that he tries to look for a way out of the crisis by trying to localize and identify the true, progressive Hungarian character in Transylvania (in the second part of 'Ismeretlen Korvin-kódex margójára'). It's on these grounds that he proposes – in several other articles – the nation's mixing with Jews or other times with Americans, both in order to better the Hungarian character (which is believed to be incapable of practicality and trading in general) and to ensure its survival in the modern age.

As Trencsényi points out, from the 19th century on, the challenge of modernization takes the form of an existential question: if a nation is unable to adapt, it means the 'death of the nation', but on the other hand, the danger of extinction is considered to be the strongest tool of national mobilization. Ady expresses different views considering the future, the survival or demise of the Hungarian nation varying from the revolutionary optimism to the pessimism of his darkest poems verbally flagellating the nation or depicting its death, continuing the romantic tradition of his literary predecessors. It is interesting to observe the possible interpretations of this topos to better understand how national culture reacts to this act of provocation. The decoding of such a complicated and sensitive topic poses difficult questions. Should one read Ady's words simply accepting their literal meaning? Or should one detect some kind of rhetorical figure – and if so, which one? How to decide whether to use hyperbole, protrope, irony or hypocrisis as a key of interpretation? As the literary cult of Ady

(prospering in the context of nationalism) shows: its hardly possible for the Hungarian reader to take these texts word by word or even as documents of emotional overstatement. Instead their negative contents must be turned into positives to limit the crisis depicted in them. Ady himself seems to feel the necessity of turning negatives into positives, when he puts his two articles (published half a year apart in 1905) together in 1911 to form 'Ismeretlen Korvinkódex margójára' as we know it: reversing their chronological order of publication, placing the latter, more pessimistic one first, and continuing it with the earlier, slightly more hopeful piece which ends on the relatively optimistic thought of 'maybe'.