

THESES OF KRISZTINA KOLLARITS' PhD WORK

The old and the destroyed house. Cécile Tormay's efforts to preserve conservative values

1. When examining the intellectual life of the first half of the 20th century literary history focuses primarily on the Nyugat circle, or authors who joined the various avant-garde movements; less attention is given to conservative-nationalist authors. However, this era can not be fully understood without knowing the works and mentality of those in the latter group.

In my opinion Cécile Tormay (1876-1937) is one of the prominent figures of the conservative Hungarian literature between the two world wars. Her life and works paint an accurate portrait of the mentality and values of her era and her social class. István Bibó characterized post-Trianon Hungary using the term political hysteria. A The Horthy era's revisionist politics and the fear of another revolution overrode everything in Hungary, and this affected not only foreign policy, but also the intellectual life and mentality. Art and science, and especially literature and historical sciences were saturated with politics; it was typical of the era for "*The audience, as well as the individual (...) spaces to a kind of fake resolution, the illusion of a resolution.*"

This kind of mentality can be observed on the leading political figures of the era, such as Horthy, István Bethlen, Klebelsberg, it can also be noted in the life and works of Tormay Cécile.

The first international and national successes of Tormay were her two novels, the 1911 *Emberék a kövek között* (Stonecrop) and the 1914 *A régi ház* (The Old House). The latter described how her family and the German citizens of Pest became Hungarians 19th century. This work has already shown how important past and tradition were for Tormay, as well as the silent witnesses of the lives of previous generations, the furniture, everyday objects, their home, the old house. The events of 1918-19 crashed her carefree, sheltered world. All that mattered to her fell apart in front of her eyes: a society she believed to be eternal, the state, the life of those around her and her own existence. All these motivated her to partake in politics, and she founded and led the society for conservative and patriotic women, the National Alliance of Hungarian Women. She wrote her famous book *Bujdosó könyv* (An Outlaw's Diary), she accepted the role of editor at the *Napkelet*, Klebelsberg's opposition of the liberal *Nyugat*. Her works and public appearances were devoted to supporting the Horthy regime.

2. The old house is not only the title of one of her most successful novels, but it is also a metaphor fit for the life and mentality of the author.

Her family and ancestors gave her personal identity, her sense of security. Reading her works one will notice her distrust in all human relationships (may those be friendship or love, relationships between men and women are never harmonic), the only exception being the mother-daughter relationship. Another anchor for her were her memories of her ancestors. This is featured heavily in her short story *The Clock Has Stopped*, where she takes refuge in her family's past from the unbearable present, there she can find peace and strength to continue living. This outlook on life is represented in the novel *The Old House*, where the building is not only the

home of the family, but also a witness of multiple generations, becomes the symbol of a family, a lifestyle, a mentality.

This metaphor can be extended onto her next novel, *Bujdosó*, this novel can be interpreted as the novel of the destroyed house, as for Tormay the key meaning of the events of 1918-19 was that both revolutions have tried to destroy what was so important for her, what “the old house” symbolizes.

Tormay’s further written and public works were focused on protecting and rebuilding of conservative values “the old house.”

3. The *A Bujdosó könyv* has evoked radically different responses since its publication. A more objective examination of it has yet to be published. One of the reasons for this is that there is no consensus on the historical opinions on the events of 1918-19. Tormay gave a right wing interpretation of the 1918-19 events, understandably, it received numerous criticism since its publication from the left. Zoltán Fábry „*incendiary book*,” the 60’s History of Hungarian Literature edited by István Sötér says that „*the image painted of the revolution is crooked and thuggishly slanderous*”, we could list countless other examples. During the socialist regime only the positive effects of the revolution have been presented, all details were omitted or altered that did not fit this perfect picture. (This is how the feared Szamuely and the boys for Lenin became positive heroes.) Contrary to this, Tormay presented these days as the darkest hours of Hungarian history, and for those, who wished to and still wish to write of the 1918-19 events in the mentality of the “forward-thinking historical tradition” naturally do not appreciate writings of events from a different perspective. On the other hand, Tormay’s book does not lack bias either. A better knowledge of history would no doubt help the reader in a more critical understanding of *Bujdosó könyv*.

4. The *Bujdosó könyv* is debated to this day, this initiated in the books voice and propagandistic goals.

The authos, whose self-proclaimed goal was not only to chronicle this year and a half, but also to write the „*book of pain*”, it put the emphasis on emotions: wanted to show what she felt and thought during these times. According to the book she was present at almost all important events, she judged what she saw, she was upset, terrified and hopeful. While doing so, she often fails to consider events, she does not aim to be objective, “understanding the other side”, understanding the events in the background, she wants to project the events. This strong emotional undercurrent is that makes this book a double-edged sword: the reader conforms to it or strongly opposes, attacks it. Both negate somber deliberation or critical a internalization.

At the same time, one cannot understand the book without knowing the political stances of the 1920s. Both internal and foreign policy fights over the interpretation of the events of 1918-19. In the 20s countries often focused on the history of Hungary to thwart foreign policy. Tormay’s book played a role in this; it was translated to a few European languages. This book was a response to the attacks of the “red emigrants.” After the fall of the Republic, Oszkár Jászi, Lajos Hatvany with Béla Kun in the lead have not thought it impossible to return to Hungary. The communists have hopes in Moscow's help, the civic republicans looked for

connections with the Little Entente. The Viennese emigrants worked hard on their propaganda war against the new Horthy regime, the *Ember*, the *Bécsi Magyar Újság* and the *Jövő* periodically printed articles about the real and imagined terrors of the “white terror” and were in talks primarily with Czech and Serbian politicians in order to create an emigrant Hungarian government with the goal to stage a coup against Horthy. The most serious propaganda wars took place around 1920, when Cécile Tormay wrote part one of *Bujdosó könyv*. Her purpose was evident, she wanted to soil the good name of left wing leaders in front of the Western public.

On the other hand, the *Bujdosó könyv* held significant measure for national politics. Gergely Romsics called attention to the political struggles of the 20s for not only the future, but owning the past as well. The *Bujdosó könyv* played an integral role in this struggle.

5. The evaluation of the merit of *Bujdosó könyv* is made more difficult by its antisemitism.

Antisemitism is a delicate matter today as well, the issue is not without radical thoughts. All writings that address this matter are in the gray. Tormay has voice her view, that was commonly heard in her times, that the people responsible mostly for war are the Jews, to highlight this, she never fails to address the Jewish origins of a revolutionary or other. Her faith in the Jewish conspiracy has her reach grave nightmares. Her views were not entirely sympathetic in her lifetime, but became viewed in an very different light after the Holocaust.

6. The contemporary reception of the *Bujdosó könyv* is problematic because of its questionable genre. It matters greatly whether one reads it as factual or as a literary work. In my opinion the genre best fit for it is fictional docujournal.

By its format it appears to be a journal, the dated entries suggest this as well, just as the first person narrative, the strong subjective nature of the entries, these all hint at the fact that the entries were created at the time of the events, and give an accurate recount of events. It is suspicious however that Tormay appears everywhere where there is an important political event in the first part, she has the view of events from beginning to end, showing an uniform viewpoint, occasionally with deliberate phrasing and aimed effect, all these hinting at that these are thorough rewrites of previous writings. Tormay's novel is uneven, once it is a novel with a heroine incidentally called Cécile Tormay, and whose family has an adventurous life, other times presents legitimate documents of the time, detailed excerpts about historical events, or a portrait of a politician or writer. Therefore the novel remains a fracture as both a literary work, and as an analytical, exploratory work. In summary, I believe that the book, while it contains a large amount of facts, it is a work of fiction, rather than documentation in nature and the fictional docujournal is the most fitting genre.

7. The fate of and workforce behind the *Napkelet* edited by Cécile Tormay reflected the literary world of the time. Learning more of the *Napkelet* can give us insights into our views of the *Nyugat*.

The *Napkelet* originally formed at Klebelsberg's suggestion to be the anti-*Nyugat*

in January 1923. Its history in the 20s shows the influence of politics in the literary and scientific world, the boundaries that separated the opposing parties. When starting the paper, Tormay made an effort to get the greats from the *Nyugat's* first generation, Babits, Kosztolányi, Árpád Tóth, Aladár Schöppflin to get on board. She got promises but in the end no one switched parties to join the *Napkelet*, but Babits seriously considered the idea on many occasions. Likewise, Móricz could not succeed in 1929 with his „national concentration” program to get the attention of the *Nyugat* or its readers. There were no crossovers within the two camps at this time.

This divide was the cause that the *Napkelet's* critics and scientific corner held the best minds (János Horváth, Gyula Szekfű, Frigyes Brisits, Tivadar Rédey, Dezső Pais), as appearing in the *Nyugat* was not advisable, therefore the first serious competitor for the *Napkelet* was the *Magyar Szemle* published in 1927 for the first time.

8. The Klebelsberg-inspired new conservatism had a great effect on the mentality of the new generations of the 20s, they rarely supported the liberal opposition and that effected the staff of the *Napkelet*.

The aggressive conservatism was representative of the initial years of the *Napkelet*, in the 20s it became the host of the new essay writers (Antal Szerb, Gábor Halász), László Németh who left the *Nyugat*, the novice Miklós Szentkuthy. It became a testing ground of sorts for these new writers: Gábor Halász perfected his later work method, the literary historical portrait and tableaux, László Németh published his world literature critiques that *Kritikai Napló* were the his path to his views.

9. The *Napkelet* flourished in the 30s: the changes in mentality and its new co-editors Antal Németh (1933-35), then Miklós Kállay (1935-41) gave the publication a new thrust.

In 1933-34 the publication changed in its content and structure. The *Szemle* section was revamped: the music, art and theater articles were now in their own section edited by Margit Prahács, István Genthon, and Tivadar Rédey, and new sections started as well. In February the *Külföldi Krónika*, that reported on the actualities of world literature, and gave more ground to Béla Hamvas, in May the „*Gépművészet*” or radio and film section, in December Jenő Katona edited the *A hónap szellemi élete*, about the actualities of the intellectual life of the day. The literary section started printing works of contemporary foreign writers, beginning with March of 1933 it featured etchings (István Szőnyi, György Buday, Dezső Fáy, Pál Molnár C.). A reader numbers were raised by reducing the number of volumes, but increasing the page numbers per volume, they reduced their costs and the subscription fees as well. Tormay oversaw the editing work, she had final say. Her letters to Antal Németh show her editorial philosophy. Initially they described their mentality in terms of their christinity and nationality. Tormay still held these value in the 30s. She made sure that catholic and protestant issues were both featured within the issues, she held national feelings and supported literary works that encouraged this. She avoided publishing political articles in order to preserve the literary nature of *Napkelet*. It was important for her that the authors would remain

apolitical as well. She tried to maintain a balance in the age of her writers as well. Beginning in 1933 the *Napkelet* got younger, more experimental, tried a new co-editor, Antal Németh, with Tormay in the background to hold the reigns when necessary.

It is important to highlight the role of the new, talented and ambitious co-editors, and the fact that conservatism transformed since the beginning of the 20s, and a new generation was looking for a forum. Therefore authors like György Rónay, Gábor Thurzó, István Sötér, Zoltán Szabó, Zoltán Jékely, Iván Boldizsár joined its ranks. The *Napkelet* has undergone changes and its radical opposition to the *Nyugat* almost completely vanished in the 30s, therefore its understandable that in his article saying farewell to the *Napkelet* in 1940 Schöpflin noted his sorrow.

10. Cécile Tormay's final novel, *Az ősi küldött* set during the Tartar raid of Hungary, where history is rather style and form a tool for her to note all she deems important of her life experience and thoughts.

In the 1920-30s historical fiction had its renaissance in Hungarian literature. While Tormay made an effort to get to know the 13th century environment in Hungary, her writing is different from that of the other historical fiction of her time. There are no authentic traditions, long sections on lifestyle, historical figures or events. We get only what is necessary to describe the lead character. History remains in the background with Tormay, she uses it to compose her general thoughts. She wanted *Az ősi küldött* trilogy to be her main work. The setting is evident, the Tartar parallels Trianon. The shared experience of the country destroyed, fight against barbarians from the East, the necessity for fight and reconstruction. Dezső Kerecsényi notes that Ung goes through „*the conflict of conscience of the entire Hungarian nation*” . The other key aspect is the contrast between East and West: ever since King Stephen I. Hungary wanted to belong to Europe, but it has remained Asian. In Tormay's works paganism and christianity is a central element, turning towards pagan Asianism is portrayed as impossible and pointless.

In her third novel the thread of Ung's soul-eating troubles are in focus, the author uses this to sum up her ideas of life and her experiences.