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The cultural context

The most striking feature of early twentieth-century Hungarian culture was its severely divided nature. On one side stood the forces of traditionalist patriotism, on the other, those of international Modernism. All the traditional institutions of the establishment, such as the ministries, the Academy the universities and the literary societies, were in the hands of conservative groups who followed official doctrine. The Modernists, however moderate, had no option but to create their own institutional establishment: the press. Most of the important writers of the era went to university (as their families wanted a 'proper' career for them), but only a couple actually graduated. Most of them left to pursue journalism, or, more precisely, freelance writing backed up by journalism, which could also be interpreted as a symbolic desertion to the 'other side'.

Even more importantly, the leading literary journals became alternative institutional centres of modern culture. The name of the most important periodical of moderate Modernism, *Nyugat* (West, 1908–1941), became synonymous with the whole period, serving as a meeting place and a collective label for several literary generations. Similarly, the premier cultural review of the Hungarian avant-garde, *Ma* (Today, 1916–1925), as well as its short-lived predecessor, *A Tett* (The Action, 1915–1916), were synonymous with the Modernist renewal movement to such a degree that its members were often referred to as 'Maists'. It is also worth noting that *Ma* is unusual among the European avant-garde periodicals because of its ten-year lifespan. The greater part of the cultural history of this period could be written as the history of these journals.

The once-revolutionary ideas of Hungarian Romanticism (especially those of János Arany and Sándor Petőfi) were considered highpoints of national culture and thus followed slavishly. In effect, the cultural establishment rewarded didacticism and unoriginality, if not downright plagiarism. Literary innovation was regarded with suspicion, as reflecting either immorality or cosmopolitanism. In this context, even the title of the new literary journal of 1908, *Nyugat*, was a provocation. The periodical embraced the New, the central idea of Modernism, and for at least a decade became the unchallenged leader of literary renewal. One would expect its editors to have considered Futurism a natural ally, a comrade-in-arms against the obsolete views of official obscurantism, but this was not the case. *Nyugat's* attitude towards Futurism was mostly patronizing and sometimes even downright hostile, but not just because of aesthetic conservatism. The mission that *Nyugat* set itself, and that it successfully accomplished in terms of literary history, was the modernization of mainstream Hungarian culture. The review had to introduce the ideas of Symbolism and Naturalism before turning to more radical streams, and it had to employ ideas that could flourish within

the framework of a modern mainstream culture. Futurism was definitely modern, but it was not mainstream, and (at least in the beginning) it was not intended to be so. The Futurists' constant provocations resulted in a constant challenge to mainstream culture, and the leading minds of *Nyugat* reacted to that challenge from the point of view of their projected, ideal mainstream. They also saw in Futurism a potential rival in the contest for a leading position in the process of modernizing Hungarian culture.

The Hungarian avant-garde, as a movement, started only in 1915, with *A Tett*, edited by Lajos Kassák (1887–1967). Its relationship with *Nyugat* can be characterized as one of friendly rivalry. Their common enemy (which we can call 'academism') meant that the two periodicals and their circles were comrades-in-arms. The main difference in their attitude towards academism was that *Nyugat* permanently sought to be accepted as a legitimate rival to it, while *A Tett* and its direct successor, *Ma*, following revolutionary principles, did not see the conservative establishment as an equal rival but, rather, as a fundamental enemy. Kassák was a regular contributor to *Nyugat* even after he started his own literary reviews, and he held its legendary editor, Ernő Osvát (1877–1929), in high esteem. After 1915, Kassák and Osvát sometimes recommended prospective contributors to each other from their respective circles, but apart from Kassák himself, hardly anyone contributed to both reviews at the same time.

Notwithstanding their alliance, Kassák's main ambition was to divert the flow of the mainstream towards his more progressive artistic ideas. This can best be seen in the initial editorial of his new periodical of 1926, *Dokumentum* (Kassák et al.: "A Nyugat húsz éves"). It is also safe to assume that, in the *Nyugat* circle, there was a silent majority who believed that the avant-garde was a series of obscure groups and -isms with a limited impact, both temporally and geographically, and that Kassák and his fellow activists were immature, infantile, self-appointed Titans.

The first reactions to Futurism

It is a distinctive feature of any emerging avant-garde movement that it challenges the cultural establishment, and that the response of that environment is predictably one of resistance. Although *Nyugat* had not yet become fully established as a mainstream magazine, its opposition to Futurism was pronounced and considerably stronger than its opposition to other artistic movements, as they did not contain the essential element of the avant-garde: the radical break with tradition. Several elements of Futurist aesthetics, such as the cult of speed and technological innovation, were vaguely acceptable to *Nyugat*, as Mihály Babits (1883–1941), one of the finest Hungarian poets of the century and editor-in-chief of *Nyugat* from 1929, admitted in his first evaluation of the movement (Babits: "Futurizmus"). The *Nyugat* circle appreciated the Futurist response to the growth of modern civilization, but rejected other ideas that extended far beyond aesthetics, for example, its militarism and misogyny

(see §9 in Marinetti's *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism*). It was exactly because of those extremist tenets, and not because of its works of art, that Futurism became synonymous with eccentricity and fanaticism. However, as this verdict was pronounced long before anyone had actually *seen* a Futurist work of art in Hungary, and as it was present long before Babits's essay appeared in print, we may duly call this attitude a premature judgement'. It was an involuntary, widely shared belief in Hungary that Futurism was not merely a destructive movement but also an infantile prank that lacked seriousness and gravity.

When the *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* (20 February 1909) was first mentioned in *Nyugat* (on 1 May 1909), it was referred to as an already well-known phenomenon. The relevant article was written by a somewhat atypical contributor, the Communist journalist Ernő Bresztovszky (1882–1922), who talked about how the proletariat was gradually becoming responsive to art and how a change was needed in the ways that art was produced. "And as the mother of this new taste is technology, the intention of the Futurists to create a poetic theme out of the automobile and aeroplane won't be such a folly" (Bresztovszky: "Új hedonizmus", 486). Three issues later, Frigyes Karinthy (1887–1938) published a poetic essay on the metaphysics of the moving picture that mentioned Marinetti as if he had already become a household name:

But what then happens to art, and to the mysticism that nourishes it? There's no use struggling. Art is quiet and unarmed, my dear Mr Marinetti, against reality. When a wheezing locomotive arrives, snorting, in this infinite realm, art recoils into the hideouts of woods and groves, and cannot but gaze into a flower's chalice as the lord of the air, an aeroplane, sweeps by above its head. Art does not fight, my dear Mr Marinetti; it calms down and embraces reality like morning glory – yes, like morning glory. (Karinthy: "A mozgófénykép metafizikája", 645)

In early 1910, the editorial office of *Nyugat* received a Futurist publication for the first time, Paolo Buzzi's *Aeroplani: Canti alati* (Aeroplanes: Winged Songs, 1909), and Marinetti's manifesto, *Let's Kill Off the Moonlight* (1909). Subsequently, the journal published both a review (by Mihály Babits) and a sample of specimen poems (translated by Dezső Kosztolányi, 1885–1936). Both authors were leading figures of the *Nyugat* circle at that time, and had a national reputation, which indicates that the phenomenon of Futurism was taken seriously by the journal. Babits, in accordance with the spirit of *Nyugat*, tried to distance himself from the prejudices surrounding the movement, yet began his essay in a harsh tone, referring to *Aeroplani* as an "Italian book in late-Symbolist style, rather tasteless, as wide as it is tall" (Babits: "Futurizmus", 487). Attributing the whole phenomenon to 'Secessionism', a Germanic equivalent to Symbolism, he contended that the book's style was outdated and lacked the most important Modernist feature: newness. Later on, he also denied its serious intentions: "What the Italian is attempting, with his peculiar childish enthusiasm, is for us just a worn-out idea; we see in these things not modernity, but a parody of modernity" (Babits: "Futurizmus", 487). He then cited some examples that were

meant to prove that the thematic range of Futurist poetry had already been present in Hungarian poetry, for example in his own allegorical poem, *A halál automobilon* (Death Sits in an Automobile, 1905).

Kosztolányi's approach seemed more sympathetic, and although he never became a Futurist and did not even adopt their ideas, he managed to reveal to his contemporaries some of the potential of Futurist poetry. In 1911, Endre Ady (1877–1919) also voiced his views on Futurism. The pretext was the première of Giacomo Puccini's *La fanciulla del West*, and he referred to a Futurist manifesto on music, most likely Francesco Balilla Pratella's *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature*, that attacked "the rickety and vulgar operas of Giacomo Puccini and Umberto Giordano". Ady's judgements on Puccini and on his attackers were equally harsh: "Well, I detest the Futurists, naturally only because and predominantly because they have little talent and are all too heavy on theory" (Ady: "La Fanciulla del West", 247). He also complained about the fact that the Futurists kept on sending him their latest publications.

Ady's remark shows that there was a general feeling of annoyance about the Futurist movement. The following year, Béla Balázs (1884–1949), poet and future founding father of film theory, made a more profound and more honest attempt at understanding the phenomenon of Futurism. In his report on the Futurist exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery in Paris, he admitted that he could perceive in the artists unmistakable signs of talent and that "what they do is really new". His final verdict came close to an actual acceptance of the works on display: "This is not art. But even so, the [Futurists] cannot be simply dismissed as fools and madcaps" (Balázs: "Futuristák", 647).

The most important account of Hungarian Futurism (unsurpassed for several decades) was written by Dezső Szabó (1879–1945), one of the most original authors of the *Nyugat* circle. He developed his very own Expressionist style of writing that made a great impression even on Kassák. Strangely, his first remarks on Futurism were rather sarcastic. He reports that he bought a book by Marinetti from a street vendor in Paris. It only cost him a few sous and turned out to be a dedication copy (Szabó: "F.T. Marinetti: Le Futurisme", 156). In the following years, Marinetti sent several books to Szabó, who in turn reviewed them in a serious manner. His general opinion is summed up in the sentence: "Youth, bravery and power are sympathetic, even in their excesses and mistakes" (Szabó: "F.T. Marinetti: Le Monoplan du Pape; Luciano Folgore, Futurista: Il Canto dei Motori", 300). Szabó undoubtedly developed a certain sympathy towards Futurism and in 1913 wrote an important essay that not only reviewed the movement as a whole but also made an attempt to attribute to it a place in the history of European culture:

There may be much folly and sickness in Futurism because the world heals itself with folly and sickness. But its general message is cunningly clever: enough of the romantic snivel of the last 150 years, there has been too much analysis, criticism, denial, whimpering. We have to look for the positive building blocks of the future. (Szabó: "Futurizmus: Az élet és művészet új lehetőségei", 23)

These words had a lasting effect on Kassák who, in 1915, asked Szabó to write the inaugural column of his first periodical, *A Tett* (Szabó: “Keresztelőre”).

Nyugat and Futurism after 1915

From 1915 onwards, two new factors influenced Hungarian opinions of Futurism. The first was the emergence of a native avant-garde; the other was Italy’s entry into the First World War on the side of the *entente cordiale*. When Babits commented on this latter event, he also mentioned the Futurists: “Italy today is an entirely Futurist State”, he declared with a good dose of sarcasm that foresaw (unknowingly) the future of Futurism in Mussolini’s Italy (Babits: “Itália”, 643). Almost at the same time, Kosztolányi wrote his review of Kassák’s first volume of poetry, *Eposz Wagner maszkjában* (Epic in the Mask of Wagner, 1915), and he made a point of dissociating the young poet from the Futurists: “Marinetti defines war this way: Battle = Weight + Stench. The definition of our gentle poet would probably go like this: Battle = Tears + Tears ... ad infinitum” (Kosztolányi: “Eposz Wagner maszkjában”, 626; the poem referred to, *Bataille: Poids + Odeur*, formed part of Marinetti: “Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature”, 117–119).

In 1915, it was still impossible to deploy the term ‘Futurism’ in an objective, descriptive manner. In a book review from that year, we see the pejorative meaning surface again: “If I had been thinking like this a year ago, they would have said ‘he is just as mad as Marinetti, the Futurist’” (Erdély: “Néhány háborús könyvről”, 804). Similarly negative was the handling of the term by Frigyes Karinthy, this time in a war scene in a fantastic short story: “What happened afterwards, he remembers like a bizarre nightmare, like an illustration of Dante’s Inferno by one of those maniacal Futurist painters” (Karinthy: “Legenda az ezerarcú lélekről”, 651). Remarks and gestures like these mirror the public opinion that prevailed in Hungary in the 1910s. Kassák reported in his autobiography that, when he was arrested in 1919 for his involvement with the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic, his lawyer demanded that he include the following statement at the end of his testimony: “I would like to remark that I am a Futurist writer.” Kassák objected, but the lawyer tried to persuade him that this was the only way to get him out of prison: being a Futurist was synonymous with being a harmless fool, meaning that he would not be held responsible for his actions (Kassák: *Egy ember élete*. Vol. 2, 661).

In the meantime, some people, connected both to *Nyugat* and the Kassák circle, managed to adopt a historical perspective on Futurism and sought to remove the prejudices that were attached to the movement. Iván Hevesy (1893–1966) published a book on new trends in painting and mentioned Futurism together with two rather more acceptable movements: Expressionism and Cubism (Hevesy: *Futurista, expresszionista és kubista festészet*). Vilmos Rozványi (1892–1954) wrote a review of *Szabadulás* (Getting Free), an anthology of poems by four former *Ma* poets, in which

he tried to use the term ‘Futurist’ in a non-judgmental manner. However, to avoid any offensive associations, it was placed in quotation marks, possibly at the editor’s demand (Rozványi: “Új költők”). Eight years later, when Kassák returned from his exile, he wrote a report on Walter Ruttmann’s masterpiece *Berlin – Die Symphonie einer Großstadt* (Berlin – Symphony of a Metropolis) and complained about the hostile and discriminatory introductory speech before the screening: “They [the audience] haven’t seen anything yet but they had already learned that some Futurist idiocy was about to start” (Kassák: “Az abszolút film”). It seems that negative overtones had become indelibly attached to the word.

Futurism in Kassák’s periodicals

It is astonishing that Kassák’s periodicals showed considerably less interest in Futurism than *Nyugat* did. When reading the pages of *A Tett* and *Ma*, there is no indication that Kassák was in any serious way an adherent of Futurism. Throughout its history (seventeen issues in 1915 and 1916), his first journal, *A Tett*, published only one Futurist poem, *Le case parlano* (The Houses Speak), by Libero Altomare. Kassák also wrote a prose piece based on Carlo Carrà’s painting *Funeral of the Anarchist Galli* (Kassák: “Carlo D. Carrà ‘Anarchista temetés’ című képe alá”). The December 1918 issue of *Ma* contained a small section with three poems by Altomare and Buzzi, and in November 1921 a Words-in-Freedom composition by Luciano Folgore was published. *A Tett* also published the above-mentioned *parole in libertà*, *Battle: Weight + Stench* (1 June 1916), and the manifesto *Tactilism: A Futurist Manifesto* appeared in *Ma* (1 June 1921). In 1924, to coincide with the *International Exhibition of New Theatre Technology* in Vienna (24 September – 15 October 1924), *Ma* published a special issue on Music and Theatre, which contained two important Futurist writings in their original (respectively Italian and French): Marinetti’s *Abstract Anti-psychological Theatre of Pure Elements and the Tactile Theatre* (1924) and Enrico Prampolini’s *The Futurist Scenic Atmosphere* (1924). As far as the visual arts were concerned, there were reproductions of two works by Boccioni, as well as one by Aldo Fiozzi and one by Prampolini (*Ma* 3:5 [1 May 1918]: 53, 4:5 [15 May 1919]: 91, 8:4 [1 February 1923]: 35, 9:8–9 [15 September 1924]: 174). And in 1925, Kassák published a short essay on Marinetti, which (according to Kassák) Marinetti had refused to publish in the Futurist periodical *Noi* (Kassák: “F.T. Marinetti”).

This does not amount to a lot of material over a ten-year period, especially when considering how well *Ma* covered other phenomena of a much narrower scope, such as Kurt Schwitters’s *Merz* aesthetics. This may not have been entirely due to ideological factors, but also due to technical ones, one of them being language. While *Nyugat* was dominated by highly qualified, professional men of letters, the writers of the Kassák circle were mainly self-taught men of lower-middle-class extraction (Kassák’s

own formal qualifications were those of a locksmith's apprentice). While knowledge of German was generally expected from anyone with a secondary education (it was still the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), and some French was required for more educated conversations, translators familiar with Italian were rather hard to find. Kassák had very little money to pay royalties and largely relied on his contributors' enthusiasm. Thus, the Italian language was a hurdle that was easier to overcome for *Nyugat* than for Kassák's reviews.

The other detrimental factor was timing. Futurism began more or less at the same time as *Nyugat*; when *A Tett* was founded, Futurism was already six years old. This may not be long for an artistic movement, but when it is entirely geared towards the values of novelty and originality, six years can mean a lot. Consequently, Kassák opted for the German Expressionists as potential collaborators and used one of their key periodicals, Franz Pfemfert's *Die Aktion* as inspiration for his own review, *A Tett* (which also means 'The Action'). Although Kassák never actually agreed with the Futurists' goals, his attitudes nonetheless showed traces of Futurist influence in that his ambitions went beyond the territory of Modernism in the cultural field and were marked out in terms of radical political and social change. In fact, it was on these grounds that he called his movement 'Activism', signifying not a style but a moral obligation towards the oppressed of the world.

A third technical factor can be detected in Kassák's preferred methods of communication. The early Futurist movement was characterized by its actionism, as in the infamous *serate* and street performances, which relied on immediate and personal presence, improvised response, provocation and pandemonium. Performance, as handled by Marinetti, developed into an autonomous art form, independent of the representational traditions of theatre, and was later taken to an extreme by the Dadaists. But Kassák and his circle were not very interested in this kind of activity and instead preferred the established, institutionalized forms of artistic communication like literary journals. It is no coincidence that *Ma* was one of the longest-lasting avant-garde periodicals internationally, whereas its soirées and matinees were only occasional and infrequent events. Kassák avoided scandals and improvised actions, and preferred to make his points as level-headedly and cogently as possible through other means.

Ideological disagreements

The above-mentioned technicalities account for the rather low profile of Futurism in *A Tett* and *Ma*. But, as also indicated above, Kassák's attitude towards Futurism was not simply one of indifference; in fact, one can detect a distinct and rather consistent dislike that can be traced back to several causes, the four most important of which I shall discuss below.

The foremost cause of disagreement between Kassák and the Futurists was related to the question of war. Futurism started off in the spell of an imagined, idealized and still hypothetical future war, while the organization of the Hungarian avant-garde was in great part due to the everyday experience of a *real* war. Kassák and his associates had witnessed the deaths, forced drafting, food shortages and lies of nationalist propaganda during the Great War. For this reason, they were unable to see any positive aspects in war, and as early as 1916 Kassák referred to it as “eighteen months of world-monstrosity”. In this programmatic statement he condemned not only war but also the Futurists’ attitude towards it:

The new literature must not swear loyalty to the flags of any -ism. As it cannot accept the new possibilities of Christianity, it must confront Futurism head-on as well. Because, while on the one hand there are ascetics gazing at their navels for thousands of years, on the other there are haughty prima donnas singing the apotheosis of war ... Every artistic school is an indicator of either decadent aestheticism or superficial virtuosity or sanctified mediocrity. (Kassák: “Programm”, 154)

By “Christianism”, which is a neologism in the original too, Kassák is probably referring to the neo-Catholic writers of the time such as Paul Claudel or François Mauriac.

The second controversial question was linked to historical circumstances: nationalism. While Marinetti again and again declared his patriotism, Kassák hardly ever mentioned the idea of the nation. In fact, it was due to his internationalist sympathies that he came into conflict with the authorities. In August 1916, he published an ‘international issue’ of *A Tett*, which contained translated poems and prose pieces by Émile Verhaeren, George Duhamel, Paul Fort, Ludwig Rubiner, Libero Altomare, Mikhail Petrovich Artsybashev and Wassily Kandinsky – that is, authors from several ‘enemy nations’. At that time, such an action was deemed high treason and could lead to the banning of a periodical, as indeed happened with *A Tett* in November of the same year (Kassák: *Egy ember élete*. Vol. 2, 304–305). Kassák’s international pool of artists had a symbolic significance, just like the gathering of a multinational group of Dadaists in Zurich earlier that year.

When, in 1920, Kassák emigrated to Vienna, he became a member of an international community. In *Ma*, he regularly published works by artists from many nations, corresponded with them and advertised their periodicals just as they advertised his. This internationalist tendency was a welcome development for the Kassák circle in exile. For the Futurists, on the other hand, having promoted such ideas as ‘fervent patriotism’ it was less easy to accept. Marinetti nevertheless made his own attempt at internationalism with his *Le Futurisme mondiale* (Global Futurism) manifesto of 1924, predominantly a publicity stunt without much foundation, and with a “ridiculously inflated list of adherents” (Berghaus: *Futurism and Politics*, 263). Although Marinetti used the international scene cleverly by participating in conferences and exhibitions, giving lectures, functioning as national secretary of PEN and so on, his concept of internationalism was one of conquest rather than fraternity.

The third cause of disagreement was also political. It related to Marinetti's argument that collectivism degraded the achievements of talented individuals and was thus inferior to individualism. As far as we know, Kassák, a born democrat, held substantially different views and expressed them when he met Marinetti in Vienna. The accounts of this encounter in 1925 are rather insubstantial and somewhat biased. József Nádass (1897–1975), an associate of Kassák, was present and recalled the event at the time of Kassák's death:

Marinetti, the pope of Futurism, visited Kassák in Vienna and provoked a debate with him. It is characteristic of the purity of Kassák's ideology that the debate led to the throwing of chairs, banging of tables and almost to actual fighting, because Marinetti was already flirting with Fascism and wanted to convince Kassák of the genius of Mussolini and the truth of his ideas. Kassák in turn called Marinetti's hero a traitor, and he called Fascism a reactionary, anti-human adventure. (Nádass: "Kassák Lajossal az emigrációban", 1629)

Kassák's own recollection provides even less detail, but he adds one characteristic element to the account: "At the end of the meeting, Marinetti shook my hand at great length, hugged me and said that the world needs artists of this kind who can stand up for their ideas" (Kassák: *Az izmusok története*, 275).

Marinetti regarded Futurism as his own absolutely original and unprecedented creation, which had been plagiarized by other art movements and had, sometimes, even been distorted and perverted, as in the case of the Russian Futurists who had joined the Bolshevik cause. Kassák saw Futurism as one of several possible systems within which the enlightened creative artist could fulfil their sublime vocation: the elevation of the suppressed masses to the heights of the creative Spirit.

The fourth and final cause of Kassák's dislike for Futurism was purely aesthetic. Long after Marinetti's death and the termination of their political differences, the aging Kassák voiced his doubts concerning Futurist aesthetics in *Az izmusok története* (The History of -Isms, 1972), where he related his account of Futurism to Maurice Raynal's criticism (Raynal: *Modern French Painters*, 82-83) and drew on the decades-old debate between abstraction and figuration:

What is essentially new in painting twelve legs of a running dog instead of four? Is it enough to conceive of movement in a Naturalist manner and to demonstrate it by using quantitative redundancy? Does it go beyond superficial illustration? Can we induce the feeling of reality by showing appearances? (Kassák: *Az izmusok története*, 74)

At the end of the chapter on Futurism, he declared the essence of his views: "The real creative artist always aims at changing the world, and a real work of art always advances the changing of the world. The work is not a mirror image of the world but it is the world: the sea in a drop of water." The Futurists, he wrote, denied their audience this experience, which is why their legacy was the least positive among the

movements of the historical avant-garde: “They only demanded and promised the New. This attracted much attention, of course, but their success in exciting world opinion brought real artistic results in other, more substantial domains” (Kassák: *Az izmusok története*, 75).

Aesthetic convergences

There was very little chance of reconciliation between Kassák and the Futurists. In the first (and, as we see it today, most productive) period of Kassák’s career, his fundamental aim was to find an artistic form that could help people to understand, absorb and heal the historical trauma of the First World War. This precluded any ideological agreement with Marinetti. On the other hand, when he depicted the monstrosities of war in his poetry, he was quite content to use the techniques he had learned from Marinetti. Some of the verses in *Eposz Wagner maszkjában* show the impact that Futurist inventions had on Kassák and without which not only his oeuvre but also the whole of Hungarian culture after the First World War would look significantly different:

Fölöttünk vad acélmadarak dalolnak a halálról,
pre-pre-pre, pre... pre... rererere... re-re-e-e-e...
és vér, vér, vér és tűz, tűz, tűz,
vér és tűz és fölötte, mint repülő sakál vonít a
srapnel,

Above us wild steel birds singing about death
pre-pre-pre, pre... pre... rererere... re-re-e-e-e...
and blood, blood, blood and fire, fire, fire,
blood and fire, and above, like a flying jackal, a
yowling shrapnel

Zizegő golyóraj... Égő acélüstökösök... Szürke,
zömök gránát...
s valahol a tarajos sörényű óperenciákon,
mint vérmes bronzbikák bogárzanak az U 9 és
XII-ők.

Buzzing swarm of bullets... Burning steel
comets... Grey, stocky grenades and somewhere
on the crested mane of the oceans,
like sanguine bronze bulls, U9s and XIIs prepare
to mate

Fu-u-ujjjiii... bum... bururu-u... bumm... bumm...
siü-cupp, paka-paka-paka-paka-brura-rü-ü-ü-ü...
fru-urrru-u-u-u... pikk... frrrrrrrru-u-u-u-u-u,
a porban égő rózsabokrot forgat a szél.
(Kassák: *Összes versei*. Vol. 1, 15)

Fu-u-ujjjiii... bum... bururu-u... bumm... bumm...
shü-cupp, paka-paka-paka-paka-brura-rü-ü-ü-ü...
fru-urrru-u-u-u... pikk... frrrrrrrru-u-u-u-u-u,
the wind whirls a burning rose-bush around in
the dust.

However, when Kassák created his first typographical works, he had already embarked on his voyage towards his mature, Constructivist art. Nevertheless, some of his most original works closely resemble *parole in libertà* as well as Dadaist word-collages by Kurt Schwitters and others. His best-known typography, which occupied a full page in the 15 October 1922 issue of *Ma* and is widely considered to be his motto, reads:

“Destroy so that you can build and build so that you can win”. This slogan might not be directly inspired by Futurism, but it is definitely rooted in a spirit that had been deeply influenced by it.

As for the visual arts, it seems that, in the first decades of the twentieth century, the Hungarian experts distinguished three radical trends: Futurism, Expressionism and Cubism. When in 1919 Iván Hevesy wrote his short monograph on these three -isms, and when he published an extended version in 1922 (*A futurizmus, expresszionizmus és kubizmus művészete művészet* [Futurist, Expressionist and Cubist Art]), he did not include one single Hungarian artist in the section on Futurism.

The Hungarian public's first opportunity to see actual Futurist paintings came in 1913, with a representative exhibition at the National Salon, Budapest (25 January – 28 February). The dynamism of the works by Boccioni, Severini and Carrà had a great effect on several Hungarian artists (see Szabó: *A Magyar aktivizmus művészete 1915–27*, 46). Their impact can be most easily observed in thematic novelties: in the following years, the themes of machines, elevated depictions of human work and man-made environments became relatively frequent, for example in the paintings of locomotives by Sándor Bortnyik (1893–1976), in whose oeuvre this period seems an important step toward his later Constructivism. (On the other hand, the appearance of war-related themes can be attributed to the experience of the war itself.) A deeper correlation can be detected if we consider Lajos Gulácsy (1882–1932), an instinctive Expressionist, whose later paintings show a close resemblance to the dense structures and psychological symbolism of Boccioni's work (Szabó: *A Magyar aktivizmus művészete 1915–27*, 48). The presence of the two methods or features of Futurism, distinguished by Hevesy as dynamism and simultaneism (see his *A futurizmus, expresszionizmus*, 5) is undeniable in several paintings and drawings by such diverse artists of the *Ma* circle as the master of László Moholy-Nagy, Róbert Berény (1887–1953); Lajos Tihanyi (1885–1938), an excellent portraitist of Kassák, Tzara and others; or János Schadl (1892–1944), a religious Expressionist – as well as in the works of painters who belonged to an older generation and became attracted to the avant-garde in a later period of their career such as Béla Kádár (1877–1956) or Hugo Scheiber (1873–1950).

The 1913 exhibition also had a great effect on Kassák (who wrote a prose piece based on a Carrà painting, as mentioned above), and his close collaborator (also his brother-in-law), the painter and graphic artist Béla Uitz (1887–1972). In the following years, Uitz created several paintings on the subject of war, with both unmistakable Futurist dynamism and pacifist intentions – similarly to Kassák's poem above. In 1919, Uitz, together with Kassák and the majority of the Modernist intellectuals, became a resolute supporter of the Hungarian Soviet Republic. Uitz, Berény and a few others prepared some outstanding political posters, most notably on the theme of military mobilization. The imagery of these posters was later incorporated into the Socialist-Realist iconography of the 1950s, and some of their characteristics even found their way into public art of the Communist era – quite an ironic fate for Futurist ideas.

An ironic aftermath

In 1931, Marinetti, as a member of the Italian Academy, was invited by the Hungarian Academy to visit Budapest (Dobó: “A közönség nevet, az elnök komor arccal néz maga elé”). He gave a lecture to an audience of academics and aristocrats and was introduced by the Academy’s president, who stated: “There is no established common opinion on Futurism as of yet, but we have to consider the fact that conservative Fascism supports it, and that cannot mean anything else but that it sees a creative, rather than destructive force in Futurism” (Bálint: “Futurizmus a Tudományos Akadémián”). We do not have an exact record of the event, but according to the newspaper reports, Marinetti spoke about his latest inventions (tactilism, aeropainting, possibly Futurist cuisine), recited *Il bombardamento di Adrianopoli* (The Bombardment of Adrianople, 1912), *Paesaggio d’odori del mio cane-lupo* (My Wolf-Dog’s Landscape of Smells, 1925) and other poems. He also argued about individualism and referred directly to Kassák:

He suddenly stops and utters a name that has never before had been heard between these walls. He says “Kassák”. Then he says “Ma”. There is silence for a moment, the president raises his head and watches Marinetti expectantly, with rapt attention. Marinetti argues against Kassák. He claims that Futurism cannot be connected to communism, because Futurism is equal to nationalism, individualism. In some places [Russia] the Futurists became communists because the ruling classes and circles failed to support them. (Bálint: “Futurizmus a Tudományos Akadémián”, 7)

It was a strange situation: the conservative press praised Marinetti’s artistic originality while the left-wing press sneered at his opportunism. Marinetti was, for both sides, above all a high-ranking representative of the Fascist state. Kassák (who was not present) saw the moral advantage afforded to him by the situation and wrote a sharp and uncharacteristically witty article in *Nyugat* (Kassák: “Marinetti az Akadémián”). Among other things, he warned Marinetti that publicly calling someone a communist could be deemed slanderous (and Kassák, in fact, was a Social Democrat). However, the main thrust of his sarcasm was aimed at the conservative reporters, especially an anonymous one from the *Budapesti Hírlap* (Budapest Gazette), who tried to explain the artistic value of the canine performance to his readers in bombastic terms:

And it is also art, though without the sublime and sometimes on the brink of the grotesque, when he presents the monologue of the dog, thinking through its olfactory organs. [...] Anyone who is able to create a man, animal, tree, flower, stone or even decay, so that we stand before it deeply moved and feel “yes, that’s right” – is a God-blessed artist, whatever form he uses to that effect. Because it’s not the form that is important, it’s the essence. (‘M’: “Futurizmus”, 7)

Kassák’s retort to this was almost cruel:

Of course, form is nothing. We know very well that during the Great War, the battles were only a form, a mere formality even, the essence being the massacre, the all-engulfing decay, to which Marinetti contributed by using his God-given ability of thinking through the olfactory organs of a dog. (Kassák: “Marinetti az Akadémián”, 57)

In the article, he quoted his own words of 1916 (“haughty prima donnas singing the apotheosis of war”), and at the end reiterated the closing remarks of his 1925 essay: “Marinetti is the man who cleverly runs away from darkness but instinctively recoils from light.” (Kassák: “F. T. Marinetti”). Kassák made his point and demonstrated his uncompromising moral stance that stood in marked contrast to Marinetti’s opportunism. It was not a debate between them any more: in his own frame of reference, Marinetti might have been consistent and faithful to his principles, but in the Hungarian context and in Kassák’s view he had clearly deserted and gone over to the enemy side.

After the late 1920s, avant-garde activity in Hungary became virtually non-existent, but the images and ideas of the avant-garde, including those incorporated from Futurism, remained very much present. As the most popular Hungarian literary historian, Antal Szerb, wrote:

Everyone who read *Ma* at that time, and leafs through it again today, will be faced with two surprises. First, it turns out that the poems and prose which were once considered entertaining nonsense, have now become perfectly comprehensible. [...] Second, one will be amazed to notice just how much of *Ma*’s agenda was realized, and how much has sunk into our literary consciousness and today counts as self-evident. (Szerb: *Magyar irodalomtörténet*. Vol. 2, 230)

After 1948, Communist cultural policy condemned the avant-garde altogether as a by-product of the decay of Western bourgeois society. In this context, Italian Futurism was particularly easy to denounce as downright Fascist. However, it is worth quoting a sentence from a 1960 letter of György Aczél, deputy minister and de facto head of cultural politics at the time: “We don’t like and don’t understand the ‘art’ of Lajos Kassák” (quoted in Sasvári: “A mi kultúránk nem lehet más itthon, mint külföldön”, 103). But only two years later, when the Gondolat publishing house started an educational book series on the -isms, the two initial volumes were ironically on the Baroque and on Futurism, the latter one being fairly substantial. Futurism, at last, had begun to find its place in the cultural memory of Hungary and in the minds of its people.

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