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Summary of the doctoral dissertation

Antal Szerb's modernist output

Antal Szerb is known in Hungary primarily as a literary historian and author of prose fiction. The dissertation, which is the first monograph of the writer's oeuvre in Poland, brings his novels to the foreground, considering the rest of his output as an important interpretative context. The primary research perspective here is broadly understood modernism, or rather the circle of issues related to it, which have been literarily developed in Antal Szerb's books, but still awaited a comprehensive scientific discussion. This study therefore expands the way of perceiving the aforementioned works by offering a rarely adopted approach.

The *Introduction* defines the field of interest of the dissertation, identifies and characterises the most important publications that make up the current state of research, as well as sketches the problem framework and main threads of the individual chapters. Before carrying out detailed textual analyses, it proved necessary to comparatively outline representative concepts and periodisations of modernism or modernity in Polish, Western and Hungarian literary studies, i.e. to define key terms taking into account their broad semantic spectrum. This allowed, in the further part of the thesis, to locate the predominant features of Antal Szerb's work in the field of reference thus delineated.

The writer made his debut in the magazine "Nyugat", which was the main centre of literary modernism in Hungary. The next chapter takes a closer look at the activities of the periodical, presenting its artistic and ideological orientation against the background of national and European trends. One of the leading figures of "Nyugat" was Mihály Babits, whose cultural reflections inspired Szerb's essayistic and scientific deliberations on the changing role of literature throughout history and in the modern era.

The next part of the dissertation is devoted to the theory of the modernist novel presented in the work entitled *Hétköznapok és csodák* [*Workdays and Wonders*]. This concept was heavily influenced by György Lukács's ideas from his pre-Marxist period contained in the collection of essays *Soul and Form*, and especially in *The Theory of the Novel*. This thinker believed that the Homeric epic expressed the ancients' characteristic sense of unity with the world permeated by transcendence. The novels created after the disintegration of this image would tell the story of the journey of alienated heroes searching for community and the divine element in a disenchanted reality. In *Workdays and Wonders* one can also see the inspiration of the religious studies reflection of Károly Kerényi, who linked the genre's origins to sacred works in the era of antiquity. The miraculous elements, present in the novel from the very beginning, were to survive until modern times, however, undergoing numerous transformations over the centuries. Antal Szerb traced the changes in literary imagery taking place in particular eras, each time finding in the works various manifestations of metaphysical longing. He saw miraculous phenomena as a chance for liberation from the yoke of ossified laws imposed on the individual by society.

The Hungarian writer applied his theoretical considerations in practice, hence the next three chapters are devoted to his novels. A brief presentation of the storylines in his debut novel *The Pendragon Legend* is followed by an analysis of the work's genological complexity. This dissertation also provides thus far the most extensive elaboration of the references to the esoteric tradition present in the book and reconstructs the ways of transmitting secret knowledge from the earliest times to the present day. The history of the secret society of Rosicrucians plays a particularly important role in the novel, as it forms the backdrop to the events, significantly influencing the fate of the characters. The dissertation not only takes a closer look at the history of the brotherhood, but also compares the references in Antal Szerb's work with the current state of knowledge and source texts. In the perspective of both the Hungarian writer and some researchers, the Rosicrucians, by transferring and adapting ancient wisdom to the modern era, acted as a link between two great historical and cultural formations. The confraternity probably had a hand in transplanting the Templar heritage into the symbolism and ceremonial of Freemasonry. In addition to discussing the Freemason themes in *The Pendragon Legend*, the thesis carefully analyses references to nineteenth-century occultism, which significantly influenced some currents in European modernism. Oswald Spengler's views also left their mark on Antal Szerb's thinking. One of the things the Hungarian writer took over from the German

philosopher was the division into culture and civilisation, which is visible in the construction of the novel's characters.

References to the author's biography significantly enrich the interpretation of the novel *Journey by Moonlight*. His diary entries made it easier to identify the prototypes of the individual characters, and also allowed to recognise Szerb's distinctive tendency towards camouflage. The writer's reflections on his trip to Italy, described in the essay *The Third Tower*, correspond with the protagonist's impressions. Key motifs related to the youth of the characters described in the novel appeared already in the early story *How Did Tamás Ulpius Die?* Psychoanalytic tools proved useful for their interpretation. These issues are also present in other literary works of the era. Antal Szerb was directly inspired by the novels *Les Enfants Terribles* by Jean Cocteau and *The Rebels* by Sándor Márai. In all these works, the philistine mentality against which the heroes rebel is criticised. The protagonist of *Journey by Moonlight*, on a wandering journey through Italy, not only moves through physical space, but also delves into his own psyche, often perceiving his surroundings in terms of Freudian uncanny. Fragments of essay-like text were woven into the plot, making it possible to discursively present religious studies reflections inspired by the concepts of Károly Kerényi. The references to plot events and the analysis of specific scenes serve, on the one hand, to show how Antal Szerb implements the principles of his own theory of the novel in practice, and on the other hand, it allows him to capture and describe the struggles of the protagonist and the author himself with the dilemmas of modernity.

The next chapter of the thesis is devoted to the short novel *Oliver VII*, which has been studied by Hungarian literary historians to a very limited extent. György Poszler, in his monograph, drew attention to the parallels between Szerb's book and Luigi Pirandello's works, but did not undertake to describe them. The present dissertation takes up this interpretative perspective, as it allows for a better understanding of the evolving labile attitude of the main character in Szerb's novels, who is searching for the right place in reality.

The modern era had its dark side, which was most fully revealed during the Holocaust. The final chapter outlines the changing situation of the Jewish population in Hungary over the decades, and then raises in this context the issues of the writer's complex identity, which left a strong mark on his individual fate. The dissertation describes the difficult living conditions and literary activity of Antal Szerb during the war and the circumstances of his death in a forced labour camp. In the following years, the late author's oeuvre faced attacks from communists, who criticised bourgeois literature for its allegedly fascism-friendly irrationalism. However, the

works of Zygmunt Bauman and representatives of the Frankfurt School show that it was the modern scientific paradigm that made the extermination of the Jews possible. According to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, the domination of enlightened reason actually meant a return to mythical thinking. The main characters in Antal Szerb's novels are internally torn individuals, longing for a sense of lost harmony with the world, but seeking liberation in modernity.