

Ferenc Molnár and the Culture of Adolescence

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The aim of this essay is twofold. First, by methods of intellectual history to enlighten the concept of adolescence from the 1890s to 1910s. Secondly, a short critical analysis of the collective metaphoric meaning given to it by Ferenc Molnár, a Hungarian writer, is offered by way of examining his patriotism, his view of war and of heroism.⁰

I. The invention of adolescence

The term adolescence was born in the decades around 1900. What was supposedly the social, 'concrete reality' of youth life from nine up to twenty-four years of age became conceptualized as adolescence in prevailing evolutionary discourse of life in general. Enormous interest in phenomena of adolescent physical and mental growth, and especially, 'crisis' developed. Psychoanalysis, psychology, criminology, pedagogy, sociology and literature all contributed to the formation of the new category of age. In consequence, concerned, scientific and emancipatory attitudes towards adolescent education shook the basis of traditional, paternalistic control.¹

The findings of human sciences on adolescent behaviour and mentality were summarized by G. Stanley Hall (1844–1924), an American psychologist, in his pioneering and also in Europe widely read study *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relations to*

⁰ Dominick LaCapra has emphasized the methodological similarities between intellectual history and critical analysis in a way which seems especially useful here. See his *Re-thinking Intellectual History; Texts, Contexts, Language* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1983), pp. 23–69.

¹ John Neubauer, *The Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Adolescence* (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1991), pp. 5–6. For general cultural and scientific background, see *Fin de Siècle and Its Legacy*. Eds. Mikulás Teich and Roy Porter (C.U.P., 1990).

Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education (1914). Hall applied contemporary theories of heredity to adolescent development and insisted that physical and mental growth of an individual recapitulated that of the human race. In order to guide youngsters to realize their developmental potential a teacher should imbue their susceptible minds with images of "crude, rank virtues of the world's childhood"². Adolescents' lost connection with nature's life and its laws was to be reestablished by means of repose, leisure, sports, art, legends, romance and idealizations.

The idealization of war as adventure or rough fair-play was one of the literary means to organize *male* adolescent identity from the outside. In pre-war European great power societies compulsory military service was generally regarded as the only efficient apprenticeship to manhood. Patriotic literature for adolescent readers abounded mental preparation for war and contributed to the enthusiasm which made the majority of the reading public look forward to a war.³ In the same vein, youth, especially boys, should have been emancipated from intellectual 'overeducation'; time and space had to be found for their 'healthy' and 'normal' development. The nineteenth-century 'progressive' process of self-control and suppression of instincts was to be relaxed.

The invented independence of the youth was, however, to be channelled into respectable forms and organizations. Neotraditionalist movements of male purity, such as the boy-scouts and the *Wandervogel* encountered 'decadent' modernism and 'degeneration' by a reversal to well-ordered, hierarchical value-systems of the army. In comparison to secondary school curricula, they could be more effective in inculcating the ideologies of patriotism, nationalism, chauvinism, anti-Semitism and racism into young minds.

II. Ferenc Molnár and the boys of Budapest

Ferenc Molnár (1878–1952), perhaps the most famous and controversial of all Hungarian playwrights, was during his early career preoccupied with adolescent anxieties, too. In the greatly

² Op. cit., vol. I, preface (1904), p. xi.

³ W. J. Reader, *At Duty's Call. A Study in Obsolete Patriotism* (Manchester University Press, 1988).

successful boys' story *A Pál-utcai Fiúk* (1907) he wrestled with the problems and ideals of particularly lower-middle-class urban (Budapest) youth.⁴

One authoritative textbook informs us that recent western criticism finds in Molnár's book a powerful anti-war message. The statement is supported by referring to post-World War I disillusionment and distrust of military leaders.⁵ However, this is an interpretation of the book's reception, not of the author's own purposes. If it were, it would simply be anachronistic. Anxious readers of the early 1920's may have found the pith of the book anti-militaristic, but there is no evidence to show that Molnár's own disillusion had set in before the war. It would be more credible to argue that his experiences as a war correspondent at the Galician front in 1914–1915 accomplished it.⁶ So, it may not be amiss to analyse *The Paul Street Boys* against pre-war cultural and intellectual setting and try to find the message Molnár himself wanted to convey.

As John Neubauer suggests, Molnár's account of the two belligerent high school gangs is probably the first modern story of adolescent gangs, and it seems that it contributed considerably to the change of reformatory attitudes from suppression to understanding and manipulation of the 'gang-instinct'.⁷ It is the formation of this modern stance towards adolescence that provides the

⁴ The novel was written in urgent need of money and hurry in a Budapest café where a military band used to play. At first it came out in a serialized form in a teen-age magazine called *Tanulók Lapja*. For details, see Clara Györgyey, *Ferenc Molnár* (Boston, 1980), pp. 71–72, 179 n. 13; Ferenc Molnár, *Companion in Exile. Notes for an Autobiography* (London, [1951]), p. 115. The socio-cultural meanings of Molnár's book could be contrasted with the more sophisticated ones hidden in Mihály Babits's *A gólyakalifa* (1916).

⁵ Lóránt Czigány, *The Oxford History of Hungarian Literature* (O.U.P., 1986), p. 276.

⁶ See Molnár's introduction to his *Diary of a War Correspondent, 1914–1915*. Quoted in Györgyey (1980), p. 53. Cf. George Parfitt, *Fiction of the First World War: A Study* (London, 1988).

⁷ Neubauer (1992), pp. 52–53. Cf. Illés Endre, *A fiatal Molnár Ferenc. Krétarajzok* (Budapest, 1957), pp. 316–319.

starting-point here. Let us first briefly reiterate the plot of the novel and then focus our attention on main themes.

The two gangs featuring in the book fight over the *grund*, a vacant lot held by the Paul Street boys. The rival gang, Redshirts, is eager to conquer it for ball game and declare a war for that very reason. Paul Streets boys' defense is led by the intelligent János Boka but saved by Ernő Nemeček, a weakling(!), in a decisive battle. He eliminates the enemy leader, Feri Áts, and becomes the hero in victory. Unfortunately, he dies of pneumonia shortly afterwards, and the *grund* is lost to its proper owner. The novel ends in an atmosphere of loss and resignation.

The Paul Street Boys is not the usual boys' story of adventures. It contains serious moral material from which the narrator invites the reader learn a few basic truths. The narrator purports to be an historian, faithfully recording all preparations and incidents of the war in great detail. He points out the basic principle of historical writing: strict chronology must be followed when describing the preparations for war and the progress of the fight (Molnár 1992 ed., 150–151). He is also careful enough to mention that the war is being waged in the year 1889 (74). In this sense, the narrator leads the reader think that he has taken on a solid identity, assuming the role of an objective, outside observer, not an involved third-person mouthpiece of the defending Paul Street boys. However, Molnár's boys are not ignorant of wider patriotic issues – the narrator discusses them through the boys' voices. He also presents his readers a view of life which could be designated as naturalistically historical and at the same time ironic so characteristic of Hungarian historiography.⁸

III. The Grund – the fatherland of freedom

The central scene of Molnár's book is the *grund*. It creates the space for the boys' own troubled life to be played out. Simultaneously, it becomes for the narrator the metaphor to attach sensitive patriotic meanings and feelings.

⁸ For the role of historian in East-European nation-building, see Bernard Lewis, *History: Remembered, Recovered, Invented* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1975), pp. 45–50.

In contrast to the *grund*'s centrality, home, school and church remain irrelevant places, and adults' concerns do not have much bearing on the novel's plot and action. They rather disturb boys' activities. Molnár did not problematize adolescence sexuality or sexual awakening either. The only girl, Mari, is a messenger but a neutral one.

When, in the opening pages of the book, a message of the coming election of a leader ("Elnökválasztás a grundon", 8) of the gang is spread around in the classroom, the sun, May fresh air, folk music and exciting seremonies waiting at the *grund* begin to call the boys outdoors and all intellectual tasks are cast aside. Unlike, for instance, in Leonhard Frank's *Räuberbande* (1914), the boys' restlessness is not developed into opposition to social control.⁹ They can quite freely gather at the "secret" *grund* after school-hours and give vent to their feelings and instincts there. Their scouting expeditions are not guided by any scout-leaders. Their emancipation ("Mintha kiszabadult kis rabok lettek volna...", 9) from studies and adult world in general is highlighted by a human skeleton which the teacher is left alone to examine as the boys run out of the classroom.

The *grund* symbolizes for the boys their own beloved fatherland ("haza") or realm ("birodalom"), representing metaphorically a free Hungary of the future. In their imagination it is their urban *Alföld*, an open plain without boundaries: "Ez jelenti számára a végtelenséget és a szabadságot" (20, 86–87). In actuality this realm of freedom is surrounded by stone-walls and a wooden fence with only two gates but neither do the buildings of a saw-mill nor the stacks of timber situated in the *grund* harm its openness since they can always be imagined as forests and mountains on the verge of plain, or during the war, as a fortress.

In the boys' minds the *grund* is idealized as a "beautiful" and "gentle" homeland which they are always ready to defend at duty's call. It is as if the boys, oldest of them only fourteen, could foster adult-like patriotic feelings of noble love of fatherland ("nemes hazszeretet", 35) and imitate the pre-World War I militant and patriotic enthusiasm for war by making their shout "Long live the *grund*!" sound like 'Long live the fatherland!' (35). In anticipation of fighting, they throw their hats in the air in happiness and in-

⁹ Cf. Neubauer (1992), p. 54.

toxication like people used to do in 1914 as they heard that the war had finally been declared.

As in concurrent philosophy of war, the motivation for warfare is depicted by the narrator rather as a 'natural' necessity than a human quest for seizure ("kapzsiság", 55). The essence of life is the same everywhere, in nature, in relations between nations and gangs of the street. It is all about fighting over living-space. The Readshirts declared the war against Paul Street boys for the very same reason as real wars of the era were being declared. The narrator-historian reminds the reader that the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905 had its origin in the 'natural' expansion of Russia to the Pacific ("Az oroszoknak a tenger kellett, azért hadakoztak a japániakkal", 55). The fact that the Russians were beaten appears to foreshadow the boys' loss of their *grund* in the end of the book.

The only foreign threat within the *grund* is a Slovak saw-mill guard (not the Italian vendor of sweets, 10–11) who is bribed by a traitor to force the boys out of the *grund*. He fails and the episode turns out to be so momentary that it can be argued that Molnár did not want to make any harsh racial or ethnic comments. Unlike, for instance in Rider Haggard's boys' stories¹⁰, Molnár's handling of Hungarian national and ethnic stereotypes is lightheaded and quite harmless – the cultural assimilation of his Jewish-bourgeois origin to the cosmopolitan life of Budapest had done its work.¹¹ The battle over the *grund* involves Hungarians only. Nevertheless, the urgency to defend the *grund* is the source of basic anxiety for the boys. In comparison to many earlier boys' books, it is remarkable that the boys' psychological experiences are not simply religious or merely moralistic but existential, as especially in the character-building of the democratically elected leader of the gang, Boka. Although the narrator informs his readers that the character of Boka is caught in between adolescence and approaching adulthood (his voice is already "serious", 13) denying him at first the opportunity to grow into fully charismatic leadership, Boka all the same gradually assumes the status of unquestioned authority at the *grund* ("elnök úr", 66; "tábornok", 129). Thus he cannot become the main hero of

¹⁰ Cf. Wendy R. Katz, *Rider Haggard and the Fiction of Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹¹ Györgyey (1980), pp. 22–23.

the story but the brains of his mini-army. Like a proper leader of a nation should, he, for instance, duly issues a declaration of emergency (101): "Everyone alert! Our realm is in great danger, and if we are not brave, our land is taken away from us! The *grund* is in danger!... But here we are, and if we have to, we shall defend our realm until death! Everyone has to do his duty!"¹²

Boka's uncontested leadership grows out of realizing that genuine authority presupposes certain amount of loneliness and aloofness from the level of ordinary soldiery. He has to make his far-reaching plans and keep the totality of the situation in view. In believing that his strategy and tactics should stand the test of enemy attack, Boka loses instant ethnic connection to his own *grund*: a general should be able to defend *any grund*. Before the actual fighting starts, he stands alone in the middle of the *grund* feeling alienated in a "distant, foreign country" where a single battle shall decide "the fate of the nations" ("...egy csata fogja eldönteni nemzetek sorsát", 114). And yet, this estranging but exalted experience is not contradictory to the preservation of the *grund* because it brings out the very charismatic trait in him which is badly needed: he understands his mission and grows self-confident and bold. The image of Napoleon emerges from a school history-book in his mind and he feels the immense responsibility involved in leading the gang to battle. It is from this point on when Boka's personality begins to transform from that of adolescent ambivalence to determined adulthood. His soldiers assure him: "Tetszett nekik, hogy az elnökük nem gyerek, hanem komoly férfi" (119). The narrator makes the boys honour him in the same manner as the old guards of Napoleon had honoured their general.

Since Boka took on the role of a military leader, boys' play and scouting began dramatically to replicate adult warfare. The *grund* was systematically changed into a battlefield, defenses were being built and the atmosphere became heated, warlike: the Indian-like (cf. Karl May) yelling was tuned to European warcries. A war-plan

¹² Most mindenkinek talpon kell lenni! Birodalmunkat nagy veszedelem fenyegeti, és ha nem leszünk bátrak, az egész területet elveszik tőlünk! Veszélyben a grund!... De mi ott leszünk, és ha kell, életünkkel is megvédelmezzük birodalmunkat! Mindenki teljesítse kötelességét!

was drawn, defense practised and all quarrels between factions within the gang were quelled. Agitation was accelerated, martial spirit ("harckészség", 142) aroused. Even nature favoured fighting: the weather for operations was fine. A hierarchical system of rank was brought to effect, the flag was hoisted and weaponry inspected. An oath of allegiance was taken; everyone had to know his job and keep his station. Napoleon-like Boka was standing on a hill watching through his binoculars when the "diabolical" enemy was approaching. In this way, the narrator filled the text with military vocabulary, even the military court ("haditörvényszék", 110) was introduced to make it clear that those who would not subdue to discipline were severely punished. It had to be understood that the time of war ("háborús idő", 111) had certainly begun.

Ironic enough, the war so minutely prefigured led to little more than symbolic violence. It was a gentlemanly, pretend war; real fighting was prohibited, only wrestling, crossing swords and throwing sand in each other's faces was allowed. Thus the narrator brings the story back to the commonplace level of adolescence. The death of the protagonist, the only victim of the war, is caused by cold caught before the fight. In this sense, the idealization of the war was complete.

IV. Heroism

In modern boys' novel sports and games, scouting and warfare as masculine preoccupations created adolescent heroes of the adult-type, and the war over the ownership of the *grund* was no exception. The whole effort of the Paul Street boys was heroic in itself and everyone of them was a minor hero. Yet, above others raises the main hero figure of the story, Ernő Nemeček, the "weakling" and the only private in the boys' army. It is Nemeček's irrational, self-sacrificial instinct that wins the field in the decisive battle. He is the one who is blindly and totally committed to the *grund*. The irony of rationalized warfare is brought home to the readers: the fatherland is ultimately kept by ordinary (dying) soldiers, not by clever military strategists or commanding officers.

The narrator contrasts traitorousness with heroism but allows the conflict partly to relax before the actual fighting begins. The function of the theme is to establish the credibility of the hero, Nemeček, who is believed to be a traitor himself. On a scouting visit

to the enemy headquarters Nemeček finds out that the real traitor, Geréb, has betrayed the *grund* to the Redshirts (55). He faces the difficulty of making others see the truth but, in the end, the "wise" leader Boka sees with his own eyes how Geréb is willingly plotting with the enemy leader against his own gang (86). However, Geréb is soon rejected by the Redshirts because of cowardice and wonderfully "just" Boka accepts him back to his own gang after pardon and a trial period. Now Geréb is allowed to become a sort of a hero, too – he wants to fight at the front-line. In the meanwhile, the fighting begins and it is only in the end that Nemeček is cleared of all accusations and justice done. The purpose of the postponement was to underline the moral how troubled the life of a real hero should be. Moreover, it gives a further touch of sentimentality to the end of the book.

Nemeček's heroism is tragic. When the war begins he is confined to sickbed but just before the collapse of the *grund*'s defense he drags himself to the battlefield and with superhuman powers pulls the Redshirt's strong leader down. Now victory is with the Paul Street boys. By rescuing the *grund* in this way Nemeček defies one basic law of nature which he himself had during his captivity defined: "who is more powerful, wins" ("Aki erősebb, az győz", 97). The price he has to pay is terrible. His sickness proves to be fatal and he dies after prolonged agony. His last words in horror of losing the *grund* border madness (193), and the narrator leaves the reader wonder whether the sacrifice an individual makes for the sake of his *grund* in a war is really worthwhile. And, for Boka at least, it remained at first incomprehensible (199).

At the very end of the novel it is disclosed that a house is about to be built on the *grund* by its proper owner. Boka cries in anger – the *grund* has let its own boy-heroes down. The only consolation is that Nemeček did not have to face it. Next day at school it dawns on Boka what the war, its result and consequences had really meant. It was after all impossible to resist the overwhelming forces of 'higher' and natural ownership that proved more powerful than boys' will and limited means. The law of natural and political life dictated that in the world a small, formerly insignificant *grund* could unexpectedly be claimed by a more powerful agent who is searching to expand his territory. When a nation has set out to gain more living-space its citizens become life's "fighting, sorrowful and

merry” servants (208). To be a hero in the process, one has to surrender oneself to the flow of life completely. In an idealized war, a hero marched singing, indifferent to death, to the front.

V. Messages

The social message of *The Paul Street Boys* is bound to Nemeček’s heroic figure. From the fact that he was a son of tailor’s it can be inferred that Molnár resisted the idea that heroes must necessarily be aristocratic. Nemeček, though ”weak” was no degenerate, he was dutiful, even inventive. His character was right. The rational, élitistic Boka was matched by instinctive and sentimental Nemeček.

The death of the hero-Nemeček and the loss of the *grund* constituted for Boka existential and moral education. He calmed down. He had left adolescence behind. The militaristic, masculine belief that conscription and warfare were the ’schools for manhood’ was not lost on young readers, but Molnár’s intention may well have been more complex: blind subservience to higher collective goals such as keeping or gaining more living-space for a nation or a group contradicted the aim to preserve one’s own life. Before surrendering to propaganda extolling martial arts, an individual should keep in mind that war was mostly about pure killing. The laws of war were as amoral as the laws of nature. Boka took the hint: it was of no use for a general to sympathize with the sufferings of ordinary soldiers, they were his living mass to mould. This simple observation turned him into an adult, the kind of an adult which Molnár himself would later have considered a cynic.¹³

Molnár’s patriotism was tamed by the insight that most human efforts were frustrated by some more powerful and unpredictable forces. Small peoples and nations should not expect much from history even if they might one day seize the opportunity to territorial aggrandisement. The victories of the weak turned out Pyrrhic. In keeping with this basic ’truth’, Molnár was no warmonger in *The Paul Street Boys* even though he seemed to acquiesce in the mood (1907) that for those credulous people who were willing to die in a war, the experience could be a ”merry” one, too.

¹³ Cf. Molnár ([1951]), p. 312.

Pre-World War I idealistic liberals often complained about the hostility of life: the evolution of culture had not been able to eradicate wars from the surface of the earth. On the contrary, civilization itself had made the European man idealize and respect war and expect an impulse of 'progress' from it. Nemeček's death, an equivalent for adolescent suicide which abounded in fin-de-siècle novels and plays, indicates that it still belonged to the nature of life and culture to waste human life to further 'higher' purposes. The holder of a *grund* had always to be alert and worried about the 'proper' owner's declarations of straightforward invasion or of diplomacy of imperialism. The narrator-historian could speak out the lesson of history: it was in the nature of things that unfortunately might was also right.

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