

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

VARIETIES OF PROSE ON THE HORIZON OF MODERNISM

BY FINTA GÁBOR

Eötvös Lóránt Tudományegyetem  
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*I. Field, objective and structure of the dissertation; theoretical  
framework and methodology*

The changes in the course of literature concerning prose works towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are, in general terms, often described as the end of the great narratives and the growing significance of shorter forms. During this process internal relations as opposed to continuity gain importance, therefore the problematics can be articulated as a question of the poetics of genres. However, the building of a nation and other related procedures at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that can undoubtedly be explained from the national paradigm of the era are often connected to modernisation by retrospective works that, e.g. Hatvany's pamphlet on Babits's *Timár Virgil fia*, also take later events into consideration when evaluating. If modernisation is described in such evolutionist terms that do

not have a teleological characteristic (Matei Calinescu), the novels of the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century examining the socio-cultural environment can be read as the thematisation of the problematics of modernisation. Consequently the question may also be raised on the horizon of the several possible correlations of modernity and modernisation. Due to the characteristics of the topic, I approach it by examining the viewpoints provided by different scholarly discourses. In the interpretations of the analysed texts in different chapters of my dissertation I take into consideration and apply the different theoretical frameworks of several literary discourses to the necessary degree as well as the approach and viewpoints of literary history and criticism. In some of the chapters an interdisciplinary framework has been applied.

## *II. Conclusions*

The chapter *On the apropos of story cycle* makes an attempt to itamise the possible varieties of how cyclicality may arrange the pattern of prose works. Based on the questions articulated by former reception, in the interpretative subchapters (on Csáth Géza: *A kis Emma*, Ottlik Géza: *Iskola a határon*, Mikszáth Kálmán: *A hályogkovács* and Kosztolányi Dezső: *Hályogműtét*, Krúdy Gyula: *Budapest vőlegénye*) I look for answers to the following questions: What does the term *cycle* mean? On what conditions should a text be considered independent? Can a text be regarded as a story cycle if it patterns itself on a cyclical structure, though it does not consist of independent parts? Is thematic likeness a sufficient basis to read independent texts together a story cycle? Should the

author choose and arrange cyclical texts to be considered to be a story cycle?

The analyses of the above texts show that there are at least three different types of cyclical patterns. 1. There are texts that do have a cyclical pattern, however, even if there is a set of stories that are to a certain extent independent, it is hardly possible to say how the set should be arranged into independent stories due to the lack of any “authorial” instruction (as in the case of Csáth’s *A kis Emma*). 2. The second type scholarly discourse often calls short story cycle. In a short story cycle there are independent stories but the pattern of the whole modifies the meaning of the individual pieces. (Examples are Mikszáth’s *A jó palócok* and Kosztolányi’s *Esti Kornél*, or Krúdy’s *Budapest vőlegénye* and the twin short stories of *Az újságíró és a halál* and *Utolsó szivar az arabszürkénél* by Krúdy.) As far as the possibilities of meaning-

construction are concerned, however, there is a debate whether these two groups should be studied by the same means.<sup>3</sup> In the broadest sense, although it is generally true that reader’s experience modifies the understanding of newly read texts, we can talk about the relatedness of such texts that the reader for thematic likeness or other reasons, such as thematic or other likeness, considers to belong together by the reader (Mikszáth’s *Hályogkovács* and Kosztolányi’s *Hályogműtét* are instances).

Accepting that the author who is to restrict the open flow of fiction (Foucault) is defined by the discourse forming around the texts, I suggest the term *short story cycle* be used as a generic term to name a set of texts where the number and order of the pieces is given and arranged by the author. Those in which it is not I call récit-cycles using the French term as it

also indicates the act of story-telling just like the Hungarian expression ‘elbeszélésciklus’.

Since the term ‘composite novel’ (Margaret Dunn and Ann Morris) approaches the genre from the novel, it is more likely to be applied as a generic term to those prose works the chapters of which may be read as independent short stories, but due to the metonymical connection between them not so much the integrity of the parts as the integrity of the whole may be emphasised.

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In the chapter *The tales of a bell* I attempt to read Krúdy’s novel as a composite novel. Although many of the chapters can be read as independent, often interrelated, thus forming a cyclical pattern where the development of meaning is based on the dynamic pattern of recurrent development, the semantics

of interchangeability is limited by the narrative which follows the story of Szinbád’s recovery.

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The title of the chapter *El-beszélések* is a pun thus it requires an explanation. The word means story-telling as a narrative act, as a literary term it refers to a genre closest to the novella or long short story and it can also describe the failure of communication, the lack of understanding (“talking sideways”). The chapter examines the relations of modernity and modernisation in the contemporary criticism of Babits’ two novels: *Timár Virgil fia* and *Halálfiái*, and attempts to take Babits’s answers to the question raised in the contemporary reviews into account. The articles by Hatvany Lajos, Ignóty, Kassák Lajos and Szabó Dezső suggest a connection between modernity and modernisation. It is true that one of the principles of modern literature is autonomy,

without the institutional background provided by modernisation, however, modern literature would have never flourished. Hatvany's example also shows, on the other hand, that understanding this does not necessarily mean a better understanding of modern literature. The way Hatvany approaches the novel's poetic structure implies 19<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic values and asks for a mimetic description of the 'real world' instead of an understanding gained by the means of a poetic use of language.

The subchapter *Babits and the modernism* examines Babits's concepts of nation, culture, literature and language. The starting date of the second book in his history of European literature is 1760 which Babits marks, not rigidly, as the opening of a new era. Since many scholars today regard the second half the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the end of the idea of transcendental beauty, Babits here shows a great deal of

insight. Classical literature seems to have timeless values in his opinion, however, this has to do with earlier selection (canonisation). Thus, fixed meaning is associated with classical literature not with modern literature. No doubt he very often applies earlier forms in his writings and the pretext of quite a great proportion of his works is of classical texts, this does not mean the retelling of earlier stabilized meaning. The prerequisite for a poet to talk is the inscription of earlier world concepts and forms, that is to say, tradition may be the basis of the kind of understanding that makes it at all possible for the other to understand the unique, the single.

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In the chapter *Amans amare Virgilius*, on *Timár Virgil fia*, I examine, based on the above findings, how Babits's theory works in his prose work. As new classicism is not the program of returning to eternal and universal principals it is not at all

certain that the linear story and the meaning intentions possibly associated with the text due to its way of writing can be harmonised. Supposing the borrowed and transformed texts do take part in the shaping of meaning, the novel is based on a kind of recurrence as a matter of course. Thus, cyclicity in the novel creates meaning intentions articulated in the recurrent development of meaning due to the tissue of borrowed texts, citations, internal repetition and self-reference that modify or question the meaning that may seem to be clear and simple from the very first page of the book.

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Ottlik Géza's *Iskola a határon* (*School on the Border*), like earlier prose works analysed in the dissertation, has a storyline but it does not build on metonymical successivity, it rather structures itself on a cyclical pattern of recurrent development.

The first of the three subchapters analysing Ottlik novel reflects on the issues raised by the story and narration, and concludes that in the novel remembering is the medium of self-understanding and the recreation of the self that is realised in story telling.

The second subchapter examines the interrelations of the language of the novel and the story. The novel thematises the title of the book creating a new meaning and reference of the word *border* (*határ*) based on the historic meaning of the word. The new semantics has to do with 'getting somewhere' (that is going forward, 'valahová ér', 'előrehatol') which, referring to the end point and the process at the same time, relates to inner development and the creation of the self. Again, it seems to be impossible to overcome language problems, as in Hungarian 'being defined' (*meghatározottság*) is formed from the word *border* (*határ*). The generated meaning of the word is applied

as a theme in the case of all the three main characters (Bébé, Medve and Szeredy).

The semantics of the names interrelated with the narrative and narration forms two opposing groups of characters. Three boys (Merényi the leader, Varjú and Homola) identify themselves with the dehumanised attributes of the school although they did have the potential in themselves and had the possibility to choose a more self-conscious life. The other group consists of the three main characters discussed above. The rest of the characters can be placed between the two groups but it does not mean that only the three main characters' course of life is presented as applicable. One character Jaks, for example, belongs to those who know how to take a hint (understands from "half-word" as the Hungarian saying goes), and two of the boys who belong to the Merényi gang once save Medve from a duel who offended Merényi.

This seems to contradict those interpretations that relate the motto of the novel to Calvin's theory of predestination. The concept of the novel read in a theological discourse shows similarities to the Lutheran concept of salvation according to which man has free will to decide whether to accept God's free grace, and the decision should be manifested in the form of behaviour as well.