

**UNIVERSITY OF LORÁND EÖTVÖS  
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
DOCTORAL PROGRAMME OF LITERARY HISTORY  
SUBDIVISION: THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY, THE „WEST”  
AND ITS ERA**

**ÁGNES KOVÁCS**

*„...everything is written beforehand.”  
Rewriting text tradition in the prose art of Artúr Elek*

**THESES OF THE PhD DISSERTATION**

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**Budapest  
2010**

## THE SUBJECT, AIM AND OBJECTIVE OF THE RESEARCH

The thesis undertakes the poetic analysis of Artúr Elek's fictional texts, who was merely known as Nyugat's („West”) –the literary journal's - literary critic and translator of early 20th century world literature texts. The choice of this topic can be explained by the one literary historical fact, which is that Artúr Elek's fictional texts are not at all mentioned in the evolution of 20th century Hungarian prose. There may be many reasons for this, on the one hand the all-time literary history writing did not consider the author good enough, therefore the canonization of the texts was out of the question from the beginning, and as such the writer's figure appears solely as aesthete, art historian, translator or critic in the comprehensive monographs. On the other hand Elek's short story work remained outside the area of interest of the literary historians engaged in researching Nyugat („West”), therefore no analyses were produced about his writings. The majority of the author's artistic short stories were published from 1902 in Magyar Génusz („Hungarian Genius”), Szerda („Wednesday”), and Figyelő („Observer”), later on from 1908 to 1941 his works mainly appeared in the Nyugat („West”). Defining the place occupied by the author at the periodical and his role in the turn of the century's prose literature is a difficult task, as his literary work is appreciated in only very few instances regarding the writings published about Nyugat. Artúr Elek was judged mainly along the lines of his reviews about works of fine art and his analyses of art by succeeding generations. He undertook an important role in introducing works of world literature to the public, as a number of his translations and reviews appeared in Nyugat, but his aesthetic analyses about works of some authors were published as a series. Regarding his short stories, no one apart from Marian Birnbaum D. undertook to analyse those, from his only short story compilation titled *Álarcosmenet* („Masquerade”) – published during his lifetime in 1913 – not one writing ever achieved canonization. More than a decade after his suicide in 1944 - the day after the reception of his forced-labour service call-up - the book entitled *A platánsor* („The Plane-tree Alley”) appeared in 1959 arranged by the Szépirodalmi Kiadó (Literary Publisher's) in a posthumous volume. Among the texts featured are some which the author omitted from the 1913 Nyugat publication, others were written during the last decades of his life. Besides the mentioned selections the short story texts published in Nyugat also compose the object of my research.

The thesis deals primarily with the narrative characteristics of Artúr Elek's epic texts, while in the interpretability of the narratives questioning the manner of the short story's construction receives great emphasis, as does the description of the authorship's definition. It is justified to approach the texts from the aesthetics of the artistic novel and artistic narrative. In Elek's texts the characters are artistic figures, authors whose talent has been aborted, protagonists who inevitably fail at the end of the story. The authors of the essays on his work saw the writer's suicide in these narratives, however if we perform for instance an examination of the poetic motivation behind the characters names and the story-defining role of the reoccurring symbols in the texts, it may be observed that these suicidal protagonists do not antecede the author's self-fulfilling prophecy. This research – the examination of literary name-giving – can be referred to the scientific sphere of onomasticon. The narrative analysis of epic texts gives me the possibility to show the elipsis of the narrative manner and the motive behind the short stories' metaphorical organization. I need to mention the configuration of intertextuality, an important instrument in the poetic meaning-formation. The interpretation of the short stories relies significantly on whether the reader recognizes and understands the infiltration of the pretexts into Elek's texts. The examination extends over the whole of Elek's prose, about twenty-five short stories, with special regard to a few such works, in which the dominance of the metaphorical principle deems characteristic in the story-telling narrative. In the texts of 20th century prose writers, which carry upon themselves the signs of classical modernism it often happens that the metonymical principle of the story's linear progression and the metaphorical principle of recurrence are completed or substituted by the author. In Elek's case the elliptical technique, the interruption of the narrative is characteristic. The metaphoricity of the texts, the application of recurring motives receive greater emphasis where the short story makes use of elipsis. I am of the view that Elek's short stories are characterized by a manner of speech which resists truth to nature, the assumed presence of the fictional act, some narratives even mirror the late modernist perception of language crisis. The texts openly and purposely accept their own artificiality. One reason for this, I must point out, is the artistic theme since the creative protagonists similarly to certain works from André Gide, Thomas Mann, János Asbóth, Zoltán Ambrus, Margit Kaffka, or Dezső Kosztolányi make the creative process their topic, therefore their story primarily seeks to turn the process of artistic creativity into a theme.

I consider the author's prose-poetic works important, which one can principally read in Nyugat. The examination of these creates an opportunity read together or read in unison the theoretical writing along with the literary text. Moreover part of the thesis comprises of a philological research as well, in which I elaborate on Elek's letters found in the documentation department of the Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum (the Petőfi Literary Museum) and the Magyar Nemzeti Galéria (the Hungarian National Gallery). The letters bear witness to literary history facts, rarely do they ennumerate on aesthetic principles, still less do they offer insight to the process of creation of the works, and at some points they merely summarize translation theory propositions.

## **APPLIED METHODS**

As the topic choice and the set aims clearly show, the dissertation primarily follows a prose-poetic, narrative theory-based interpretation. With the exception of the chapter rendering the results of the letters' philological research, the study is based on the specialized literature of literary theory comprising of understanding, formation theory and trope theory. The thesis also relies on theoretical writings concerned with the epic texts of late modernism, as well as elaborating on a mere analysing writing about Elek.

In the short stories I will mainly examine the reality-fiction distinction, since in the case of certain works special emphasis is given to how the metaphorization takes part in the issuing of the narrative and story-making. In Elek's written art evoking the Renaissance often occurs, he does not always paraphrase, but he often places for instance his protagonists or stories in an Italian renaissance setting. He chooses cities, known and used as scenes (Venice, Florence, the township of Arquà, famed because of Petrarca's house), on occasion he gives the names of towns, at other times he picks merely implicitly characterized towns, to only then, using the narrative's story, fully destroy the reality-like illusion. During the course of the short stories analyses, detailed examination of the dialogue between significant works of literary history can not be left unmentioned; such as Diderot's novel (*Jacques the Fatalist*), a Petrarch(an) sonnet (*The Man Inscribing in Snow*), a Beethoven song composed upon a Metastasio verse (*Midnight*), occasionally exceptional works from the attendant arts, such as a Rubens painting (*The Garden of Love*). Accordingly a specific form of literary memory

constitutes in the writings, for instance one short story text is written along the lines of a sacred operation of a medieval burial procession (*Ilaria*). The narrative structure and metaphor-net of the writings bring forward the intertextuality, which in turn appears as a poetic meaning-producing agent in the creation of the work.

The forms topicalising reading are systematically repeated in the short stories. Elek places his characters zestfully in reading situations. In his short stories the writer's figure, who knows life only by the books and thinks that every book speaks of one thing only, as if all the books, all books in world literature could be read as one single volume, returns many times (Endre Zarandok – *The Plane-tree Alley*, Old Man/Öreg – *The Shadow*, Orbán Dávidházi – *Jacques the Fatalist*, Hypnohpanes – *The Single One Song Man*). It is with ironic differentiation that these texts acknowledge the single and unrepeatable essence of creation, along with the irrelevance of authorship. When examining the intertextual parallels, not only do I examine the manner in which the literary texts slide into each other, but also how the prose theory writings can be summoned in literary texts.

Placed within the body of the text the italicized letter segments, lyrics, verses, lines and volume titles prove the difficulty of the writing and narration and at times allow meta-fictional reading. Elek usually tells a seemingly everyday story in a detached tone. The majority of the tales is however quite absurd, at times mystical, occasionally lifting its characters into the fantastical world, as such the text plays on *strongly emphasizing the difference between fiction and reality*. The reader is also alienated from the character, if the story is narrated in first person singular, as it far too distant from everyday life, it is anti-realistic. In a few short stories the text's self reference receives emphasis, in other words the text renounces the possibility of creating the illusion of transmitting reality, it is but rather uncharacteristic of the text to unveil its own artificiality. Elek however tries to experiment with this. The author uses the application of the "self-mirror" form in many places, namely the plot holds hints regarding the writing and reception of the text, therefore what happens with the book repeats itself within the book. It may be assumed from the examination of the narrated identity, that a self-image constructed to the likeness of the novel takes form, a subject, who is struggling with the hardships of narration, the character of the writer-figure.

The depiction of the image, its substitute the alter-ego, and the mirror-image play a central role in Elek's narrative. Amongst his self-defining metaphors the aforementioned egybe!!!shadow, mirror and photography can also be deemed as instruments of auto-definition. I attempt to examine the narrative technique of the short stories from the standpoint of narrative

theory. The auto-homo- and heterodiegetic narrator are to be both found in Elek's texts. In some short stories multiple perspective narration is highly significant. The alternating narrator invalidates, apart from the linear reception of the story, the very same meaning of the text(s). Elek often applies a third person singular narrator, in other short stories we encounter a first person singular narrator, by applying the multiple perspective narration both manners of speech form the characters identity. The text thus plays upon the *application of combining various methods of reading* as well, the narrator plays the role of the traditional storyteller, while the main character, mimicking the narrator's voice, shows the story from his point of view. This strange debating dialogue shapes the text, narrating a story, which thus forms the protagonist's identity through conjuring the self from two aspects. Dream and fairytale, reality and recollections mingle in the texts.

## SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

In my dissertation I principally examined how Elek's art of prose engages in dialogue with the literary traditions of earlier decades, I analysed the narrative technique of the texts in detail, the handling of time and space, the observable changes of the narrator's role in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century texts and Artúr Elek's peculiar name giving habits, as well as the construction of his rich motif scheme.

My main guiding principle in the interpretation of the texts was to compare the aesthetic of the artist novel, the artist short story with the so-called post-modern narrative process, a theme which became justified, since the creative protagonists of the artist narratives take part in the formation of the story with continuous self-referential character. The quotation in the title "...everything is written beforehand." is taken from the short story *Jacques the Fatalist*, not only because Orbán Dávidházi's, the monographer's, greatest problem is to write a perfect work on Bishop Tamás Bakócz, but because Jacques, who evolved from the Diderot novel into an Elek protagonist is preoccupied with the same issue. On one part this passage in the text allows itself to be read from the direction of predestination, on the other as functioning pretext from the horizon of the summoned literary tradition, from Elek's short stories, through Diderot's novel, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* all the way to the Book of Daniel from the Bible. The forefront of my interest was in how the certain layers of meaning restructured in Elek's

short stories in the light of rewriting the pretexts. How do his short stories interpret the opposition of *reality and fiction*, as it is worth considering how Artúr Elek's writings relate to the Aristotelian principle of mimesis in narratives employed with the theme creation.

I do not claim that Elek's short stories are post-modern texts, however I do believe, that his writings, especially his artist narratives question the *Aristotelian* tradition of story-making and attempt to undo the opposition between reality and fiction. The majority of his self-reflexive prose of peculiar mood appeared in the early 1900s, his best texts were created between 1902-1913. Among those published later (1913-1944) there exist works, which renew the traditional narrative manner of classical modernism and can be brought into connection with the attempts at innovation destined to appear much later in Hungarian prose. The plot is no longer causal in every case, the metonymic connections are replaced by the metaphorical text arrangement, the linear treatment of time comes undone and in its place elliptical forms appear. To render the reception more difficult Artúr Elek applies an obscure narrator, which may at times be characterized by the disappearance of the omnipotent storyteller, in other instances when the phrases of the character and the narrator mingle. By eliminating the know-it-all narrator the dialogue, which the text engages in with other texts, comes into the limelight. It is not at all impossible for a verse uttered by a character, an aria lyric, a personally interpreted picture, a favourite book to move the meaning of the story in other interpretive directions. It often happens in the stories that with the analysis of the summoned work the protagonist overwrites his own earlier actions, but also that Elek places the medieval, renaissance literary, artistic topos of love in an ironic light or perhaps these artistic phenomena of fictional nature assist the protagonists in making important decisions in their lives. If we assume that Elek abandons the true-to-life depiction in his texts, that his narration is fragmentary, at times ironically playful, moreover he frequently invokes the literary tradition, then we can administer the texts to such a narrative formula, which offers a wide perspective to the post-modern text at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As such we may suppose of Elek's narrative that his narration (*may*) *point forward to the direction of certain so-called post-modern poetic processes.*

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