

THESES OF PhD DISSERTATION

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THE THEORIE AND PRACTICE OF NARRATIVE IN VERSE IN JÁNOS ARANY'S ŒUVRE

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There are two basic aims in my dissertation. On the one hand, I make an attempt – by the means of the close reading of *Toldi*-trilogy and *Bolond Istók* – to show that there are two poetically distinguishable basic-types of János Arany's narrative discourse, and I also try to characterize the specific features of these discourses in respect of the constructive principle, worldview and subject-concept. On the other hand, I elaborate those theoretical essays of János Arany which deal with verse language and narration, and I re-read them from the point of view of the 20th century literary theories with the aim of drawing out a general theoretical concept that can be applied to any kind of literary work based upon the *dominant process of crossing verse language and narrative construction*. The extended perspective of my theoretical concept is provided by *discursive poetics* which links up the best of formalism and hermeneutics, and which is very near to the contemporary endeavours of the Ricœurian form of interpretation theory because of this integrative claim. I draw up the correspondences of action, emplotment, metaphor and narrative identity on the basis of Ricœur's essays, and the correspondences of action, verse language, poetical text production and text-subject with the assistance of discursive poetics; it is set me the difficult task of understanding and interpreting the poetical act that crosses the processes of verse language and narrative construction. János Arany's narrative poems may appear in a new manner in the light of this (more or less) new line of approach.

With the interpretations I am out for join the reception history of the Arany-oeuvre in three ways: first, I aim at applying those personal and biographical notices of the Arany-monographs (Riedl, Gyöngyösy László, Voinovich, Keresztury) that can be poetically motivated in my analysis which is concerned not with the author, but with *the subject being constituted by the poetical text production*; second, I strive to make use of the general ideological notions of the most important overall literary history books (Erdélyi, Gyulai, Horváth János, Barta, Sótér) in my argumentation which is concerned not with the epoché of the Hungarian 19th century era, but with *the worldview being constituted by the language-creating act of literary work*; third, I hope that I contribute with my interpretations about *the literary history being constituted by the narrative and intertextual processes of the poems* to enrich the results of those history books of literature, of poetics and of concepts (Beöthy Zsolt, Horváth János, Németh G. Béla, Szili József, Szegedy-Maszák, Dávidházi Péter, Imre László, S. Varga Pál, Eisemann György) which specify the historical function of the Arany-oeuvre.

I. The crossing of the processes of verse language and emplotment in narrative poem

The analysis of the special problems of verse language and the analysis of the particular poetic emplotment are prominent tasks in János Arany's theoretical writings. The notion of rhythm is applied in the course of the understanding of verse language's mechanism (*A magyar nemzeti versidom – The Hungarian National Verse-form*); the concepts of the form of literary work and compositional wholeness are used by the description of emplotment (*Naiv époszunk – Our Naive Epic*). The specificity of rhythm is understood as the fusion of phonic and semantic constituents; the literary wholeness of the emplotment is described as the connection of a course of events and

a symbol (or a set of symbols). But it is essential to comprehend the cooperation of the two notions and processes if we were to take under consideration the mechanism of the narrative poem – the narrative poem that activates the poetics of verse language and emplotment simultaneously. After all, the question inevitably emerges: what is the difference between the narrative in prose and in verse? Arany himself writes in a letter about the cooperation of rhythm and thinking or emplotting. The quasi-notion of “*neszme*” (nonsense as the seed of the sense) is applied in this letter in order to develop a train of thought that concludes in a definition: in every piece of the poems in verse “the thought emerges from melody and rhythm”. The theoretical chapter of my dissertation is concerned with the explanation and the understanding of this thesis. In this challenge I rely on some theoretician from the 20th century: Tynanov’s and Jakobson’s essays on verse-theory, and Ricœur’s narrative theoretical concept of configuration are applied. The theoretical attempt culminates in a definition that serves as a working hypothesis: in the narrative poem the semantic equivalence of the configuration of emplotment is organized by phonic equivalence. I prove this hypothesis in an interpretation about the ballad *A walesi bárdok* (*The Bards of Wales*) before I set to analyse the long narrative poems. I draw up the poetical progress that transforms the well known English historical legend into the special emplotment of the ballad which is based on a particular phonic (internal rhyme) sequence: *Sire – sír – sírás – síralom – síró lant – lángsír* (*Sire – grave – crying – lamentation – crying lute – stake*).

II. Verse language and emplotment in narrative poem

The analysis of the narrative poems of János Arany observes markable differences: narrative voice and composition separate two absolutely different forms and types of the narrative poems. On the one hand, *Toldi*, *Toldi estéje* (*Toldi’s Evening*), *Toldi szerelme* (*The Love of Toldi*), *Murány ostroma* (*The Siege of Murány*) and *Buda halála* (*The Death of Buda*), and on the other hand, *Az elveszett alkotmány* (*Constitution Lost*), *Bolond Istók* and *A nagyidai cigányok* (*The Gypsies of Nagyida*) show two inconsistent and incompatible aspects of the poetics of composition. The preceding ones are based upon the integrity of the form in which verse language and emplotment work together in order to create a whole text. In the latter ones verse language creates a consistent text, but emplotment forms an exploded, split narrative with the multiplication of digressions, and the ironic narrative language results in semantic confusion. This evident duality in the poetics of János Arany’s narrative poems can be demonstrated accurately by the close re-reading of *Toldi-trilogy* and *Bolond Istók*.

1. The poetics of *Toldi-trilogy*

The immanent poetical analysis and the studying of the production of *Toldi-trilogy* lead to what follows.

Toldi, the first part (1846), seems to emplot the *heroic action* by the means of the sujet production of *folktale*. But at the same time this narrative poem reshapes the narrative form of folktale and creates an autonomous and peculiar literary emplotment. This autonomy and specificity consist of the crossing of metaphorical and narrative processes. The caesura in the second strophe tears in two the word *szemfényvesztés* ([~the loss of eyelight] ‘eye-wash, deception, miracle’); the verse language dynamize the semantic structure of the word and the main metaphorical process writes this metaphorical semantic field onto the story of the main character as an interpretant. In this narrative poem the “stories” of the word *eye* (subject and name), *light* (firelight and darkness, day and night, Sun and Moon) and *loss* (lost and find, death and resurrection) rewrite and re-interpret the meaning of heroic action. In this interpretation heroic act is not only the way of saving somebody’s life or honour, but also the possibility of the self-regeneration – this is the personal significance of action. Personal significance causes such an innovation in the semantic field of narrative poem that this literary work surpasses the folkloristic

processes of tale-employment, the ancient meaning of the epical heroic struggle, and the popularity of historical legend.

Toldi estéje (*Toldi's Evening* – 1847 [1853]) takes a look at this new interpretation of heroic action (and at the whole previous narrative poem) with a critical eye by placing there the forced *inactivity* beside the importance of will and action. The narrative poem emplots inactivity and creates a special employment resembling a *short story* where defeat is the dominant. In this narration of inactivity everything is reduced in speed: the employment puts on the breaks, the rhythm of the story becomes much slower, the action is held back; and by the way, the opportunity of the extension of internal dialogue presents itself, and reflection takes the place of action. In this literary work the most important sign and symbol of inactivity or senseless action is grave digging (which is narrated in the first song of the poem). Grave digging and the spade itself becomes the most precise index of the situation of Toldi – a situation in which the heroic power still exists and shows huge energy, but means nothing, has no function, and results in senseless and destructive quasi-actions. These semantics are extended to the whole poem by metaphors like *rust*, *dust* and *mildew* that explain the same existing but senseless and useless potentiality.

In the third part of the trilogy, in *Toldi szerelme* (*The Love of Toldi* – 1849–1879) the conflict of heroic action and useless action culminates in *impotence*. The adequate literary form and genre to this theme is *novel*. One of the main aspects of novel is *detail* – the detail that extends and disperses the main character into the context of action. And what is more, sometimes the agent of the action sublimates in the huge amount of details. The same occurs in *Toldi szerelme* (*The Love of Toldi*) which is not just a narrative poem, but a novel in verse. The major character loses his main function in the employment and secondary characters take over control. In this poem Toldi becomes unable to direct his own life, so he is compelled to live through the story of his king (Lajos) and his beloved (Piroska). There are two discourses (wisdom and sensitivity) and two narratives (adventure and romance) linked up with the two stories – and all these make up the two-sided dialogicity of this novel. Toldi has to undergo the adventure novel of the king and the romance novel of his beloved; he has to endure the struggle of two narrative identities; and he has to think in the two different language of wisdom and sensitivity. This is what we can see in the verse language of the V/94th strophe [rough translation]:

Egyszer, csak ez egyszer – de mit ér, mit használ!	Just one time, just this once – but there's no sense in that!
Látni Piroskáját – jaj! nem övé az már;	He must see Piroska – oh! she is out of reach;
Tőle hideg búcsút – azt sincs joga venni;	Just to say fare thee well – but has no right to talk;
Egy néma sohajtást – jobb oda se menni.	Just to sigh silently – better not to go there.
Hátha szilaj vére – de galamb lesz, bárány;	What if his hot temper... – but he's like dove and sheep;
Váljon meg örökre – meg, ez egy perc árán;	May he leave forever – he should go instantly;
Keserűbb lesz akkor – legyen! azt szomjúzza; –	It would be very sad – let it be! no way out; –
Így habozott a hős: de az örvény húzza.	That's how he hesitates: but the whirl sweeps away.

One of the main features of alexandrin verse-form is caesura in the middle of the line. In this strophe caesura is emphasized by a dash which breaks in two not only the rhythm of verse-line, but also the sense of verse-sentence. These abnormal semantics created by verse language culminate in a special twofold discourse inside the main character's internal thought. The discourse of sensitivity is brought out in the first half of the line and the discourse of wisdom in the second one. In the fight of these two discourses Toldi can not found his own language. And what is more, the internal dialogue of this twofold and antagonistic discourse condemns him to undecidability and impotence as the hopeless and hesitating reflection postpones action. This is the situation which is extended to the whole poem.

If we read the narrative poems one by one and interpret the production of the trilogy as a whole, a main poetical principle emerges that consists in the more and more precise, more and more versatile, more and more profound analysis of action itself. On this way, *Toldi*-trilogy seems to be a special poetic anthropology of action: at first, it takes into consideration heroic *action* as

the possibility of self-regeneration, than draws up the problems of *inactivity* that reveals the hiding senseless and useless character of action, finally demonstrates *impotence* as the ultimate subversion of the controllability of action. That's how this literary work reveals the semantic fields of action in a poetic manner that could be called the *poetics of action* – a special interpretation of action which is not concerned with the psychological, mental, cognitive or moral categories of act, but with the semantical aspects, that is to say the narrative and poetic function or the symbolic meaning of action.

2. The poetics of *Bolond Istók*

The other main character of János Arany's narrative poems is Istók Bolond. This figure is just as important and just as well-elaborated as Toldi. This character becomes an antropomorphisation of a special poetical interest and philosophy just like Toldi does. Toldi is the allegory of heroic action and power (first of all); he is the typical hero of tale, myth and epic; *he is the agent of action*. Istók Bolond is quite another matter: he is the typical character of the European novel in verse (like Byron's *Don Juan* or Pushkin's *Olegin*); *he is the agent of mistake and blunder*.

It is worth to consider carefully the name of the character because the semantic relations of the word *bolond* ('foolish, idiot, simpleminded, naive') characterize the special text production form of the whole novel in verse. The Hungarian word *bolond* is etymologically derived from the Slovenian *blond* ('mistake, err, error') and the Slovakian *blud* ('straying, wandering, strolling'). The two meanings interweave in the Hungarian word and the poetical processes of the poem try to make use of this huge semantic potentiality as much as it can. The word and its semantic fields obtain poetic function on the level of text – this is the so-called *textword*. But how does it work? Mistake and strolling turn into personal characteristics. The main character's destiny is to make mistake after mistake and to become a strollingplayer who have to wonder around the country. So, he is always "impertinent" – as the poem characterises him. But this specifies the narration too. The main specific of the narrative structure is the lack of order: the dominant rhetorical figure of the emplotment in this work is digression and parabasis. The main character can't find his way in life; neither can the narrator of the story find an adequate voice and focus: he is unable to concentrate on his theme and always goes wrong. The narration is absolutely directed by the ironic permanent parabasis. The equivalence of the meaning of the keyword, of the special personality, and of the narrative processes extends its poetical operations onto the level of text too. The rhyme formula of stanza repeats and reflects the consequently interrupted and fragmental structure of the narration: two rhyme sequences interrupt and follow each other alternately (a, b, a, b, a, b) and culminate in an absolutely different third one (c, c). So, verse language, narration and personality constitute an equivalent poetic language structure that can generally be motivated by the etymological meaning of the main character's name: 'mistake, err, error / straying, wandering, strolling'. There is a huge and at the same time a tiny little distance between the word and the text: everything starts at the internal semantic field of the main character's name (Bolond – Idiot), than comes the impertinent personality governed by the continuously mistaken action in the form of the special narrative identity created by the confused narrative structure of the ironic permanent parabasis, and finally everything culminates in the verse language of stanza and the unique discourse of novel in verse – in the "idiot language".

Publications in relation with the theoretical and interpretative aspects of the dissertation

Book:

A történetképző versidom – Arany János elbeszélő költészete. [Verse form that creates story – János Arany's narrative poems] Budapest, Argumentum Kiadó (*Diszkurzívák* 9.) 2010. 244 p.

Essays:

Figuralitás és prózanyelv [Figurality and prose language] = *A regény és a trópusok. Második veszprémi regénykollokvium.* (Ed. Kovács, Árpád) Budapest, Argumentum Kiadó (*Diszkurzívák* 7.) 2007. 163–177.

Kettős metaforizáció Vörösmarty Mibály Ábránd című versében [Twofold metaphorization in Mibály Vörösmarty's poem Daydream] = *Nypholeptusok – Test, kánon, nyelv és költőiség problémái a 18–19. században.* (Ed. Szűcs, Zoltán Gábor and Vadera, Gábor) Budapest, L'Harmattan Kiadó 2004. 268–276.

Metafora- és történetképzés Ottlik Géza Hajnali háztetők című regényében [Processes of metaphorization and emplotment in Géza Ottlik's novel Roof at Daybreak] = *Szó – elbeszélés – metafora. Műelemzések a XX. századi magyar próza köréből.* (Ed. Horváth, Kornélia and Sztár, Katalin) Budapest, Kijarat Kiadó 2003. 144–175.

Versbeszéd és történetképzés összefüggése Arany János Toldi című elbeszélő költeményében [The correspondences of verse language and emplotment in János Arany's narrative poem Toldi] = *A szó élete – tanulmányok a hatvanéves Kovács Árpád tiszteletére.* (Ed. Sztár, Katalin) Budapest, Argumentum Kiadó 2004. 306–319

Versnyelv és dialógus (József Attila: Az a szép, régi asszony) [Verse language and dialogue (Attila József: That beautiful, bygone lady)] = *Vers – Ritmus – Szubjektum. Műértelmezések a XX. századi magyar líra köréből.* (Ed. Horváth, Kornélia and Sztár, Katalin) Budapest, Kijarat Kiadó 2006. 239–277.

Translations:

RICŒUR, Paul: *A diszkurzus hermenetikája – Paul Ricœur válogatott tanulmányai.* [Hermeneutics of discourse – collected essays of Paul Ricœur] (Trans. Kovács, Gábor) Budapest, Argumentum Kiadó (*Diszkurzívák* 8.) 2010. 160. p.

RICŒUR, Paul: *A metafora és a hermenautika központi problémája* [Metaphor and the central problem of hermenautics] = *A regény és a trópusok. Második veszprémi regénykollokvium.* (Ed. Kovács, Árpád, trans. Kovács, Gábor) Budapest, Argumentum Kiadó (*Diszkurzívák* 7.) 2007. 401–416.