

Eötvös Loránd University Faculty of Humanities

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Lengyel Imre Zsolt

A „népi író” megalkotása. Fogadtatás, viták, önreprezentáció
The making of the „populist writer”. Reception, debates, self-representation

Doctoral School of Literary Studies

Head of the Doctoral School: dr. Kállay Géza PhD

Literary Modernism Doctoral Program

Leader of the Program: dr. Gintli Tibor PhD

Chair of the Committee: dr. Eisemann György DSc

Opposers: dr. N. Horváth Béla DSc
dr. Rákai Orsolya PhD

Members of Committee: dr. Bárdos László PhD
dr. Széchenyi Ágnes PhD
dr. Fráter Zoltán PhD

Secretary: dr. Lénárt Tamás PhD

Supervisor: dr. Gintli Tibor PhD

Budapest, 2015

The starting point of the research for my dissertation was the reading of some autobiographical texts from the period between the two world-wars: these were connected not only by the fact that they all revolved around the theme of becoming an author, but also by the common feature that they all interpreted authorship as not only a mental or psychological state, but as a sociologically grounded condition that functions in interaction with its social environment, as something that depends on one's living condition, which it is also able to influence. What is more, they not only rejected the conventions of an autonomist approach to literature with their choices of framing, but also explicitly represented characters and institutions as adversaries. They seemed to argue that the supposedly neutral apparatuses of literature are actually biased and set up to keep away certain kinds of authors and that matters of taste are far from being innocent – broadly resembling later schools of literary theory like postcolonial studies or cultural studies. The relatively great number of such texts seemed to suggest that their shared concern related to an important problem of their time.

In the introduction of my dissertation I argue for an approach to these texts that regards them neither as strictly factual, nor simply fictional, but as attempts that try to influence (and not only to describe) the social world. I ground this approach in the theory of the social construction of reality, put forward in its classic form by Berger and Luckmann. According to this theory, society has no transhistorically or metaphysically fixed rules, only

contingent ones that are potentially always subject to renegotiations. From this point of view the works mentioned above can be interpreted as proposals aiming to restructure the workings of the social world – and literature in particular – in the hope of also changing their own positions. But it also follows that these are characteristics shared in fact by every text ever published, since every description of the world some patterns and discredits others. So, to understand the context of those autobiographical texts, I surveyed the reception of the authors in question with the intention to describe the ways in which others tried to determine the meaning and value of their work and also their rhetorical strategies and underlying assumptions. I tried to find every text written about a given author in a certain timeframe to be able to track the processes in which a community reached agreement or split to groups along ideological lines.

The thematic scope of my dissertation consists of authors conventionally described as “népi” (“populist”) writers. With my research I try to shift the focus from their much debated and highly controversial political or moral stances to the ways they attempted and generated a radical reconsideration of the social relations of literature. I also break with the tradition that sees the “népi” writers as part of a heterogeneous but organic movement – instead of relying on pre-established categories I try to explore the contemporary methods of classification, not accepting as evident neither what “népi” means, or who can be said to be a writer and what it means to be

one. On account of this method my dissertation consists of microhistories not coalescing to a monographic whole and not necessarily representative – the choice of the themes are necessarily somewhat arbitrary: I have highlighted themes that in my view expose some important conflicting approaches to literature in the epoch and their interactions in informative ways.

The introduction of my dissertation provides theoretical outlines, arguing for a relationist, pan-ideological and social constructivist approach, relying mainly on the classic works of Karl Mannheim, Berger and Luckmann, Alan Sinfield, Pierre Bourdieu and Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Chapter I.1 deals with a novel called *Tavaszi fagy* by Kodolányi János that I interpret as a work that argues for a conception of authorship as potential employment, and of a plurality of lifestyles ordered by non-foundational moral regimes. Chapter I.2 exhibits the struggles of Sásdi Sándor to subvert with his works the imaginary border separating “Jews” and “peasants” in the doxa of the epoch. Chapter I.3 analyzes the self-representational works mentioned above. In I.3/a I try to show the liberal capitalist conception of authorship constructed in the memoir of Sértő Kálmán, then in I.3/b the anticapitalist, revolutionary, ascetic alternative put forward in the articles of Veres Péter – the one glorifying, the other condemning the possibility of leaving physical work behind and trying to live from one’s pen. I.3/c deals with the autobiography of Sinka István that represents a middle ground between the

works presented in the previous two chapters and argues for a policy of affirmative action in the realm literary canonization. I.3/d analyzes a novel by Szabó Pál, describing the techniques used by it to chronicle the story of a rural worker becoming a writer, giving of it an account that emphasizes the interrelatedness of this process with various political, social and economic factors.

While the first part of my dissertation focuses on conceptions elaborated by individual works to make visible some strategies of intervention aiming to influence the symbolic structure of society, the second part uses a method based on discourse analysis to explore patterns in parts of the reception of certain authors. Chapter II.1 discusses the articles written about Erdélyi József around the time of the publication of his first book of poems, *Ibolyalevél*, and shows how it became a node for a whole spectrum of different interpretations that appear to be ideological reactions to the ethonationalist-antimodernist agenda of the new regime. Chapter II.2 surveys the texts written about Sértő Kálmán in the decade between his first publications and his death. In the chapter I try to show what can be reconstructed from these articles about the causes that made his debut a major sensation – an important factor which appears to be a need for authenticity and radical otherness. I also track how his representation changes in consecutive retellings of the story of his life, how his rural background, his move to the capital and then his failing health all become

subjects of ideologically loaded stories, and how he gets appropriated or discredited by various groups. The chapter II.3 then provides a complementary view of public opinion: in that, I turn my attention to the reception of *Az Alföld parasztsága*, a treatise by Veres Péter, that shows signs of a strong consensus regarding the value of the rejection of social mobility and not moving the city. These chapters together show how only a complex and micro-level analysis is able to give account of how and why a given author has become successful, since the factors in play are in every case more variegated and more unpredictable than what autonomist-textualist conceptions of the history of literature usually suggest.

Publications

Művészet és társadalom a Fekete bojtár vallomásaiban = *Egy közép-európai értelmiségi napjainkban*. Tverdota György 65. születésnapjára, szerk. ANGYALOSI Gergely, E. CSORBA Csilla, GINTLI Tibor, VERES András, ELTE BTK, 2012, 309–316

Etika, esztétika és irónia Kodolányi János Tavaszi fagy című regényében = *Esztétika – etika – politika*, szerk. GYÖNGYÖSI Megyer, INZSÖL Kata, Eötvös Collegium, 2013, 79–88

„Tiborc és Ahasvér találkozása”. Vázlat Sásdi Sándorról = *„Zsidó” identitásképek a huszadik századi magyar irodalomban*, szerk. SCHEIN Gábor, SZÜCS Teri, Eötvös, 2013, 167–180

Veres Péter pályakezdéséről = *Irodalomismeret*, 2014/4, 31–50.

Conference presentations

Sértő Kálmán: autenticitás, képviselés, esztétikum = projektkonferencia, ELTE-BTK Modern Magyar Irodalomtörténeti Tanszék, 2011.

Egy népi író városelméleti megközelítésben: Erdélyi József = *Reading the City*, PE-MFTK, Veszprém, 2012.

Kodolányi János: Tavaszi fagy – művészet, öngazolás, önéletírás = *Etika–esztétika–politika*, Eötvös Collegium, Budapest, 2012.

Autobiographies of hungarian populist writers and the social structure of literature = *Contexts*, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, 2012.

Veres Péter irodalomfelfogásai = *Műhelynapok*, Kerényi Károly Szakkollégium, PTE, 2013.