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Theses of the PhD dissertation

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A textological analysis of the editions of
István Szilágyi's novel *Kő hull apadó kútba* (A Stone Drops in a Dwindling Well)

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Theses of the PhD dissertation

In my doctoral dissertation, I investigate the works of István Szilágyi, focussing on his novel *Kő hull apadó kútba* (A Stone Drops in a Dwindling Well) positioned at the middle of the oeuvre. According to my hypothesis, the evaluation of Szilágyi's literary art centred mainly around the canonization of this work. The grand novel published in the 1970s is the result of a long creative process, including several revisions. Several editions had appeared in Rumania and it was also published in Hungary in 1980. In 2000 a „revised edition” of the novel was published by Magvető Publishing. Thus, *Kő hull apadó kútba* entered the Hungarian literary context in a renewed form, however, its understanding re-reading is still outstanding. The publication of the new edition opens up interesting questions regarding, on the one hand, the mode of the textual existence of the novel, and, on the other, the shaping of the image of the author as delineated by the corpus of his works. The aim of the textological study of the novel was to uncover the process of the formation of the text, as well as to examine the poetical differences in the novel rendered by the changes in the „revised edition”, whether the text has become easier to read, whether it has become better than the first version. The difference in time between the first and the revised editions raises the question how the image of the writer has changed after the revision of the text, and whether the prose author Szilágyi who wrote his novel *Kő hull apadó kútba* 25 years ago becomes re-written into the revised version.

The textological analysis of the editions of *Kő hull apadó kútba* was justified by the dilemmas of the narrative structure posed by the reception history of the novel, as well as the readers' expectation also related to the image of the writer, promising the possibility of the creation of the perfect text. The dissertation followed the methods of genetic editing which eliminates the illusion of a final, conclusive text by regarding each text variant as equally important in the process of writing. For this reason, the corpus of the analysis was extended to the writings of István Szilágyi that are intertextually relatable to the novel. As there were no manuscripts at my disposal, the textual changes emerged during the comparative examination of the printed editions. The philological work was greatly aided by the digital version of the novel *Kő hull apadó kútba*. In the course of the analyses, other writings of Szilágyi, appearing in periodicals, have also become electronically accessible.

The textological analysis raises substantial questions concerning the narrative structure of the text and the functioning of the language of the novel, rendering the rhetorical reading of the text necessary. The rhetorical reading continuously undermines the process of joining the

elements of the story together, the process of sense construction by making this insecure through the blurring of the boundary between the voice of the protagonist and that of the narrator, so that it becomes impossible to decide whether the story of Ilka Szendy is the same as the one the narrator wishes to tell. The creation of the text as the formation of the textual world and the narrative technique run parallel to each other, in an interdefining manner. This characteristic of the text of the novel also served as a basis for the philological examination which is carried out in the dissertation parallel to the analysis of the narration.

Although the necessity of a philologically founded comparative analysis primarily emerges in the case of writers of classical Hungarian works of literature, it is by no means unprecedented among contemporary literary works that old books are re-published, under a new title or with modified contents. György Spiró revised his prose work *A Jövevény* (The Comling) because of the insufficiency of sources, the too many essayistic inserts, but he also reckoned with the changes of reading habits when he furnished the novel with new elements and a new title. Ferenc Barnás' *Bagatell* (Bagatelle) or Mihály Dés' *Pesti barokk* (Pest Baroque) were also shortened as a result of criticism. Among successful works of literature, including Szilágyi's novel, revisions are not frequently carried out, therefore it raises interest when a contemporary piece of literature is modified in subsequent editions.

The publication of Szilágyi's novel had great resonance already in contemporaneous criticism and the main questions concerning the novel were outlined in these writings. In its Transylvanian reception and in the Hungarian critiques the book was judged relative to different viewpoints of reading: the review of the thematic elements of the novel, and the debate on its classification to a genre was mainly characteristic of Transylvanian Hungarian critiques, while Hungarian critiques discussed the relation of the fictional world to reality, the possibility of its referentialization and the evaluation of the character of the female protagonist. The problem of overwrittenness surfaced in several appraisals, firstly in Transylvanian Hungarian reviews. The notion was then taken over in writings of Hungarian reviewers, who often used it in various other perspectives, sometimes without much reflection.

In my doctoral dissertation, overwrittenness is delineated as a problem of canonization on the one hand, and as a problem of novel poetics on the other. It concerns canonization inasmuch as András Sütő's record of the homeland in his novel *Anyám könnyű álmot ígér* (My Mother Promises Light Dreams) became the cult book of Transylvanian Hungarian literature, standing in the middle of the canon. In Sütő's novel the novelistic and essayistic elements serve the clear and compact expression of the author's message; they are not yet evaluated in critiques as a weakness of the text from the point of view of linguistic formulation.

The use of essayistic inserts was raised not only as a question of writing techniques but also, before the publication of Sütő's novel, at the time of István Szilágyi's commencement as a writer, as an expectation of the readers. The prose debate of the periodical *Igaz Szó* (True Word) was a series of polemic writings following the appearance of young prose writers on the literary stage. One of the interesting questions raised there concerned winning over the reading public: „proponents of the essayistic, so-called philosophical novels argue that the intellectualization of the reading public is a natural and general process in our days, so that the expansion of the conveyance of ideas at the cost of the plot and of psychological depiction serves exactly the modern needs of present-day readers.”¹ This statement can also be connected to the success of the linguistic formulation of *Kő hull apadó kútba*, as the conveyance of ideas is built into essayistic parts of the narrator that are inserted into the narrative structure, parallel to which Ilka Szendy's life before and after the murder, as well as the psychological process of working up an unpunished crime are depicted.

It is obvious that the conveyance of ideas as raised in the debate appears as a positive expectation at the beginning of the 1960s. After the publication of Sütő's novel, however, Szilágyi's book is judged relative to another system of expectations. As László Szilasi points out in his study *A történeti poétika szerkezete (1982-2000)* (The Structure of Historical Poetics [1982-2000]): „... it is hard to judge whether the normative prescriptions of a piece had a decisive influence on reception, as the authors of funerary speeches also worked on the basis of the practice of their contemporaries and did not follow the instructions of some handbook of rhetorics. Thus, during the analysis of a novel, for example, its contemporaneous context and the context of the writer's corpus are both of decisive importance, yet they can never completely unveil the complex interplay characteristic of the relation between theory and practice.”²

Since the notion of overwrittenness is differently accentuated in the reception, a clarification of the notion was necessary, although we can say in general that it has mainly been used referring to the reflexive parts of the narrator, to the essayistic inserts. These parts nuance the character, the acts of the protagonists, reflect upon Ilka's story or convey the philosophical reflections of the narrator. Overwrittenness is connected with attributes such as exuberant, gaudy, overspoken, overdetailed, and is thus formulated on the basis of a specific linguistic-

¹ KOVÁCS János, *Korunk és a kommunista hős teljesebb ábrázolásáért: Elvárásolt hétköznapi helyett – a hétköznapi varázsa* [For a fuller description of our age and the communist hero: The charm of weekdays instead of charmed weekdays]. *Igaz Szó*, 1964/1, 117. My translation – Á. M.

² SZILASI László, *A történeti poétika története (1982-2000)* [The Structure of Historical Poetics (1982-2000)] = *Filológia: bevezetés a régi magyarországi irodalom filológiájába*, szerkesztette HARGITTAY Emil, Universitas, Budapest, 2003, 243-245. My translation – Á. M.

aesthetic system of norms, which characteristic can be related to the narration technical character of the novel, to the difficulties of the delimitation of the narrative and protagonistic parts. The hair-thin line of the boundaries of the narrative voice is the basis for the other question raised in the reception, namely the play with the identifiability of the monogram I. Sz. with several signifiers, which also renders the questions concerning the notion of author raised by Foucault and Barthes an important problem in the dissertation, also having an effect on the textological analysis.

The basic thesis of the textological analysis of Szilágyi's novel is that the text is never a closed, finished entity but an unstable, varying phenomenon which can even alter due to a new edition with an unchanged text. Gunter Martens' notion of the dynamic text presupposes the dynamic interaction of text carrier and text meaning, since the copying of the text, the reading and revision of the text by its author leave their mark on the carrier of the sign, so that this mode of text creation is the realization of a constantly changing text meaning. Martens views the text as a complex sign: the text can never be fixed for the receiver based on the inseparable unity of Saussure's signifier and signified or on Pierce's dynamic model of the sign, the interpretant and the object.³ In *The Textual Condition* Jerome McGann calls attention to the existence of the text in social space, so that the meaning of the text does not only derive from the decoding of the linguistic signs but also of the material aspects of the text (font type, page layout, cover design, binding). In the dissertation the methodology of the evaluation of the authorial corpus follows McGann's conception: to uncover the points of connection of the text's history of production and reception and thus to show what the notion of textuality, the textual condition means in the case of István Szilágyi's novel.

Concerning its methodology, the textual analysis of the editions of *Kő hull apadó kútba* is not set far from genetic textual criticism, inasmuch as the text is approached on the basis of a selection of documents forming part of its genesis. The material is treated similarly to the method of genetic criticism also in that the more important sources are offered as notes or appendices. Due to the lack of the manuscript, however, the creative process could only be reconstructed mainly based on the bibliographical data and the context of the published texts. The dissertation also deals with the pre- and post-texts of *Kő hull apadó kútba* which include the publications of parts of the forming novel in periodicals and the texts related to the textual world of the second novel. These render the philological analysis as well as the following

³ Cf. Gunter MARTENS, *Mi az, hogy szöveg?: Szempontok a szövegfilológia kulcsfogalmának meghatározásához* [Was ist ein Text? Ansätze zur Bestimmung eines Leitbegriffs der Textphilologie], Hungarian translation by SCHULCZ Katalin, *Literatura*, 1990/3, 249.

interpretation more nuanced. Many readers may not be acquainted with these texts, and they have not been related to the text of the novel in its later reception either. By now, a lot of the author's texts have been published electronically and many texts have become accessible through the website of the Digitális Irodalmi Akadémia (Digital Literary Academy) which, earlier on, could only be found in the original place of their publication, in periodicals. Other writings of the Szilágyi-corpus may initiate the re-reading of well-known texts according to new points of view and may shed a more nuanced light upon the author's oeuvre.

The basis of the textological chapter of the dissertation is the appendix containing the comparison of the 1977 edition and of the revised 2002 edition published by Magvető Publishing. This appendix is also the basis of the chapter on the author's technique of text production and text emendation and on the reading process. The comparison was justified not only by the shortening of the text but also by the change in the ratio of the chapters of the novel. The appendix of the dissertation also contains the text variants of the editions after 1977 which represent the stages of the genetic history of the text and may shed light upon aspects of the conscious, intentional formation of the text by the author. As the appendix of the dissertation created a fragmented novel form, in which the chapters are compiled similarly to mosaic pieces, it was sometimes difficult to evaluate the emendations of the given passage, so that the character of the alteration could only be assessed considering the textual context. This was facilitated by the electronic version of the novel, which rendered the comparison of the editions easier.

The improvement of the author's own text leads us to the clarification of the notion of textual mistake. In the genetic history of a text, it is hard to define what should be considered a mistake in the text variants since each prose work reflects the individual language use of the writer. Furthermore, mistakes play an important role in the oeuvre of many contemporary Hungarian writers and have a poetic function: a significant part of Endre Kukorelly's texts centres around the author's own emendations and alterations; mistakes are treated as the author's and as necessary in the text by Péter Esterházy; in the works of Lajos Parti Nagy mistakes are always those of a removed narrator, his writings are characterised by the richness of the layers of the meanings of the corrupted text. Thus, textual mistakes are phenomena inherent to the existence of literature both in prose and in lyrical texts.

The textological chapter also analyses another observation concerning the narrative structure raised in the reception: the problem of the narrative function of the picture of the prince and of its integration into the structure of the novel, which rendered the discussion of the genre of ekphrasis necessary. The chapter on the picture of the prince is complemented by the analysis of other depictive figures found in the novel. The picture of the prince is connected

with other appearances of the picture bound to various medial carriers which I call “optical leitmotifs”, a term used by Friedrich Kittler in his book *Optical media* on the history of the technical media. According to Kittler, the appearance of photography in the 19th century also had an influence on the mode of literary image production and writing, since literature „no longer produces merely inner images [...], starts to build in such objective and consistent optical leitmotifs that can later be easily filmed.”⁴ In Szilágyi’s novel, the technical changes also reflecting the ever-changing image of the observing individual can be traced with the help of the various optical media. The subject is therefore both the historical product and the scene of certain practices, techniques and institutions of the making of the subject.

The “revised edition” of *Kő hull apadó kútba* is based on a teleological text conception, according to which all later versions are better than the preceding ones. The changes in the text of the novel have led to alterations in the narrative structure: the essayistic inserts and the detailed description of the picture of the prince have been removed from the text, and the narrative details describing the inner world of the protagonists have also been shortened. The stylistic changes are fine-tunings of the author’s mode of expression: the new edition is characterised by the replacement of dialectal words by their everyday variants, by the striving for more precise, more accurate and less sophisticated formulations. The lengthier Rumanian edition from 1977 offers its readers a more stimulating mental adventure by the more nuanced presentation of the characters of the protagonists and by the exploration of the motives for their deeds than the stylistically and narrative structurally revised, scantier new version.

Publications related to the topic of the dissertation

A hiábavalóság krónikása: Álom és példázat Szilágyi István A hóhér könnyei című regényében [The chronicler of vainness: Dream and parable in István Szilágyi’s novel *A hóhér könnyei* (The Tears of the Hangman)]= Mozgásban: Irodalomtudományi PhD-konferencia elméleti irányvonalakról, kihívásokról és lehetőségekről, Debrecen, 2008, *Studia Litteraria*, 164-178.

⁴ Friedrich KITTLER, *Optikai médiumok* [Optical Media], Hungarian translation by KELEMEN Pál, Bp., Magyar Műhely – Ráció, 2005, 147. –My translation. Á.M.

A jelen régmúltjában: A képiség Szilágyi István Kő hull apadó kútba című regényében [In the distant past of the present: Figurativity in István Szilágyi's novel *Kő hull apadó kútba* (A Stone Drops in a Dwindling Well)], *Alföld*, 2009/3, 87-100.

In the volume: *Jelenlét '07*, Bp., 2009, KRE-BTK Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskola, 207-224.

A történelmi regény terhéről (Toldi Éva: A múltreprezentáció lehetőségei) [On the burden of historical novels (Toldi, Éva: Possibilities of representing the past)], *Kalligram*, 2009/11, 100-103.

„Bimbózni kezd a töröktubarózsa, s maholnap elnyílik a fehér liliom.” Nő és test Szilágyi István *Kő hull apadó kútba* című regényében [“The Turkish tuberose starts to blossom, and very soon the white lily shall wither.” Woman and body in István Szilágyi's novel *Kő hull apadó kútba* (A Stone Drops in a Dwindling Well)], *Új Forrás*, 2010/1, 63-73.

Évszázadok pányvázta lélek: Szilágyi István Adyt olvas [A soul tethered by centuries: István Szilágyi reading Ady] = *Nemzet - Sors - Identitás, Írások a hatvanéves Bertha Zoltán tiszteletére*, szerkesztette PAPP Ágnes Klára, SEBŐK Melinda, ZSÁVOLYA Zoltán, L'Harmattan Kiadó- KRE BTK, 2015. – to appear shortly.

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