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Borbála Pintér

The Letter in the Novel

**Letters as a Structural Principle of Text
in Zsigmond Kemény's Four Novels**

**Supervisor: Professor Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, Regular Member of the
Hungarian Academy of Sciences**

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For a long time Kemény's oeuvre had been interpreted in the literary-historical tradition in terms of the dialectics of romanticism and realism before the emphasis eventually shifted to the disjunctive character of the same relationship. In recent years Mihály Szegedy-Maszák's monography paved the way for a Kemény-reception open to modern trends and it has by now evolved into a dominant tradition of the reception-history. Fortunately, contemporary interpretation has removed the above mentioned oppositionist view of Kemény's novels and, due to a re-reading of the oeuvre, focus has ceased to dwell on thematic and story-related changes or character development and the actual texts have found their place in present day paradigm just as, on a larger scale, re-reading of 19th century novels on a contemporary horizon has increasingly penetrated modern interpretation and assigned a new place to a number of works of this period in the canon of literary history.

In line with this tradition, our study predominantly focuses on letters constituting, as it were, the texture of Kemény's novels. Hence our particular way of reading – far from obliterating the romantic interpretation of these texts – observes romantic twists and turns in the plot, patiently awaiting the reencounter of divergent threads, perceives the construction thereof as well as the objective and subjective viewpoints alternating in the narrative technique, also paying attention to the language of form that departs from it, notes the deconstruction of integrative storytelling, the disrupted continuity as a principle of form, recognizes and connects motifs previously considered independent, while, as a rule, recognizes and accentuates figures of intertextuality, construction, language-embeddedness and self-reflection so typical of metaphoric narration, centering its analysis on the act of reception and attribution of meaning.

The first three chapters of our dissertation lay the theoretical fundamentals and formulate criteria for the analysis of Kemény's four novels to be carried out in the four chapters that follow. Chapter 1 opens with the study of the genre of epistolary novel, its history, the movement of the textual reference in real and fictitious horizons as well as the way of this kind of poetics is articulated in various procedures and the discovery of the potentials for the narrative structures of the genre of diegesis. Furthermore, letter inserts interrupting the dynamics of interweaving levels of discourse and narration are taken under scrutiny along with the intricate structure and relationship-system of embedding and embedded narratives.

Chapter 2 outlines the typology of epistolary novel, primarily by the number of correspondents. Besides, we discuss the potential roles of correspondents, the connections between narrative proposition and its object, the possible manners of discourse, the tone of the

narrator-actor-correspondent and especially the manifestations of narrative propositions along with the viewpoints and interconnections that assist their reading. We also analyze the self-reflective character of epistolary novel as well as its changes during the course of writing and reading, how it originates and deviates from its origins, the gestures of creation and re-creation. Letter is also studied in its dialogic nature, i.e. that it, despite the fact that the epistolary subject both defines and manifests itself by addressing another person, evolves into a genre for the self-representation of subjectivity.

Chapter 3 focuses on letter as representing the physical and medial character of writing. It is analyzed in the dualism of its oral and written character with a primary concern on the contrast and interplay between the stationary, visual, spatial and timeless physical existence of written, and the transient, current, auditive nature of spoken text. The way letter manifests its speech-like character, colors the distinctive character of writing, the logic of storytelling appears in letter inserts, on the whole, how writing opposes, and conflicts with, speech. Starting out from Derrida's concept of writing we dissect the potentials of communication and understanding, as, given the unstoppable process whereby signifiers mutually interact and influence each other and continually rearrange in new structures, the meaning of the text not only becomes independent of the writer but continually compels readers to discover new and ever newer meanings as well. It is at this point that the historical character of writing, the material distinction between handwriting and printed type and its consequences are outlined, paying attention also to such minute details as the influence of paper quality on writing. We conclude by discussing certain issues of the temporal character of letter, focusing especially on the time of writing and reading as well as of the actual occurrences and their narration.

In an attempt to apply a versatile approach each of the three preliminary theoretical chapters involves sections that introduce the issue at hand diachronically. As points of reference a number of examples are given (see 1.2, 2.1, 3.6), while no attempt is made at a full enumeration, as present dissertation claims to make no historical statements. Nevertheless we seek to discuss the issues of our subject by a synchronic treatment, combining several theoretical approaches. However we do not claim to follow any given school, model or theory of literary science, instead, we prefer to apply our methods to the subject under discussion. For example, besides Gérard Genette's structuralist system of narratology hermeneutic modes of understanding are used, the scope of text interpretation is extended by deconstructionist ways of reading and the science of medial culture also serves as a point of departure for our investigations.

In view of the space limitation of the dissertation as well as the scope of the reader's attention we thought it apt to constrain text corpus before setting out to write the chapters to discuss the novels in detail. Kemény's stories and unfinished novels as well as their letter inserts are left out altogether since, at least in the latter case, for a thorough and detailed analysis of the texts each novel should be treated as a whole. For understanding individual details and putting them into perspective would presuppose familiarity with the whole corpus, besides, according to our intentions, inserted texts should be seen with reference and in relation to the work of art as a whole.

Again, regarding space limitations we found it necessary to carry out further selection. That is why we only four of Kemény's novels are discussed in depth – *Gyulai Pál* (*Pál Gyulai*), *Férj és nő* (*Husband and Wife*), *A rajongók* (*The Admirers*) and *Zord idő* (*Harsh Times*). Our decision is based not merely on quantitative reasons. In fact *Ködképek a kedély láthatárán* (*Hazy visions on the Horizon of Mood*) includes few letters, as a matter of fact, all we find is what Randon Villemont wrote to Florestán. However in *A szív örvényei* (*The Swirls of the Heart*) Anselm Szeredy writes five letters from Venice to his friend, Pongrácz, and in *Özvegy és leánya* (*Widow and Daughters*) not only can we read Rákóczi's letter to János Mikes but we also find out about the details of his correspondence with Kapronczai, the messenger. And no matter how thoroughly and detail fully scrutinizing the letters of these three novels, we discovered little important new aspects relevant for these novels as a whole, allowing us to draw essentially new conclusion, essentially different from what we found for the other four novels. Of course, by this selection we intend to make no aesthetic judgment as to the ranking of the novels.

The literature of fiction is famously rich in works not made up of letters or details of correspondence exclusively but occasionally interrupting the flow of the text with letters. Our dissertation supports the notion that, from a structural point of view, letters spread throughout the volume of the text should be interpreted as inserts, consequently we read them as such. There are various interpretations as to the letter inserts in Kemény's novels. In his 1989 paper Mihály Szegedy-Maszák argues for the functional feasibility of this structural idea and the decisive role it plays in the narrative structure of Kemény's novels. In agreement with his proposal we also underline the role of this distinctive architecture.

Already in the first editions letter inserts apparently break the text flow which, even visually, makes a striking impression on the reader. Letter as a kind of subtext, however, can have a disadvantageous effect, too, by breaking the integrity of the embedding narrative and, also with the tedious effect they might produce, due to their very rules of architecture, a

constant repetition of the recurring binding formulas (date, place, salutation and closing). Such clichés, however, rarely become a nuisance in Kemény's texts even in those including several letters. Less important items (salutation, closing) are often omitted or, if a compulsory formula – usually date and place – is given, it will gain relevance for the organization of the text.

The mapping of letters embedded in Kemény's novels, rather than sufficing with the investigation of letter inserts from the point of view of narratology, textology, typology pays special attention to letter as a dynamic motif, a structural element in the organization of the plot. The genre itself involves the potential of focusing on letter in its tangible physical quality. Besides having an intradiegetic narrative structure, when lost, hidden, annihilated, delayed, forged, disappropriated etc, it may well become an organizing instrument of the plot.

We examine closely how the reader's attention, while following the stream of letters, is directed to the interpretation strategy offered by the text, the structure that emphasizes its createdness by disrupted continuity and ever well marked boundaries of text fragments. As, for instance, the text of *Gyulai Pál (Pál Gyulai)* fulfills our expectations by uniting plot threads, unveiling secrets, accomplishing vengeance and the chosen one's fall, all so characteristic of romantic storytelling. At the same time, however, the plot markedly defies linearity, there's a distinct emphasis on time and space in both the narration and the actual events with their duality and opposition, until we're completely lead astray in the maze of romanticism by the very narrator commentaries that appeared to guide us in the first place. The two techniques work side by side simultaneously, we immediately recognize the elements of worldliness in the romantic construction and realness of the story while the emphatic role of narration and constructedness seem to represent modern characteristics of textuality. Just like the letters, both explicit and concealed, *Férj és nő* or *A rajongók* never allow us to forget about of the constructedness of the text, of its corpus emerging through certain procedures of communicative and selective interventions.

Letters can be studied from the perspective of both the sender and the receiver. So, on the one hand, texts expose themselves from the aspect of creation. The distinctiveness of the aspect of writing serves at times (as in *Gyulai Pál*) to assist readers' identification with the role of the writer, in other cases (as in *Férj és nő*) to bring the subject's self-representation as manifested in the text, the issue of the tellability of the self into the problem horizon. Secondly, there is a possible reading from the point of view of, or together with, the addressee, whereby we gain insight into the reaction of the reception side as well. In *A rajongók* narrator's comments to the reactions of the reader-addressee call our attention to the

structure of narrative layers, in other words we experience how the possibility of continuous storytelling within the time of the novel is suspended by different time-planes of the interweaving narratives. In *Zord idő* we can trace, focusing on the temporality of the messages, how the original message is changed and eventually eliminated during the time that elapsed between its writing and reading. Furthermore, primarily in connection with *Férj és nő* we discuss the way the subject of letter-writing is represented, told, exposed or voluntarily hushed to the other one while facing at the same time the inaccessibility of the other's story from a fixed center of a given character, its alterity setting an insurmountable obstacle to knowing.

The interpreter's particular position allows us to come to know certain events in the universe of the novel from different angles i.e. the same occurrence can be exposed in various discourses. The receptive attitudes that display at various points, as well as mirror scenes of the reader underline that the staging of reception not only confronts us with its fictitious character and the horizon of understanding created within the oeuvre, thereby serving to present the technique of understanding textual phenomena, but also brings into play the ontological quality of (self)comprehension.

In conclusion, the dissertation attributes special significance to the letters in Zsigmond Kemény's novels with the intention to show how Kemény's epic works are intentionally and characteristically organized by a form principle that tends to disrupt the continuity of storytelling, weaken the order of causal interconnections of the story and bring to the fore other procedures of text organization based on figures and allusions. Along with the recession of the story as such, a more text-like prose universe is created with the emphasis shifting to the way the story is told. With the prevalence of the textual functions of the fiction as well as the self-reflective construction of *mise en abyme*, new expectations are created towards the reader that require active participation along with a way of reading that explains why these novels continue to appeal to the interest of our days.