

Abstract

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This thesis has been prepared as part of a two-year research programme on high culture supported by the Hungarian Academy of Science. In my thesis I seek for a new approach, an approach that interprets the everyday process of reading classics without any background knowledge whatsoever about history, literature theory or any related fields. Reading classics is a rather ordinary challenge that most of us can cope with. My aim is to reveal our routine methods/tactics of reading. I analyse classic novels to develop a methodological frame that clarifies our reading practice, and also enables us to argue for or against aesthetic judgments.

I found the guiding heuristic principle for my analysis in the essay of Goethe's *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* by Walter Benjamin. Actual essays and case studies form the pith of our thesis.

We start by showing the problem of myth and mythology as it appears in the correspondence of Thomas Mann and Károly Kerényi. We use Kerényi's standpoint to point to the possibility of narrating and re-narrating old and new stories.

Our next assay on Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* aims to demonstrate how the narrative finds universal values in the context of a fairy tale. Before the analysis of Fielding's *Tom Jones* and Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* there is a brief introductory essay that sketches the intellectual historical context of the novels. One of the aim of these analysis is to identify this intellectual history background, as reflected in the common sense of the time, in these two classical novels.

It is not difficult to identify the values guiding the episodes in Swift's fantastic, obviously constructed world. The other two novels, however, may confuse the reader, because, apart from their original goal, i.e. to be a source of aesthetic enjoyment, they also provide useful and direct information about an age that passed long ago. An important part of our reading experience consists of information that enables us to linger on in the everyday life of a historical time, and to get an understanding of the values that keep this life together. Still, our experience goes beyond collecting information and becomes an aesthetic experience. Whether we liked the novel or not and thus form an aesthetic judgment. In such a way, understanding the intellectual historical background helps us to link and merge our personal artistic experience and the contingency of values in the past.

The paper intends to demonstrate on a few examples how considerations outside of the realm of aesthetics bring us closer to an aesthetic judgment. We have to emphasize, however, that the examples here presented are more than just special cases. According to our conclusion, artistic objects in general offer values for the receiver on the one hand and carry the proof of

the age in which they were born on the other. This very ambiguity produces the tension in the receiver that allows for aesthetic pleasure.