

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL DISSERTATION
FROM THE MULTIPLICITY OF WORDS TO THE UNITY OF WORD: AN
APPROACH TO THE PROBLEMATICS OF 20TH-CENTURY HUNGARIAN
CATHOLIC LITERATURE

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I. FIELD, OBJECTIVE AND STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The aim of my dissertation is to make an attempt to show, through the 20th-century interpretation history of catholic literature with regard to the defining questions of contemporary literary studies, in what framework it is possible to reinterpret the concept of catholic literature today. The first part of the thesis approaches the problem from a historical perspective. After analyzing the works of Prohászka Ottokár, as a fundamental factor of the pre-history, I interpret the concept of catholic literature of Sík Sándor, Rónay György and Pilinszky János. In the last chapter of the first part, I examine the weltanschauung prerequisites of the central question of Catholicism (and every religion, generally): the possibility of speaking of God in relation to the changes in the European intellectual history up to our present; and I intend to outline Christianity's concept of language and art rooted in ancient Greek philosophy as the happening of tradition that determines the reinterpretation's way of questioning, based on which we can attempt to establish the basics of a Christian poetics. In the second part of the dissertation, I examine, in the light of the conclusions drawn in the first part, the works of Sík Sándor, Mécs László, Pusztai Sándor and Tűz Tamás through the detailed analysis of some works without aspiring to present their complete career.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Although the poets examined belong to catholic literature proper, that is to the group of priest poets, through the interpretation of their works I primarily intend to show that the notion, partially applicable only to a definite group of poets or literary trend, can be reinterpreted from the perspective of analyzing its relation to the Christian tradition and literary modernity. Thus, what we conventionally call catholic literature can only preserve its interest to hermeneutic interpretation, in the context of today's literary studies, if we regard the works not only as the relics of the past, but also as poetic texts, investigating the problems of human existence in the transcendent prospect of being which can preserve their relevance for the people of our age in the present-time horizon of literariness. The success of interpretation, besides the interpretive intention, primarily depends on, of course, whether the texts themselves (are able to) meet such expectations. Due to the characteristics of the topic, I approach the problematics of the 20th-century Hungarian catholic literature by considering the opportunities provided by several scholarly discourses (mainly theological and philosophical besides the literary theoretical); and I interpret the texts chosen to be analyzed in different chapters of my thesis in an interdisciplinary framework.

III. CONCLUSIONS

I built the arguments of my dissertation explained above on the following theses:

. 1. Prohászka Ottokár brought modern attitude and new dynamism to the life of the Hungarian Catholic Church at the turn of the century. His work, however, from the perspective of 20th-century interpretation history of catholic literature, belongs to the pre-

history because in the reception of modern ideas as well as in his philosophy of art and his literary criticism he enforced an apologetic approach, primarily.

It follows, that his approach built on the bases of Christian morality could not (and did not intend to) meet the autonomy-requirements? of modernity concerning man and works of art. Nevertheless, the main ideas and horizon of literary criticism of Prohászka's philosophy of art are important to describe in connection with the interpretation history of catholic literature for two reasons. First, in light of this history, Sík Sándor's literary approach and concept of catholic literature can be clearly outlined. Second, reading Sík Sándor and Mécs László makes it clear that Prohászka's view of history and culture built on the opposition of the "Christ-like nice character" and the modern decadent individual does not only determine the attitude and tone of the starting catholic poetry at its first attempts, but this effect is palpable in the catholic lyric poetry right before the second world war and decisively influences its relation to modernity.

2. If we examine the literary and criticism historical prerequisites of the interpretability of the concept of catholic literature, innumerable problematic points occur in the evolving of the relation between catholic literature and literary modernity in Hungary. The concept of catholic literature first appears in the context of apologetic literature in connection with the 16-17th century literary history. Then, in relation with the horizon shift of the 18-19th century, both the hiatus of the tradition history and stepping through the threshold of the age of modernity, the problems of the possible ways of integrating the apologetic tradition can be observed. To a certain extent, the hermeneutical horizon of apologia evolves again during the debate based on the modern-conservative opposition in Hungarian intellectual life at the turn of the century and between the two world wars, with the consequence that in the world of "split literature" catholic literature ended up on the conservative side. From the perspective of interconnections of the 20th-century catholic and world literature, it also becomes obvious that the change which began with the appearance of Sík Sándor and Harsányi Lajos, inspired by the intellectual background of "modern" Christianity represented by Prohászka, organically fits into the literary processes at the turn of the century.

3. Sík Sándor's study *Egyetemesség és forma* (Universality and Form, 1935), in which he endeavored to elaborate on the concept of catholic literature with theoretical thoroughness, was partly motivated by the "catholic poetry"-debate initiated by Illyés in 1933, and partly by the growing demand for self-definition following it. Sík's argumentation has double purpose: on the one hand, he wants to answer the criticism of Illyés and Babits, on the other, he wishes to renew the attitude of Hungarian catholic literature. He does all this in a way, that breaking away from Prohászka – who criticized the literature of the time strictly on the basis of religious ethics – he builds his reasoning on the view of literature based on the autonomy of art and the individual creator. In so doing, besides an update interpretation of Catholicism, he actually frees the concept of catholic literature from the earlier denominational definition. Yet, the over-extension of the concept of universality in Sík's study made it significantly hard to interpret the concept of catholic literature in the given literary context. His later writings (in 1940 and 1946), reflect the same attitude and shed light on how it is possible to answer the actual questions, defined by extra-literary criteria most of the time (in 1940 about the national characteristics of literature; in 1946, about the post-war cooperation of writers), on the basis of the earlier concept of catholic literature.

4. The first works on the topic of Rónay György approach the question of 20th century Hungarian catholic literature from a very critical perspective. Since in connection with the 19th century pre-history, Rónay considers its relation to the "universal Hungarian literature," modern French catholic literature, the lack of knowledge in national traditions, mysticism and

theology, problematic, as well as the applicability of the concept to different writers and poets in an essay in 1947. In an article published in *Helicon* in 1966, he gives the summarizing overview of the past 80 years of mostly French catholic literature, philosophy and theology. In this article, he builds catholic literature on such a Christian anthropology the essence of which is that man as his existential situation is defined by sin is constrained to divine grace, but due to his free will he may refuse it. This is why it is possible that the great sinners so frequently described in modern catholic literature are closer to God than those for whom this relation never gets problematic. Thus, through the interpretation of the concept of catholic literature, Rónay manages to step over the over-extension of the demand for universality springing from the adjective “catholic” by linking catholic literature partly to contemporary catholic philosophy, and partly to liturgy seen as a “sign system” that makes it possible to understand the world and to express the authentic catholic experience in literature.

5. The initiation of Pilinszky János into the interpretation history of catholic literature may be problematic from the point of view of history of lyrical poetry in as much as by catholic literature we mean the oeuvre of priest poets. Nonetheless, Pilinszky writes about the question of catholic literature in some of his prose, and his ideas about “evangelical aesthetics” can be grouped here because of identity in content and perspective. The concept of catholic literature taking shape in his writings differs from Rónay’s interpretation of catholic literature. Since for Rónay, the existential situation of man defined by original sin and divine grace provides the anthropological basis for catholic literature, but in the interpretation of works of art it is only a thematic element; for Pilinszky, this existence is an inseparable part of art’s ontological status in relation with the receptor’s experience of being (in the world). So, Pilinszky re-interprets the concept of catholic (religious) literature by pulling down the barriers which separated religious or sacred art proper from “profane” topics. In my interpretation, what Sík Sándor had suspected in his study, *Egyetemesség és forma*, - namely that in terms of literature’s autonomy it is essentially not possible to speak accurately about catholic literature, - was reinterpreted by Pilinszky who related it to the religious origin of arts. And he did so after Babits, much rather than after Sík: “if every art is truly religious in origin, then no religious art, much less a religious literature exists nearby the sacred texts.”

6. The postmodern era following modernity brings tendencies that threaten the traditional Christian way of thinking. From a different point of view, it also opens up new space for the dialogue on tradition as the space for self-interpretation. Realizing and filling this space may contain the chance of renewal for Catholicism. Since at the time Christianity evolved, it opened up a new chapter in the history of thinking about the European language, for its logos-doctrine preserved the Platonic tradition to a certain extent, which construed logos as apofantic speech. However, it became eventually impossible to talk about the unity of logos in the Heraclitean sense. Christian thinking, by comprehending God as the wholeness of existence, re-interpreted the ontological difference which originally referred to the impenetrable gap between the existent and existence. The difference, though, separating the infinite God from the created finite world, formed the problem in which the discourse (theological and poetic) about God was possible. The question of uttering the unutterable divine essence was not just theological but poetic as well. The question of the relation of theological and poetic discourse has remained determinant even today, partly because if we invite literature into the interpretation history of the Bible, the relevant literary tradition - and thus the texts of catholic literature, - can become a part of the happening of tradition only if such an intertextual connection evolves between the biblical and literary texts, due to which the different manners of speaking become mutually enriching in the intersection of discourses

in a way that both are able to preserve its autonomy, that is, the literary perspective is not subdued to the theological, nor the other way round.

7. The cycle, entitled *A lélekben lakozó titokról*, Sík Sándor's attempt on mystic poetry at the beginning of his career, could have expected a favorable reception not only in the intersecting context of the history of lyric poetry of literary modernity and mystic tradition, but also because by the time Sík's first volumes of poetry were published in 1910 and 1912, Ady's poems of God had already been out, so religious topics were present on the Hungarian receptive horizon of literary modernity. However, examining Sík's attempt on mystic poetry from the perspective of literary and theological meaning construction taking place in its biblical intertextual relation, it becomes obvious that Sík uses the lexicon and semantics of a ready-made language in his poems. His works, inspired by mysticism, can hardly exceed the allegoric interpretative horizon of biblical texts, that is, the elaboration of the biblical topic threatens the autonomy of the text's literariness, so dogmatic tenets prevail over the poetic functions of the texts. Besides this, the factor threatening the text's literariness can also be revealed in the effect of Prohászka's binary model of culture, which prevents him in his early works from totally comprehending and receiving the contemporary literary phenomena rated as decadent. The attitude of his poetry after the First World War shows the most significant changes at these points since the brotherhood-idea based on the Christian ethics of love which prescribes the moral commandment of understanding all created being in love comes to the front increasingly.

8. The attitude of Mécs' poetry at the beginning of his career, his negative attitude to the world war in his near past, the refusal of nationalism, the optimistic belief in the reformability of society and the future in general are related in worldview to the early Hungarian avant-garde in a way which, combined with the salvation historical promise of Catholicism, offered a particularly new discourse and answer to the Hungarian catholic lyric poetry. Taking the Hungarian social and cultural relations of the time into consideration, we may attempt to interpret what it means to be a priest poet in the context of playing a possible poetic role on the basis of the poem *Hajnali harangszó*. The pursuit, though, which, at the zenith of Mécs's artistic and poetic success, knowing the audience's expectations, was aimed at popularity, made the effort for direct impression the most important factor of his poetry. The aesthetic distance, therefore - with which in the early 1920s Mécs went beyond the aesthetic experience of the audience formed by the lyric poetry of the first generation of priest poets, Sík Sándor and Harsányi Lajos, and of the conservative poetic tradition, - disappeared by the end of the decade and due to this, from the early 1930s his lyric poetry fell far from the mainstream of Hungarian history of lyric poetry.

9. Pusztai Sándor's poetry, starting in the 1930s, clearly shows the break that took place in Hungary following the political change after the Second World War, and which forced Pusztai into an almost 30-year period of silence. In the second part of his career, starting at the end of the 1960s, his lyric poetry is free of the strong influence of Mécs felt at the beginning of Pusztai's career. He created a characteristically unique poetic language in his later volumes which was able to integrate even the latest initiatives of the Hungarian poetry of late modernity. The features recalling Pilinszky's poems of epigrammatic compactness, or the poetic language of Kassák's 'classicized avant-garde,' seem only a superficial poetic solution in most of Pusztai's poems with such a worldview in the background within the frame of which he never questions neither that by the human mind God's transcendent being can be recognized, nor that it can be experienced through the immanent beauty of the created world. He also fails to question the integrity of the lyrical self constituted as the centre of worldview.

The most significant poetic piece of the last period of his career is the Emberfia-cycle, which has the ability to express on the different levels of the work of art the restrictedness and fragmentedness of the perspective of human understanding of being determined by immanency.

10. Tűz Tamás' lyric poetry written in emigration created such a new, up-to-date poetic discourse through which Hungarian poetry of catholic nature could be included in the literary canon in which it could become – independently of the productivity of Pilinszky's influence history – a remarkable form of modernity. The evolvement of the so called catholic lyric poetry would run a course that, thanks to the first generation of priest poets, and first of all to Sík's theoretical reflections, crossed the limits of denominationalism proper; and in later decades created an open poetic world that could freely integrate the latest lyric initiatives of world literature. Tűz, in his works written from the mid-70s, stepped over the poetic paradigm of late modernity, and had a more independent relation with the Christian tradition, less bound to the theological and religious ethical constraints. The central point of his poems is the temporal stabilization of the lyrical self's position in poems through the apostrophic discourse of works. The subject of poems wanting to define its identity determined against the addressed other can be defined only in the momentariness of actual articulations, so the steady self-identity is spread among many of the poems. In his poems and his sonnet sequences, written in the 1980s the self's identity is characteristically created against the other in the meeting the mystic Third, through the mutual, existence-defining experience of being sinners. The most significant work of this period of his career is the *Amoris via Dolorosa*, which breaks up with the tendency allegorizing the biblical texts of the mystic tradition, and brings the complexity of meaning of the biblical texts in motion.