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Faculty of Humanities

PHD THESES

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THE IMMATERIALITY OF WRITING
(THE FANTASTIC AND MEDIALITY IN ROMANTIC AND MODERN
HUNGARIAN PROSE)

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I.

The main theme of the dissertation is the symptom of the Fantastic discussed in the context of prose-epic texts. The aim is to pass this symptom beyond the horizon of hermeneutical questioning and to apply and broaden it through the wider relationships of literary language of form and mediation. The title might be provocative attempting to point out the tension in which the visible-material medium of writing (as codes of literal archiving) is constituted by uncontrollable and immaterial laws. However, these laws are not independent and are manifested by their textual mode of being. The immaterial effects are textualised by such *writing acts* that *cannot be linked directly* to an author or a narrative voice. The dissertation would like to focus on this complex symptom (often performed as *Unheimlich*) by the close reading of romantic and modern texts, while it does not want to miss the seemingly ambivalent (paradigmatically often opposed) theories of „romantic” writing defined as a result of artistic creation and the „modern” transcription influenced by different technical-medial automatisms. The process of reading and writing are in constant interaction – there is no writing without reading and there is no reading without writing. Kittler describes this interaction as follows: “The new fantastic is (...) an endless oscillating from Nature to books back to Nature”. Therefore, the dissertation chooses Foucault’s and Kittler’s theory of the *Bibliothèque Fantastique* instead of Todorov’s theory defining the Fantastic in the plot and the narrative to support the argument that writing acts induced by reading experience and reading experiences influenced by writing acts form a mutual and endless series making us uncertain. However Todorov’s theory is not completely ignored. Therefore, the text comprehended as a *letter-world* (Thienemann) is the result and also the starting point of modes of reading in which the experience of being appears as an aesthetic experience, and vice versa. The dissertation deals with technological-mediologic point of views within this reciprocity as important but not primary aspects. The dissertation does not neglect the importance of interference that comes from the graphemic transcriptions and the new media (*photograph*, *telegraph*, *cinematograph* etc.) but considers the immanent materiality of the writing act as the precondition of these articulations. At the same time this materiality is perceptible and predisposed by the dependency of the previously mentioned immaterial archives. The dissertation also focuses on the result of this transmission, namely the playfulness that derives from the traceability of the semantic operation of the language, analysed by the interaction between orality and literacy in the poetics of the genre *regény* (*novel*) developing from *rege* (*romance*).

II.

Following the introduction of the theoretical background, the preface of the dissertation gives a short selection of Hungarian and foreign texts published before the earliest text (the romantic genre-series of *Magyar titkok* – 'Hungarian mysteries' – by Ignác Nagy) in order to introduce the later interpreted phenomena and notions. The subchapter shortly mentions the Fantastic which appeared only as a marginal symptom till the first third of the 20th century in Hungarian literature due to the expansion of the mimetic, reality referential reading strategies. This is why the dissertation cannot lean on a large canon of texts. Although the authors of the following novels – excluding maybe Ignác Nagy and Kálmán Harsányi – are members of the current master-canon, this fact does not refer to the majority of their chosen works. Of course, the dissertation does not argue (cannot argue) for the aesthetic value of the chosen texts. Its primary technical aim is to explain and validate theoretical frames, followed by the verification of the effectiveness of the reading „programs” shaped and extracted by their application.

The first chapter presents the experimental re-reading of *Két élet* (Two lives) by Miklós Jósika and *A gólyakalifa* (The Stork Caliph) by Mihály Babits. It tries to analyse the traces of the whim and the whimsical operation of the writing act from the stories the main figures of which have mental problems due to the confusion of the memories of reality and dream. It is confirmed that Jósika's – according to the genre – whimsical novel necessarily overwrites the interpretation which would assure obtaining the „healthy reality” over the reception taken under the „fancies of whim”. In *Két élet* a “borrowed text” appears unexpectedly, a chronicle which contains the protagonist's, Kálmán Szécsi's dreams in a previously written form. This chronicle proves that the text does not draw the lessons which would guarantee the continuous writing of the family history. Although Szécsi recovers and the identity of his dream-self (doppelganger) crushes, the appearance of the chronicle proves that the Other in his dreams is not an individual figure constructed during dream-work but participant of the collective memory of the family. The authority who can be linked to the writing act of the text, that is, the author who countersigns the preface would like to simulate the operation of Szécsi's consciousness. Nevertheless, he realises that the portrait hall containing the pictures of his hero's ancestors depends on the narrative parameters of the linguistic process and their inscriptions. Moreover, the confusion of names, which seems to be a failure, can be interpreted as a necessary consequence coming from the collective recollection and present experience reading each other, as they appear as layers of writing copied on each other. In the *A gólyakalifa* the „whimsical” strategy of writing is counterweighted by the authority of a

Writer. According to the letter at the end of the novel, the notes of Elemér Táborny's testament could not have become public without the written reflections narrating the journey of the bunch of manuscripts, their elaboration, and publication. Except for the record of the „murder” with a negative end as opposed to the one in *Két élet*, which cannot be written down in a first-person narrative. According to the letter of the Writer, the text contains a lot of deletion signs, since its editor rewrote every name, governed by the desire of encryption. This is why the name-loss of the Caliph is a negative experience, which cannot be restored by any rereading. In view of this fact, the novel can be interpreted as a narrative in which the problematic identities are articulated in a multifaceted way. While Táborny, as an ideal reader, is dealing with dream-theories and writing articles, the literacy of his other self manifests in the experiences of automatic writing, *passing* time by reading consumable texts, and facing bars formed of letters, which block meaning. The civil servant can only remember that his ambitions for literacy remain eternally empty because of the self-destructive and unfulfillable structure of his desire. Nevertheless, these identifications help him strengthen his individual frames which deconstruct the unity of Táborny's consciousness step by step.

The second chapter attempts to compare the novels *Kísértet Lublón* (Ghost at Lubló) by Kálmán Mikszáth and *A podolini kísértet* (The ghost of Podolin) by Gyula Krúdy. The dissertation analyses the relationship of the materiality and the spirit of mediation from the point of view of the “credit” of communication (the cooperation between sending and approving of information). Its aim is to “decipher” the codes of credit. The dissertation points out that the poetics of the texts is based on the contradictions of the different cognitive levels of oral and written contexts. On the other hand, it also allows for the use of compilations. These features lead to the condition in which meanings that have already been coded and cyphered as information or data can be *valued*. Moreover, they lead to an uncontrollable transcription act which forces the constant reinterpretation of the credibility criterion containing the value of originality. The analysis of these changes approaches the historical genre of *regény* (novel), trying to poetise the firm meaning of the past, from the direction of the reality appearing in 19th century prose-theories in order to emphasize that the texts in question construct the credibility components of the “contract” established while reading instead of the “realist” paradigm of the credit *already given*. Thus, the economic (symbolic) logic of the exchange of goods and the allegoric logic of pledges of frozen assets operates within the frames of “monetary” reading. While in *Kísértet Lublón* the change of identities (its superstitious and official explanation) becomes a *ghostly* sign, in *A podolini kísértet* the fantastic impression derives from the experience of “timelessness” caused by the time

spent in pawn. The latter context performs a dream-like mnemotechnics which gives a rhythmic repetition of a corpus of texts connected to Rákóczi in the collective memory, especially in the event of stealing the signifiers as the fundamental law of being out of space and time. The writing acts would inscribe the indices of credibility by the handling different sources, however, these attempts fail half way. The *story-teller* of Mikszáth realises by compiling old stories that the centuries-old history of the ghost of Mihály Kaszperék can be explained rationally. He writes down and publishes the events after retelling them many times, but in the attachments of *Kísértet Lublón* we can read that the protagonist multiplied by the *transcription* escapes the writer's authority. The *A podolini kísértet* is the consequence of reading Mikszáth but the story-teller of Krúdy is aware of the fictive space of Lubló of Mikszáth as well as his own texts about Podolin. Meanwhile, he has to construct his script from the ambivalent fragments of oral tradition instead of "concrete" historical sources. By the use of some inner (fictive) sources, he realises that these legends are extremely ambivalent. On the horizon of the writing acts, this means that the variants of the story undermine the cohesion of the *A podolini kísértet*. Another puzzle comes from the reminder of the structure of the pawn: the dating of the text seems to "misappropriate" six years. Although the text was published in 1906, the real date is 1900 according to the final note. These traces of not being credible can only have a negative effect on the mimetic-referential reading strategies, as the modern aspects of authentication (as opposed to the classical strategies of credit) encourage the involvement of readers. Mikszáth's story-teller creates a narrative frame to strengthen its conditions. The strong effects of presence while reading can be experienced by the processes encouraging involvement. Thus, readers can acquire strategies of the interpretation of being and techniques of reading the existence by authentications and transitions between the real world and the world of letters. These techniques include the recognition that poetic representations of history cannot be structured as objective relations but they encourage constant reinterpretations through the acts of empathy and understanding.

The third chapter of the dissertation compares *A jövő század regénye* (The Novel of the Next Century) by Mór Jókai and the *A kristálynézők* (The Crystal Gazers) by Kálmán Harsányi, arguing that writing is permanently forced by reading. In this case the "task" of reception is to construct a virtual space the imaginary frames of which are developed by the experience of reading preceding writing and which create a medial surface on which the writing act becomes visible. The "references of reality" in *A jövő század regénye* cannot be *proof-read* through ordinary ways, for example by the theory of the Fantastic of Todorov. Although the important statement of the preface is that the novel calculates the future from the present

of writing (this way it can be operated as the forthcoming memory of the present), it can presuppose feedback points in the form of sources compiled by the writing act. Therefore, the interpretations can lean on the different media of the novel's plot set in the 20th century. It can be stated that the novel transposes the media of its own present into the future (excluding the newspaper called *Asztrapé* written in stenographic signs and printed by machines reminding of a photocopier). Neither the photograph, nor the telegraph, nor the press show new medial features. At the same time, the semantic code of the daily newspaper called *lightning* "reports" the experience of a paradigmatic shift used by the novel, namely the technologizing of nature. The first aeroplane made of the fantastic mineral, the ichor-crystal inscribes the myth of romantic creation in the text (along with the protagonist, Dávid Tatrangi, the Szekler Sabbatarian, who bears the characteristics of a romantic "superhero"). This inscription is represented by the "divine" attribute of *ichor* (originally the fluid of gods), the metamorphosis of the figure during his flight, and the possibility of "omniscience" which comes from the new perspective. The mirror-image of this condition is represented by the figure of Evil, Lady Sasza. In her case the romantic of creation is unveiled in the – technically determined – stages of *artificiality* and manipulation. She stages the blood-river of the mythical story spectacularly with her "steam guillotine", and she efficiently destructs the concurrent newspapers with the help of her paper, *Éva almái* (Apples of Eve). The plot rewrites universal history as the narrative develops. In his experience of eschatology Tatrangi goes back to the earliest sources of Hungarian prehistory when he discovers the Hungarians of Friar Julianus in Kin-Tseu, and when he traverses Milky Way as Prince Csaba. The text replays the events of Babel in the form of "world-script", thus, the *apocatastasis* materializes through the appearance of planet *Pax* which occurs as the consequence of the reasons outlined in the preface.

The aim of *A kristálynézők* is to outline the conditions of a world without letters. The "visions" become empirical "reality" with the help of a crystal in this novel as well. Nevertheless, it is problematic whether everyone can see the images that appear in the crystal of Fábíán Balogh who starts his way of living *letter-less* after the trauma he suffered, or if these images are the fantasies of a disintegrated mind. According to the present interpretation, the loss of letters is only an illusion, since the monomaniac repression of the urge to write operates only in the stage of romantic-like recording, which can be regarded as the synonym of *creation*. Otherwise, writing – as inscription from the immateriality of memory – beats and destructs the letter-less state: at the beginning of the novel, Balogh is participating in the performance of *St. Matthew Passion* during which he is writing a letter on a page of sheet music forced by the flow of his memories. Furthermore, he often recalls the traumatic events

connected to the burned manuscript of his novel and the murder of his child. At this point the letters appear as their own “photonegatives” in the context of a photographic memory. The unavoidable mediality of writing is also underlined when an actress – during the tests which should verify crystal gazing – can dub the images of the crystal by retelling previously memorised information of museum catalogues. After the replay of his trauma Balogh enters into his desired future space and time. He becomes the prisoner of his own crystal, and he *experiences St. Matthew Passion* as a performer. Finally, he starts automatic writing and becomes a writing-machine (a human typewriter), an impersonal medium. Parallely, writing is “blocked” by the experience of the destruction of a manuscript (a text called *Budapest lelke / Soul of Budapest*) representing an oeuvre similar to *transcribed life*. However, blocked writing transforms into images. Consequently, the reading experiences of Balogh are *projected* through the moments of imaginary reading, and as its fantastic version, as the ideas of writing are postponed in a stage where rewriting is not possible. Meanwhile, in Balogh’s “image-writing” the unpredictable future is perceptible only through the image sequences of the past tracing back to written signs. The calculus coming true in the writing act of *A jövő század regénye*, is concentrated in the attempts made by the experimental plot in *A kristálynézők*. Presaging the “multimedial” operation of the novel, in the preface we can read about the sound wave *drawings* of Chladni’s vibrating plates and the divergent experiences coming from the different perspectives of a three-dimensional *punctuation mark* standing in the middle of a circle of the novel’s characters. Balogh activates imagination by the symbol of the aeroplane and uses oriental (prehistoric) codes similarly to Jókai’s novel: he hears Hungarian words at a Babylonian market but his desired future also means that he returns to the roots of the Hungarians. This refers to the fact that narratives heading to the future cannot avoid the regressive inscription of their own *memory*.

In the case of the last pair of texts, the dissertation compares two novels that are the most distant in time from each other among the texts analysed in the dissertation. The distance in time between the novels (*Magyar titkok* by Ignác Nagy and the gothic novel entitled *A Pendragon legenda* by Antal Szerb) can be bracketed by the postmodern doctrine which opposes different and ambivalent patterns in order to address the texts following the aim of the dissertation. Parallel to this, the poetic formulas of metafiction are also applied, as the novels forcefully reflect on their own textuality. Both contain the self-presenting traces of additional elaboration but the writing acts demonstrate this experience in different ways. What is especially apparent on the “postmodern” horizon is that the “author-character” of *Magyar titkok* writes a letter to the publisher after he has recognized himself as a character in

an earlier text. The speaker, who obtains his voice by the exchange of letters, steps over the limit between the real world and the world of letters with the help of a comical story of origin in which he destructs the signifier of his nickname and unfolds it as a texture. The game with the signifier is present throughout the whole text but special footnotes underlining the polyphone style also appear: Bende is permanently reflecting the “perfect” harmony of signifier and signified (for example in the names of streets with motivated meaning), questioning the romantic ideas of the certain arbitrariness – creativity – of signifying. A separate chapter interprets the birth and origin of *Magyar titkok*. According to this, Bende learns the controversies of Hungarian life from an evil ghost in his dream that he later transcribes “with the help of” an automatic pen. In the dream-scene the future title of the novel becomes visible by a *laterna magica*. Even though the novel does not thematise media openly – except in the chapter named *Daguerreotype*, an early form of the photograph –, it has many intermedial reflections which qualify the physiological and mnemotechnical descriptions. Many characteristics of the “news service system” which regularly appears in the genres of *Magyar titkok* as well as the afterword of the novel can be emphasised. In the latter, a character appears “from behind” Bende and he answers the reactions generated by the novel published in booklets and the relations between genre and novel, which is represented by the metaphor of *red thread*. This is unlike *A Pendragon legenda* which does not mark or highlight the borders of the literary genres it uses. This architextural polyphony has been underlined by contemporary Hungarian criticism as well as foreign reception of the 21st century English translation of the novel. Although the first Hungarian *gothic novel* can only perform the original patterns of spookiness as a parody in 1934 – more than one and a half century later than the novel of Walpole, which introduced the genre –, it follows the poetics of the genre which has been defined as the modern version of the epic poem by Babits’s *Kritika* (Criticism). Beside becoming the variant of mass literature of interpretative reading by the Belle Époque, in the case of Antal Szerb the detective novel validates the reading that aims decoding mysteries in the context of philological deciphering. The protagonist, János Bátky feels himself comfortable in the world of books, he compulsively textualises his experiences and adjusts his perception of his environment to what he read before. Thus, Bátky loses hold over the investigation as a philologist, and he faces defeat on another front as well. For he should interpret the codex containing ancient secret (Rosicrucian) doctrines in order to solve the mystery of the ghostly horseman who protects the Pendragon family, however, the “mysteries of nature” behind the letters only “dawn” to him. Since the reading of the world – as metaphor of the *book of nature* – fails, there is no explanation for the fantastic

elements. Furthermore, Bátky is tricked by his own memory of texts: among the numerous quotations of the dream-scene leading to the solution he forgets the very name, Benjamin Avravel, the signifier of a “dream” figure, that has been given to him by the Welsh earl, the offspring of the ghostly horseman, at the beginning of the novel

The interplay of world and letter-world, the hermeneutic interpretation of being, and philological decoding is accompanied by a lecture of Antal Szerb given in the 1930’s in which he considers the Rosicrucian myth a lie. Thus, the novel confronts its contemporary meta-text and “reference point”. The direct cause of this fact was not entirely the production of the Dream Factory: the experience of films, which at the same time deepened and prevented the interpretation of the world and reached much bigger masses than its rival, the world of letters, could have contributed to the fact that alternative realities became used as models for life.

Finally, the chapter contrasts the anthology *Éjjél* (Midnight), which got rather negative criticism when it was published in 1917, with the experience of the detective story becoming a major genre in film at this time. The argumentation points out that the aesthetist canon of the first part of the 20th century could easily use the writing strategy of “pulp”. For example, the writing acts of *A gólyakalifa* and *A Pendragon legenda* used such techniques that could not be found in the textual corpus of high-literature insisting on the system of aesthetic value.

III.

In the final chapter the dissertation sums up the most important experiences and results and places them in an “evolutionary” context. That is, the argumentation leans on the evolutionary tradition of the history of genres, and reshapes some of its terms. Accordingly, interaction of genres is discussed with the rhetoric of *hybrid forms* which contain the traces of *mutations* and medial turns. This assumes the succession of metamorphoses and the personalised entities of texts from those who give voice to the readers who perceive their voice and start a dialogue with them. The dissertation proceeds with the theory of Tivadar Thienemann, namely that the press called longhand has created the new type of readers competing with book-literature, promoting, at the same time, the Romantic anti-writing tendencies of the turn of 19th and 20th centuries and the counteraction against the strengthening letter-world. The main question of the eight chapters of the dissertation is how and by what form the vocal codes of orality got transferred to literacy. It is confirmed that in the analysed works the loud dialogue, the chit-chat becomes a playful secretive relationship, which disarrays the traditional hierarchy of relation between text and reader. The destruction of the myth of the narrative omniscience and the spread of crossing borders accompanied by metalepsis also belong here. This can

prove the existence of a censorial function taking part in the “control” of the writing act, since the text loses its primary source of control by the changing identities of the narrative voice. The dissertation distinguishes the levels of censorial activity realised in the writing act by the 18th-19th century typology of Franz Karl Hägelin. The levels range from complete prohibition through limited concessions to free reading. These can be perceived in the novels as three aspects. First, some texts suffer censorial provisions (for example, *A jövő század regénye* could be published in greater number only after the end of Communism); second, some texts imitate or thematise the operation of the censorship; third, some of them are marked by “psychological” traces of censorship of consciousness during the numerous dream-scenes.

Through the interpretation of the short story entitled *A láthatatlan seb* (The invisible Wound) by Jókai, the epilogue states that the previously analysed texts give an insight to a letter-like materiality which seems to be unreadable (hieroglyphic). This, however, contains immaterial attributes (references) due to its textuality. Reading is an attempt to arrange imaginary “source-texts” into the *signs* of a text. Although each of the individual signs behave as unbreakable codes, this is why they cannot manage to turn into a materiality independent from immateriality. It can be stated that *the potential space of writing is always constructed by a previously inscribed and archived experience of reading. The experience of reading constantly modifies the writing act subject to time, which is completed by its own textual memory. The writing act is partly unconscious (unreflected), as its phases with unseen consequences are attached to the inscription of the signs of “whim”. An action captured as grapheme and pointing to the opposite direction builds the patterns of “credibility” into the text. With this, the premises of another aesthetic function, namely reading (receptivity) – the receptive perception and temporal interpretation – are verified, following institutional-communicative parameters.*

Finally, the dissertation states that literature considers the universe of texts in a quantitative (and not qualitative) sense in postmodernity. This explains the theory of Barth about the impregnation and “exhaustion” of literature. The originally disturbing effect of multi-layered texts (considered as palimpsests) can be captured in the confusion which is caused by the homogenisation of the constantly evaporating tradition of texts. For the majority of host texts cannot be identified, and can hardly be recognised as descending from the corpus of the text, even though the writing is carried and made visible by the virtual surface consisting of them.

IV.

PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE TOPIC OF THE THESIS

András WIRÁGH, *A térbe vetett hang aspektusai. Harsányi Kálmán: A kristálynézők*, It 3 (2010), 355-373.

András WIRÁGH, „Túl” a *fantasztikumon. Megjegyzések Cholnoky Viktor novellisztikájához*, Iskolakultúra 8-9 (2011), 51-60.

András WIRÁGH, *A kedvező megvilágítás „hermeneutikája”. Észrevételek A Pendragon legenda olvasandóságáról = Regényművészet és íráskultúra.* szerk. Árpád KOVÁCS Árpád – Katalin SZITÁR, Argumentum, Budapest, 2012, 254-270.

András WIRÁGH, *Az írás szépszélye. Jósika Miklós: Két élet – Babits Mihály: A gólyakalifa*, It 3 (2013), 375-399.

András WIRÁGH, *A történelem vadhajtasai és mellékzöngéi. Mikszáth Kálmán: Kísértet Lublón – Krúdy Gyula: A podolini kísértet. Bevezető vázlat = Esemény és költészet. Tanulmányok Kovács Árpád hetvenedik születésnapjára*, szerk. Katalin SZITÁR and other, Pannon Egyetem, Modern Filológiai és Társadalomtudományi Kar, Veszprém, 2014, 144-149.

András WIRÁGH, *Egy előszó, és ami mögötte van* (Éjféli Magyar írók misztikus novellái, 1917), before publishing (konferenciakötet és Kalligram)