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Lessons from a Book in Alba Iulia
Tamás Balásfi: *Epinicia*, 1616

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ABSTRACT
The only complete copy of Tamás Balásfi's *Epinicia Benedicto Nagi* known today is preserved among the old books at the Batthyaneum in Alba Iulia (Gyulafehérvár). This work was published in Pozsony in 1616. According to current knowledge, only three copies of this small volume, consisting of about forty pages, have survived. The copy in the Hungarian National Library is missing the entire first sheet (A), including the title page and dedication, as well as two pages from the end. This small book is particularly significant for the study of Péter Pázmány's controversial writings before his archbishopric, representing the final piece in a series of polemics (1614–1616) written against the Lutherans of Western Transdanubia. Pázmány became archbishop in 1616 and was either unable or unwilling to continue engaging in this controversy, leaving Tamás Balásfi to conclude the polemic on his behalf. At the end of this paper, I will provide a transcription of a missing part from the Budapest copy: the Latin dedication at the beginning of the book.

Keywords: Péter Pázmány, Tamás Balásfi, Catholic-Protestant controversy, polemics, theology, Catholic Reformation

The only complete copy of Tamás Balásfi's *Epinicia Benedicto Nagi* known today is preserved among the rare books at the Batthyaneum Library in Alba Iulia.1 This work was published in Pozsony (present-day Bratislava) in 1616, printed by the Archbishop's printing house. As far as is known, only three copies of this slim volume, comprising around forty pages, have survived. The copy held by the Hungarian National Library is missing the entire first sheet (including the title page and dedication) and two pages from the end (Balásfi 1616). This

1 National Library of Romania, Batthyaneum, Alba Iulia, Title: B 3 IV.19.

modest book holds particular interest for the study of the life and work of Péter Pázmány, the preeminent Hungarian Baroque polemicist and later Archbishop of Esztergom.

Polemical works constitute a substantial portion of Pázmány's *oeuvre*. Nearly forty of his writings were published, encompassing twenty-six distinct works, as some were reissued multiple times by Pázmány himself. His polemical writings are best understood in relation to their intended audience and the specific works he engaged with in dispute. Each controversy typically unfolded as a series, with Pázmány responding to a particular work and often prompting further replies. One of his principal argumentative strategies was to always have the last word, leaving no challenge unanswered.

The *Epinicia* is part of a series of polemics directed against the Lutheran preachers of Western Transdanubia,[2] and it serves as the final piece in this series. In 1613, Pázmány published his *Kalauz* [A Guide to Divine Truth], a monumental work nearly a thousand pages long in its first edition. This edition (reprinted two more times during Pázmány's lifetime, in 1623 and 1637) incorporated nearly all of his earlier writings, making it Pázmány's most extensive, multi-thematic work. Following the publication of the *Kalauz*, he engaged in debates with those who challenged it. The *Kalauz* prompted Protestant scholars both to refute it and to articulate their own beliefs and principles in greater detail, often through translations of foreign works.

In 1614, the Lutheran preacher Imre Zvonarits of Csepreg translated Matthias Hafenreffer's *Loci theologici, certo methodo ac ratione in tres libros tributi* (Jena, 1601) (Hafenreffer 1614). (Hafenreffer was a Lutheran theologian at Tübingen.) Benedek Nagy, a schoolmaster from Kőszeg, wrote a preface (*Praefatio*) endorsing this work, and therein launched an attack on Pázmány's *Kalauz*, as Pázmány had previously written against Hafenreffer. Later that year, Pázmány published his response under the pseudonym Miklós Szyl (Pázmány 1614).

The counter-response arrived swiftly: in 1615, Benedek Nagy and Imre Zvonarits published their joint work, *Pázmány Péter Pironsági* (Zvonarits–Nagy 1615), a substantial volume that, in addition to theological arguments, contained numerous personal remarks. At the end of the book, readers find four Latin and three Hungarian satirical anagram poems targeting Pázmány and his *Kalauz*.

In 1616, Pázmány issued his rebuttal, *Csepregi szégyenvallás* (Pázmány 1616), printed in Prague under his own name. Throughout this text, Pázmány's anger is palpable; the somewhat patronizing yet jovial sarcasm that marked his earlier *Csepregi mesterség* is notably absent. Instead, he counters his opponents' points with rigorous theological arguments, supported by extensive annotations.

In 1616, the year Pázmány became Archbishop, he either could not – or chose not to – dedicate more time to this controversy. For

2 For more on the Debate of Faith, see Ajkay 2021, 69-82.

instance, he did not respond to the satirical poems mocking his name and the *Kalauz*; instead, this task was taken up by Tamás Balásfi, one of Pázmány's most devoted followers. Balásfi, born about a decade later than Pázmány in Cluj (Kolozsvár) and also from a Protestant noble family, eventually became Bishop of Bosnia, then of Vác, and later of Pécs. He lived and wrote in Pozsony until his death in 1625. An active participant in Pázmány's polemical struggles, Balásfi was entrusted by the newly appointed Archbishop with editing several of Pázmány's works.

In this West Transdanubian controversy, Balásfi published two volumes following Pázmány's polemical writings, ultimately concluding the debate. His first work, a nearly five-hundred-page rebuttal to the *Csepregi iskola* (Balásfi 1616), harshly critiques each Lutheran thesis, following Pázmány's approach and employing extensive annotations. This book, published in December, reflects Balásfi's knowledge of and reliance on Pázmány's earlier *Csepregi szégyenvallás* from the same year (1616). In his introduction "To the Christian Reader", Balásfi praises Pázmány, asserting that no one in the nation has done more, or more valuable, work for the defence of the Mother Church.

Balásfi's argumentation mirrors Pázmány's, adopting his style and even incorporating popular or amusing vernacular expressions, sarcasm, and vibrant language – albeit in a somewhat more forceful, even coarse, tone. He justifies his contribution by stating that it is beneficial to defend the truth from multiple perspectives. His primary goal is to demonstrate that the preacher in Csepreg, Imre Zvonarits, contradicts core Lutheran beliefs. Accordingly, he methodically refutes each point made by Zvonarits and Benedek Nagy.

While *Csepregi iskola* was primarily directed at Imre Zvonarits (as shown by the 36-page preface addressed to him), Tamás Balásfi's other book, published in 1616, was aimed at Benedek Nagy. Titled *Epinicia Benedicto Nagi*, this work is much shorter, around forty pages, and contains verse intended as mockery. Balásfi returned the favour for the satirical anagrams mocking the Archbishop by composing similar verses himself. The book includes fifteen Latin anagrams, forty-seven Latin epigrams, and nine Hungarian anagrams fabricated in the name and person of Benedek Nagy,[3] as well as a Latin poem criticizing Lutheran followers of Hafenreffer in general.

In the Hungarian introduction for readers, Balásfi mentions that the Lutherans were planning to translate Pázmány's *Kalauz*, originally written in Hungarian, into Latin. Their aim was to send it to Wittenberg so that professors there could respond authoritatively. It was already widely known within Pázmány's circle that this translation was underway. While the identity of the translator of Pázmány's *Kalauz* into Latin remains uncertain (and the translation itself is not extant or known), we do know that Bishop István Klaszekovics received inquiries

3 The poems in Hungarian can be found in volume 8 of the 17th century series of the RMKT (Komlovszki–Stoll 1976, 216-218).

from Erzsébet Czobor, wife of Palatine György Thurzó, about the progress of the translation, which was still incomplete as of February 1620. Hungarian students later brought it to Wittenberg in June of that year (Gyurás 1987, 392-393). In 1622, the Wittenberg professor Friedrich Balduin began composing a response, which was published in 1626 under the title *Phosphorus veri Catholicismi*. From Balásfi's introduction, we learn that one of the Latin translators of the *Kalauz* was indeed Benedek Nagy.

The Hungarian copy lacks the Latin introduction at the beginning and two anagrammatic mocking poems at the end. The introductory dedication is addressed to György Hetesi Pethe, son of Baron László Hetesi Pethe, commander of the Upper Hungarian armies and chief bailiff of Torna County. László Hetesi Pethe played an instrumental role in Pázmány's election as Archbishop of Esztergom in 1616, and his wife, Anna Kapi, had requested that Pázmány write his *Imádságos könyv* in 1606. In 1616, György Hetesi Pethe was still a young man of great promise and would later marry Zsuzsanna Balassa of the Colony.

In the dedication, Tamás Balásfi expresses his high regard and friendship for György Hetesi Pethe, describing their shared admiration for Pázmány. Balásfi explains that he did not originally intend to engage in verse, as he saw no need to address the attacks on the Catholic Church and its esteemed leaders. Nonetheless, he decided to respond in kind so that "these fools" would not believe their criticisms held any weight. Balásfi's purpose was to prevent an "unskilled poet" and his ignorant supporters from taking satisfaction in their poems, which had targeted an unparalleled scholar like Pázmány. Thus, he counters with "poems for poems and anagrams for anagrams," not to provoke further attacks but to show that any opposition would be met with the same rigor in every genre. He suggests that Benedek Nagy will meet a fate similar to that of Péter Alvinczi, who also attacked Pázmány insolently and received a fitting rebuttal.

This statement underscores Balásfi's critical role as Pázmány's assistant during this period. The second controversy with Péter Alvinczi (the first occurring in 1609) coincided with Pázmány's disputes with Lutheran preachers in Western Transdanubia. In 1614, Pázmány published two treatises against Alvinczi (Pázmány 1614a; 1614b), leaving the printing and final revision of the second to Balásfi, as he was preparing for a trip to Rome. As a result, Balásfi was intimately familiar with these texts and concluded the debate with Alvinczi on Pázmány's behalf. Similarly, he closed the dispute with the Lutheran preachers of Csepreg, not only editing Pázmány's works but also contributing two of his own.

The introductory text sheds light on the chronological sequence of publications from that year, as Balásfi notes in the dedication, dated April 28, that "the real rejoinder" had already been prepared in Prague and would soon silence the "constantly shouting brat" (referring to Benedek Nagy). This indicates that Pázmány's second reply, *Csepregi szégyenvallás*, was published in the early months of 1616.

The Latin dedicatory letter is signed "Thobias Benedictus Eleemosynis Extitit Beatus". While challenging to interpret, the initials TBEEB can be deciphered as *Thomas Balásfi Electus Episcopus Bosniensis*, or "Thomas Balásfi, Elected Bishop of Bosnia". The Hungarian initials BTBP similarly stand for *Balásfi Tamás Bosnian Püspök* (Bishop) (Frankl [Fraknói] 1868, 159). Pázmány used a similar notation in his work against Calvin's *Institutio* (Pázmány 1609), with the abbreviation S.T.D.P.P., which stands for *Sacrae Theologiae Doctor Petrus Pázmány*. His work *Öt szép levél* (printed in 1609), written against Péter Alvinczi, appeared with the same notation.

The following text is entirely absent from the Budapest copy. Vilmos Fraknói previously referenced the Alba Iulia copy, but he too only knew of it second-hand, based on another's account (Frankl [Fraknói] 1868, 158-159). Every component of this small book is significant: the poems are vital to the history of lyric poetry in Hungarian and Latin, while the preliminary texts offer insight into the religious debates of the period. Tamás Balásfi's role is particularly noteworthy in Pázmány's early controversies, as he was the only known figure to actively participate in these debates alongside Pázmány. The Archbishop's trust in him was evident, as he entrusted Balásfi with the final press-editing of his own text. Given the rarity of the Alba Iulia publication, it is valuable to present the missing portion here in transcription.

> {A2:} SPECTABILI, AC MAGNIFICO IVVENI, DOMINO, GEORgio Pethe, de Hetes, Domino, in Ormosd, Szaduara, Ruso, Kis Tapolczian, et Eberhard, Domino, et tanquam fratri dilectissimo: foelicitatem precatur a Domino.
>
> NOn fuit vnquam, animus meus, Nobilissime Iuuenis, cum Tricone isto, et valde rudi Koezegiensi Magistello, carminibus altercandi, praesertim vero, cum foeces istas hominum, quae in dehonestandam Ecclesiam Catholicam, turpandosque viros sapientissimos, irritis conatibus effunduntur, tantum illis nociturae, quantum sordes aliae, Solaribus radijs, naturae meae, quodam quasi ductu, mirum sit, quam facile semper contempserim. Sed quoniam tam altis, et crassis, ignorantiae tenebris, Lutherus, et Calvinus, haeredes suos inuoluerunt, vt vel ea, quae et virgis, digna sunt, et verbere, si tamen ab illis, in nos, quocunque impu-{[A2v]:}dentiae, mendaciorum, et fraudum genere, confingantur, et conscribantur, apertae statim veritatis nomine, pulcherrimae artis laudibus, publicatione, honore, quin et munere ornanda, et compensanda censeantur a Lutheranis,

et Calvinistis: ad quae si taceamus non quia pueriles illorum ineptias, tyrocinia, et nugas contemnamus, sed quia respondere illis nesciamus, arbitrantur, atque ita qui stulti sunt, magni sibi videntur sapientes.
Ne itaque plus illi, quam nos, vel de solis profundiorum disciplinarum corticibus, habere videantur, (nihil enim habent illarum succi) quo, ego, hoc est, corticum nomine, voces, et verba intelligo, et orationem, siue solutam, vt vocamus, siue certis metrorum legibus colligatam, quae similitudine quadam sicut corticibus arbores, earumque medullae obducuntur, ita humanam ambiunt rationem, eiusque quasi medullam, et vitam, omnes disciplinas: ea tamen vicissim dissimilitudine, vt non sicut arbores corticibus insunt, ita Philosophia, vel Theologia dictioni, et scriptioni, sed illarum domicilium in spiritualibus animae facultatibus est constitutum: scriptis autem, et oratione tanquam instrumentis vtimur sensus nostros explicandi: ne inquam insulsus Literator, et Poetaster Paedagogus, magno scilicet {A3:} Anagrammatum, aliorumque suorum carminum artificio, quibus doctissimo, atque incomparabili viro, Petro Pazmany insultat, in voluptatem suam gaudeat, ne inter pares suos, aeque atque ipse est, commodos ad lyram, in vulgo scilicet Praedicantico, inter applaudentes ipsi, nobisque obmurmurantes Magistras, et Praedicantissas, inter dignas operculis patellas, glorietur, habet pro carminibus carmina, habet Anagrammata pro Anagrammatibus, non quia illis, quibusdam quasi irritamentis, homulum Epicureum, frustra in nos furore suo debacchantem, in maiorem rabiem velim exacuere, sed quo exemplum capiat, nihil nobis esse facilius, quam omni liberalium artium, artificiorumque genere praestare et Lutheranis, et Caluinistis, et quo verbosa doctrinae simulatio, hac quoque ratione castigetur. An, non ita pridem, locutuleius ille antea, iam vero victus, et mutus Alvincius, simili propemodum insolentiae genere, non obganniuerat Pazmanio? responsum accepit pro conuicijs, non conuiciantis, sed qui ostenderet, quam parui apud nos negotij esset, et quam triuiale, verba verbis connectere, etiam si subijcienda sint metrorum legibus quam apud aduersarios quedam quasi summa est omnis illorum doctrinae: rerum enim, quarum cognitionem non habent, inopiam, verborum {[A3v]:} pompis, quamuis ne illis quidem accommodatis, ad praecepta eloquentiae, tegunt, et dissimulant.

Fit itaque cum hoc ludibundo Paedagogo, quod factum est, cum indocto Praedicante Cassouio, vt, quam in verbis, victoriam quaerunt, Pazmanianae Philosophiae, atque Theologie mancipia, Lutheranismi, et Caluinismi Administri, etiam verbis confusi, conuincantur, et pro pari culpa, imparibus opinationibus, ad rauim vsque ad rixas, ad pugnos, et pugnas, inter se dissidentes, parem quoque poenam experiantur, quam si non luerent, fierent in profunda barbarie, quotidie insolentiores.

Offero itaque tibi, non aequandum generi tuo, aut indoli, sed quod amore metitus sum tuo, munusculum, amore inquam tuo, plane et in me, et in illum singulari, quem sordentes istae Muscae, sibimet ipsis nociturae, et consumpturae semet ipsas, tanquam Candelam, in haeresum tenebris lucentem, et nimium stulte, et impudenter circumuolant. Ex quibus, ridiculus hic Soce, cui subiectis carminibus, nasturtium porrigo, sub nominibus

puerorum, quibus ille perdendis, operam suam diuendidit, ex carminificina sua, turpissimorum quorundam carminum sordes, in Solem Pazmaniani nominis effudit, cuius splendore, et calore, etsi vel nullo purgante {[A4]:} consumerentur, refundendae tamen fuerunt statim in Latrinam, vnde profluxerunt, vt iusto rerum ordine, foeces quoque, suo redderentur receptaculo.

Ridebis, et quidem non indigne, sat scio, bene carminatum, hunc carminificem, nescientem quo se vertat sub verbere: sed virgis istis flagella succedent, Pragae iam comparata, quibus, Bone DEVS, quam fortiter, quam egregie castigabitur, clamosus, et insolens Verbero, nullam vel hiscendi amplius securitatem quocunque perfugio, reperturus.

Tu interim, et me, et illum cuius causa vapulat malus Soce, dilige, et magnum, optimumque Parentem tuum, cuius viua imago esse debes, totis viribus imitare, vt Vir ille, magnis dignitatibus ornatissimus, quem, fidei Catholicae constantia, et Zelus, morum grauitas, virtutumque omnium abundantia, singulariter vero, maximis in rebus probata fidelitas, Sacrae Caesareae, Regiaeque Maiestati, tam charum fecit, te, non tantum nominis, et opum suarum, haeredem esse gratuletur, sed et omnis virtutis; imo vero, Familiae quoque tuae, tantique Patris, memoria, te succrescente, et superstite, tuorum etiam {[A5]:} meritorum monumentis, et incrementa capiat, et ad

seram vsque posteritatem propagetur. Vale. Posonij die 28. April. Anno Domini 1616.
Tui
Amantissimus
Thobias Benedictus Eleemosynis
Extitit Beatus.

Summary

In conclusion, the text and study presented above contribute significantly to the limited knowledge available on Tamás Balásfi's Epinicia. Although item 1118 of the RMNY (*Régi magyarországi nyomtatványok* [Bibliography of Old Hungarian Printed Works]) notes that the only complete copy of the work is located in the Alba Iulia and cites some missing parts from the Budapest copy, the Pázmány monographer Vilmos Fraknói and, following him, Károly Szabó also discuss the volume held in the Batthyaneum. However, for the broader Hungarian scholarly community, only the incomplete copy in the National Széchényi Library in Budapest is digitally accessible via the oszk.dk and Hungaricana RMK (*Régi Magyar Könyvtár* [Old Hungarian Library]) collections. For this reason, the availability of the full text of the Alba Iulia volume is particularly significant.

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---. *Csepregi szégyenvallás. Az az reovid felelet, melyben az Csepregi hiusagoknak, Köszegi töldalékit, veröfényre hozza* [Confession of Shame from Csepreg. A Short Reply, in Which He Reveals the Additions to the Vanities of Csepreg]. Prague, 1616.

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Author's profile

Alinka Ajkay is an habilitated associate professor at the Institute of Hungarian Language and Literature at Pázmány Péter Catholic University. Her main research interests include 18th and 19th-century Hungarian literature, the process by which Hungarian became an official language, the intertextuality of poetic forms, the history of 19th-century Hungarian lyric poetry, the life and works of Péter Pázmány, Pázmány's treatises, and 17th-century religious controversies.

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'Nobody Appreciates the Soldiers'

The Afterlife of a Hungarian Soldier Lament (Eighteenth-Nineteenth Centuries)[1]

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ABSTRACT

The variants of the song analyzed in this paper have persisted in Hungarian popular poetry (manuscript songbooks) and folklore from the 1710s to the present day. The song, composed after the fall of Ferenc Rákóczi II's War of Independence (1703–1711), expresses the grievances of soldiers regarding public order. Despite their heroism and victories, they were not appropriately honored by their noble officers, which facilitated the Habsburgs' ability to suppress the revolt. Nearly all variants of the song criticize the arrogant Hungarian nobility for their delusions. Later versions of the song transcend the Kuruc era, addressing soldiers' experiences more broadly across different historical periods. It was sung by Hungarian soldiers fighting against Napoleon and other adversaries, as well as in the context of conflicts with outlaws. Starting in the mid-19th century, the rise of "Kuruc romanticism" imbued this popular song type with renewed significance, leading new written versions to be perceived by the public as "original." The *Tyukodi Song* (*Te vagy a legény, Tyukodi pajtás* – 'You are the guy, our pal Tyukodi') stands as one of the most renowned examples. It can be regarded both as an authentic relic and as a counterfeit, reflecting its dual role in Hungary's cultural memory.

Keywords: popular poetry, 18th and 19th century, history of Hungary and Transylvania, soldier songs, the cult of the Rákóczi era

1 This paper was originally published in Hungarian as a paper on philological data (Csörsz 2013). The English version was presented on June 2, 2023, at the International Ballad Conference in Helsinki. Sincere thanks to Dávid Szabó for his assistance with the translation and to Imola Küllős for 30 years of collaborative research and text editing.

1. Soldiers, heroes, rebels

The history of Hungary exhibits a distinctive rhythm, alternating between struggles for freedom against oppressive empires and periods of lethargy following the suppression of rebellions. The battles against the Ottoman Empire during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries exemplify this pattern, as the Habsburg Empire frequently demanded repayment for its assistance against the Turks. The tragic defeat at the Battle of Mohács (1526) foreshadowed the inability of the Hungarian Kingdom to withstand the overwhelming power of the Ottoman Empire on its own. Following the occupation of Buda in 1541, the country was divided into three parts.

The western and northern regions, integrated into the Holy Roman Empire, retained the name "Kingdom of Hungary". The central areas, including much of Transdanubia and the Great Plain, fell under Ottoman control, with the border zones becoming contested territories marked by battles for fortresses and trade routes. The *Partium* ('Parts'), located east of the Tisza River at the edge of the Great Plain, along with the entire region of Transylvania, became part of the Principality of Transylvania. Although nominally independent, this principality was required to pay tribute to the Ottoman Empire.

This tripartite division persisted for nearly 150 years, severely hindering Hungary's financial and social development while fostering the survival of many archaic cultural elements. It also encouraged vernacular publishing efforts by both the Reformation and Counter-Reformation movements. The status quo impeded the establishment of a formal standing army, leading to reliance on irregular forces such as the *hajdús* (originally cattle herders turned free soldiers), noblemen's private troops, and fortress garrisons. This military organization is crucial to understanding the song type at the center of this study, as the collective memory of soldiers became closely tied to the identity of the early free-soldiers, even during the later period of the Habsburg regular army.

After the expulsion of the Turks from Hungary (1686–ca. 1730), the Habsburg Empire brought the entire territory of the Kingdom of Hungary and Transylvania under its control. This led to two significant wars of independence: one led by Prince Imre Thököly of Transylvania (1697, the "Hegyalja Rebellion") and the other by Ferenc Rákóczi II (1703–1711, the "Rákóczi War of Independence").[2] However, the broadly defined Kuruc period (1670s–1711) constitutes only a brief chapter in Hungarian history. What is known about this era was primarily documented in the eighteenth century by a posterity that remembered and debated it, rendering the period increasingly distant and rife with distortions.

The cult of the Kuruc era was multifaceted in Hungarian historical and literary tradition. On one hand, the nobility of the subsequent

2 Czigány 2004.

period (18th century) regarded it as a false promise of independence that had not been realized – an irresponsible and perilous era that pitted the country against its lawful monarch. From this perspective, Kuruc soldiers were viewed as rebellious and arrogant troublemakers, remembered in this tradition through mocking songs. On the other hand, the lower classes nostalgically revered the Kuruc era, lamenting their later burdens of heavy taxation and military obligations. Many among the poor clung to the hope of Prince Rákóczi's return from exile (even after his death in 1735), occasionally plotting new rebellions, though these aspirations gradually dissolved into the realities of the 18th century. Slowly improving living standards and the enhanced career opportunities for Hungarian nobles – such as military roles during the War of the Austrian Succession and the Seven Years' War – helped ease social tensions. These developments also left their mark on Hungarian and Central European popular poetry.

The majority of popular poetry concerning the Kuruc soldiers can be divided into two categories. Some poems are directly associated with the Kuruc period because they were sung during that time, either by supporters or detractors, or during the difficult decades before or after the rebellion. Others draw on motifs that evoke the Kuruc period and its heroes, though these texts are mostly of later origin.

The text type[3] analyzed in this study belongs to the latter category, representing the deliberately preserved rebellious traditions of the 18th century. Until the mid-19th century, this type of poetry circulated exclusively in manuscript form, with only a paraphrased version appearing in a Hungarian chapbook around 1820. This paper examines the variations of the text, its evolving contexts, and its adaptations to different historical periods, tracing the history of its manuscript transmission and the limited printed versions over nearly a century.

2. Metrical and musical background

The history of the enduring soldier's song "Nobody Appreciates a Soldier" parallels that of the famous Hungarian *Rákóczi Song*. This lament is addressed to the exiled Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II on behalf of the Hungarian nation.[4] Both melodies are archaic, originating in the seventeenth century, and their emergence predates the earliest written records. Bence Szabolcsi (1899–1973), one of Hungary's most prominent music historians, identified this melody as the "Rákóczi melody type".

The metrical tradition associated with these songs was refined through other poems before shaping these cultic compositions.[5] The tunes of the metrical forms within this tradition are closely related, forming a

3 In secondary Hungarian literature on popular poetry, the term 'text family' is used to refer to a network of closely or distantly related variants.

4 For its literary contexts see Csörsz 2024.

5 Domokos–Paksa 2016, 57-60.

distinct sub-type in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Hungarian poetry. The first couplet consists of 9, 10, or 11 syllables, while the third and fourth lines consistently contain 13 syllables, structured with a 4+4+5 caesura.

syllables	*ceasura*
9 ~ 10 ~ 11	4 | 5 ~ 5 | 5 ~ 6 | 5
9 ~ 10 ~ 11	4 | 5 ~ 5 | 5 ~ 6 | 5
13	4 | 4 | 5
13	4 | 4 | 5

Nints betsűlleti | a' Katonának
Mint volt regenten | az Kurutzsagnak
Vallyon vagyon | e' hirevel | az meltosagnak
Hogy az Iffjak | Magyar fiak | rosz betsben vagynak[6]

Two love laments from the early seventeenth century, dating to around 1616 and the 1670s, can be identified as metrical precursors to the *Nobody...* text type:

Zöngnek az erdők, | csöngnek az mezők	5 | 5
Minden jókkal | majd bétölnek | a szűkölködők	4 | 4 | 5
És bévölködők,	5
De azok is | nékem csak búszerzők.[7]	4 | 6
Édes Juliám, | gyenge violám,	5 | 5
– – – – – | aranyalmácskám,	[5] | 5
Jó illatú | és víg kedvű | sólyom-madárkám!	4 | 4 | 5
Szállj bátran én | kezemre.	4 | 3
Hozz örömet | szívemre.	4 | 3
Ne félj semmit, | édes sólymocskám![8]	4 | 5

Later, in the mid-seventeenth century, a well-known prayer from the 1650s also appears:

6 'Nobody appreciates the soldiers, / as the Kuruc soldiers appreciated them a long time ago. / Does your majesty know, / That young people, Hungarian lads have been neglected?' In the entire study, the translations are our own.

7 'The forests are resounding and the fields are chiming, / who is needy, will be filled up all of goods / and those who abound in good too, / but these only give me sorrows.'

8 'My sweet Juliet, my tender violet, / – – – – my gold apple, / my happy falcon bird who smells delicious! / Fly onto my hand, / bring happiness into my heart, / do not be afraid, my dear falcon!'

Régi hatalmú | s gazdag irgalmú,	5 | 5
Mindenek fölött | nagy igazságú	5 | 5
Szent Jehova, | áldott Isten! | Én por és hamu,	4 | 4 | 5
Te előtted, | kebeledben | futok, mint hív juh.[9]	4 | 4 | 5

From the eighteenth century (1730s) we can cite the bitter lament beginning:[10]

A szerencse | tündér kerekén	4 | 5
Öröm után | következik kén,	4 | 5
Ha mi jót ád, | akkor fémlik | neked a napfény,	4 | 4 | 5
Míg meg nem csal, | s búban nem hajt – | példa vagyok én.[11]	4 | 4 | 5

Another poem with the same metrical structure is a farewell song to a bishop, Ferenc Barkóczy: *Eger diocese, you have a reason to cry* (Román Jakabfalvy, around 1761).[12]

Egri megye, | vagyon miért sírj,	4 | 5
Nincs mód benne, | hogy bánattal bírj.	4 | 5
Énekeket, | bús verseket | könyveiddel írj,	4 | 4 | 5
Ily herceget, | ki tégedet | kedvelt, így késírj.[13]	4 | 4 | 5

One of Pál Ányos's (1756–1784) poems, the epitaph for Ferenc Nádasdy, a renowned general, conveys a rebellious message (1783):

Hová hanyatlasz, virágzó hazánk?
Hát már nem tud más, csak bu, jönni ránk?
Nem is reményli nemzetünk többé hajnalát,
 S éjjelében
Kék egében
Csillagot sem lát?[14]

The metrical structure is similar to Mihály Csokonai Vitéz's (1773–1805) patriotic anti-German poem (1790s):

9 'Holy Jehova, blessed God, who have your power from the beginning, / whose mercy is rich, and have truth above all! I am only powder and ash, so I run in front of You and Your bosom as a faithful sheep.'
10 Critical edition: RMKT XVIII/15, no. 143.
11 'On the unpredictable wheels of Fortune agony follows joy. When it gives you something good, the sun is shining – but later it misleads you and drives you into sorrow. I am an example for this.'
12 Dóbék 2019, 117.
13 'Eger diocese, you have a reason to cry, but you do not have any possibility to be sorrowful, neither to write sad songs with your tears, to accompany your prince, who loved you.'
14 'Where are you sinking, our prosperous country? / Oh, the sadness can go on ours only, no other? / Our nation does not hope for its dawn any more, / and cannot see / in its night or blue sky / any stars?'

Oh szegény Országunk! Óh szegény Hazánk!	6 | 5
El mult szabadságunk, Nyakunkon a' Hám.	6 | 5
Hová legyünk? Jaj! mit tégyünk? Csúf a' rabota.	4 | 4 | 5
Olly Országba mért nem mégyünk? Hol nincs Despota.[15]	4 | 4 | 5

Earlier versions of this verse form were widespread during the 17th and 18th centuries, serving as a musical and rhetorical model for similar lament songs. Until the mid-19th century, *Nobody Appreciates the Soldier* was the most well-known example of this type.

3. Variants in the 18th and early 19th centuries

The original text, the lament of the Kuruc soldiers (and its variants), appears almost exclusively in Protestant sources. It was first recorded in a Unitarian manuscript collection in Torda, Transylvania[16] (1754–1763), and later in the networks of major Calvinist colleges along the Tisza in Eastern Hungary, including Debrecen, Sárospatak, and, to some extent, Pápa in the Transdanubian region. These schools were renowned for their Hungarian patriotic education and played a key role in promoting the cult of the Kuruc period during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In contrast, variants of the *Rákóczi Song* were recorded by Catholic scribes, and sometimes by parish priests. In Hungarian popular poetry, we occasionally observe significant differences between religious confessions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – these differences are evident not only in sacred topics but also in secular genres that might otherwise seem neutral.

The temporal distribution of the variants is also informative. The most prominent periods of circulation were between 1790 and 1810, and again in the 1820s and 1830s. It is also important to consider the re-folklorization process, exemplified by the *Tyukodi Song*, a late paraphrase that was published several times in the 1860s.

Let us now briefly review the main directions of variation and the subtypes of the song *Nobody Appreciates the Soldier*. The variants of this text type, or more specifically the periods during which this text type evolved, can be compared in a spreadsheet. The horizontal rows represent the beginning lines of the stanzas in chronological order (schematically), while the column headings correspond to the serial

15 'Oh, our poor country! Oh, our poor homeland! Our freedom was gone, so the harness is around our neck. Where should we go? What could we do? The drudgery is ugly. Why don't we go to such a country, where there are no despots?'

16 Today: Turda, Romania.

numbers of the sources. The numbers within the columns refer to the serial numbers of verses in each given variant.[17]

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	XIII	XIV
Nobody appreciates the soldiers (Nincs becsületi a katonának)	1	1						1				3		
The blood of the poor lad / the soldier is cheap (Szegény legénynek olcsó a vére)	2	3		2	1	[6]	3	2	1		1	2	1	
We liked the Kuruc era (Igen kedveltük a kurucságot)	3	2												
The poor lads were made officers (Szegény legényből tisztek tétettek)	4													
[heroic deeds of the Kuruc army, 1]	5													
	6	6												
	7													
	8													
	9													
How could we occupy Huszt castle? (Híres Huszt vára Máramarosban)	10						2	5		1	3			

17 Sources: I. *Diary of Mihály Szolga* (1745–1763), p. 287; II. *Dávidné Soltári* [Psalms of the Wife of David] (Sárospatak, North-Eastern Hungary, 1790–1791), no. 195; III. *Songbook of Imre Szeel* (Debrecen, 1790–1794), p. 144; IV. *Melodiary of István Elek* (Pápa, Transdanubia, 1805), 29a–b; V. *Songbook of Dávid Nihelszki* (Szatmár, 1806–1824), p. 153; VI. *Zőld Martzi, és a' szeretője nótáji; és egymástól való bútsúzások* [Songs of Zőld Martzi, and His Lover; and Their Farewells], undated chapbook after 1816, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár [Hungarian National Library] 821.148, pp. 12-13; VIII. *Felvidító V. Nóták I.* (Sárospatak, 1824), no. 185; IX. *Songbook of János Komáromi (1829)*, 4b.; X. *István Tóth: Áriák és dalok* [Arias and Songs] (Kiskun region, Great Plain, 1832–1843), p. 16; XI. *Melodiary from Szatmár* (1820s), pp. 64-65; XII–XIII. *Collection of R. K.* (Debrecen, 1839–1843), no. 7, pp. 63-64 and no. 10, 16b; XIV. *Songbook from Selmecbánya / Schemnitz (1830s)*, p. 70. More details and variants: RMKT XVIII/14, no. 8, notes: pp. 349-354.

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII	IX	X	XI	XII	XIII	XIV
If you have ever been to the treasured Transylvania (Ha mikor voltál kincses Erdélyben)	11	7					1	4			2	1		
[heroic deeds of the Kuruc army, 2]	12													
	13													
And who rode into Austria (De vajon ki volt mind Bécs aljáig)	14	5												
[heroic deeds of the Kuruc army, 3]	15													
	16													
	17													
	18													
All of the miracles (Ha valaholott voltanak csudák)	19													
That would have happened (Mely dolog bizony meg is let volna)		4												
Woe us, the Hungarian nation / famous rogues (Jaj már minékünk, magyar nemzetnek)				1	3	[7]			2					1
If the poor man has a little bacon (Szegény legénynek ha szalonnája)			1	3	2	1		3			4		2	2
If the outlaw desires the hard-earned wealth (De a más véres verejtékére)						2								
[Marci Zöld and his adventures]						3								
						4								
						5								

The table also demonstrates that there was only a loose connection between the representatives of this text type, yet the same melody and verse form united more distant versions. In the next chapter, an attempt will be made to classify the periods of the variants.

4. Periods and layers in the life of the text type

The history of this text type can be divided into several periods. The disproportionate features of the spreadsheet are not unique; it is generally true of Hungarian popular poetry that the earliest variant is often longer than later versions. Most stanzas are omitted due to changes in context and gradual refinement over time. Thus, the original text represents an isolated variant in the history of the text type, while shorter, more flexible (and sometimes fragmented) later versions became more popular.

In textological analysis, networks and dynamic models are more useful than genealogical connections, as they better reflect the occasional, contemporary use of the texts. The first variant (1750s) presents a coherent Kuruc theme with many details. Its central message is that, during the Kuruc period, common soldiers were still held in esteem, as they were always ready to fight for their homeland, in contrast to the nobles. However, today, "nobody appreciates the soldiers." The most important stanzas, in English translation, are:

1. Nobody appreciates the soldiers,
the way the Kuruc soldiers were appreciated long ago.
Does your majesty know,
That many soldiers, brave lads, have been neglected?

2. The blood of the poor lad is cheap,
His wage is only three worthless forints,
But he can't even spend it as he wishes,
Thus, poison, as a tormenting worm boils in his heart.

3. We admired the Kuruc era,
We received it as news,
And we believed we could earn such freedom,
That we could save and liberate our poor homeland.

4. The poor lads were made officers,
Who fought against the enemy,
Because the disputing lords were never defeated in battle,
While the soldiers fought as dragons or lions.

5–9. [heroic deeds of the Kuruc army, 1]

10. How could we occupy
The famous castle of Huszt in Maramureş?
We, poor lads, attacked from ambush,
And I saw German lords fleeing.

11. If you have ever been to the treasured Transylvania,
And seen heaps of German corpses,
They were cut by the hands of poor lads,
As demonstrated by the army of our lord and Fehérvár
[Alba Iulia].

12–13. [heroic deeds of the Kuruc army, 2]

14. And who rode into Austria,
Near Vienna?
It was the horse of the poor lads that ran, not of the lord,
Let's go, soldier, come on, hand on the sword, be faithful unto your death!

15–18. [heroic deeds of the Kuruc army, 3]

19. All of the miracles
Outside and inside [Hungary] have been brave adventures,
The poor lads fought valiantly in battles,
And only the poor men shed their blood, not the nobles.[18]

The *Dávidné Soltári* (its humorous title meaning "Psalms of the Wife of David") was recorded in Sárospatak around 1790, in a manuscript songbook belonging to a student. This songbook contains only an

18 In the Hungarian original: 1. Nincs becsületi a katonának, / Mint volt régentén a kurucoknak; / Vajon vagyon-é hírével a méltóságnak, / Hogy sok vitézek, próbált legények rut becsben vadnak? 2. Szegény legénynek olcsó a vére, / Három rossz forint szegénynek bére, / Azt sem költheti el soha szegény végtére, / Melyért méreg, kínzó féreg forr a szívére. 3. Igen kedveltük a kurucságot, / Oly igen kaptuk, mint egy újságot, / Nyerünk, gondoltuk, oly szabadságot, / Oltalmazzuk s szabadítjuk szegény hazánkot. 4. Szegény legényből tisztek tétettek, / Az ellenséggel kik szemben mentek, / Mivel a sok pártos urak meg sem verettek, / Mint sárkányok, oroszlányok, mégis küzködtek. […] 10. Híres Huszt vára Máramarosban / Miképen esék birodalmunkban? / Mi pedig szegény legények voltunk csak alattomban, / Magam láttam, tokos uram futott pallosban. 11. Ha mikor voltál kincses Erdélyben, / Német testhalmot láttál sok helyen, / (Mind szegény legény kezei vágták azt egyben) / Urunk hada, Fejérvára bizonyság ebben. […] 14. De vajon ki volt mind Bécs aljáig, / Ki nyargalódzott Ausztriáig? / Szegény legény, nem úr lova futott mindaddig; / Nosza, vitéz, no, kardra kéz, légy hű halálig! […] 19. Ha valaholott voltanak csodák, / Mind kívül-belől estek szép próbák, / Szegény legények magokat frissen forgatták, / Csak szegények, s nem úrfiak véreket onták. Diary of Mihály Szolga (1745–1763) p. 287. The complete original text in Hungarian: RMKT XVIII/14, no. 8/I.

excerpt of the text, but the original message remains intact. In the 1790s and extending into the 1800s, the moral meaning of the cracked couplets could be applied not only to the soldier's fate but to that of any poor man. The couplet "If the poor man has a little bacon" appears in the opening position in one version.

Szeginy embernek ha szalonnája
Vagyon kenyere s. testi rúhája
Furtsa tsinos felesige meleg szobája
Bár botskoros ha nem adós mi menkű baja.[19]

The most suggestive opening line is 'the blood of the poor lad is cheap'.

A katonának óltsó a vére,
Három négy krajtzár egy napi bere
Azt sem elheti meg szegény mindég kedvére
Keserűség és nagy inség száll a fejére.[20]

This period was one of the most challenging decades for the Habsburg army. Hundreds of Hungarian men were killed by cannonballs in the wars against the French, against Napoleon's army, or returned injured, crippled, and unable to work. These deeply ambivalent processes had a profound impact on Hungarian society, contrasting with the victorious battles and the strengthening of the military identity in Hungary during the eighteenth century. Consequently, in the popular poetry of the late century, marches aspiring for war, based on Western melodies and following the early Hungarian military tradition, are intertwined with laments that reflect the hardships of soldier life. Among these laments, the post-Kuruc text type can also be found.[21]

The growing nostalgia and irony accelerated the spread of the stanzas *The Noble Castle of Huszt in Máramaros* (Maramureş), *If You Have Ever Been to the Treasured Transylvania*, and *Woe Us, the Hungarian Nation*.

Jaj már mi nékünk Magyar Nemzetnek
Kik fel támadtúnk rebelliseknek
Zákány István Szuhay Mátyas kopasz fejeknek
Nagy pipájú, kevés dohányú szegény Legénynek[22]

19 'If the poor man has a little bacon, / Bread and some clothes, / A pretty wife and a warm room: / Although he is a lower noble, / If he has no debts, he does not have any troubles.' Songbook of Imre Szeel (Debrecen, 1790–1794), p. 144.

20 'The blood of the soldier is cheap, / His wage is only three or four pennies, / But he can't even spend it as he wishes, / Therefore, bitterness and big poverty fall upon his head.' *Melodiary of István Elek* (Pápa, Transdanubia, around 1805), fol. 29r-v.

21 Critical edition: RMKT XVIII/14, no. 8.

22 'Woe us, the Hungarian nation, / Who have resurrected, rebels! / Woe to the bald heads of István Zákány and Mátyás Szuhay, / And to the poor lads, who have big pipes and a little tobacco.' This stanza appeared in the late 17th century.

These stanzas – reflecting the earliest text type of the Kuruc nostalgia, are a hint to the past with comic overtones, singing about the Hungarian people, who have 'big pipes, but little tobacco'. It reflects the military noble rebellions against Napoleon (for the last time in 1809), which were large-scale, tragic events in this period.

The Hungarian army marched against France and lost the Battle of Győr (14 June 1809) in a heroic struggle. Napoleon occupied the Transdanubian region for several months. In this context, the uprising that supported the Austrian Emperor was judged in the same way as the ill-fated war of independence led by Rákóczi a hundred years earlier. Thus, the tradition of rebellion and patriotic (empire) fervor could merge in popular poetry.

A paraphrase of the Kuruc song tradition was written during this period, undoubtedly playing with these overtones, though the addressee has been changed. It became the lament of three well-known outlaws before their hanging. This song was published in a chapbook titled *Zőld Martzi, és a' szeretője nótáji; és egymástól való bútsúzások* [*Songs of Marci Zöld and His Lover*; *and Their Farewells*]. It tells the story of the notorious outlaw Marci Zöld ('Martin Green'), who was hanged in 1816. The presumed author of these poems was József Erdélyi (1795–1863), a Lutheran priest and teacher.

This broadside print can be divided into three main sections on the topic of executions. The first section features a multipart duet sung by Marci Zöld and his sweetheart. The second part contains the confessions of the outlaws (Marci Zöld, Palatintzki, Betskereki) during their interrogation in the county jail. At the end of this section, two original songs by Marci Zöld are printed, one beginning with *If the poor lad has some clothes...*, and the second, a lament, is printed alongside a woodcut depicting the three hanged outlaws.

The first song in the second section returns to the original epic structure of the text type; however, the stanzas are new (focused on the outlaws' robberies). Yet, they align with the variants of the early moralizing stanzas from the 18th century.

Szegény Legénynek teſti ruhája,
Ha van kenyere és ſzalonnája,
Felesége tsendes gondos meleg ſzobája,
Bár botskoros Ha nem adós nints ſemmi baja.

De a' más véres veréjtékére,
Ásitó 'Sivány mikor kedvére
Nyargal a' lován akkor jut Hóhér kezére,
Bár Gróf légyen örök ſzégyen száll a' fejére. […]

Jajj már minékünk nagy 'Siványoknak,
Kik feltámadtunk úton rablóknak […][23]

The transformations of the text type, as observed, impacted both the historical context and the geographical regions. The Transylvanian-originated lament spread primarily in the Protestant colleges and towns of the Great Plain.

5. Afterlife, cult

We can trace the fate of this text type into the 1840s and beyond, due to the rediscovery of poetic or musical 'Kuruc' publications. The 'Tyukodi Song' ("You are the man, our pal Tyukodi") represents a unique blend of late additional stanzas and earlier verses. It was first recorded in the 1850s and later published by Kálmán Thaly and Gyula Káldy:

Te vagy a legény, Tyukodi pajtás!
Nem olyan, mint más, mint Kuczug Balázs.
Teremjen hát országunkban jó bor, áldomás,
nem egy fillér, de két tallér kell ide, pajtás.

Szegénylegénynek olcsó a vére,
Két-három fillér egy napra bére.
Azt sem tudja elkölteni, mégis végtére
Két pogány közt egy hazáért omlik ki vére!

Bort kupámba, bort, embert a gátra,
Tyukodi pajtás, induljunk rája,
Verjük által a labancot a másvilágra,
Úgy ad Isten békességet édes hazánkra.[24]

23 'If the poor lad has some clothes, / Bread and bacon, / A quiet and tidy wife, and a warm room: / Although he is a lower noble, if he does not have any debts, / He does not have any troubles. // But if the outlaw, who covets the hard-earned wealth of others, / Rides on his horse, / And falls into the hands of the executioner, / Even if he is an earl, eternal shame falls upon his head. […] // Woe us, famous rogues, / Who resurrected as outlaws on the roads!' Chapbook *Zőld Martzi, és a' szeretője nótáji; és egymástól való bútsúzások* [Songs of Zőld Martzi, and His Lover; and Their Farewells], after 1816; Budapest, Országos Széchényi Könyvtár [Hungarian National Library] 821.148, pp. 12-13.

24 In English: 'You are the man, our lad Tyukodi, / Not like the others, like Balázs Kuczug, / Let good wine and blessings grow in our country, / We need not a penny, but two thalers, my friend. // The blood of the poor lad is cheap, / His wage is only two or three pennies a day, / But he can't even spend it, ultimately, / His blood will spill out between two pagans for the homeland! // Wine in my cups, wine, and bring some fellow to fight, / My lad Tyukodi, let's go against the enemies, / Let's beat the Labanc to the other world, / And God will give peace to our sweet homeland.'

The *Tyukodi Song* became a cultic text in Hungary and was considered an original Kuruc song throughout the twentieth century. It was published with piano accompaniment, arranged for choir, and even adapted into a novel. The fictional heroes of the song were incorporated into the novel, and 'lad Tyukodi' emerged as the allegorical figure representing the Kuruc soldiers (despite his nonexistence).

The *Tyukodi Song* is a descendant of the early Kuruc soldier's lament, both in its musical and poetic elements. Some folk music variants serve as revival data, as the song was soon included in schoolbooks, popular anthologies, and novels. Thus, the song began as a post-Kuruc, eighteenth-century lament but evolved into a Romantic Kuruc song, preserving many of its original characteristics.

The *Tyukodi Song* was a cultic text in Hungary, and it was thought to be an original Kuruc song in the twentieth century as well. It was published with piano accompaniment and arranged for choir, even adapted as a plot of a novel. The fictive heroes became the heroes of a novel and 'lad Tyukodi' became the allegorical figure of the Kuruc soldiers (although he did not even exist).

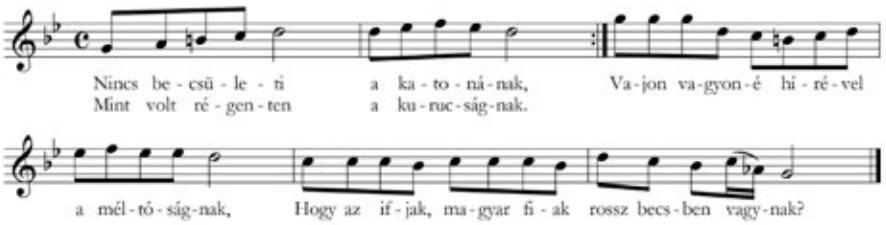
6. Summary

This study outlined the transformations and thematic changes of a rich text type from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century. As a work of popular poetry, the variations can only be partially compared, as they were sung and written in different communities. Nevertheless, it is instructive to analyze the collected variants as a network. On one hand, the literary-historical connections are clearly discernible. Over the course of the genre's evolution, the heroic deeds of the Kuruc period fade into the background and lose their relevance. The song gradually transforms from a heroic narrative into a lamentation and, by the 19th century, into a mournful, boisterous drinking song of Kuruc romanticism. Hungarian songs composed in this verse form are consistently bitter or rebellious, often carrying a patriotic message. On the other hand, the text also serves as a testimony to social history. In contrast to the cult surrounding Rákóczi's war of independence, which celebrated the 'heroic age', the soldiers of the 18th and 19th centuries present themselves as impoverished men on low wages. At times, they seek solace in an increasingly distant, cultic past, in opposition to the evils of the present (as seen in the insurgents of the Napoleonic era). The song thus becomes a bitter self-characterization of the Hungarian nation, "with a big pipe and little dough", which reflects the political changes of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Appendix: the melodies associated with this text type

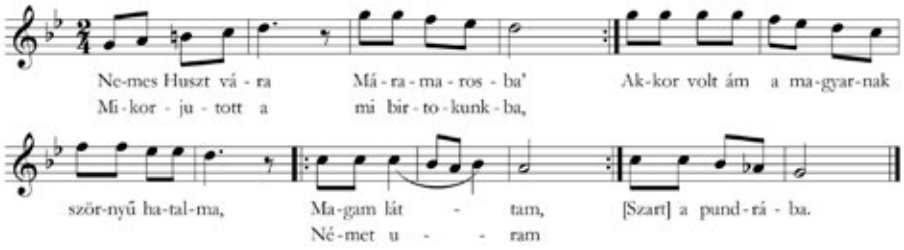
Score 1

Dávidné Soltári [Psalms of the Wife of David], 1790–1791. RMKT XVIII/14, 353.



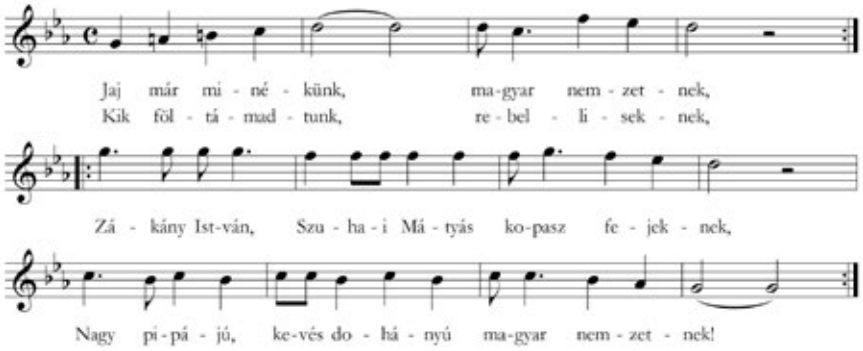
Score 2

István Tóth: Áriák és dalok [Arias and Songs], 1832–1843. RMKT XVIII/14, 353.



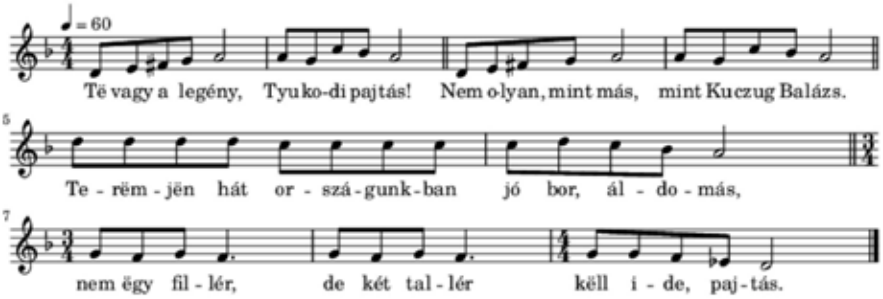
Score 3

Sámuel Almási: Magyar Dalnok [Hungarian Singer], the 1850s. RMKT XVIII/14, 354.



Score 4

The 'Tyukodi Song' (after Gyula Káldy: *Kurucz dalok: XVII. és XVIII. század* [Kuruc Songs, 17th and 18th century,] sine loci, 1892.



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Rumen István Csörsz (b. 1974) literary historian, former leader of the Research Group *Literature in Western Hungary, 1770–1820* and the series editor of *Doromb* (*Jew's Harp: Popular Poetry Papers*). He has received several honors, including the József Kiss Award (2014), the András Martinkó Award (2015), and the Ferenc Faludi Award (2017). His research focuses on Hungarian popular poetry from the 17th to the 19th centuries, the influence of folklore and popular poetry on the works of Mihály Csokonai Vitéz, Sándor Petőfi, and János Arany, as well as Central European melody families. He performs early music with the *Musica Historica* ensemble and teaches Renaissance chamber music in Csíkszereda/Miercurea Ciuc. He serves as an occasional lecturer at the Ferenc Liszt Academy of Music and has been a visiting professor of Hungarian and comparative literature at Babeș-Bolyai University.

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Layers of Tradition in Lilla Bulyovszky's Travelogue

Norvégiából: Úti emlékek (From Norway: Travel Memoires, 1866)[1]

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ABSTRACT
The paper offers an analysis of Lilla Bulyovszky's Norwegian travelogue, published in 1866. An important context for the interpretation is the socio-historical connections of the author's biography, particularly her conflicts concerning gender and nationality. Lilla Bulyovszky's subversive career led to a deprivation of her social roles in two senses: the contemporary press responded to both her "anti-national" and "unfeminine" behaviour with discursive exclusion. The second part of the paper tries to identify the cultural and literary historical traditions that enabled Lilla Bulyovszky to write *Norvégiából: Úti emlékek* in a way that bears virtually no marks of her conflicts concerning social roles. The comparative investigation ends with the conclusion that the travelogues produced by classical authors of European literature (especially Dante), and female writers (above all, Mary Wollstonecraft and Polixéna Wesselényi) provided a tradition to build on and to continue for Lilla Bulyovszky. The confidential conversational tone of her travelogue was the result of a conscious connection to available traditions.

Keywords: female travelogue, conflict of social roles, gender and nation, female literary tradition, nineteenth-century Hungarian literature

1. Conflicts of Lilla Bulyovszkyné Szilágyi's Social Roles

Lilla Bulyovszky (née Szilágyi) was born in 1833 and became a well-known actress at a very young age. At fifteen she was already playing

1 This paper was supported by the János Bolyai Research Scholarship of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

serious roles at the Hungarian National Theatre in Pest, and critics of the time predicted a great future for her. Her career showed a steady progress up to the mid-1850s, but from the second half of that decade she became increasingly neglected, presumably due to various machinations in the theatre, and received fewer significant roles. It seems that established older actresses of the time (e.g. Mór Jókai's wife, Róza Laborfalvi) did everything to push Lilla Bulyovszky into the background. The actress made a tour of Western Europe in 1857, emigrated in 1859, and pursued an acting career in Western Europe, specializing in German-language roles. Lilla Bulyovszky became one of the international stars of the era, a roaring success on every major stage in Europe. As an actress, she has not only gained European fame, but also amassed a considerable fortune. In 1875 she returned home, but was never given a theatre contract in Hungary, so at just over 40, she was unable to continue her acting career at home.[2]

The main reason for her neglect in Hungary was that building an individual career abroad (in a foreign language) instead of cultivating Hungarian-language theatre proved to be an anti-national act, almost qualifying as treason. The dominant discourse of the time perceived Lilla Bulyovszky's successful international career as the assertion of individual, selfish pursuits over communal, national interests and values. Women's self-assertion, the prioritisation of an individual career over community values, ran counter to national as well as feminine virtues (Vega 2002). A fundamental requirement of the nineteenth-century social role of the patriotic man and woman was that the individual should subordinate their own self-interest to the objectives of the community and place his or her life at the service of nation-building; in exchange, the individual (regardless of gender) was entitled to become a full member of the nation. The public success of women (especially if it was of a material nature) was difficult or impossible to reconcile with the nineteenth-century expectations pertaining to the role of the patriotic woman. As a consequence, women who have achieved individual success have typically attempted to construct a life narrative that framed individual goals as subordinate to national and community objectives. Emilia Kánya (the first female newspaper editor in the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), for example, was relatively successful in developing her own life story in such a way that her norm-breaking actions and individual career were narrated as a patriotic act of service to the community (Bozsoki 2018). Lilla Bulyovszky made similar attempts in some of her publications, particularly in her debate with Pál Gyulai (Bulyovszky 1858), but to no avail. Theoretically, constructing a framework in which cosmopolitan, individual artistic successes could be seen as serving the cause of Hungarian art should have been possible, since the artist who became famous abroad had after all gained

2 For more biographical details see: Bartha 2018, 69-81.

recognition and popularity for Hungarian art.[3] Lilla Bulyovszky did try to employ this interpretative framework in her article by referring to the example of actors who successfully performed in multiple languages: "Jerman is a member of the Berlin court theatre, who played with no mean success at the Theatre Francais (...), and Prussian writers *were proud* of this exploit" (Bulyovszky 1858, my emphasis). However, foreign language (or language-independent) theatre was not conceivable within the nineteenth-century concept of nation that was based on a community of language and tradition (S. Varga 2005).[4] Although European artistic successes could – in principle – be placed in a framework where an actress born and raised in Hungary ultimately serves the cause of the homeland abroad, since her international successes also enhance the reputation of the Hungarian nation, such an interpretative approach could not become a realistic explanation in the mid-nineteenth century.

Lilla Bulyovszky was unable to deliver a narrative framework that would effectively deflect accusations of anti-nationalism and selfish careerism in response to her self-assertive emigration and her international success (in a foreign language). Bulyovszky's individual success brought social disqualification in two senses: her work as a foreign (foreign-language) actress led to the accusation of anti-nationalism, while her high-profile career and financial success, which went against the obligatory feminine modesty, triggered the accusation of unfeminitiy. By the end of the 1850s, the press scandals surrounding her person had reached the point where Mór Jókai, in the satirical magazine *Üstökös*, could make an unmistakable joke about what Lilla Bulyovszky's body was primarily for. Jókai's joke refers to an article in the Viennese *Theaterzeitung* which mentions the actress' noble origin: "Until now, historians thought that the Szilágyi family of *Horogszeg*, related to the Hunyadi family, was extinct, and now here is a member of the Szilágyi family declaring that she is also from *Horogszeg*."[5]

Jókai makes a strikingly vulgar pun out of the name of the "Szilágyi" family in Horogszeg when he claims that Mrs Lilla Szilágyi Bulyovszky is a woman for the "hook-nail" (the literal translation of the place-name Horogszeg, used as an extremely lewd term by Jókai). The actress's husband, Gyula Bulyovszky, tried to clear the insult from their names

3 A theatrical reportage in the magazine *Szépirodalmi Figyelő* seems to open up towards the possibility of such an interpretation: "According to the referred Pestofner Zeitung, Mrs. Bulyovszky plays in Altenburg to great acclaim. If she chose to become German, it is appropriate not to abandon the Hungarian name!" *Szépirodalmi Figyelő*, vol. 1, no. 5 (5 December), 1860, p. 79.

4 On the concept of a nation based on shared tradition with regards to the views of Pál Gyulai: S. Varga 2005, 496-512. *Delejtű* puts it in what counted as the more typical tone: "According to tidings, Mrs Bulyovszky is contracted to the court stage in Koburg. It would be good to know how it is more glorious to be a member of that court theatre than our very own national theatre!" *Delejtű*, vol. 2, no. 35 (30 August), 1859, p. 281.

5 *Üstökös*, vol. 7, no. 5 (29 September), 1860, p. 39. The pun is untranslatable, see the explanation in the subsequent passage of the main text.

in a duel.[6] The press scandals surrounding the actress and Jókai's smear of both her body and her name are symptomatic of the clear discursive exclusion that resulted from the violation of the requirements of gender- and nation-related social roles. Jókai's joke was widely spread, and became such a well-known and memorable "bon mot" that Kálmán Mikszáth saw fit to mention it again in his biography of Jókai, 46 years after the incident; even though Mikszáth mentioned the incident as an example of cheap, obscene and far too crude jokes (1960, II.16). Lilla Bulyovszky could not gain the recognition of the community either as a patriot or as a woman, neither could she expect human respect for her person (and her body), or the chivalrous protection due to women.

2. Layers of Tradition in Bulyovszky Lilla's Travelogue *Norvégiából: Úti emlékek* (1866)

In the summer of 1864 Lilla Bulyovszky made a long tour of Norway. Her travel experiences became the source of her Hungarian travelogue *Norvégiából: Úti emlékek* (*From Norway: Travel Memoires*, henceforth: *From Norway*) which she published in Gusztáv Emich's printing press in 1866. By that time the 31-year-old actress had been living and acting abroad for more than six years. However, her conflicting social roles, and the emigration which represented a break or at least a turning point in her life, did not leave much of a mark on her Norwegian travelogue. *From Norway* is similar to Mary Wollstonecraft's travelogue *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* (1796) not simply because of the traversed Scandinavian landscape and the female traveller's gaze, but also the striking contrast between the authors' marginalised social position and the text of their respective travelogues.[7] Like the missing elements of Mary Wollstonecraft's peculiar course of life (which was all about transgressing social norms, and negotiating the ensuing social conflicts) in the text of the *Letters*, Lilla Bulyovszky's loss of social prestige is a peculiar absence in *From Norway*. Both texts make use of the genre of the travelogue to create a self-interpretation of the individual through the personal reflections on the traversed landscape and the unknown region (Favret 2002).

There are only two passages in Lilla Bulyovszky's travelogue that could possibly be interpreted in the context of the conflict related to national and gender roles. One of these occurs in the preface that addresses readers. Here the author interprets the travelogue written and published in Hungarian as an offering in the service of the nation:

6 The duel was also reported by the husband, Gyula Bulyovszky, in a letter to his wife. The letter is quoted in: Bartha 2018, 77-78. The case appears also in the correspondence of Gábor Egressy, see: Szalisznyó 2017, II. 851.

7 On the paradigmatic impact of Mary Wollstonecraft's travelogue: Walchester 2014, 17-20. On Mary Wollstonecraft and her travelogue (in Hungarian): Péter 2022, 106-119.

> "the only thing that inspired me to brave the obstacles was the fact that I could do a service to Hungarian literature with the experience I would gain, and that I could please the Hungarian public by introducing a country which our travellers had hardly discussed before, if they did at all" (I. *Dedication to the reader*).[8]

The text of the foreword portrays the author as the creator of a text for the public benefit of Hungarian readers, so she is represented as an active member of the nation and an enthusiastic patriot. Another example of a story that can be read as a restoration or affirmation of women's role in society is to be found in chapters 5 and 7 of volume I. In these two chapters of the travelogue, the author-narrator worries about her child that she left at home. The beauty of Norway and the excitement of an adventurous journey immediately lose their weight as the travelling mother begins to fear for the well-being of the child she has left behind in Pest. The representation of the anxious mother puts the author in the most highly valued female role, that of the Hungarian mother. In other words, there are at least two passages in the text that can be interpreted as attempts to restore the social role of the author, whose national and gender identity had been offended. However, these are only scattered passages, and have little impact on the overall tone, the themes and the discursive position of the travelogue as a whole. Apart from the two barely perceptible hints at the role of the mother and the patriot, Lilla Bulyovszky's travelogue makes more sense from a personal perspective: the burnt-out actress, completely exhausted from her work, seeks revitalization and relief in solitary travel and unspoiled nature:

> "During a walk (...) I told them that I wanted to rest for a few months (...). I badly needed that. (...) I longed to escape far, far away (...) where I am not idolised but not slandered either, where I am not loved but not hated either, where no one finds me but I could invent myself" (I.1. 2-3).

It is clear from the text that Lilla Bulyovszky's journey is not bound to make sense from a predominantly communal perspective, as, for example, Sándor Farkas Bölöni's *Travels in North America* (1834), but offers a solution to an ongoing personal crisis in an individual's life. Public benefit appears in the text of *From Norway* as a mere gesture

8 Quotes from the travelogue refer to the first edition (Bulyovszky 1866). Henceforth, quotations are indicated by the volume number, chapter number and page number in brackets.

in the already quoted lines of the preface, which can even be read as a form of self-justification, whereas the whole work is characterised by an individual, private perspective. The autobiographical text perceives the "invention" or construction of the self as an individual, not a communal activity.

Despite the autobiographical nature of the travelogue genre, in terms of subject matter, form, and rhetoric, *From Norway* was not determined by Lilla Bulyovszky's role conflicts and loss of social prestige (as revealed by contemporary journalistic sources). The narrator's voice of the travelogue is that of a confident, free-flowing chatterer who needs no self-justification. Her gaze is objective, her words provide a vivid portrayal of the explored landscapes, while her cultural-anthropological, and social reflections present her as an impartial, benevolent and authoritative interpreter of local customs.

> "It was 9 o'clock and the sun was still far from the shadows of dusk when we arrived at the inn. Although I call it an inn, its meaning is not the same as the Norwegian word *Gjestgivergaard*. – We were received by a very respectable woman, with a friendly face and a kindly look, and (...) she led us into a large room on the ground floor, at the door of which we halted with surprise: nothing could ever have been cleaner than this bright white floor, covered with green pine branches spreading a pleasant fragrance (...)" (I. 4. 41.).

This is how she praises the tidiness of the accommodation, where, following local customs, the floor is covered with pine branches serving as an air freshener. When their accommodation fails to meet the fundamental standards of hygiene and comfort, she uses light-hearted humour to illustrate their situation:

> "Performing our usual examination of the beds before going to sleep, our first finding was that that they were berths, but hardly beds. The resourceful innkeeper (...) had furnished the room exactly 20 years ago, and it has been left unchanged ever since (...). Finally, a short, colourful duvet, which must have been filled with some unidentifiable material, served as a blanket (...). Olga said that it might contain dry fish scales; I suspected crushed herrings." (II. 1. 7-9.)

The travel narrative presents the reader with an independent, cheerful, lively and good-humoured sober traveller, who reliably guides us through the rich natural and miserably poor social conditions of Norway, dotted with wild waterfalls and fjords. The foreword to the only modern edition of the nineteenth-century travelogue similarly praises the fresh tone and the sensuous descriptions produced by the traveller's gaze:

> "After no less than a hundred and fifty years, her travelogues still feel so fresh and vivid that even if the reader has never been interested in Norway, they will enjoy the original, well-rounded little stories." (Bulyovszky 2001)

Into the conversational, predominantly descriptive travel narrative of *From Norway* Lilla Bulyovszky has woven another thread of plot: the love story of the narrator's companion, the young and permanently sad Olga. The beginning of the travelogue informs the reader that the author-narrator is not travelling entirely alone, but with a newly met Polish family. Her companions are a Polish colonel, the colonel's wife, and Olga, the young sister of the wife. During most of the trip, Olga and Lilla share a bedroom, and quickly become friends. Olga slowly confides in her elderly companion, and the reader is introduced to the reason of Olga's grief and her tragic love story. The relationship between Olga and the author-narrator (Lilla) appears in the text as a sisterly relationship: " – Olga, I want to be your sister!" – as the author-narrator exclaims (I. 4. 45). And later: "Talk to me Olga, confer your trust upon me, I have grown to love you as if we were two branches of the same tree (...)" (I. 7. 102.). According to the characters' self-interpretation, their protective-defensive sisterly relationship helps the travellers through both the often cruel trials of nature, and the soul-torturing disappointments of love.

Olga's story, woven into the fabric of the travel narrative provides an interpretation of the northbound journey, and vice versa, the Norwegian landscape, and the wild landscape of the North provide an interpretation of Olga's love story. The metaphorical link between the landscape and Olga's soul is reflected in the description of her face:

> "I studied her with tender compassion, not knowing which to admire more: the nobility and tenderness of her heart, or her strength and firmness. Such rarely common traits appear together in her, but what is more striking: in spite of her childish mood, her bosom was full of the deepest passion. – I could compare her [i.e. Olga] to a snow-covered field of rocks, such as is often

> found in Norway: the rock is smooth, and flowers and depths are concealed beneath." (I.4. 43-44)

Or later, concerning Olga's self-control:

> "[Her] calm was false and feigned, like a thin layer of ice covering a bottomless abyss, which yields to the first touch and breaks" (I. 5.59.)

In this sense, from *Norway* is a dual travel narrative: the dangerous geographical journey to the north, to the realm of eternal snow simultaneously leads the reader to the dangerous regions of the passions and torments of the soul. The reticent Olga takes the author-narrator Lilla in her confidence, and little by little she lets her in on her love tragedy. The turning point, when Olga first begins to talk honestly about her past and her feelings, is introduced with the following sentences:

> "– She looked at me with her big eyes, (...) grabbed at her heart, and fell down in my arms in a swoon. The warmth of my unexpected words *broke the ice*." (I. 4. 45 Emphasis mine.)

The Norwegian landscape the narrator travels through is more than a simple scenery, background or setting for the travel narrative and Olga's love story. In the narrative and rhetorical structure of the travelogue, the descriptive parts related to the landscape and the stories embedded in the narrative parts mutually interpret each other: an active dialogic relationship emerges between the descriptive and narrative layers of the text. In the text of *From Norway,* descriptions of the surface, the Norwegian landscape, receive new depths through this process; and the otherwise slightly banal and sentimental love narrative thus turns into a peculiar story sensually painted with unique contours and bright, cold, Nordic colours.

One of the meaning-making layers in Olga's story is the overlapping composition of the description of the Norwegian landscape and the portrayal of Olga's complexion and soul. Another powerful interpretive figure in *From Norway* derives from the intertextual aspects of the travelogue. Olga's story is told and interpreted within the text through multiple levels of allusions to Dante. The first Dante quote in the travelogue appears on the flip side of the medal hanging in Olga's neck. One side of the medal features a miniature of her lover's face, while the other contains the famous inscription of the entrance to Hell:

> "Olga reached into her bosom, from where she produced to me, on a black ribbon, the coin above which she prayed every night. With a press on the spring, the coin burst open. My eyes fell on the face of a beautiful young officer (...) Such features cannot deceive, I said.
> Olga smiled bitterly and warned about the other half of the coin. Here I read in black letters the famous words of Dante:
> – Lasciate ogni esperanza!
> – This is my epitaph, she said, with touching serenity (...)" (I.5. 61)

The interpretation of Olga's journey as a Dantesque passage through hell is later clearly hinted at in the text at several points. Thus, the narrative structure of Lilla Bulyovszky's travelogue is connected to the primary root of European cultural history. While engaging in a confident and effortless conversation with the reader at the level of the travel narrative, she also gives subtle signals that the text is both a living continuation and perpetuation of a centuries-old European tradition in which travel is both a journey of self-discovery and a process with metaphysical dimensions. In the final chapter of the first volume of the travelogue, the generic, narrative and intertextual layers of the text are inextricably intertwined in a complex, extensively developed image. The travellers – on the level of the literal travel narrative of the text – are sailing in a narrow fjord with no apparent way out. From the boat, it looks like they are heading straight for an iceberg. The sight is compared by the travelling observers to the deepest circle of Dante's inferno, frozen in perpetual ice. At the same time, the author-narrator calls Olga's attention to the potential similarity between the natural landscape that is coming into their view along with the travellers' journey within it, and the *apparent* absence of a solution to her love tragedy:

> "– Olga! (...) do you see the beautiful mountains that block the horizon before us? (...) Look around well: do you see the possibility of escaping from this arm of the sea? (...)
> – Indeed not! she replied – (...) I see no opening, and if this landscape were not paradisiacal, I should believe myself in some circle of Dante's inferno, where one can only enter, but never escape!
> (…)

> An hour later, arriving to two huge mountains, when we started to think that our path is closed and we can go no further: suddenly two straits opened up before us; (...) the shut horizon opens out in two directions,-and wherever we looked the landscape was surprisingly magnificent (...).
> – Behold, Olga – I said, taking her hand – such may be your fate too" (I. 8. 116-117)

The literal, concrete journey to Norway and the metaphorical, inner spiritual journey in Lilla Bulyovszky's travelogue gain a cultural-historical and European perspective through the allusions to *The Divine Comedy*.

What kind of tradition was Lilla Bulyovszky drawing on when she wrote her Norwegian travelogue? On the one hand, she obviously drew on her own previous work and experience as a translator and fiction writer, as this is not the author's first book. She was far from being a novice in her own writing career when she published *From Norway*. In theatre history, Lilla Bulyovszky is also noted as a translator. According to the archives of the National Theatre, she translated more than twenty plays, including Alexandre Dumas Jr.'s *The Lady with Camellias*. She was not only known as a translator, though: she also published a collection of short stories and a travelogue of her 1857 trip to Western Europe. In other words, the linguistically and stylistically confident text of *From Norway* is clearly the work of a skilled author trained on many previous writings.

As seen, *From Norway* tells the journey of heartache and self-discovery in the manner of Dante's *Inferno*. However, not only the cultic texts of European literature constituted an accessible and confidently malleable tradition, for Lilla Bulyovszky's work as a female travel writer in Hungarian is not without precedent. She was able to construct her fluent narrative voice, the rhythm of her prose and the narrative structure of her storytelling by drawing on the tradition available to her. From Hungarian literature by women authors, Polixéna Wesselényi's travelogue, *Olaszhoni és schweizi utazás (Journeys to Italy and Switzerland,* 1842), represented the main tradition for her to continue. Continuity with Polixéna Wesselényi can be seen primarily in the tone of the two travelogues. Lilla Bulyovszky converses with her readers in the same confident and witty tone that Polixéna Wesselényi used in her travelogue from two decades earlier. The direct, chatty relationship with the reader and the educated, yet subject-oriented, and distinctly feminine narrative tone are closely related in the two texts. In addition to the linguistic continuity (reflected in tone, style and the narrator's attitude), there are also thematic links between the two texts. These include practical and detailed descriptions of dressing and clothing, or reflections on the particular challenges and difficulties of travelling as a woman:

> "(...) we took a pleasant walk through the town, where all the children ran after us, every window was full of spectators, and people stopped in the street to stare at us.
> In Norway the passenger is a rare bird, and the female passenger is a white raven" (I. 4. 43.)[9]

Perhaps the most striking – but certainly the longest – and most specific thematic overlap between the two travelogues is the partially failed and decidedly risky mountaineering adventure of the travelling women. Lilla Bulyovszky's attempt to climb Snohatten (in her text, Sneehätten) (II. 5. 68-77) is a rewriting of the climbing adventure of the *Olaszhoni és schweizi utazás* around Mont Blanc (Section IX). In both travelogues, attempts at mountaineering are discussed as a transgression of the boundaries of women's social roles, as the climbing of the female traveller is met with remarks of concern and, in some cases, disapproval in both texts.

But the two texts also share a lively sense of humour in the language used for description and characterisation. Both travelogues introduce readers to the characters they meet along the way with a similar witty humour. One of the most amusing passages in Polixéna Wesselényi's travelogue is where she ridicules the Hungarian chauvinist young soldier (at the very end of Section VIII). Lilla Bulyovszky introduces us to several memorable characters. George, the Norwegian cicerone, suffers from reading fever, so he tries to speak in the delicately sensitive and extremely rhetorized language of sentimental fiction – most of the time, defectively. The groom, who is a mouthy bragadoccio but is in fact a coward, joins them on their climbing adventure, and never fails to add the justification "on my word":

> " – My Ludmilla (...) is not a great beauty, on my word, nor can I say that we would be madly in love with no restraints" (II. 5. 68.)

The scene in which the groom, who, on his word, truly pities his companions because God has not given them a man's heart as brave as his own, falls off his horse, is particularly comic. The almost Chaucerian wife of Bergen, who compares her first husband to a sheep

9 A common feature of nineteenth-century Norwegian women's travelogues is that the narrators reflect on the fact that women travellers are rare in Norway and are therefore stared at by the locals. More details on this topic: Walchester, 2014, 30-34.

and her second to an ox ("I wonder," I said, laughing, "what her third husband would be like if she were to become a widow again?" II. 3. 33) is an equally memorable character. The linguistic humour of her characterisation, and her vivid, sensitive descriptive-narrative voice make Lilla Bulyovszky's text a pleasure to read even today. "I'm dying for a good chat," the narrator bids farewell at the end of the travelogue. And this self-portrayal is quite authentic. The narrator of Lilla Bulyovszky's travelogue – like the narrator of Polixéna Wesselényi – not only loves to converse with her readers, but she is also capable of doing so in a lively and witty way.

3. *From Norway* as a self-shaping and community-building travelogue

Public benefit journeys in the nineteenth century often led to the more developed societies of Western Europe, and possibly the United States, where travellers studied the more sophisticated and civilised social conditions than at home (Popova-Nowak 2006). The Nordic trips to the seemingly untouched natural world of Scandinavia occasioned a different kind of reflection. The rural, almost medieval society of nineteenth-century Norway, as seen from Western Europe, evoked an often nostalgically conceived old world, but also provided an opportunity to imagine the idealistic societies of social utopias (Kassis 2015). The sparsely populated countryside and the wild yet unspoiled nature became the ideal setting for romantic seclusion and an individual's journey into the self.

Above all, the series of nineteenth-century women's travelogues about Norway beginning with Wollstonecraft meant an opportunity for reflection on individual emotions (Favret 2002) and for private conversation (Walchester 2014). Lilla Bulyovszky's travelogue fits naturally into this Wollstonecraftean tradition, insofar as in her case, too, the ongoing crisis of her individual life (burnout in her work as an actress, fatigue, exhaustion) justifies her expedition to the North, which transforms into Olga's journey of self-discovery and an inner journey of her personal, love and emotional crisis. The travelogue is primarily informed by the reflections on inner, individual emotions and self-shaping. Although neither Wollstonecraft, nor *Letters* is referred to in the text of *From Norway*, Lilla Bulyovszky followed in Wollstonecraft's footsteps both in a concrete geographical sense and as an author who broke social norms in her lifestyle – but also as a confident writer.

4. Conclusions

Lilla Bulyovszky's travelogue is not a work of public benefit in the national sense, since it primarily deals with private matters. *From Norway* leaves

the national context and its text cannot be interpreted in terms of the author's conflict concerning social roles. At the same time, the layers of tradition and the literary patterns to which the text of *From Norway* is connected, however, do spell out a network of literary connections where the text does not stand alone, but identifies with a community of related works. When Lilla Bulyovszky adds a metaphysical perspective to her Norwegian journey through the references to Dante, she also opts for a tradition. References to Dante place the text of *From Norway* in the stream of European cultural history, and in the community of European culture. The similarity in tone with Polixéna Wesselényi's travelogue, the shared humour of the texts, as well as the striking thematic overlaps establish a textual link with the community of female travellers and female authors.

As an author, Lilla Bulyovszky could draw on a rich European literary tradition, but also on a modest Hungarian-language tradition of women authors and genres. The intertextual references in the travelogue mark the position of *From Norway* within the universe of European and female literary texts, and provide a framework for its interpretation. The layers of tradition in Lilla Bulyovszky's travelogue elevate the speaker out of the national role conflict, and make her a member of a wider European cultural community and a sisterhood.

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The 19th-Century Beginnings of the Modern Hungarian Art Novel/Novella and the Emergence of the Modern Literary Profession

A new framework for a transnational cluster[1]

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the emergence and significance of the modern Hungarian art novel and novella in the 19th century, situating it within a broader transnational literary framework. The genre, often overlooked in literary histories, reflects the socio-cultural modernization of the era and the professionalization of the arts. Through the lens of seminal Hungarian works like Pál Gyulai's *The Old Actor* and Júlia Apraxin's *The Diary of Ilma Szerendy*, the study delves into themes of artistic autonomy, emotional depth, and the societal challenges faced by artists, particularly actors and actresses. These narratives illuminate the paradoxical nature of artistic independence – intertwined with societal expectations and market constraints – while also addressing gender dynamics in the context of artistic creation. By linking Hungarian and global literary traditions, the paper argues for a reevaluation of the 19th-century art novel/novella/short story as a critical expression of artistic and intellectual modernity, emphasizing its enduring relevance in understanding the complex identity of the modern artist.

Keywords: art novel/Künstlerroman, Theaterroman, art novella, modern literary professionalization, Pál Gyulai, Júlia Apraxin

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1. The Great Unknown of nineteenth-century literary modernization: the genre cluster of art novel/novella/ short story

The fate of the *Künstlerroman* (art novel) and the art novella in the history of Hungarian literature has been exceptionally unfavourable, but this is not at all far from the way in which global comparative literary histories treat this genre pair. Those who deal with it usually interpret its appearance as a branch of the 19th century Bildungsroman, as a relatively minor thread, a kind of backstory. Understandably, those who wish to rehabilitate it often focus on the number of times it presents the alter egos of well-known, world-famous artists, or on the complex intermediate works it produces, which straddle the boundaries of the visual arts, theatre, music and literature. In Hungarian literary history, moreover, the appearance of the art novel itself is typically dated to the early 20th century (less frequently to the end of the 19th century),[2] ignoring the fact that decades earlier there were already interesting Hungarian art novels to be read and that the art novel and the art novella in the 19th century had a closely related history, organised around common problems of vision.

It is for this reason, embedded in the global history of the genre, that I argue that the sudden emergence of the art novel and its extraordinary popularity in the 19th century is not accidental and contingent, but the consequence of an important structural problem.[3] Both genres, in fact, describe an extraordinary turn of modernisation that fundamentally transformed and modernised the literary field; modern artists' novels were both a consequence of and a reflection on the emergence of the professional artist and writer and of professional literature and art, the artistic emancipation and autonomy that this entailed, and the limitations and illusions of these. This is why they play a special role among the various types of novels and short stories in the heyday of modern prose, and why they deserve much closer attention. Artists' novels and novellas are the heralds and barometers of artistic modernity, and through them we can understand the complex process of artists and writers becoming a distinct intellectual profession.[4] But with this emancipation comes not only the idea of artistic independence and autonomy, but also the frequent fear and anxiety about capitalism and the modern market that allowed the modern artist to articulate his

2 In her excellent monograph, basically interprets the art novel as a 20th century genre: Harkai Vass 2001; Gergye 2004; Kardeván Lapis 2015. Art short stories and the representation of art in prose works are interpreted in the frame of Romanticism in an excellent overview by Veszprémi 2015.

3 Some works from the international literature that are important to me, but which take a different path and focus their arguments on different issues are Blessing 2010; Krone 2016; Cobetts Miller 2019; Smith 2007; Zima 2008; Varsamopoulou 2002; Wolfe 2023.

4 For an interpretation of this process, see my several previous reflections in T. Szabó 2006; T. Szabó 2008a; T. Szabó 2008b; T. Szabó 2016; T. Szabó 2021.

identity. It is for this reason that I consider the paradigmatic case of the artist novel and the artist novella, from the point of view of this line of thought, to be the type of story in which writers and artists (visual artists, actors, musicians) reflect on their own and others' art, on the nature of artistic creation, on its specificity. As a result, they very often speak of the erosion of artistic autonomy, of the impossibility of achieving the desired artistic masterpiece(s), of the backwardness of the artistic market, of the confrontation between artistic success and artistic independence.

2. The Birth of the Modern Hungarian Art Novel: Pál Gyulai's *Vén színész* [The Old Actor]

It would be hard to say that Pál Gyulai of the 1850s did not consider everything carefully. The young but already very well-known writer and critic, who had made a name for himself in Hungarian literature, and later a renowned literary historian and university professor, was already weighing every publication and every sentence with concern, often worrying, almost desperately considering the possible damage to his reputation as a writer and critic. It is for this reason that almost everything he said at this time can be regarded as particularly conscious, deliberate and reflexive. And although literary historians traditionally consider 1851 to be the year for which Gyulai is remembered, not for his fiction, it is worth arguing that, whether in a narrower or broader sense, *The Old Actor,* written and published at this time, is an extremely important glocal work – embedded in both Hungarian and world literary processes – from which a new perspective can be opened on the social history of modern Hungarian literature.

It is telling that Gyulai first published this theatre-fiction about the experiences of being an artist in the *Losonczi Phönix*, a series of albums designed to help the people of the town of Losoncz and alleviate their suffering, an important endeavour of the early philanthrocapitalist literary movement of the period. The novella is also about suffering, only more invisible than the suffering of a town devastated by the struggle for freedom: an ageing man, a former actor, recounts the derailment of his career and his suffering.

But these are not just any sufferings. They are the result of his sense of his vocation, his view of his profession, and the short novel grows out of this kind of 'professional suffering', and of his personal and private failures. It is the story of a young man who discovers his vocation in acting, elopes with her admirer who becomes an actress herself, together with her young lover, in a major city and company. But before they are married, she is seduced by the patron of the troupe, and her frenzied lover, discovering her infidelity, kills her on stage as Othello. The novella/ short *Künstlerroman* as a whole is a retrospective of the

past, but the former actor's passionate, self-mortifying monologue is not the result of some belated remorse, but a self-contradictory monologue of an actor re-enacting events of the past in front of his new imagined audience.

Well, the very idea of this links theatre as an art form to emotions. The appropriateness, quality and sincerity of emotion is what distinguishes true art from amateurism. The difference between the artist and the non-artist, between the true artist and the not true artist, is that for one, art does not evoke emotions or does not evoke adequate emotions, and this confuses and distorts the artist, the artistic experience: "You don't know what it is. Only I know, I who have lived, rejoiced, suffered. How could you know! But who are you?

You expelled student who never shot Sophocles. You gravedigger, who only appears after the catastrophe, when the curtain has fallen and the tragedy has been obscured. You carpenter, who, planning the boards of the stage, have no idea that you are making a rack – and what a rack! He who weeps must laugh, and weep whose heart will burst with joy; and at these contortions of weeping and laughter, like a gladiator's tussock, the insolent raving audience amuses itself." (Gyulai 1851, 35) - says the narrator–actor who dominates the work. And although his failure is multifactorial, in the logic of the narrative and in his argument, virtually all of it can be traced back to an audience that is 'immature', 'ungrateful', that does not appreciate art at its true value and character – that is, that does not feel it in the right way. The understanding of emotion and art here go hand in hand, and the novella speaks in a very dense way, not shown in detail here, of this experience, that to experience and understand art requires both a way of dealing with emotions and an intense knowledge of emotions.

David, the hero of the art novella, cannot conceal and suppress his inclination towards art, even though it is a curse and a scourge for his mother who wants him to become a pastor and who is sick of her son's decision. Early on, too, after his first defining theatrical experience, a staged version of Schiller's *The Robbers* performed by a travelling company of actors, the son instinctively realises that he could do the play better than they could, but that, partly because of the dependence on the audience, the stakes of this vocation are life and death: "I had an instinctive, mysterious premonition in my soul, and I wanted to leap on stage, to speak like these painted people, but with more fire, with a bolder gesture, to make the audience cry, laugh, applaud like a fool. [...] Let me shine, let me reign, let me die among the applause and the cheers of the audience." (Gyulai 1851, 39) The mother, who fears and forbids him from becoming an actor, stifles the boy's ambitions as an actor in such a way that they burst forth in

the form of ghosts and temptations[5], and this kind of depiction of the struggle with instincts, repressions and suspicions also undoubtedly makes this narrative one of the best solutions of early Hungarian psychological prose. It is in the wake of such a visionary scene, similar to the epiphanies, that he makes his grave decision leading to his mother's death, and even here it is the effervescent and fearful reactions and the uproar of the (imagined) audience that almost ecstatically proclaims to him the great decision ("I have no mother, I am the child of muses"), which is to grow up, and at the same time a radical break with his mother, a radical disconnection, a painful and sacrilegious gesture of the first great sacrifice for art, since from now on the mother cannot expect her son to protect and care for her in a somewhat secure job and status:

> "When I fell asleep at such a time, with an exhausted body but a soul filled with visions and poetry, I found myself on a bright shining stage. The shadows took shape, spoke, suffered, until at last a storm of applause, a wreath of curtains, washed away from my eyes. When I awoke, the brook was roaring, the valley was roaring, like an excited audience; wreaths of flowers were open at my head; the sun, like blazing glory, shone dazzlingly in my eyes; but the whims of the old rocks seemed to mock me with their faces, and from behind them the echo cried ominously, 'Why are you late?!' – I was stupefied, I knew not that I had cried out these voices.
> I will be an actor! away, away to the stage!" (Gyulai 1851, 40)

A huge part of the emotional regime of the novella is about the complex emotional world that the relationship with the audience can represent. Audience recognition is both a guarantee of unfolding, but also carries with it the risk of being helpless, of being stripped of one's own individuality, of being unable to conform to the world, truth, aesthetics and logic of the plays being performed: "What is to the gambler the intoxicating excitement, the tremendous fervour, the terrifying excitement which binds him to the mournful table of the game; what is to the hero the rattling roar of battle, the yells of the dying, and the raging triumphs of the living; what is to the man who wants to live, to enjoy, to live no more, to die, the laughing,

5 "I saw the bleeding Julius Caesar, the pale Cassius, the dark Macbeth, the grey-haired Lear, the thirsty Romeo, the angry Othello, the doubting Hamlet. Their shadows were drawn in the air, their voices whispered through the faltering foliage." (Gyulai 1851, 40)

teasing speech of wine, music and women who are eager to please. His god, his dream, his devil, his sweetheart, his poetry. [...] King and slave of the public, which he will have to adore and then despise. Seldom lifted to his feet, more often bowed under his feet. Oh, how often must he renounce his ideals, desecrate his genius, in order not to lose the fickle favour of the public, its arbitrary applause, to feel the excitement, the intoxication which animates, sustains, stupefies, digests." (Gyulai 1851, 50) David's lifelong question is whether art can exist without an audience (since even at the end of his life, it is the much-loathed, imagined audience – the readers! – whom he speaks to), but at the same time whether the audience can fully share the artist's higher ideal of art, whether the artist can remain faithful to this ideal despite the audience success. It is for this reason that the range of talk about the audience of art in the novella is astonishingly wide and intense: from anxiety, frustration, and deathly hatred to burnout and cynical indifference, ecstatic and epiphanic feelings. But at the same time, David's performance makes the audience experience something about themselves that more than once proves to be disruptive for them. For instance, the actor plays the role of a villain so convincingly that the gallery scolds him, the ground floor curses him, the women dare not look at him ("he who plays such roles should thank him if he is not chased"), and his landlord, likewise, does not appreciate the outstanding artistic performance, but immediately labels him as evil, dishonest and refuses to tolerate him in his house any longer.

It is this emotional roller coaster ride, moreover, that takes the actor away from the pursuit of popularity, from catering to the tastes of the audience, and sets him on the path of self-education, of becoming an autonomous artist. From this point on, he becomes truly reflexive about the cost of success, fame and the cost of serving the public to the full. Gyulai brilliantly portrays the birth of the modern actor, who is demanding of himself, who is dripping, who decouples art from public success, and the immense loneliness, asceticism (the topos of the 'priest' of art) and constant crisis that this kind of reflexive art entails: "[...] For the first time in my life I was satisfied with myself. How beautiful is a clear and deep artistic sense of self. Calm happiness, purified enthusiasm, virginal self-glorification. How much more than the noisy, dirty intoxication of applause and wreaths. Oh, if you would rather love the art than the audience" (Gyulai 1851, 55) – the aspiring actor says.

But one of the lessons of the novella is that this kind of experience of art, imbued with pure emotion, is not feasible: you cannot be without an audience. The net effect of the actor's helplessness is that even the private and artistic drama of Dávid and Kornelia is adapted to the theatrical expectations of the audience, Dávid's desire to take revenge on Kornelia, his director, his patron and the audience, is to commit the murder by playing on and exposing the audience's habitual reaction ("the whole

story is about to end. But now is the time for the good stuff, for which the audience is in a frenzy. There will be noise, cursing, killing."), nor can he exempt himself from the fact that the less educated part of the audience ("the gaggle") is enjoying his own artistic and private drama as cheap entertainment. In fact, even the afterlife of this drama becomes one; David feels misunderstood, ignorant of his true story, and feels an irresistible urge to tell the story of the stage murder of his lover and his partner from his own point of view.

However, retelling encounters the paradox of the actor's profession. Dávid still needs an audience, and while he narrates himself, he is also vulnerable to it, misunderstood, and he is able to tell his own story only in a very theatrical, monologue-like way. In other words, he remains a prisoner of the tools of the theatre, dependent on his audience, their goodwill, empathy, literacy and, not least, their emotional intelligence. This is the shocking realisation of the first Hungarian art novel: that not only *artistic independence*, but also *personal independence,* does not exist. *The Old Actor* is thus one of the first modern Hungarian psychological novels, which, moreover, finds the driving forces of psychological tension in the stratification of modern artistic identity: Gyulai's excellent narrative perceives the turn of the theatrical profession as a phenomenon with psychological implications.

However, the real weight of the very varied, expressive, poetically innovative solutions of art and emotions of the time can be attributed to the fact that Gyulai's art novella – in fact a *Theaterroman* or *Theaternovelle*, as it was called in the German literature of the period – is surrounded by a very complex Hungarian and world literary textual framework. This has remained invisible until now because Hungarian literary modernity is still surrounded by literary historical repressions, taboos, emotions and admiration. Hungarian literary historiography was so passionate in its desire to see modern literature as centred around the magazine *Nyugat*, which was launched in 1908, that it spectacularly tried to detach modernity and modernisation, from 19th -century ('classical') Hungarian literature at all costs. The consequence of this was that the history of Hungarian literature insisted spasmodically that the art novel is a modern, i.e. "twentieth-century" work (and at most Zsigmond Justh's *Művész-szerelem* [Artists' Love] or János Asbóth's *Álmok álmodója* [The Dreamer of Dreams] can be named as precursors of this type of history). But in world literature the emergence of the Künstlerroman and the art novella occurs suspiciously earlier and seems more diverse than this phenomenon. In Hungarian literature, we can also find warning signs that this narrow-mindedness may be a dead end. The most visible warning sign is the spectacular proliferation in the 1850s of stories about artists and thus about the nature of art, which make spectacular use of the topos of global art history (e.g. set in Venice, a place stylized by Romanticism as the city of the artist and also of decadence). Some of these have been spectacularly recanonised by Hungarian literary

history, but never placed in this context (Zsigmond Kemény's *A szív örvényei* [The Swirls of the Heart], set partly in Venice, the 'city of art'), and there are many portraits of artists, art novellas or short stories that we have overlooked because we have fetishised an alleged 20th-century emergence of the art novel.

So, it is the *Künstlerroman* from the late 18th/19th century. (Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre*, Jean Paul's *Titan*, Mörike's *Maler Nolten*, Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, Ludwig Tieck's *Franz Sternbald's Wanderungen,* Mme de Staël's *Corinne ou l'Italie*, Benjamin Constant's *Adolphe*, or *The Unknown Masterpiece* from the pen of Balzac to Zola's *The Masterpiece*), one can really suspect the temporal dynamics and identity of this type of text, since these art novel/art novellas are also extremely diverse (often about very different art forms). And the suspicion about Hungarian works is not at all unfounded. If we look at the literary tradition of the middle of the 19th century, there is a very rich proportion of forgotten texts, texts on the margins of the canon, which have become invisible in the meantime and which therefore cause literary historical blindness in this matter.

These artist novellas/short stories are only a slice of the rich prose literature that unfolds from the early 1850s onwards, exploring the identity, fate and social perception of artists. Obviously, there is a huge difference in quality between these texts, and the real benchmark is undoubtedly Gyulai's *The Old Actor* and Zsigmond Kemény's *The Whirlpools of the Heart.* But the other texts are also interesting from the point of view of how, by the 1850s, original and translated prose of such a sweeping scale appears, which takes the artists' vocation as a given, and regards the artist as a special personality with a particular social status, identity and spiritual make-up. It is clear that from this period onwards, this type of story is not the exception but the new rule, and that the specific character and exponentially increasing variety of this prose is both a reflection of the growing status of artists and art, of curiosity about art, and that an ever-widening spectrum of questions about the artist's identity, his or her self- and social perception, and the relationship between art and society, become an integral part of the modern social imagination. The art novel is thus indeed an inherent, sensitive and reflexive product of social and artistic modernity, but the texts listed above may also suggest that the art novel, the art novella and the similar short stories should or could be seen as a coherent group.

This is not just a question of dating or textual typology, but a deeper and more complex problem of the possible functions of this type of narratives. By all indications, this early boom in literary narratives on art and the artistic professions, is both a consequence and a cause of the modern professionalisation of literature and art. The art novel/novella/short story is therefore not the beginning of something, but in fact an organic continuation of a colourful and complex world of artists' stories that are part of the basic experience of artistic professionalisation. The

great art novels/Künstlerromane such as János Asbóth's *Álmok álmodója* [Dreamer of Dreams], Zsigmond Justh's *Művész-szerelem* [Artists' Love], Zoltán Ambrus' *Midás király* [King of Midas] or Pál Jámbor's *A művészek* [The Artists] (1869, first published in French in 1856, rarely mentioned in the secondary literature), Antal Váradi's *Hamis istenek [False Gods]* (1893), Árpád Gabányi's *A művészet nyomorultjai* [The Miserables of Art] (1894) or Árpád Abonyi's somewhat disintegrating *A haldokló gladiátor* [The Dying Gladiator] (1898), Sándor Bródy's *Színészvér* [Actor's Blood] – to name but a few more or less well-known Hungarian examples from the 19th century. The experience of the same literary-artistic modernity frames them, even if they give very different responses (for example, texts written in the earlier period of professionalisation sometimes have a very different worldview than those that can be interpreted in the context of aestheticism or decadence at the turn of the century).

But what type of art novella is *The Old Actor*? What does it say and how does it speak about the fate of the actor-artist, the relationship between the professional artist and artistic professionalism and dilettantism beyond what I have shown so far?

Let me show this through a topos of this cluster of texts. A recurring 19th-century topos in the art novel/novella/short story is the narrative of Pygmalion and Galatea, but it is telling what could and will become of the master-disciple relationship that embarrassingly overgrew its creator. It could be an inspiring and liberating story of a female artist surpassing her master, but this is rarely seen in our Hungarian texts: such is the case with Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, and an important forgotten piece of Hungarian literature, the almost never analysed but later examined theatre novel, *Ilma Szeréndy's Diary* of Apraxin (Batthyány) Júlia. Because a huge part of European and Hungarian art novels is socially strongly gender-coded (one might say deeply macho) stories about artist-men and the women who are attracted to them and to art, and who are distracted from art, the (usually male) artist cannot reconcile his private life with his artistic ambitions, and the great love of his life and his hopeful muse become the stifler of his artistic fulfilment. In other words, the Pygmaleon and Galatea topos is often rewritten as a male artist/female inspirational and creative relationship from which the male artist comes out badly. It is portrayed as an emotional trap in which the artist becomes too much of a man, and can no longer pay enough attention to his art, unable to create the masterpiece that will crown his life's work. It is worth recalling the representation of this cultural pattern in Gyulai's novella to see the importance of the emotional web that permeates the world of art in this type of *Künstlerroman*.

Kornelia in Gyulai's art novella drifts into the world of the theatre almost by accident, unable and unwilling to see her own role, talent and preparation, swept away by the magic of easy audience success, giving up and betraying her love for the man who had made her run

away from her mother and introduced her to the world of art. The postponement of the marriage and then, following the discovery of the infidelity, the relationship's culmination in murder, is a dark vision of artistic marriages, which, according to the logic of the novella, are threatened by a multitude of factors, from different artistic outlooks and preparation, to artistic and social publicity, different artistic talent. The chosen woman here outgrows the self-sacrificing role assigned to her, willing to follow her lover even to death, and inspiring in her art, and she also outgrows her artist-master-lover. She becomes her own will, her own story, she herself wants to become an actress-artist against David's wishes and demands, and she does not so much complement him as compete with him on stage. She takes over the role of the audience favourite, she conquers the audience instead of David in a way that threatens the stage position and the private life of her acting partner, and David frames this with violence.

It is not only Gyulai's reservations about female intellectuals and artists, which in many situations make Kornelia – but also the wife of the theatre director of the novella – look like a light-blooded woman: there are many episodes from the era that can be cited to illustrate the vulnerability of actresses, and there is also a transnational topos, which portrayed actresses as prone to prostitution (and in a figurative sense, *artistic* prostitution). Of course, what Gyulai adds to this – precisely to the prejudice that stigmatises the emancipation of women writers and artists – is that the actress-girlfriend is unable to rise above the level of dilettantism, and it is from her lack of education, preparation, spiritual depth and reflexivity that the novella derives her private life's turnaround. Of course, it should be added immediately that in Gyulai's art novel we see the events exclusively from the point of view of the murderous man who is wounded to the point of blood; just as the bitter actor in love does not ask the woman to explain his suspicions and the gossip he has heard from the whisperer, so the reader no longer knows why and how the lovelorn teenager became a heartbreaking diva.

This male point of view partly explains why murder is never called a name, i.e. murder, in this art novel. Even in old age, *The old Actor*'s protagonist does not feel remorse for his deed, and this is also connected with the way he remains a prisoner of the aestheticisation and textualisation of life that often characterises nineteenth-century art novels and short stories. This is why he combines his meeting with Kornelia and the story of Pygmalion and Galatea with the story of Romeo and Juliet, and is surprised when she does not fulfil this role. And for the same reason, the story of Othello replaces the story of Galatea and Romeo and Juliet (and her relationship with the protagonist who reveals the events is therefore characterised by the story of Mephisto) when he rewrites his life after his great private disappointment. He is constantly trying to understand and frame his life through plays, through famous theatrical heroes, and because of this it all becomes textualized, a

theatrical performance with a dramatic framework.[6] For him, death and its retelling in old age also become a work of art, creating a powerful narrative and a grand, summarising dramatic monologue at the end of his life, in the twilight of his life. In fact, he not only acts it out, but also narrates it, turning the actor into a writer who tries to legitimise and explain his act to himself and others with a desperate end-of-life gesture: a little as if he had not killed an innocent young woman after all, or if his passion for art made this murder forgivable. But the kind of Pygmalion and Galatea topos that *The Old Actor* evokes is also clearly a response to a very contemporary dilemma and pattern that preoccupied many in the period: it also questions the fate of intellectual and artist couples, their relationship to each other, their perception of each other, the risks of their relationships.

Nineteenth century is not only a time of emancipation of professional writers and modern intellectuals, but also *of* the first *modern intellectual marriages*, be they writers, artists, actors or musicians. If we look only at a fair number of Hungarian examples from this period that made a big impact on the public, the relationship of Sándor Petőfi and Júlia Szendrey (or later Júlia Szendrey and Árpád Horvát), Mór Jókai and Róza Laborfalvi, Miklós Jósika and Júlia Jósika (Podmaniczky), Károly Szász and Polyxéna Szász (known as Iduna), Sándor Vachott and Sándor Vachott's wife Csapó Mária, the relationship between Lilla Bulyovszky and Gyula Bulyovszky, Lenke Bajza and Gusztáv Heckenast, Emilia Kánya and Mór Szegfi show nuanced and diverse patterns of professionalisation, from canonisation as a star couple (as in the case of Petőfi–Szendrey and especially Jókai–Laborfalvi) to the situation of the four-handed creator (in the case of the Jósika couple).

6 "I look up, and behold, there it is. If then, like Juliet, she ask, »Who brought me here?«" (Gyulai 1851, 56.) Then, "I did not move, I waited for him to return, like Juliet, and bid me good night once more" (Gyulai 1851, 56). And later, after the girl's elopement: "Ah, he soon understood and even sooner learned the science of love. The first week he called me uncle and clung to my neck, the second he played Romeo with me and kissed me, the third he fell in my arms, innocent as a lamb to be sacrificed, smiling and trembling like Io when he felt the kiss of the cloud." (Gyulai 1851, 56) And in the emended version: "Oh, she soon understood and even sooner learned the role of Juliet in love, and without Lorenzo's blessing she fell into my arms, fair, innocent, like a lamb for sacrifice, smiling, trembling, like Io, when she felt the kiss of the cloud." (Gyulai 1911, 115) Or later still: "Seeing her books, the first moment Othello's words echoed in my soul: if the earth were to fall with a woman's stones, every drop would give birth to a crocodile; but in the second I fell at her feet and recited the most beautiful passages of my role, where atonement, fidelity, love come forth. Tear down the curtains from the windows, that curious folk may look in, we are playing a glorious comedy tragedy. Shame on Shakespeare and Molière, shame on Garrick and Rachel." (Gyulai 1851, 60) But in the same way, Kornelia plays a part, for, seeing her lover's jealousy, she convincingly and deceptively plays the part of travelling and being mistaken for him in the first city. And in a similarly theatrical way, the director's wife makes an offer – albeit a very cheap and transparent one – to the young, handsome man who would like to seduce her immediately.

In the case of actors, moreover, the situation is quite specific from an early age, since professional marriages, joint contracts and contracting, a family lifestyle that socialises children to the stage at an early age, and as actresses, these types of marriages often mean protection and recognition, but also extreme bondage.

There is also a particular nuance of *The Old Actor*, also related to the literary-artistic profession: the insight and empathy with which it speaks, in this early period of professionalisation, about artistic success and failure, and about issues of vulnerability and power-social relations within the art system. The art novella shows how the art world is extremely burdened by a lack of professional solidarity. The protagonists of the story live from one month to the next, the protagonist's mother falls ill and dies because her son has chosen acting despite the somewhat secure pastoral careers that both of them had been promised, Dávid and Kornelia's tragedy is partly caused by a wealthy patron who abuses their vulnerability, who sees the artists as tools rather than equal intellectual partners, and both the director and the cast conspire against David and for the wealthy patron. But the world of acting is also internally divisive, and the companies suffer from a lack of solidarity: the acting director withholds his company's rightful fees, sees David as a tool, and turns a blind eye to his girlfriend, while his wife tries to get even with the actor. Under such circumstances, mutual respect and solidarity cannot be established, and this undermines the common artistic minimum that would allow talent to be truly recognised and promoted, artistic harmony to be established, and artistic hierarchies to be formed within the company on the basis of common criteria. This is why, in David's case, disillusionment with the profession, *professional burnout*, is intertwined with existential problems and the actor's vulnerability. The actor is vulnerable not only because he is professionally ahead of his time, but also because he realises this particular situation, his own artistic truth, its limited validity: "To die on the threshold of a career that we still believe to be beautiful, to fall asleep in the holy moments of enthusiasm without disappointment and disillusionment (Gyulai 1851, 49), without hatred and without cynicism. Not to bear the bitter memory of a life gone astray; not to feel that the blessing of heaven has been cursed by our limitations" (Gyulai 1913, 97). In the later, rewritten version of the novella Gyulai adds another year, and in the meantime "our company roamed a few counties, and by winter had returned to the small town where I first appeared". The new version further caricatures the new, mature, self-conscious, reflexive, less audience-friendly and more demanding of the audience's attention and patience as the reason for artistic solitude: "Because I played with more restraint and artistry, I was rarely received with applause" (Gyulai 1851, 105).

In the *Old Actor*, pioneering professionalism and the proud sense of the role of the autonomous artist are combined with a recognition of

vulnerability and a deep sadness. Gyulai is very sensitive to this already at this time, after the Revolution and the War of Independence, and it is telling that he organises one of the first modern art novella in Hungarian literature around this theme, incorporating the issues of vulnerability, lack of solidarity and social inequality into the discussion and thinking about the artistic profession very early on, and partly deriving the failures of the actor's vocation, preparation and empathy from these. Gyulai's insight is also important because the development of the social dimension of the literary profession and the new institutions of literary solidarity in the coming decades can be very much linked to him.

3. A Hungarian protofeminist Künstlerinroman/art novel by a woman author? Júlia Apraxin: *The Diary of Ilma Szerendy*

In the history of Hungarian literature, Júlia Apraxin is remembered primarily for her life story, which is a twisty tale of adventure: the aristocratic lady of Russian origin, related to famous Russian aristocratic families, brought up in Vienna, after a decade and a half of marriage and four children, decided or was forced to break up, left the marriage, and for a few years pursued an artistic career, then disappeared from the Hungarian public eye, and later in her life became famous as the first Spanish female freemason.[7] She has never been taken seriously in Hungarian or international literary or theatrical history, with the possible exception of her novel written late in her life, although there is much to be learned from a closer look at her novels, her newspaper business, her plays and her brief career as an actress, all written largely around the early 1860s.[8] There are at least three important reasons to take this oeuvre seriously. First, because the Countess, raised in Vienna, with her complex ethnic and cultural identity, undergoes a unique and interesting multiple cultural and linguistic transition in the wake of her marriage and afterwards. Often written in French and then translated into Hungarian (or partly written in Hungarian), her multilingual theatre work in Hungary and Paris results in very particular situations of multilingualism and interculturality. One of the striking traces of this is the variety of author names he uses in different cultural contexts: Julie Batthyány, Julie Apraxin, Nixarpa Eiluj, Yuliya Apraksina (a variant of which is Yuliya Aleksandrova Apraksina), Júlia Budai (Apraxin). Secondly, because the themes and characters of her works are sometimes very provocative in the Hungarian context: for example, she portrays

7 Unfortunately, there is no detailed monographic treatment of his life's work, the most thorough and comprehensive of the short biographical overviews is Kovács 2013.

8 After three decades of silence, in 1895 she published another major literary work, a novel in French (*Deux Passions*).

strong, pro-active, rebellious women who stand up for themselves, make decisions or behave in a subversive way. Thirdly – and for me, in this argument, partly related to the first two – Júlia Apraxin is the first woman author in Hungarian literature to write an art novel, and one whose protagonist is an emancipated woman with a tragic fate, who, following her talent, becomes an actress. Although uneven in quality, the novel, relatively successful in its time, offers an unparalleled insight into what the revolution in literary and artistic professionalism of the period might have looked like from the perspective of a woman author who was radical in many respects and well acquainted with European literary and artistic life. Is it the same as in Pál Gyulai's pioneering novel about artists? Are the emphases the same, are the artist protagonists facing the same difficulties, is the way of thinking about the theatre the same? Is this the same type of *theatre novel/ Theaterroman* as the work of the renowned Hungarian critic, literary historian and fiction writer?

Szeréndy Ilma naplója [The Diary of Ilma Szeréndy] was originally published in Paris in 1861 under the title *Journal d'Ilma Szerendy*, and was translated into Hungarian almost immediately by the very young son of the renowned literary historian, the later eminent Francophile writer István Toldy, who was only 16-17 years old. It was published in Hungarian in 1862 and is the third in a series of Apraxin novels which appeared in rapid succession, first in French, then in Hungarian and partly in German, in parallel, at the turn of the 1860s.[9] These novels, the plays she produced and performed in parallel with them, and her short-lived but substantial cultural journal, *Budai Lapok*, advertised as the first Buda newspaper, can be seen as both the intellectual quest of an aristocratic woman leaving or being cast out of her marriage and part of a large-scale nation-building project with a female perspective. All of her texts and cultural enterprises emphasise the new roles of the *honleány* (patriot woman/daughter of the homeland) and recurrently speak of the scope for manoeuvre that various groups in Hungarian society (especially the aristocracy and the intelligentsia) could have in a transitional period when Hungarian parliamentarism and social life were spectacularly re-launched in the early 1860s during the late period of absolutism. This is why many of his works include a spectacular critique of the aristocracy, emphasising that the traditional aristocracy can only earn its leading position if it takes an active social role, follows the path of the modern intelligentsia, learns

9 Conte Batthyány 1860a, Conte Batthyány 1860b, Conte Batthyány 1861a. All of these are signed under the name of Conte Julie Batthyány, and published by the Ferdinand-Fleurus Amyot, a Parisian publisher and bookseller. A parallel German translation of *Ilona* is being produced directly from the French original: Nixarpa 1861.

from it or becomes an 'aristocracy of reason' itself.[10] From this point of view, what is special is that, in many respects, her own rebellious, self-righteous life is also incorporated in many of her works, which tell of the world of women who are attracted to intellectual careers and who see a truly social stake in literary and theatrical creation. It is also this broader context that makes the work of her magazine significant, since, in addition to the (short-lived) *Euphrosine*, and the highly influential *Családi Kör*, both launched by one of the first European women editors, Emilia Kánya, *Budai Lapok*, launched by Apraxin in 1863, is the second (or third) Hungarian magazine to be published by a woman journalist. Her journal places her among a number of prominent pioneering international women journalists who, as editors and owners of newspapers in the mid-19th century, contributed in a pioneering way to the emancipation of the role of cultural entrepreneurs and to the rethinking of the role of women.

This is reason enough to read and interpret the Apraxin oeuvre, which has unfolded and come to an end in less than half a decade, and within it the *Diary of Szeréndy Ilma,* with much more discerning eyes, attention and understanding. Written in the form of a diary, the novel follows the tradition of the "found manuscript". It is the struggling diary narrative of a girl orphaned and raised in a Parisian foster home, far from her homeland, who returns to Hungary at the age of 18. Ilma finds herself back in a vacuum, having lost her best friend, and the only living member of her family, her cold uncle who adopts her, regularly and unabashedly insists that if she cannot find a rich husband for herself, she will marry his elderly (and rich) friend in short order. She falls in love with a young, educated, attractive aristocratic young man, but the situation is made hopeless by the fact that the half-orphaned young man's mother despises the lady, who inherits only modest wealth, and intends to find her son a much richer aristocratic wife from her circle of acquaintances. The situation is complicated by the fact that the young man's brother is hopelessly in love with Ilma, and is self-sacrificing in his efforts to help his brother and Ilma fulfil their hopeless love. Clinging to his love, openly embracing the idea of marriage, openly appreciating and cherishing the arts, defying social hierarchies and wealth prejudices, Elemér's conflict with his mother ends in tragedy. His mother's rage proves fatal, she becomes sick with her agitation, but before she dies she curses the marriage and makes her son swear never to marry her. Although she considers the vow of vengeance unjust, neither the young man nor Ilma can get over the vow of vengeance, forged on her deathbed. Ilma immediately travels to Paris, where she has a resounding success and, after her debut

10 It is a recurring idea in her literary works (for example, it is at the heart of her comedy *Országgyűlési beszéd* [Parliamentary Speech]. She spoke about it so explicitly in a lengthy essay (*Gombostű* 1862, 1 January and 4 January 1862) that it clearly contributed to the break with the aristocratic milieu in which she grew up and spent the first third of her life.

performances, is immediately signed on for a whole decade. But she is devastated to hear that her lover has collapsed, half-mad at the news of Ilma's departure, and so she actively helps to nurse and recover the man she has brought to Paris. Ilma considers her lover to be extremely talented, she sees in him one of Hungary's future leading statesmen, and desperate to see him torn between their unfulfilled love (in Paris) and service to his country, she takes it upon herself to save the day with the most magnificent and tragic stage performance of her life. In her favourite role, Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, she intoxicates herself and fails to wake up at the climax of the play. It is the greatest, the most frightening role, the one that will occupy audiences for a long time, the one that will be immortalised in a novel, the one that will become a work of art, the tragic pinnacle of theatrical art, and one that cannot be forgotten.

The novel is not just an art novel, but a *Theaterroman*/theatre novel, as it depicts theatre as a prominent art form on multiple levels, but at the same time frames the entire novel through the theatrical roles. As in the Pál Gyulai novella, the theatre becomes the interpretative framework for tragic love and life, and it is *in relation to* the world of the theatre, the plays and the theatre roles – i.e. the *theatre as a vocation*, a longed-for, meaningful new identity – that the other, non-artistic, intellectual roles and life stories are interpreted. From the very first pages of the novel – and his diary – Ilma refers to theatre as the most noble art form, but he also looks at the new intellectual vocations and elites in general as the ones to which the traditional elite must grow up. His unconventional vision – confirmed by his young aristocratic love – is that the aristocracy is of value in a new, modernising world only if it bases its public service on its own sensibility as a connoisseur of literature, the theatre and the social arts. Of course, this also shows that, for him, the theatre is not an end in itself, but a form of public service – even if indirectly. For example, the novel's protagonist clearly no longer sees his forced career in Paris as a service not to the Hungarian homeland but to some higher art (and so it is even more tense and tragic that he renounces both this and his love by a voluntary death).

Let us recall some of the key points in the novel where culture, and theatre in particular, functions as such a complex artistic medium. "– Oh!" said Elemér, "if you only knew how disheartening this emptiness, this total lack of interest in serious things, is! This insufferable idleness would have killed me, had I not created for myself an existence unlike that of my peers. These people think to do an incredible thing when they touch a book and turn the pages for an hour a day; it is a race of idiots which, if it does not change, will be doomed to perish. [...] If things remain as they are, the aristocracy must perish in its inactivity and ignorance, and the nobility will lose all its advantage over the bourgeoisie. Nowadays the sons of all merchants are more learned than the counts and dukes. They cannot then be surprised if the others feel their superiority over them." (Batthyány 1861b) – reveals Count Elemér,

the novel's protagonist, in one of their first deep conversations. It is from this confession, which treats meritocracy, education and the arts as the new general social yardstick and framework, that their love affair unfolds.

The art-loving girl herself is inspired by this relationship to realize her passion for the theatre, the superiority of the theatrical profession, and contrasts this realization with the lives of men and women (!) lived without meaning or purpose. In the Hungarian context of the turn of the 1860s, these are undoubtedly surprising and strong, relatively novel statements, which name the female analogy of the male partner's public engagement in the profession of actress: "What order, what clarity in this head! This man will make a name for himself in our country. Sooner or later, he will shine like a bright star in its sky. I myself am not well here, and this idle life is not my nature. If I had the strength to leave this land where Elemér lives, I would follow my vocation and take up a full career. I have a talent for acting. I have so far only acted in French, but I have no doubt that I could also perform successfully in my native language." (Batthyány 1861b, 39) – says the increasingly assertive Ilma in a chastened inner monologue. It is here that the later decision, postponed by her love, which she had already taken, to commit herself for life to acting, which she considered one of the noblest and most meaningful of all vocations, is made. This apologia for intellectual life, this framing of intellectual occupations as the top professions of the social elite, is also exciting because it indirectly outlines the extraordinary possibility that women can be models and leaders of society in the new society organised around the modern professions: "What happiness in itself is to be surrounded incessantly by talents and flames of all sexes. The poet, the musician, the painter, the actor are one being. Behold, this is the life I want!" (Batthyány 1861b, 40) – says Ilma.

In an important scene in the novel, which uses theatre play and role in a reflexive way, interpreting human relationships and social relations, a large-scale family theatre performance is planned for Ilma and his young companions, who are guests of his lover's family, to entertain the family and the visiting troupe. For the girl, however, this is far from being entertainment, but a life-and-death matter of strength, and through the role she reveals and announces her love affair with Elemér, rivals the fiancé already chosen by Elemér's mother,[11] and displays her intellectual superiority through her acting and preparation. This is why it is significant that Elemér is the "director" of the play, i.e. it is through their common interpretation of art that

11 "Elizabeth wants me to accept the Margaret that was meant for her. I took it, because Elemér asked me nicely to agree to it, and encouraged me that I would play it well. Elizabeth does not wish to portray anything else than Christiene, which makes the two mothers very annoyed, as they seem to wish to see the intended marriage between their children contracted with equal fire." (Batthyány 1861b, 98)

they rebel against parental arbitrariness, against a planned marriage based on dishonest relationships. It is through theatre as a medium through which they send a message to the haughty aristocratic female head of the family, who always imposes her will. And it is also this fateful play that will seal their fate, foreshadowing the maternal curse, that is to say, in this sense, it will also have an existential effect, as if mediating reality.

The choice of the play itself is also an exciting and telling intertext, a self-reflexive theatrical moment in the novel. The family's choice of a play based on one of Octave Feuillet's popular novels turned into a play, *Le roman d'un jeune homme pauvre* [The Story of a Poor Young Man], written shortly before the novel's publication. The play, however, turns out to be in reverse casting, a kind of mirror, telling the story of a pair of lovers whose relationship is hindered by the wrong-thinking. As in the Feuillet novel and its dramatic transcript, one of the important questions in Apraxin's novel is what is the true social value, who is truly rich and whether what is visible in wealth is permanent, whether it is the only basis on which long-term family and emotional decisions can be made.

But an equally reflexive theatrical element is the choice of the protagonist's stage name. Ilma, who realises that if she stays in Hungary, she will only hinder her lover's public actions by maintaining a love affair, consciously chooses the Parisian stage and her stage name also marks her new identity. The theatre is her new family, the theatre world is her new life, she becomes the "priestess" of art. But her stage name, Lélia, is a very evocative one, and it is not just a reference to her personality but to the world of the novel, since it seems to be a reference to George Sand's famous 1833 proto-feminist novel, which shocked her contemporaries by redefining the role of women. Its protagonist rejects the conventional social roles ascribed to women and lives her emotions and her gender at the cost of tragedy. The past of Lélia in the novel is also unknown, and like the 1839 version of the novel, which was reworked and, in many respects, reinterprets the original, the Lélia – or Ilma – of the Hungarian novel chooses to commit suicide in the wake of her ordeal. To give a sense of the multiple meanings, it is also worth recalling that Sand herself left a marriage she perceived as stifling, a gesture that was both extraordinary and scandalous because, like Apraxin, she already had children and found herself in new relationships, claiming for herself a freedom of choice similar to that of men.

As we have already sensed, Apraxin's novel is also groundbreaking because it intertwines acting – and art in general – with the question of modern women's vocations, women's emancipation, women's self-expression. It is a reflexive Künstlerroman/art novel in the sense that it also becomes a framework for early emancipatory women's thought, and this is an indication of the extraordinary scope for manoeuvre in the worldview of the art novel, art novellas and short stories that emerged

in response to the emergence of artistic professionalism and modern intellectual roles in the mid-19th century.

In Apraxin's novel, unlike Gyulai's, we see the story not only from the female protagonist's point of view, but she is inherently a more sensitive, innovative, dedicated artist. In comparison, her male partner seems more passive and weaker. It will take strength and determination without her for a fledgling male public career to unfold in the distant future. But at the same time, it is also thought-provoking that here too it is a young woman who foresees the future greatness of the young man in a determined, visionary way. It is through her will and sacrifice that this can be achieved, and so even after his death she determines his future life, she sets a good, sensible direction for it. Paradoxically and indirectly, according to the logic of the novel, a woman's 'artistic sacrifice', a formidable force and decision, through the theatre and the arts, is needed even for the world outside the theatre and the arts to function well (for example, for a prosperous nation to emerge in the not-too-distant future, thanks to such female sacrifices). Art and the sacrifice performed through art will be, as in the Gyulai art novel, what gives life a framework, a contour, a direction: it is not art that imitates life, but life that can take off in some nobler direction in the wake of art.

Apraxin's novel is difficult to read, sometimes turgid, sentimental. This is due both to the inexperience of the young translator, barely in his mid-teens, and to the fact that Apraxin's writing career took her only 3-4 years, without any preparation, without any prior sign, and that he was experimenting in a multilingual, intercultural environment that did not facilitate the rapid canonisation of such works. This small and unusual oeuvre deserves much more attention, especially the first Hungarian art novel written by a woman. Not only by right of being the first, but also because of the way in which it responds reflexively to the modern history of professionalism, sometimes in dialogue with Gyulai's work, and speaks in a particularly sharp and thought-provoking way about the position and scope for action of women artists, including their multiple vulnerability in the meritocratic revolution of emerging modern literary and artistic professionalism.

4. Why read 19th century artists' novels/novellas? A methodological proposal

The interest in writers and artists is not new. One need only recall the influential world of Renaissance artists' anecdotes to see that there is a long tradition of stories about artists, their creative world and their private lives. Only that in the 19th century this interest was transformed into important, paradigmatic stories of such great volume, so varied and so defining their own genres, that it would be foolish and inattentive not to notice it. This is why this paper has argued that we should

reconsider not only the narrower question of whether the tradition of the Hungarian art novel can be dated to the early 20th century, but also how the 19th century stories told about artists in the art novel, the art novella and the short story are the outgrowth, the representation, and often the reimagining of a larger, globally intelligible new worldview.

The art novel and the art novella are a glocal genre cluster of 19th century world literature. Obviously, there are many different versions of this cluster. But one of its important, novel paradigms, innovative in the whole literary field and within the genre of the novel/novella, makes the new, modern (isolating and modernising) nature of creation and creators, of art and artists, through the stories of writers-artists, a central problem. The heroes of these works – writers, actors, musicians, painters, sculptors – are at once the beneficiaries of the new social turn of modernity, which marks the emergence and the valorisation of the modern intellectual. They characterise and experience literature and art as the noblest, most important, most worthy, most profound human and social experience, but at the same time they are constantly confronted with the human and social limits of creation and creative existence, with tragic consequences. These stories are characterised by masterpieces that will never be created, by the collision of private life and creative existence, by the recognition of the benefits of the modern market and, at the same time, by the extreme vulnerability and limitation of the creator to capitalism and, as a corollary, to success and to the public. It is for this reason that art becomes a reflexive figure in these works, for they are artworks in which attention is drawn to new forms, possibilities and limitations of art in a multiplied and complex way through other artworks.

In both of the pioneering Hungarian art novels and novellas of the 19th century – similarly to texts like Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Madame de Staël's *Corinne*, Balzac's *The Unknown Masterpiece*, Zola's *The Masterpiece* and many other fascinating works of the period – literature, theatre, opera, music, painting are a dubious, complex, often tragic and terrifying field of identity, self-reflection and cognition. In the art novels/novellas I have recalled, it is through the theatre that the characters come to know and construct themselves and the world, through it that they form and reformulate their interpersonal relationships, and often through it they come to realise that art is something deep and troubling, and that the artistic vocation is different and more complex than other vocations. The unveiled terrain of art novels, novellas and short stories is therefore the cult of the artist, but it is much more ambiguous and layered than the well-known cults and celebrations of the artist from the 19th century[12] – in fact, it is another, darker, more ambiguous, multifaceted and more reflective side of them. This is what makes them particularly important; they can show us the great turning point of the great new

12 On these see, for example, Dávidházi 1989; Dávidházi 1998; Leerssen–Rigney 2014.; Dović–Helgason 2017 – and my own interpretations: T. Szabó 2016; T. Szabó 2023.

era of artistic modernity, the emergence of the global modern literary-artistic-theatrical-musical vocations, and at the same time the darker, more reflective, more ambiguous face of this fundamental process of literary and artistic modernity.

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"Dance, Too, Originates From a Celestial Muse"

The Press Reception of Claudine Couqui's Guest Performance in Pest, with Particular Attention to the Critiques by Pál Gyulai

"For the sake of the weaker ones, especially for people in the villages, I must explain: what is ballet? Otherwise, they wouldn't know. It's a play where everyone speaks with their feet, using their heads for nothing. Here, the characters' faces do not move for the world – anger, good humor, or surprise *cannot* be shown, they must all be expressed with the feet. Hm. It is easy to express anger with the foot, by giving someone a good kick, but joy? Now, that is the art."[1]

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ABSTRACT

The Italian-born ballerina, Claudina Couqui (1835–1913), performed as a guest artist in numerous cities, including two appearences to Pest during the 1860s. Her first performance in 1863 was preceded by great anticipation, and after receiving an enthusiastic reception, she returned to the National Theatre the following year. This study seeks to explore the context of Pál Gyulai's lesser-known–and, to our knowledge, only–ballet-related dramaturgical work through the lens of the guest performances of the ballerina who had come from Vienna. The investigation is justified by the fact that Gyulai's critical writings and theatre reviews primarily focused on dramatic productions. However, Couqui's guest performances required the clarification of some fundamental questions: What role did ballet play among theatrical genres? Where did it stand in relation to drama and opera? And what expectations did contemporary theatre critics and dramaturgists have regarding the genre? Furthermore, what could Gyulai have known about the ballet productions in Pest at the time, and to what extent? Addressing these questions requires an examination of the reception of specific ballet productions.

Keywords: Claudina Couqui, Pál Gyulai, ballet, National Theatre, Pest-Buda, critic

1 Kakas 1856. Emphasis in the original. The title of the study is a quotation from a theater review. See below: N. N. 1864f.

The career of the Italian-born ballerina, Claudina Couqui (1835–1913), began in Milan, continued in Paris, and later flourished in Vienna. As a guest artist, she performed in numerous cities, including two appearances in Pest during the 1860s. Due to regular reports in the local press about her successes in Vienna, her first performance in Pest in 1863 was eagerly anticipated. After an enthusiastic reception, she returned to the National Theatre the following summer. This study aims to contextualize a lesser-known dramaturgical work by Pál Gyulai, which, to our knowledge, is his only piece related to ballet. The analysis is conducted through the lens of Couqui's guest performances in Pest.

This examination is warranted, given that Gyulai's critical essays and theatre reviews[2] primarily focus on drama. However, before the Royal Hungarian Opera House opened in 1884, the National Theatre also hosted opera and ballet productions. In Gyulai's career as a theatre critic, these types of performances received relatively little attention, and dance theatre performances, in particular, almost none. Couqui's guest appearances raise fundamental questions: What role does ballet play among various forms of theatre, and where does it rank in the hierarchy amid the coexistence of the muses? What expectations did contemporary theatre critics and drama theorists have for the genre, and what did Pál Gyulai know – and to what extent – about the dance theatre productions in Pest at the time? Addressing these questions requires a more detailed presentation of the reception of individual ballet performances, as reconstructed from periodicals. Thus, this study takes an interdisciplinary rather than a narrowly literary-historical approach.

Among the arts, dance and music are the least conceptual, while painting, sculpture, and literature remain the most tangible. They leave no permanent, physical objects to which one can return or that can serve as reference points for later works. Music, at least, leaves behind a score, a tangible object that can be found; but for dance or ballet, nothing endures beyond the immediate experience, and even that is limited in time. Dance, "the art of creating time and space" (Boros 2020, 8-9), vanishes once the moment passes. The work "exists or 'happens' only as long as the artist is present in full physical, biological, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive reality." The ballet dancer becomes one with the created space and time, yet the artwork only persists as long as the performance continues. It leaves behind no material object in time nor in space; the performance itself. It leaves no lasting objects in time or space; the performance is a one-time event, leaving nothing to revisit, walk around, or observe from multiple perspectives (Boros 2020, 8-9). Reconstructing dance history from the pre-recording era – writing about the invisible and the inaudible – thus presents a uniquely challenging task. Newspaper articles written in the wake of performances are the only available sources, making the study of periodicals crucial for

2 For the results of Gyulai research in recent years, see Ajkay–Császtvay 2018; Beke 2017; T. Szabó 2021.

examining cultural production, the dissemination of knowledge, and, not least, channels for expressing opinions (Török 2022, 227-228).

1. Musical stages in Hungary

Like most institutions, theatres were born out of social demand. In Hungary, opera appeared in the 18th century without prior foundations, so it did not have the roots and developmental stages seen in Italy or France. As in other European countries, demand for the genre came from the most affluent social strata – the aristocracy.[3] The model was Vienna and the imperial court, where French language and culture dominated through Maria Theresa's husband, Emperor Francis I of Lorraine. In Hungary, there were more than 50 private theatres owned by the aristocracy, including the theatres of the Esterházy dukes in Kismarton and Eszterháza, the theatre of Bishop Ádám Patachich in Oradea, the opera of Count János Erdődy in Bratislava, and the opera companies of Prince Primate József Batthyány (Staud 1984, 7-15; Székely–Kerényi 1990).

In addition to the aristocratic establishments, musical theatre productions also begin to appear in bourgeois theatres. The first musical theatre performances were staged in Pest, at Rondella, which opened in 1774 and was converted from a bastion into a theatre. However, these were ballets rather than operas, following the influence of Jean-Georges Noverre, whose work flourished in Vienna.[4] The genre, popular in the imperial city, spread throughout the Habsburg Empire by German touring companies. According to records from 1783, the Rondella staged 274 performances over 137 evenings, of which 58 were ballets performed 134 times. Ballet was not only popular but also a relatively low-budget genre: a simple backdrop sufficed as scenery, a single costume was enough, and all roles, from the tragic to the comic, were danced to accompaniment typically provided by a harpsichord, violin, and a flute (Staud 1984, 16).

The cultural boom in the Buda region began after 1873 when Joseph II relocated the administrative centre of the empire from Bratislava to Buda. To entertain officials, the former Carmelite monastery in Buda, left vacant, was converted into a theatre. This new venue, the Castle Theatre, was completed in 1787 (Staud 1984, 16). The first independent Hungarian ballet initiatives appeared here on the programme of the Hungarian theatre company that operated between 1833 and 1836. During this period, efforts

3 The trend has continued in later years. See Ujvári 2023b.

4 Jean-Georges Noverre (1727–1810) was a French dancer, choreographer and ballet master. *His Letters on Dance* (1760) is considered the theoretical foundation of ballet. He was who first introduced coherent ideas into pantomime and then brought them to life through dramatic action, i.e. he recognised the role of dramatic action in dance. The plot was expected to be simple and easy to understand, since only mimicry and dance are available for the narrative.

to adapt dance performance for Hungarian audiences began. On the one hand, librettos were written on Hungarian themes; on the other, verbunk elements appeared in the music, and the choreography incorporated folk dance motifs. Alongside operas, ballets became an integral part of the theatre repertoire, and the genre enjoyed great popularity.

The German Theatre of Pest, initially proposed by Joseph II but completed only in 1812, also supported the development of opera and ballet.[5] The new theatre, which could seat 3,500 people but had poor acoustics, was the largest theatre in Europe at the time, despite being located in a city with only 33,000 residents. Its repertoire was largely based on those of Austrian and German theatres. The massive auditorium posed a challenge for dramatic actors, so the venue was more suited to grand opera and ballet productions, although the high cost of scenery and costumes proved to be a limiting factor. In its early years, the theatre had no resident ballet company, a gap it filled by hiring guest artists – a practice that would later become standard (Staud 1984, 19, 45).

Of particular significance to ballet was the appointment of ballet master François Crombé,[6] who, starting in 1842, made considerable efforts to train a ballet ensemble. Notable performances during the 1840s included *Giselle* and *Esmeralda,* and during this period, the celebrated ballerina Fanny Elßler[7] also appeared as a guest in Pest. Several composers created music for the theatre's ballets, including Ferenc Doppler, József Heinisch, and Ferenc Kaczér. However, in February 1847, the German Theatre was destroyed by fire, ending its leading role in opera. The displaced German company continued to perform temporarily in various venues, but was no longer able to stage ballet productions (Staud 1984, 24).

A milestone in the cultural life of Pest-Buda occured with the establishment of the Hungarian Theatre of Pest in 1837 (renamed the National Theatre in 1840), which began staging operas in the 1840s.[8] The opening performance conveyed both purpose and artistic dedication, featuring drama, opera, and dance: alongside the works of Vörösmarty, József Heinisch, and Márk Rózsavölgyi, Hungarian dances taught by Lajos Szöllősy were included.[9] This third element – dance – was

5 For details see: Pukánszkyné Kádár 1914, 1923.

6 His biographical details are unknown. He was a member of the Vienna Court Theatre from 1829 to 1838, after which he worked as a ballet master in Graz.

7 Fanny Elßler (née Franziska Elßler, 1810–1884) was one of the most important ballet dancers of the Romantic era, alongside Marie Taglioni, Carlotta Grisi, and Fanny Cerrito, and was known throughout Europe.

8 For details, see Pukánszkyné Kádár 1940, 45-176.

9 They collaborated in *Belizár*. See Mihály Vörösmarty: *Árpád ébredése*; Eduards Schenk: Belizár. The program of the opening performance of the Pesti Magyar Színház, 22 August, 1837. Reference: SZT SZL Országos Széchényi Könyvtár, Színháztörténeti Tár - Színháztörténeti és Zeneműtár. [SZT SZL Theatre History and Music Collection]. The source of the image: Magyar Digitális Képkönyvtár [Hungarian Digital Picture Library].http://www.kepkonyvtar.hu/?docId=27913.

a logical addition, especially especially given the institution's aim to compete with the German Theatre in Pest (Staud 1984, 45).

Following the opening of the Hungarian Theatre, dancers from the German Theatre performed on its stage for a time. Notably, ballet master János Kolosánszky joined the Hungarian Theatre in 1839, followed later by Ferenc Kaczér. During this period, the *csárdás* evolved into its definitive form, emerging from the simplified *körmagyar* dance style (Staud 1984, 46).

One of the highlights of the National Theatre was the October 1846 appearance of Fanny Cerrito (1817–1909) and her husband, Arthur Saint-Léon (1821–1870) (Staud 1984, 46). Although the institution did not yet have a ballet master, it hired Federico Campilli (1820–1889) from Vienna in 1847. However, from the opening of the National Theatre until the early 1850s, ballet in the modern sense did not exist there, as the pieces staged were closer to pantomimes than to true ballet.

The Italian-born Campilli was tasked with establishing regular Hungarian ballet training, organizing the theatre's ballet ensemble, and developing the ballet repertoire. In the 1850s, ballet managed to exist as an independent genre within the National Theatre, primarily supported by Emilia Aranyváry.[10] However, it struggled to connect with folk-national traditions and, crucially, it catered to the interests of the aristocracy, which led to intense criticism. Partly for these reasons, and due to economic considerations, director Gedeon Ráday (1806–1873) abolished ballet's independence, reducing it to merely a ballet accompaniment for operas. This shift also limited Aranyváry's opportunities, prompting her to leave the country in 1859. Following her departure, Campilli did not create any new ballets for nearly 20 years; instead, he focused on reviving old works and choreographing for operas.

Campilli initially worked at the National Theatre until 1852, returning from 1855 to 1887 (from 1884 at the Hungarian Royal Opera). Although he was credited with organizing the ballet company, he did not establish a system of regular training. Instead, he adapted exercises and steps to each ballet being performed. This inconsistency, coupled with unregulated physical demands, often harmed the dancers. Frequently traveling to Vienna, Campilli staged productions he had seen there for the Pest audience. Throughout his lengthy career, he showed little interest in creating a national dance style, even though this became a key expectation in drama and opera. Ultimately, the ballet company lost its male dancers (Staud 1984, 46-47).[11]

10 For a career profile of the first Hungarian prima ballerina, who proved herself on the international stage, see Pónyai 2020; Gara 2022; Ujvári 2023a, 2023c.

11 After a two-decade hiatus, however, Campilli staged Delibes' ballets, *Coppélia* (1877), then *Sylvia* (1878), and finally *Naila* (1881). The Opera House was already under construction, and Campilli was aware that, once it opened, ballet would play an important role in the theatre alongside opera.

Rózsi Vályi assessed Campilli as "a compromise-bound, average craftsman who jealously guarded his profession and kept Hungarian dancers separate from ballet" (Vályi 1956, 92-93). The most outstanding dancers, including Emília Aranyváry, did not learn from him. During his tenure, there was no integration of Hungarian dance traditions with foreign ballet, "which, under a more capable ballet master, could have provided the foundation for healthy development" (Vályi 1956, 93).

2. The role of national dance performance

Ferenc Erkel had already composed the Hungarian national opera by the mid-19th century, but the emergence of Hungarian ballet and ballet music, as well as the creation of a national dance play, were still forthcoming. Although there were attempts in this direction as early as the 1830s, a significant breakthrough had not yet been achieved (Kerényi 1979; Major 1987). One of the first reform-era dance performances can be considered József Heinisch's *A haramiabanda* [The Haramia Gang], which was staged at the Budai Játékszín (Buda Playhouse, later the Castle Theatre) in 1834. The piece draws on various musical sources, incorporating elements of verbunkos, folk music, and even melodies from Beethoven, demonstrating the influence of European art music. Folk dance also proved successful and enduring, particularly with *Körmagyar* (1842), featuring music by Márk Rózsavölgyi, and choreography by Lajos Szöllősy. After the fall of the War of Independence, however, attempts in this direction ceased, with only Ferenc Doppler's Ilka vagy a huszártoborzó [*Ilka or the Hussar Drummer*] (1849) and *Toborzók* (1854) choreographed by Emília Aranyváry, worth mentioning. The success of these dance plays lay in their Hungarian content, which resonated with the spirit of the times and the sense of patriotic national identity. However, after 1849, prohibitions on theatrical performances pushed the national character of these works into the background, resulting in a decline in theatre attendance. During this time, Hungarian stage dance was only performed in a few scenes of Erkel's operas, and the National Theatre's dance company operated under poor conditions. It was only after the construction of the Royal Hungarian Opera House that the company was given the opportunity to develop (Gelencsér 1984; Windhager 2020).

The process of Hungarian embourgeoisement and the attempts to regain national independence were characterized by obstacles and compromises. These anomalies impeded and often contradicted the development of the national character of various artistic disciplines. While the evolution of Hungarian national music is marked by the work of Liszt, Erkel, and later Bartók and Kodály, a comparable trajectory is absent in Hungarian dance. There were no outstanding Hungarian ballet artists who adapted the folk dances of the time to the ballet stage with the high artistic standard and alignment with the period's

spirit and taste. As a result, Hungarian ballet in the last decades of the 19th century primarily followed the Viennese model, with only a few national elements incorporated into the *Csárdás* and *Vióra* (Körtvélyes 1966; Ujvári 2023d).

In discussing the role and significance of national dance, it is important to highlight that there was a social demand for the development of national dance culture and the art of dance in Hungary during the first half of the 19th century. However, the failure of the War of Independence, followed by the Neo-absolutist period, led to a decline in artistic efforts. After the Compromise of 1867, signs of revival began to emerge: the demand for the presentation of national dance culture became increasingly pronounced, bourgeois ballroom dance culture spread more widely, and the achievements of European dance art also began to make their impact felt.

The articulation of the necessity for national dance works, including the *daljáték*, emerged as a product of 19th-century bourgeois development. In Hungary, this artistic ambition became intertwined with the struggle for a national program, which emphasized Hungarian themes, national music, and dance, framed within the context of dramatic dance plays and romantic ballet (Gelencsér 1984, 153-154).

As noted earlier, unthinkable, the theatrical operations of the Reform-era were unimaginable without the participation of guest artists, a tradition that continued for decades. Below, we will examine the guest performances of the ballerina Claudina Couqui from Vienna (in 1863 and 1864), particularly because her productions reached a level of quality that inspired Pál Gyulai to write critiques of the ballet genre.

3. Claudina Couqui's first appearance in Pest (1863)

Claudina Couqui[12] began studying ballet in Milan at the age of seven. She initially danced at the Teatro alla Scala and, from 1855, performed in Paris. In 1857, she moved to the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna, where she achieved her first significant success in 1858 in *Carnival Adventures (Karnevals-Abenteuer)*, a piece that Gyulai later criticised. She retired from the theatre with this production in 1868. Between 1870 and 1873 she also performed at the Court Opera. In addition to her performances in Vienna, she was a guest artist in Cairo and many European cities, including London, Berlin, Milan, Venice, Florence, St Petersburg, Warsaw, and Pest. She ultimately retired from the stage in Rome in 1874 (Cucchi 1904a, 126-129).[13]

She first performed in Pest in 1863 and returned to the National Theatre the following year. By this time, she was already familiar to the Pest audience, as her successes in Vienna had been reported in the

12 Claudina Couqui (née Cucchi, 1834 or 1835, Monza – 1913, Milan) was an Italian ballerina. Other spellings of her name: Claudine, Cucchi, Conqui.

13 In German: Cucchi 1904b; Wallaschek 1909.

Hungarian press.[14] According to Károly Zilahy, Couqui was much loved by the audiences of the imperial capital, though he himself felt that her stage performances displayed "more *grace* and lightness than fire," and that her expressions, despite her constant smile, "leave one cold" (Zilahy 1860).[15] By the summer of 1861, reports indicated that three Viennese ballet dancers were expected to perform at the National Theatre.[16] The anticipated guest appearance came to fruition two years later, but only Claudina Couqui arrived in Pest on March 29, 1863. News of her scheduled appearances had been circulating in the newspapers for weeks prior to her arrival. After rehearsals, she appeared in the following plays:

Ballet title	**Presentation day (1863)**
The Devil in Love (Szerelmes ördög)	8 April
Gizella (Giselle)	10 April
Catherine, the Robber Leader (Katalin, a rablóvezérnő)	13 April
Robert and Bertram	15 April
Carnival Adventures (Farsangi kalandok)	17 April, 20 April

14 In addition to the daily newspapers and periodicals (*Hölgyfutár, Nővilág, Kalauz, Vasárnapi Ujság, Ország Tükre*, etc.), the short-lived trade journals of the period also reported on theatre productions, such as *Délibáb, Kolozsvári Szinházi Közlöny*, and *Magyar Szinházi Lap* published by Gábor Egressy in the 1850s and 1860s. The *Szinházi Látcső*, published by Kálmán Szerdahelyi and regarded as the 'official' journal of the National Theatre, is significant for the period under discussion. It reported on the events of the Hungarian theatre world between 1863 and mid-March 1864. In German, the same task was performed by *Zwischenakt*: *Blätter für Theater, Musik, Kunst und Tagesereignisse*, published daily by Mór Morländer (= Moritz Engländer) between 1863 and 1869. From 1 January 1866, the administration of the publication was transferred to the Deutsch Brothers (Gebrüder Deutsch) at Dorottya street no. 11, while the owner remained Morländer. The 'Theater und Kunst' section was mainly devoted to articles and reports signed with a signature, as was the 'Lokales und Tagesneuigkeiten' section.

15 Zilahy 1860. Emphasis in the original.

16 It was first published in *Pesti Napló* (no. 3395, 7 June 1861), then taken up by other publications, e.g. *Hölgyfutár*, no. 28, 5 March 1861, p. 223.

Among the five ballets, *Carnival Adventures* was a novelty, not yet performed in Pest, which heightened anticipation around the guest artist's appearances (N. N. 1863a).[17] Her debut, however, was somewhat overshadowed by a new policy at the National Theatre: only members of the drama selection committee were granted free tickets to *Gizella*, a policy noted in multiple newspapers.[18] As a result, there was considerable interest in the reviews that Gergely Czuczor, Pál Gyulai, Lőrinc Tóth, and Ágost Greguss were expected to publish on "the ballabille, pas deux, pirouettes, entrechats, ballonades, and everything else presented by artist and her entourage."[19]

Mlle Couqui made her debut in *The Devil in Love*, first staged in Pest by Campilli in 1851.[20] This ballet was visually spectacular, featuring "Bengal fire, hellfire, lightning, a magic table, shooting up from the ground, descent into hell – all in quick succession" (L. 1851). The production was staged again in 1855, with Emilia Aranyváry in the leading role.[21] *Pesti Napló* emphasized the importance to this production, viewing it as a significant step forward in the development of Hungarian dance:

"The theatre was once again very full, reflecting a growing receptiveness and appreciation for the noble ballet. This phenomenon is welcome; not long ago, the majority of audiences, both here and elsewhere, tended to favor the stirring appeal of more emotionally charged, bacchic dances. Now, we observe that the public is turning with interest toward a more refined ballet – a form that captivates not through provocative gestures but through poetic figures, the plastic

17 The theatre scene in Pest has benefited from the increased interest, as the number of spectators has dropped. The journal *Bolond Miksa* presents the situation as a joke, but in fact it accurately describes the situation, because after Emilia Aranyváry's departure there were no ballet dancers of outstanding quality in Pest: "Nothing could fill our theatre in recent times, and here comes Kuki [Claudina Couqui and fills the boxes and balconies [...]" (N. N. 1863e). In the days of Fanny Elßler and Ceritto, the ballet fever was greater, and the artists were treated with the public respect of (almost) royalty. The present, however, is not nearly so rosy, the situation of the ballet in Pest and its personnel need considerable renewal, but "even if something new is done, it is like repairing the fence of a museum with a board that has been stumbled over elsewhere and is even more outdated".

18 The contemporary title of Giselle.

19 N. N. 1863c. The *Szinházi Látcső* also refers to the appearance of "many learned art critics," as it was mainly the drama critics who received honorary tickets for the performances (N. N. 1863d). Humorous newspapers also noticed the unusual practice (N. N. 1863i).

20 Joseph Mazilier (choreography) – Napoléon Henri Reber, François Benoist (music) – Jules-Henri Vernoy de Saint-Georges (libretto), Le Diable amoureux. Premiere: Paris, 23 September 1840. The libretto is based on the short story The Devil in Love (1772) by Jaques Cazotte. For the libretto see: https://petipasociety.com/le-diable-amoureux-or-satanella/.

21 But in 1854 *Die Presse* was already writing that *Der verliebte Teufel* was getting old, the ballet masters' imagination was paralysed, the plots were dull and pointless, and the new dances didn't seem new (N. N. 1854a).

beauties of form, and that enchanting power which elevates dance to the level of art. We must regard this shift as progress in the development of the public's artistic sensibility. This trend is particularly noteworthy, especially considering that ballet has faced a dangerous rivalry with national dances. This rivalry is significant because it is easier for even an average artist to make an impact in national dances, whereas only distinguished dancers can succeed in ballet. And this distinction is natural. National dances resonate more closely with the public's passions and express emotions and concepts that are more easily understood by them: the music of national dances does not merely accompany the dance but serves as its very foundation. In contrast, the effectiveness of ballet relies on techniques that may not engage those who seek a deeper, more imaginative expression in dance movements. These techniques include regularity and plastic beauty – art forms that can also influence the nobler senses through the coolness of marble." (L. 1851)

About Claudina Couqui's guest appearance, Kálmán Szerdahelyi likely wrote in more detail in *Szinházi Látcső*. As we shall see below, his critique aligns with Gyulai's observation: "Generally we do not wish to make a grand sacrificial fire for ballet – this theatrical luxury – but we must admire Couqui, for she is a mature artist who not only floats like a fairy, but also expresses every mood and emotion in her performance as dramatically as an actress" (N. N. 1863d). In the ballet *The Devil in Love,* she was required to portray the passion of a demon, which she achieved through her facial expressions and "fierce and beautiful movements, her wild and graceful elevations" (N. N. 1863d). The reviewer specifically highlights Couqui's hand gestures, noting that "[the] hand, it is said, is the greatest burden on the stage," and this is especially true for a dancer (N. N. 1863d). However, Couqui turned this to her advantage, "making whole triumphs with her hands": "How beautifully she carries them, and with them, she draws lightning-quick and delicate graceful figures in the air!" (N. N. 1863d)

According to the reviewer, the highlight of the performance was the seduction scene, characterized by its light and charming rendition of the dance. Couqui's dancing was not only superb but also highly expressive. "For her, expression is the main thing. From the tip of her finger to her heel, everything resonates. It creates a poetic image that charms with its truth and idealism. That's why not only ballet lovers but also friends of drama will be delight in watching her." (N. N. 1863d)

The second performance of the guest appearance was the ballet *Giselle*. This was the "first complete dance piece staged in Hungary," choreographed by the Viennese dancer Pasquale Borri (1820–1884) on 12 June 1847 at the National Theatre (Jaquemet 2022, 61). In the mid-1850s, Aranyváry also performed it regularly with great success.

In its review of *Gizella*, the theatre magazine *Szinházi Látcső* noted that Couqui's performance showcased her great technical preparation and brilliant dancing skills, paired with lightness and grace. Her acting

nearly crowned her performance, aided by her "finely etched and spirited" expressions, which conveyed every kind of emotion with ease. "Her Gisella possesses a whole dramatic expression of life." (N. N. 1863b) "She portrayed the poor but graceful vineyard girl with precision", and at the end of the first act, she also depicted despair, madness, and death with striking authenticity. Her performance was aesthetic, gripping, and true to life (N. N. 1863b).

In *Pester Lloyd*, Adolf Dux expressed his belief that the National Theatre's monotonous and dull repertoire seems to be revitalised by Couqui's guest appearance. Her performance in *Giselle* fully lived up to expectations, and rightly so, as she possessed everything needed for an artistic achievement: her technical prowess allowed her to execute the most difficult and surprising leaps with a brilliance and ease, providing audiences with a rare treat. Her acting and expressive facial gestures significantly enhanced her performance, particularly in her portrayal of despair, madness, and finally death. The audience was very appreciative of the guest artist's performance, and also appreciated the contribution of Mari Rotter,[22] and Campilli.

Dux also highlighted fundamental issues. In his view, the ballet had not established a secure place within the National Theatre, often serving merely to fill gaps in the repertoire. This was evident in *Giselle*: the theatre technology was not functioning properly. The lighting in the second act stripped the performance of any sense of romanticism, with daylight prevailing instead of the desirable twilight. There was no trace of eerie dimness, and the beautiful blue moon that typically graced the stage was nowhere to be found (D. 1863).

Giselle was performed frequently in the mid-1850s, leading to a decline in interest. In response, Campilli staged *Catherine, the Robber Leader*, which featured gunplay, brawls, and market comedy, in 1857.[23] This production, along with *Robert and Bertram*, received the least attention during Claudina Couqui's guest performance and was scarcely mentioned in reviews. The critics' lack of interest can be attributed to the

22 After Emilia Aranyváry's departure, Mari Rotter (often referred to as Irma Rotter, 1841–1913) became the National Theatre's prima ballerina, although she could not match her in talent. She also appears in the photo album of Kálmán Szerdahelyi: "»...undeniably progressing in skill, but (we must admit) the graces seem to have forgotten to smile upon her at birth. She spins rapidly, moving on the tips of her toes with such speed that it almost has a sound, like a trill; she leaps and jumps with great vigor. However, there is no grace, roundness, or precision in her performance. Among other things, she carries her arms irregularly and expresses nothing with his face.«" See: https://kozvilagitas.blogspot.com/2016/06/szerdahelyi-kalman-fenykepalbuma-2015.html.

23 Jules Perrot–Cesare Pugni: *Catarina, ou La Fille du Bandit*. Premiére: London, 1846. For libretto see: https://petipasociety.com/catarina-ou-la-fille-du-bandit/. In Budapest: *Katalin, a rablóvezérnő*. Regényes balett táncokkal és csoportozatokkal in 4 acts. [A Ballet with Dances and Group Movements in 4 Acts]. Adapted for the stage by Campilli. Premiere in Vienna: *Katharina, die Tochter des Banditen*, 29 April 1847. *Der Humorist*, no. 104, 1 May 1847, p. 414.

fact that these plays resemble folk theatre. To illustrate this point, the reception of the latter play in Vienna a decade earlier will be referenced.

The plot of *Robert and Bertram*[24] would have been familiar to Parisians, as the story of Robert Macaire[25] has been adapted for literature. The character of Robert gained popularity through the performance of Frédérick Lemaître[26] , who made his fortune through theft and then established an insurance company to protect against it. However, the Viennese audience lacked this background information, so the story, as presented in the ballet, was not an unqualified success (N. N. 1854c). To put it more bluntly, the figures of a robber, a swindler, and a thief can be interesting and entertaining on stage, but these two ordinary prison inmates were not worthy of such portrayal. They were not in Paris either, and the play owed its lively and folkloric character to the performances of local actors (H. 1854).

The plot[27] of the ballet is permeated with folkloric traits, so the storyline could be the basis for a traditional pantomime rather than a ballet, as noted by a critic. The two protagonists are at the centre, and the value of the ballet lies in the performances of the two dancers: although as divertissements, they are also close to pantomime, wrote another newspaper. The amusing scenes of the first act feature the two villains dancing a pas de deux to fool the police, then robbing the barman, and finally escaping on horseback. After this, the plot loses its appeal. The first act is action-packed: burglary, chase, and escape, while the second act is a bit incomprehensible without background knowledge. The third part, with the Parisian avenue and the robbers escaping by airship, is very colourful and entertaining. The pantomime part suited the two

24 Michel François Hoguet–Hermann Schmidt: *Robert und Bertrand: pantomimisches Ballet in 2 Akten*. Premiére: 22 January 1841, Berlin. Staged by Paul Taglioni. Libretto: https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb00059411?page=6,7. Première in Pest in March 1858, with Aranyváry. *Pesth-Ofner Localblatt*, no. 92, 23 April 1858, p. 4.

25 A fictional character, an unscrupulous crook, he embodies the archetype of evil in French culture.

26 Frédérick Lemaître (1800–1876): French actor, who played character roles mainly in buffoonery plays.

27 The plot: Robert and Bertrand are two rogues escaped from prison and on the run from the police. They first appear at a pub where the innkeeper's son is preparing for his wedding. The happy bride is the daughter of an industrialist, whose father brings the dowry in cash. Although the police are present, Robert distracts them with all sorts of stunts and then, taking advantage of the merriment of the wedding party, steals the dowry and finally escapes on horseback with his friend. In the second act, Robert is now at the head of an anti-theft insurance company, robbing many bona fide people of their shares. Meanwhile, the police reveal Robert's identity as he is about to marry the daughter of a wealthy marquis. On the day of the engagement, they try to catch him, but Robert is faster again, turning on his heels. While on the run, he and his friend steal the coats of two recruits and then turn up at a village fete, where they are again caught. From there, they escape in an airship (N. N. 1854b).

actors well: their acting was lively and entertaining, and the audience rewarded them.

4. Closing of the 1863 guest appearance

Claudina Couqui's guest appearance in 1863 concluded with the *Carnival Adventures***.** Borri also incorporated the theme of the masked ball in one of his most successful works, the five-act ballet *Un'avventura di carnevale*,[28] which was later performed in Vienna, Milan, Parma, Reggio, Rome, Trieste, Turin, Florence, and Cremona between 1858 and 1864. The ballet was staged by Campilli at the National Theatre in 1863 under the title *Carnival Adventures* (Jaquemet 2022, 63). Following its premiere in Vienna in 1858, a correspondent from *Pester Lloyd* promptly reported on the performance. Several points from his critique would later resonate in Gyulai's review.

Based on the Vienna experience, the reviewer felt that this is not the kind of ballet to discuss in good company. It lacks depth and plot, with the sole aim of entertaining and stimulating the senses. Although the three acts are loosely connected, this is merely a facade. The spectacle, however, is lavish: Parisian painters, grizzled characters, a country aunt and uncle, an English traveller and his French companion, as well as countless supporting characters appear on stage. When they meet, they immediately break into dances, most often performing cancan. Adeline, the painter's model, showcases various forms of movement instead of remaining still. Waltzes, polkas and cancan abound everywhere: in the studio, in the fashion store, at the masquerade ball. Naturally, the latter is where the greatest revelry occurs, with the treacherous lord kidnapping the virtuous Adeline using dream dust. In the third act, she lies on a bed, observed from a respectful distance by her captor. This is the only scene in which Mademoiselle Couqui has the opportunity to prove herself as a mimic, according to the critic. Initially, images of the last night's festivities flash before her eyes, and she begins to dance involuntarily to the music. She becomes aware of her strange surroundings, recognizes the lord and slowly pieces together the events. Thanks to her friends, there is little time for despair, as one of the painters jumps through the window and confronts the lord. A shot is fired: the painter misses his target, and the English lord raises his gun but instead of shooting, he embraces the brave young man. The bridegroom appears, his jealousy dissipates, they celebrate their reunion, and the country uncle gives his blessing. This simple plot has one flaw: for two acts, Adeline is the wildest and most unrestrained of the grizzettes, only to suddenly reveal herself as a strong virgin. This dilemma is quite striking, according to the reviewer. He concluded that ballet dancers are particularly well-suited to

28 Pasquale Borri–Matthias Strebinger: *Un'avventura di carnevale* [Carneval's-Adventure in Paris], prémiere: Vienna, 16 October 1858. For libretto see: https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/view/bsb10581466?page=5.

portray grizzettes and lovers rather than goddesses and mythical figures.[29] It marks a turning point in the history of ballet that the composer drew from real Parisian life for inspiration, rather than from thieves and knights, legends and fairy tales, or an approach to opera (Wallaschek 1909, 228).

5. Carnival Adventures, the "sugared emptiness" – or what is the function of the National Theatre?

The motto at the beginning of the essay, taken from Márton Kakas, continues:

> "Next to me sat an inept old man, who spent the whole performance grumbling about how this is the purpose of the national theatre: to fill the entire evening with foot-tapping? What service do such empty spectacles render to the moral upbringing of the people, to the expression of their good feelings, and to their taste? These should be the aims of an institution like the national national theatre in Pest, and not the tickling of the jaded sensibilities of the audience and similar concerns." (Kakas 1856, 189)

This fundamental question had already been addressed by theater critics before Claudina Couqui's guest performances. Following the 1857 premiere of *Catherine, the Robber Leader*, the critic of *Pesti Napló* reflected on the coexistence of ballet and prose plays under one roof. He noted that Sunday was always considered a reliable theater day, as local residents, after the hardworking weekdays, attended the theater on Sunday regardless of the program. On this day, the theater hosted the "most grateful, most easily enthusiastic audience" (N. N. 1857a). This trend also sent a message to the theatre management: since the audience did not mind what was on the programme, it would be advisable to stage quality dramas on these days, as had been suggested before. In this context, the novel ballet *Catherine, the Robber Leader* was somewhat unconventional, as only plays had been presented until then. Although it had its place as a ballet, a return to the usual schedule would have been preferable, meaning that the National Theatre should have entertained audiences on Sundays with quality plays: "We do not wish for the management to present ballet to the Sunday audience any longer" (N. N. 1857a).

A few weeks earlier, the editor of *Budapesti Hirlap* took the same position (N. N. 1857c), basing his argument on the ideas of *Családi*

29 Vienna preface: O. R. 1858.

Lapok. Although the ballet was spectacular, it "does not belong in the halls of art at all" (N. N. 1857b). Spending on scenery and costumes was a waste, as purely eye-catching performances cannot reach the level of prose works or the depth of thought in drama, so "getting audiences accustomed to such spectacle is always to the detriment of serious dramatic recitation" (N. N. 1857c). He reaffirmed that drama is "what we also consider the primary mission of our national theatre" (N. N. 1857c). A year later the issue arose again. The *Vasárnapi Ujság* also lamented the lack of "original dramatic productions," noting that, most recently, for two consecutive Sundays, "contrary to custom, we are treated to ballet," which was of little use (N. N. 1858).

Following Claudina Couqui's appearance in Pest, *A Hon* also resonates with the problem (X. 1863). The National Theatre's core mission was to promote national language, art, morality, and public culture, according to his critic. In pursuing these aims, the different artistic disciplines (drama, music, and dance) were not mutually exclusive, although their separation and independent institutionalization had been mooted in the past. The term "national" implies certain obligations and expectations, and in the spirit of "noblesse oblige," it must be acknowledged that for each artistic discipline, there are certain limits and quality criteria below which one cannot fall (X. 1863). In the case of prose, the introduction of folk theatre was welcomed, while the promotion of farce was deemed less fortunate.

In the reviewer's opinion, the replacement of folk theatre with operetta was also a drop in quality; for instance, the performances by Rachel and Ristori's foreign-language company were artistically acceptable,[30] but Levasseur's[31] vaudeville company was not. The guest appearances of Fanny Elßler and Cerrito on the national stage were also considered tolerable, whereas the appearance of Pepita and her companions was not welcomed.[32]

Although Claudina Couqui's dancing delighted many, the choice of program could have been more careful: Gizella and Uriele[33] demanded artistic interpretation, while *Carnival Adventures*, presented in two performances, represented a setback. The reviewer identified the basic problem in the cancan, which was not suitable for respectable ladies, even if it was referred to as a "carnival dance." They asserted, "we will perform a modest cancan with virtuous movements, demonstrating that the cancan can also be danced modestly" (X. 1863). The critic also noted

30 Similarly see Pál Gyulai 1908b.

31 August Levasseur was a dancer at the Académie Impériale de Musique in Paris, and from 1858 ballet master and principal dancer at the Hamburg Municipal Theatre.

32 "This is how a Berlin newspaper described the art of world-famous dancers. Taglioni dances to make our blood boil; Elsler [!] to please; Grahn Lucille to amaze; Pepita to tease; Cerrito to stun; Couqui – as if to praise her – dances to dance, because dance is inspired by her passion, because dance is her life, her element, because she is all and nothing but dance." (N. N. 1863j)

33 The woman-devil in *The Devil in Love*.

that it was pointless to include the csárdás in the ballet, as it was not the appropriate venue for it, given that the fundamental characteristics of this dance were entirely different

Regarding Couqui's guest performance in Pest, this production received the most coverage in the newspapers. *Szinházi Látcső* pointed out that the dance play was presented in a shortened version with some omissions. Couqui performed more and more beautiful dances, including the csárdás with Rotter Mari, who was dressed as a man and danced "with the charm and grace of someone, who had learned it from the down-to-earth people at weddings in the Great Plain" (N. N. 1863f). Her performance to Spanish melodies was full "with Spanish fervour and exuberance", Couqui "has a genuine artistic depth" (N. N. 1863f). All this was accompanied by graceful, light movements and charming expressions. Her costumes were also suited to the dances: for the csárdás, she wore a skirt in national colours and a headpiece, while in the Spanish dance, her headdress reflected the national colours.

The reviewer deemed the highlight of the ballet performance to be the pageant featuring the ribbon dance, set against a backdrop of colourful arbors. The piece concluded with a "noisy and folksy" carnival dance. The reception of the performance was equally lively: there were cheers and enormous applause, several dances had to be repeated. A shower of wreaths and bouquets was thrown at her feet from the boxes rented by the distinguished noblemen. "This shower of flowers was renewed three times." (N. N. 1863f)

Among Couqui's merits was that the cancan was able to appear on the national stage, noted *Hölgyfutár* (N. N. 1863g). This could perhaps be attributed to the fact that the piece was more of a "ball" than a ballet (N. N. 1863g, 383). She "brought enchantment to farce as well" (N. N. 1863g). Some of her dances, especially the csárdás and the Spanish dance, were greatly admired, being "welcomed with wreaths and whole showers of flowers" (N. N. 1863g). Following her guest performance, she left a significant void, making it difficult to entice the audience back to the theater.[34]

6. Pál Gyulai

Pál Gyulai published two reviews of Claudina Couqui's guest performance in April 1863 in *Koszorú*, and included them in his *Dramaturgical Papers* (Gyulai 1908c). In his opinion, the Italian artist captivated the audience from her first appearance on the stage and "made a much deeper impression on our audience than the dancers usually do". What struck him about the guest ballerina from Vienna was that, although famous virtuoso ballet dancers had appeared on stages in Pest

34 N. N. 1863h. Another newspaper also warns of the dwindling audience: during Couqui's guest appearance the theatre was so full "that one could not see from the hats, now for some time there has been a constant comfort [...]" (Csukássy 1863).

a decade or more ago, even at the National Theatre, none could rival Claudina Couqui's stage presence in terms of dramatic expression: "we do not believe that any of them could have understood better than she how to express ideas and feelings – in other words, a complete dramatic act – through dance, movement, and facial expressions." (Gy. P. 1863a)

In his critique, Gyulai made it clear that he sought "dramatic excitement" in ballet as well and appreciated the acting skills of the dancers (Gy. P. 1863a). Among his expectations for the genre, he stated that, in addition to dance, technical skills, and the presentation of the "most difficult dance formulas" (Gy. P. 1863a). He also considered it necessary to include "dramatic action" in the dance performances on stage, expecting ballet to convey this. He noted that the difference between drama and ballet is that while drama relies on words and speech, ballet expresses human feelings and emotions through music, dance, facial expressions, and pantomime, which makes the plot of the scenes understandable. These four elements – music, dance, mimicry, and acting – help the ballet dancer narrate a story that is easy to understand. The task and art of the ballet dancer is to express the state of mind and the ideas as authentically as possible through movement, and this is what the charm and the dance technique must serve (Gy. P. 1863a).

In ballet, the first embodiment of the primacy of dramatic expression, the perfect example was Marie Taglioni,[35] whom Gyulai believed Fanny Elßler could never surpass. Claudina Couqui also fitted into this lineage, who "expresses the most subtle nuances of emotion with her muscular face" (Gy. P. 1863a). Her movements and dance were in harmony with the various emotional states required by the scenes, expressing the feelings demanded by her role with sufficient charm. This was only occasionally distorted by the difficult dance techniques dictated by the spirit of the times, the "neck-breaking formulas," and the physical strain, which to a considerable extent became a disadvantage for good ballet (Gy. P. 1863a). However, this occurred far less frequently with her than with other ballerinas.

During her guest appearances in Pest, Miss Couqui performed in several ballets, including *Giselle* and *The Devil in Love,* productions that the local audience had already seen in previous years. Gyulai attributed to Couqui the merit that, until now, "no one has been able to give these works as much plastic clarity or as faithful an expression of the spoken word" as she has (Gy. P. 1863a). In *Giselle,* her passing was natural: "she died a beautiful death, faithful to nature, but within the boundaries of grace, without using any materialistic means" (Gy. P. 1863a). Then, transformed into a willi and descending into her grave, she conveyed "a love so beautifully expressed that it could not fade away, even in the

35 Marie Taglioni (1804–1884) was a ballet dancer with Swedish and Italian roots, an inescapable figure in European dance history. Her niece, Marie Taglioni (1833–1891), was also an accomplished ballerina, who later married Prince Joseph Windisch-Grätz.

tomb" (Gy. P. 1863a). In *The Devil in Love,* she was able to intensify her performance, allowing the audience to vividly feel the demonic character that continuously evolved with the plot. She showcased the many shades of demonic nuances: "archness and softness, jealousy and revenge, mischief and anger were expressed in various shades through her face, dance, and movements" (Gy. P. 1863a). At the end of the play, during her transformation from demon to angel, she delivered a performance that rivaled those of the most distinguished actresses, as noted by Gyulai.

The criticism went beyond the stage production and concluded with a realistic assessment of the situation. Gyulai made it clear that his favorable critique was "not intended to provoke support for the ballet" (Gy. P. 1863a). On the one hand, it was necessary to consider what the primary task of a national theatre was and which types of theatrical performances could be integrated into its repertoire. On the other hand, the dance genre required considerable financial resources, which the theatre did not have at its disposal. At the same time, the arrival of exceptionally talented dancers should have been regarded as a positive aspect: "the main purpose of the national theatre had nothing to do with ballet: we did not have enough money to support it, but it was always beneficial to appreciate excellent artists, especially in a manner that was not sufficiently recognized in our country" (Gy. P. 1863a).

Claudina Couqui closed her guest appearance in *Carnival Adventures* (Gy. P. 1863b).[36] Gyulai's second review focused on this performance. His strong verdict was that the work did not belong to the ballet genre. He noted that it primarily lacked a plot, and thus, "it makes no sense." Although the *Szinházi Látcső* described the sequence of events,[37] the reviewer stated that "we hardly saw any of it on stage" (Gy. P. 1863b). Gyulai also observed that the piece had undergone significant alterations, resulting in "a tasteless mixture that should not be called a ballet in the program of a national theatre. The problem is not that it is a bad ballet, but that it is not a ballet at all." He further criticized the prima ballerina for "performing in such a trivial manner when she could express the dramatic side of ballet so well" (Gy. P. 1863b). However, she did not have the opportunity to do so in *Carnival Adventures*; although she danced beautifully, she lacked dramatic expression. "What could she have expressed when there was nothing to express?" Gyulai remarked (Gy. P. 1863b). The solution would have been "to perform in a tastefully edited potpourri instead of this so-called ballet" (Gy. P. 1863b). This could have included the carnival scene, which he regarded as the best part of the entire work, and the Hungarian dance would have fit well within it. Despite all this, the success was not lacking, but it would have been better deserved in *The Devil in Love* and *Giselle*, he concluded.

Pál Gyulai's views on stage dance and his dramaturgical views on dance overlap completely (Kovács 1963, 110, 226-276). The literary

36 According to Gyulai, during her tour three times, actually twice. See below.
37 I could not find a detailed description.

press, as well as the political daily newspapers, closely followed the issues of drama and theatre even during the years of neo-absolutism. They regularly wrote about the performances of the theatres in Pest, especially the National Theatre, and not infrequently intervened in its programming policy. In Gyulai's oeuvre, drama reviews occupied a prominent place: he published his reviews regularly as early as the 1850s, and in the following decade, he turned his attention even more towards the theatre. His interest in the Hungarian theatre could be justified by its position and role, as the stage already represented a decisive intellectual force in the reform era greatly influencing national movements, the cause of independent national culture, and the development of the social and national role of drama. Drama and theatre could also become public and national issues, because during the years of repression, the National Theatre was one of the public cultural institutions that continued its activities even during the years of neo-absolutism, thus being regarded as a stronghold of the Hungarian language and culture. Its task was to strengthen national consciousness, and this expectation was articulated for all artistic branches (Kovács 1963, 226-227).

The central element of Gyulai's criticism is the plot. According to his interpretation, the plot is a fundamental part of drama, because it is "the most important element in which the character of the hero is realized and reflected" (Kovács 1963, 245). He also places great emphasis to the spiritual motivation behind the characters' development. He articulates the essential requirement that character portrayal should occur not behind the scenes but in full view of the audience, within the plot. "He urged an inner, essential connection between character and action," and he could not identify with the surprise events typical of the Romantic period, with their unexpected turns (Kovács 1963, 247-248). He rejected "the accumulation of unexpected plot twists, cheap excitement, i.e., the Romantic forms of effect" (Kovács 1963, 248). Furthermore, he did not consider the world of fairy tales and fairies to be an appropriate dramatic basis, although he acknowledged that poetic fantasy and lyricism could also manifest in such works (e.g. *Csongor and Tünde*) (Kovács 1963, 251).

According to his critical criteria, the duration of the theatre performance is closely linked to the plot. Within a few hours, it is given that fates, an entire human life, and complications must be presented and then resolved. All this requires the playwright to weave a fast, dynamic plot to maintain the audience's attention. Unlike a novel, there is no room for episodic scenes, multiple threads of plot, or slow depiction of events. The exposition and the resulting complication form a tight unit, the former having to expose almost the entire work. In this light, the possibilities for characterisation are limited, and there is no room for detailed and complex portrayals. Naturally, characters can easily find themselves in intricate situations, but the complexity of the situations always arises from the circumstances rather than the intricacies of the character themselves (Kovács 1963, 252-253).

Dávid Angyal also pointed out that for Gyulai, true drama could not exist without the harmony between plot and characterisation (Angyal 1911, 360-393, 378). He took a firm stance on the portrayal of death on stage, which also appears in *Giselle*. In his opinion, this was not a simple theatrical situation, rather "it was a big mistake to want to die on stage as people did in real life. An actor must never conceive of death from a realistic perspective and strive for a fidelity that would have earned the approval of doctors" (Angyal 1911, 380).

7. Claudina Couqui's second guest performance in Pest (1864)

1863	1864
The Devil in Love	7, 12 April
Gizella	–
Catherine, the Robber Leader	–
Robert and Bertram	–
Carnival Adventures (comic ballet)	2 April, 6 April[38]
	Esmeralda (novel ballet): 10, 13 April [39]

Claudina Couqui returned to Pest in April 1864. Compared to the previous year, she appeared in only three ballets: *Carnival Adventures*, *The Devil in Love*, and, as a novelty, *Esmeralda*. "If we remember correctly, when she was here last year, she even delighted certain stern and serious critics with her footwork," wrote *Koszorú,* referring to Gyulai (N. N. 1864a). However, *Fővárosi Lapok* deemed her choice of programme for the following year inappropriate, mainly due to *Carnival Adventures* (N. N. 1864b). Although she had achieved her greatest success with this play the previous year, the reviewer noted that the artist "seems to have been happy to deviate a little from her muse," and, in attempt to win favour with the audience began her new guest appearance in Pest with this piece (N. N. 1864b). Her choice was by no means beyond criticism, since the work was "much less than a bad ballet, if not a ballet at all," but rather a dance mixture that had undergone significant abridgement – a botched job, in fact, devoid of any dramatic plot (N. N. 1864b). This, however, was not acceptable to the adjudicator, as a coherent dramatic plot was seen as a fundamental requirement for a dance play.

38 The performance scheduled for 3 April was cancelled due to a mild case of illness. See *Fővárosi Lapok*, no. 78, 6 April 1864, p. 346.

39 Fővárosi Lapok published on 12 April 1864 (p. 366) the Adventures of Carnival as Couqui's last guest performance for the next day, while the 13 April issue announced Esmeralda as her farewell performance (p. 370).

According to reports, the other two ballets, *Giselle* and *The Devil in Love,* were much more in line with these requirements. In the former, she was able to "die so movingly," while in the latter, she captured the mood swings of "a softening demon" with artistic depth and impact (N. N. 1864b). By comparison, in the quodlibet, she could only display her remarkable dancing skills. However, there was more to Mademoiselle Couqui, according to the *Fővárosi Lapok*'s theatre critic: she was capable of nuanced characterisation, vivid storytelling, and conveying dramatic elements through her acting. None of these skills came into play in *Carnival Adventures*, where the dance sequence merely showcased her light movements, charming gestures, and the flexibility of her body. Thus, the performance essentially focused on entertainment, whereas in a dance play rich in action, all these abilities would have served a higher, artistic purpose. The reviewer believed that the audience, too, seemed to be aligning somewhat with these expectations, as evidenced by the applause, which was more restrained compared to the previous year.

The reviewer pointed out the tendencies of contemporary ballet, namely that this genre was beginning to lose its poetry, with fairies, butterflies, willies, and demons being increasingly replaced by bourgeois figures. At the same time, he stated that, regardless of the direction in which dance theatre might develop, it could not forsake plot and a coherent story for mere spectacle. In the case of an artist of Couqui's calibre, he called it a management error not to make better use of her talents by choosing a more appropriate programme. He observed that the ballet repertoire in Pest was fundamentally limited and that local theatres were not well supplied with sets and machines. Additionally, the cost of featuring guest artists was a considerable financial burden.

Although the entirety of *Carnival Adventures* was a poor piece, one part, the seguidilla, stood out as a true highlight. Couqui's appearance was captivating, her costume consisting of a black veil and a cherry-coloured dress adorned with black lace, completed by her coquettish posture, her "face was full of desire, daydreaming, and joy" (N. N. 1864b). The music of the dance play was "so evocative and amorous that we almost felt sorry for the circus music of this kind of dance play" (N. N. 1864b). Graceful steps, the clatter of castanets, and the beating of drums culminated in a dance filled with sensual, rapid, and passionate movements. Last year, this had to be repeated, but a year later, it was not. The reviewer noted the dancer's illness, which may have hindered her performance, but stated that she would remain a "poetic phenomenon for a long time to come" (N. N. 1864b). Her other dances showcased beautiful shapes, playful lightness, and charm. "Such dancing is the poetry of the female body. Love it, and you will be turned away from the rough and raw sensuality of the cancan." (N. N. 1864b) The reviewer did not consider himself a fan of ballet, nor did he believe that this genre necessarily belonged on the national stage; however, if ballet was to claim a right to exist independently, the art of Mademoiselle Couqui

could serve as a guiding example, though she should be featured in a dance play that was more suited to her talents (N. N. 1864b).

The journalist of the *Fővárosi Lapok* further stated that although Couqui had once again charmed the audience in *Carnival Adventures*, this piece was not worthy of her artistry and talent. However, the fundamental problem in Budapest was that the ballet repertoire of the National Theatre had been defined for ages by two ideal ballets, *Giselle* and *The Devil in Love*.

He remarked that the theatre's management could arrange for a couple of new ballets if dance theatre were given its own space, at least during guest performances. Another issue was the worn costumes and outdated sets, which adversely affected the guest artists performance, as they did not engage the audience. In Couqui's case, "there were also empty rows and boxes" (N. N. 1864c).

According to *Családi Kör*, although Couqui was renowned as an excellent dancer, she was "not very selective in her means of triumph;" otherwise, she would not have performed in Carnival Adventures for the first time during her second tour in Pest, as this dance work "reveals everything rather than the poetry of dance" (–i –r 1864). The critic considered the Debardeur dance to be the least suitable for presentation on the national stage. "Let's leave the 'Dunanan' laurels to the Buda theater" (–i –r. 1864, 352).[40]

Gyula Bulyovszky stated that *Carnival Adventures* was "sugared emptiness" (Bulyovszky 1864a, 21-22). He was not impressed by Couqui's performance, saying that "either she didn't dance with enough energy or not with enough spirit" (Bulyovszky 1864a, 21). He doubted the latter, as she had been paid four hundred forints for one night. Bulyovszky believed that Couqui had moved past "the first glamour of youth," and instead exhibited "a certain proportion and completeness in her technique as well as in her dance" (Bulyovszky 1864a, 21).

The reviewer of *Pesti Napló* also discussed the reasons for the worn costumes and sets in *Esmeralda* at lenght (N. N. 1864g). He noted that these decorations had not been in better condition last year, yet the performances still attracted a full house, so this could not explain the lower attendance this year. Since then, the theatre has hired a set designer tasked with creating new sets and renovating the old ones, and the ballet has also received several new costumes. "Never look for the cause of a problem other than where it really is," was the admonition

40 One of the dances of the *Carnival Adventures* is the debardeur dance (cancan), performed by the female ensemble in lighter costumes and masks. This dance also appears in Offenbach's comic operetta, *Le voyage de MM. Dunanan père et fils*, which Gyulai also reviewed, see Gyulai 1908a. The cancan was already well-known before Couqui's guest appearances, as Offenbach's work was first performed at the Budai Népszínház in 1861 and subsequently staged over a hundred times. For more on Offenbach's reception at the time, see Bozó 2021, 45-85.

(N. N. 1864g).[41] Last year, the sets were even worse, but Miss Couqui's first guest appearance in Pest was preceded by heightened anticipation. However, this year's guest performance coincides with the visit of a German actress[42] who was performing cancan, "with a natural shamelessness that Couqui's true art cannot match."[43] The appearance of the cancan was greeted with positive responses from many critics, who welcomed its arrival after Paris. According to the reviewer, this was a sign of a loss of taste, and the public will soon be content with even less.

This critique also raised the fundamental question of the place of ballet in the country's first theatre. The verdict was that ballet had no independent raison d'être on the national stage, and could only be understood as part of opera and drama. Ballet could only be presented in its own right in exceptional cases, "and only if it is not to the detriment of drama in particular" (N. N. 1864g). Of all the types of theatre, ballet was the least suited to the aims of the National Theatre. The basic requirement was that it should receive the minimum financial investment and the least amount of time (playing days), while drama should be given priority. The current director fully met these requirements and deserved praise: he first had the sets and costumes necessary for staging a drama repaired, and then had new ones made along the same lines (N. N. 1864g).

In connection with Claudine Couqui's guest performance, the *Pesti Napló*, essentially the official critic of the National Theatre, and the *Fővárosi Lapok* engaged in a polemic. According to the latter, Couqui's success was less prominent than last year due to the battered and unattractive sets, while the latter argued that the theatre's painter had been preparing for the Shakespeare Festival, making it understandable that he had not focused on the sets for the guest artist's performance. The critic's stance was firm: "Shakespeare's celebration comes first, while ballet – in our view – should not be given any space on the national stage" (N. N. 1864h). He asserted that even the guest appearance of

41 The *Fővárosi Lapok* also said that the charm of the novelty had lost its shine: although Couqui "danced with charming grace" and her acting was excellent, "she is not making as much noise as last year. Most people seem to think that if you're a guest, you should not only be good, you should be new" (N. N. 1864d).

42 Josephine Gallmeyer (sometimes Gallmayer, 1838, Leipzig – 1884, Vienna) performed at the beginning of her career as an actress in Brno, Brașov, Timișoara, Pest, and in 1862 she was engaged by the Theater an der Wien.

43 Ibid. The situation, Gallmayer's performance, and her cancan are also referred to in the *Fővárosi Lapok:* "We hear from many that it is not so much beautiful as scandalous. It is the non plus ultra of the »Dunanan's father« debauchery, which no modest woman can watch without blushing. We have also heard outcries. »The authorities, they say, »have reprimanded the cancan dancers in Buda, and rightly so; they ought to be reprimanded, and reprimanded severely. [...] and there is no better way of expressing the difference between the two theatres in Pest than to say that while there Mlle Gallmayer is blushing the women and making the men laugh, here Mlle Couqui is charming us all with her idealistic and beautiful dance." (N. N. 1864e)

such a renowned dancer should have been adjusted so that it did not interfere with the timely staging of a drama, and that, among other things, the set designer would have sufficient time. Ballet, too, required proper presentation, as it was primarily a feast for the eyes, and harmony had to be ensured. Once staged, both the performers and the audience had to be provided with the right visuals for the overall effect of the stage and performance to be complete. One of the essential tasks of a large theatre was to organize and maintain its set and costume design. However, if there was insufficient time to properly showcase a ballet, "then don't invite a guest dancer" (N. N. 1864h).

The dispute between the two sides continued over the ballet's sets and costumes. *Pesti Napló* reiterated its arguments and its stance on the hierarchy of genres. On this point, there was consensus among colleagues: ballet had a right to exist only in a subordinate position to drama and could not be given a place of its own.

In the discussion, *Pesti Napló* addressed a sentence in *Fővárosi Lapok* suggesting that the former was considered the official critic of the National Theatre and had access to many internal matters. *Pesti Napló* rejected these claims. It also pointed out that the National Theatre had its own official publication, *Szinházi Látcső*, in which Károly Vadnai, chief editor of *Fővárosi Lapok,* was involved. *Pesti Napló* declared its independence, good faith, and dedication to drama, emphasizing that in their articles, they adhered solely to their own journalistic programme and professional credo, reviewing theatre performances as unofficial critics. This stance included that if, in their view, the management of the National Theater faced unfaire or and unwarranted attacks, they would come to its def

The debate had yet to reach a conclusion. *Fővárosi Lapok* briefly revisited the issue of the sets for the productions. They argued that the situation during Couqui's guest performance might have arisen because a significant portion of the available financial resources had been allocated to costumes rather than to upgrading the stage equipment. The reviewer suggested it would have been more beneficial if the new costumes had been created gradually, allowing the larger portion of funds to be directed toward refurbishing the stage.

The article also responded to the question of identifying the theatre critics. According to *Pesti Napló*, the official journal was *Szinházi Látcső*, and Vadnai had contributed to it. However, the publication had turned out to be short-lived. *Fővárosi Lapok* retaliated by asserting that, although *Pesti Napló*'s weekly review was published anonymously, it was widely known to be written by Szigligeti (N. N. 1864i).

Pester Lloyd also expressed its views on Couqui's recent guest appearance (2. 1864). There was no doubt that Couqui's presence enlivened the theatre scene in Pest. The ballerina faced plenty of competition, and she was not the best dancer. Her artistry had its technical limits: she was not the fastest in pirouettes, nor did she

perform her jumps with the same confidence as Legrain.[44] However, it was worth highlighting the beneficial harmony and innate sense of rhythm in her dancing – qualities that could benefit some singers. The performance of Carnival in Venice and the seguidilla received special praise.[45]

While others praised Couqui's mimicry, the reviewer noted that she could not shed the Italian tradition: her facial expressions followed the rhythm of the music rather than the beating of the heart. The *Carnival's Adventures* represented a significant milestone in our theatrical history, as it was the cancan that crossed the borders of the Monarchy. The debardeur symbolized the modern carnival, while the fearsome Domino, the merry Harlequin, and the simple-minded Pierot appeared as outdated characters.

The ballet performance was criticized for being presented with significant cuts, and as a result, the plot suffered. However, in contemporary ballet, it was difficult to critique this aspect, as it no longer drew from themes consistent with the genre's forms. Its plot was not organically structured; it did not unfold organically from a dramaturgical idea. Instead, it accommodated various unrelated scenes that could be fitted into a series of dances, such as a dance performed in a Parisian fashion shop during *Carnival Adventures*. The reviewer questioned how one could even speak of a plot in such a case.

The *Fővárosi Lapok* critic stated that *The Devil in Love* proved to be a much more fortunate choice than *Carnival Adventures*, as this ballet "already has a basic idea," a plot, and provides the cast with the opportunity to "not just jump around, but to create and express something" beyond dance (N. N. 1864j). According to the reviewer, in this piece "the guest artist was much more in her element" than in the previous ballet. In addition to her dancing skills, she impressed with her expressive acting, demonstrating that she possessed "darker shades of passion" alongside charm and seduction (N. N. 1864j). Scottish dancing and a few *csárdás* steps enriched the performance. However, the staging left something to be desired; apart from the technical problems, it was mainly the behaviour and pacing of the actors backstage that the audience could see. The audience was sizable, even though Gallmayer was also guest performing in Pest at the time (N. N. 1864j).

Claudina Couqui concluded her tour with *Esmeralda*, which was the subject of a lengthy and insightful review in the *Fővárosi Lapok*. The reviewer praised the performance of the guest artist, noting that she was able to showcase her excellent acting skills in addition to her "light, delicate" dancing (N. N. 1864f). The dance was based on Victor Hugo's novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, in which the characters, the scenes,

44 Victorine Legrain (1833–1916) made a guest appearance in Pest in April 1857, appearing twice in *The Devil in Love*.

45 According to the programme, it is not the *Carnival in Venice*, but *The Women in Venice*, performed by Couqui with Irma Rotter, while the seguidilla is performed by Campilli and the dance troupe.

and the entire story were described as "grotesque, picturesque, and more suited to such silent formulae than to the strict ramp of drama" (N. N. 1864f). The reviewer called Couqui's dancing "the poetry of movement:" "like the nayadai of the tale, she touched the ground with the tip of her toe and floated as lightly as if the air itself were lifting her" (N. N. 1864f). Her light, graceful movements and beautiful hand gestures were complemented by great acting, dramatic elements, and "wit." The reviewer placed her silent performance almost above dance productions, stating: "Her mute face speaks, and she seems to understand and feel every little degree and nuance of emotion and mood" (Bulyovszky 1864b, 45).

He illustrated this with a detailed example. The charming Esmeralda is pursued by a man of wild passions, Frollo. They meet four times, and she is repulsed by him on each occasion, gradually building up to her reactions. The first time, she shows only the fright of an innocent girl; the second time, awakened from sleep, she is overcome by terror and runs away; the third time, she is overtaken by despair at the loss of her lover. The fourth encounter, the final scene, is the most dramatic: when she is taken to the place of death, Frollo would sacrifice his life for Esmeralda's love, but only scorn is his reward. In this final scene, Couqui did not even dance: she only acted, and it was here that her acting skills were at their most powerful. Her costume was not ballet-like either: instead of a tiny skirt, she wore a "long, floor-length shroud-like" dress, with her hair falling to her shoulders (Bulyovszky 1864b).

> "She staggers towards the scaffold, and every step she takes is moving. No one can fail to understand the sadness of her plight. Yet this apparition is not cold. The rays of religiosity and memories of love break through this heavy envelope. She prays, and as she kneels and lifts her hands to heaven, she presents an image of a suffering Madonna. Her face is surrounded by her raised arms, the most beautiful frame for such an expressive image. Then she rises, lifting herself onto tiptoe, and the spectator forgets the scaffold, thinking only of her ascent to the sky. Something comforts me as she convinces me that, though she dies, she dies pure and noble. But then comes the heavy moment of despair, and she collapses to her knees, broken, hiding her face. At this moment, Frollo whispers that he will save her from the bloodbath if she will love him. The broken girl straightens up, as if the feeling of contempt has restored all her strength. How she looks upon this hated and unkind man! Her gaze is like the eye on Minerva's shield, capable of turning men to stone. Her eyes flash like lightning, and her

> brow is full of majesty. Such is the full expression of her recollections of love when she kisses the red kerchief of Phebo. All the cheerfulness flows from her long-suffering face; you can see the faith that there is a better world where they will love each other. This revelation is transformed by a sudden turn of events. Phebo, healed from his wound, appears, saves his beloved, and kills Frollo with his own dagger, this dagger being aimed by Quasimodo's hand. Love and rapture could not be more touchingly expressed than in the face of the woman who has gone to the scaffold and come into his arms. Every muscle speaks. She looks now to the sky, now to her sweetheart's eyes, which both alike promise her heaven. The carnival masqueraders take her on their shoulders and lift her into the air, that we may remember still more this statuesque image, which is the noblest expression of the joy of the woman's heart." (N. N. 1864f)

In the third act there is a similar, perhaps less powerful scene in which Esmeralda moves towards fulfilment with pure love: "She hides her eyes from her lover, afraid of what she desires: she shudders, but at last a flame crescendos, covering her face and eyes, and she collapses in Phebo's arms in rapture." (N. N. 1864f) The reviewer's assessment is that "the innocent girl's invincible love, her first confession and her pure surrender cannot be more beautifully portrayed in a silent play" (N. N. 1864f). She sees in Couqui an artist who "warns the audience that dance also comes from a celestial muse" (N. N. 1864f). She considers this particularly important, given the increasing prevalence of bacchanalian dances, vulgarity, and movements that appeal to the senses on the stage.

According to the reviewer, the most negative aspect of the performance was the costumes and sets, "the poverty of the exhibitions," which greatly detracts from the overall effect (N. N. 1864f). The play was accompanied by a "worn, ugly and unpainted set" that "belongs not in front of an audience but on a rubbish heap" (N. N. 1864f). This may partly explain the drop in attendance. "There are many people of good taste who seek a cohesive presentation, and though the fairest fairy may fly on the stage, she will not delight if she flies among ugly, dirty, and fragmented scenery" (N. N. 1864f).

The reviewer of *Hölgyfutár* held a similar view of Couqui's performance: it was her dramatic portrayal that made her unique, particularly the struggle depicted in the final act of *Esmeralda*, which, even without words, was perfectly expressed on Couqui's face during the mourning procession. Her expression "gave every muscle, every line a certain meaning and a definite expression" and "reached into the soul, and, besides the intellect, struck the tenderest strings of the heart" (N.

N. 1864k). The reviewer regretted that in this year's tour, she would only be appearing in three ballets, not ideally chosen, and noted that this may not have been her decision. It would be good, he added, if the principal director could address this conundrum. "Responde mihi, due Szigligeti!" he concludes (N. N. 1864k).

Although Couqui's talent, versatility, beautiful acting, light and varied dancing, and conscious artistry could only be praised, the *Kalauz* reviewer had little positive to say about the other actors in *Esmeralda,* with the exception of Mr. Lannesz as Frollo, who credible portrayed his role. "Campilli is not a pleasant dancer, his art has already become paralyzed, and as a director, he does not offer much to commend him either. The dancers remain as vague as ever; he has little sense of order, and some formations are truly offensive to the eye" (Jósika1864).

A few months later, the *Wanderer* criticized the National Theatre's operations, programming policy, financial situation, and its shortage of singers and ballet dancers. Among the points of criticism was Couqui's guest performance, which "not only consumed all income but also a despicable amount beyond that" (Radnótfáy 1864). In response, the intendant explained that the National Theatre "has never placed much emphasis on ballet, which serves merely as a decoration for operas and other performances; independent ballet performances are only given on rare occasions" (Radnótfáy 1864). The first private dancer, Mari Rotter, held her own alongside the celebrated European guest, and the audience appreciated the work of the dance company. Although Miss Couqui's performances in the spring of 1864 did not attract as many spectators as the previous year, after deducting all expenses, the theatre's coffers retained a net profit of 147 forints per performance (Radnótfáy 1864).[46]

8. Summary

Through an exploration of the prima ballerina Claudina Couqui's guest performances in Pest (1863, 1864), this study seeks to address how 19th-century theatre criticism, particularly that of Pál Gyulai and his circle, regarded the function of the National Theatre and the position of ballet as a form of theatre alongside national drama and opera. The topic necessitated a detailed reconstruction of the reception of individual ballet productions based on press accounts, as well as a broader discussion of related issues. Consequently, it also became necessary to briefly address the status of musical stages in Hungary, the process of institutionalisation, the establishment of the National Theatre, and within it, the position of ballet, including the work of Frigyes Campilli. Despite Campilli's decades-long career, Hungarian ballet remained disconnected from folk and national traditions, and no

46 The *Fővárosi Lapok* and *Sürgöny* also published the article, as well as *Pester Lloyd* a day earlier. See: N. N. 1864l.

distinct national dance theatre was established, even as such expectations were increasingly placed on drama and opera.

Until the opening of the Hungarian Royal Opera House in 1884, ballet was staged at the National Theatre alongside drama and musical performances. However, the three theatrical genres did not enjoy equal standing, with the primacy of drama remaining unchallenged. Musical productions met critics' expectations only to a limited extent, as their generic characteristics did not align with the broader demands placed on the nation's premier theatre. They did not advance linguistic cultivation or the development of national literature, nor did they always fulfil essential dramaturgical requirements – especially in the case of ballet.

Pál Gyulai showed interest in the National Theatre's productions, regularly publishing his critiques from as early as the 1850s, with his focus on theatre intensifying in the following decade. His commitment to Hungarian theatre may have been driven by its role and responsibilities: since the Reform Era, the stage had represented a vital intellectual space, significantly influencing national movements and the cause of a distinct national culture, as well as the evolving social and national role of drama. Drama and the performing arts became a matter of public and national importance, particularly as the National Theatre, one of the few cultural institutions allowed to operate during the neo-absolutist period, stood as a bastion of Hungarian language and culture. Its role in strengthening national consciousness became an expectation extended to all branches of the arts.

Although Gyulai also paid some attention to musical theatre, he rarely addressed it in his dramaturgical essays, focusing instead on opera. Ballet was an exception, however, in the case of Claudina Couqui's appearances in Pest. His two critiques encompassed multiple threads: beyond evaluating specific dance productions, he offered his assessment of ballet as a genre, thereby expressing his view on the relative standing of theatrical forms and the function of the National Theatre.

Commenting on the guest performances, he noted that Couqui's stage presence and performance style had a profound impact on him, much more so than other ballerinas. What distinguished Couqui, he suggested, was her unique dramatic expressiveness – a quality rarely matched by earlier famous ballet dancers on Pest's stages, with the exception of Marie Taglioni. Couqui's movements and dancing were in harmony with the emotional states demanded by the scenes, and she portrayed the requisite sentiments with ample charm. Yet, technically, her execution had certain limitations. In *Giselle*, her fading away felt natural; in *The Devil in Love*, she managed to elevate her performance further, vividly conveying to the audience the continually evolving demonic character in line with the plot. Gyulai considered her portrayal comparable to that of the finest actresses, although he could not say the same of her role in *Carnival Adventures*. He felt the piece did not belong in the ballet genre, largely due to its lack of storyline. He also

criticised Couqui for choosing this piece, as it did not allow her to fully demonstrate her dramatic expressiveness.

In his critiques, Gyulai made clear where ballet stood within the hierarchy of muses – drama, opera, and ballet – at the National Theatre. In viewing the dance productions, his most intense criticism was directed at weak plot construction; yet, he valued Couqui's dramatic artistry, recognising it as the most significant means of expression available to dancers in the absence of spoken language, alongside technical skill. Gyulai, an advocate of high art, maintained distance from mass culture but found ballet to be acceptable. Nevertheless, he saw challenges in its struggle to become nationalised or to acquire national traits, as it frequently intersected with mass forms of dance, especially the cancan, then highly popular. He found this difficult to tolerate, viewing it as a form of empty entertainment that stimulated the senses.

Among the basic expectations he held for any theatrical production was the primacy of dramatic plot, and he saw this as a foundational requirement for dance productions as well, beyond technical skill. He regarded the distinction between drama and ballet as primarily that the former relies on words and speech, while the latter expresses human feelings and emotions through musical accompaniment, dance, facial expressions, and mime, making the plot understandable through these elements. The ballet dancer's task and artistry lie in conveying states of mind and ideas as authentically as possible through movement; charm, grace, and dance technique must serve this aim.

For Gyulai, dramatic action was inseparable from the hero's character and the psychological motivation of character development. Genuine drama, in his view, required the coherence of action and characterisation. He stated as a fundamental principle that character portrayal should unfold before the viewer's eyes within the action itself rather than behind the scenes: within a few hours, the play should present destinies, a full human life, create complications, and resolve them. This required the dramatist to weave a swift and dynamic plot to retain the audience's attention. Unlike the novel, drama afforded no scope for episodic scenes, multi-stranded plots, or slow-paced events, nor for detailed and intricate depiction.

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Delight or Poison

The Emergence of Hungarian Decadence at the End of the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT
For most of the 20th century, Hungarian literary history disregarded decadence as a thematic or stylistic marker and refused to acknowledge that it was a significant cultural driving force of the fin-de-siècle Hungarian literature. I propose to interpret decadence not as a mere stylistic, moral or temporal category, but as a cultural trope, a *modernist way* of perceiving the world and creating art. I hypothesize that the Hungarian reception of French and English decadence at the end of the 19th century produced a uniquely reflexive version of this phenomenon. I aim to understand how decadence integrates into and presents itself in Hungarian literature and to uncover significant works hidden by the cultural forgetfulness of Hungarian literary history.

Keywords: decadence, fin de siècle, Joris-Karl Huysmans, Zsigmond Justh, Dezső Malonyay

1. Introduction

There is a plethora of outstanding works interpreting Western, primarily French and Victorian decadence on different scales and from various perspectives. These studies, handbooks, and monographs propose that decadence should not be viewed merely as a period or style marker, but as a concept describing a complex array of artistic and social responses to modernity. For instance, Jane Desmarais and David Weir see decadence as "a major cultural trope with broad explanatory power" (Desmarais–Weir 2019, 7), while Kate Hext and Alex Murray consider it a form of modernism (Hext–Murray 2019).

Following the establishment of the international prestige of research on decadence, the shift towards a wider global perspective, as observed

in the recent volume edited by Desmarais and Weir, is promising. *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence* dedicates separate studies to Turkish, Italian, Japanese, Scandinavian, and Eastern (Russian and Ukrainian) decadence. This turn towards internationally less explored literatures seems to reinforce Weir's earlier argument. His thesis in *Decadence – A Very Short Introduction* posits that decadence manifested differently and to varying degrees in the major literary and cultural centers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries – Paris, London, Vienna, and Berlin – due to urbanization projects, cultural-political and social structures, and preexisting patterns (cf. Weir 2018). The authors of *The Oxford Handbook of Decadence* explore decadence in geographically or culturally distant literatures based on this assumption. They conclude that the delayed or sporadic reception of decadence produces a "unique" decadence that can still be contextualized within world literature. In this dual-oriented interpretation, local and global decadence mutually illuminate each other's mechanisms. Stefano Evangelista discusses this *exchange* between European and Japanese decadence (Evangelista 2022), Pirjo Lyytikäinen claims that Scandinavian decadent prose *reconfigures* Western decadence (Lyytikäinen 2022), and in the latest issue of *Volupté*, Di Cotofan Wu states: "The Korean decadent movement also added a distinct dimension to the global understanding of decadence." (Wu 2023, 203)

It is then justified to assume similar outcomes when examining Hungarian decadence. Also peripheral in Western research, it can provide a unique insight into the evolution of global decadence and raise important questions about its multifaceted nature. At the end of the 19th century, the Hungarian cultural milieu simultaneously confronted the already mature, multi-variant Western decadence and experienced those global and local ambivalent attitudes that necessitated this new artistic expression. Reframing Hungarian decadence as a glocal phenomenon also has an emancipatory effect as it showcases the recycling and creative powers of the receiving culture[1] and poses the question of whether certain aspects of Hungarian decadence are, in fact, not borrowed but internally developed.[2]

1 As Emese Fazakas and Levente T. Szabó argue in their foreword to the 2020 volume of the *Hungarian Studies Yearbook:* "From this specific angle, Eastern and Central Europe are not just at the receiving end of global phenomena, but a place where scholarly, cultural, and artistic knowledge is creatively and enthrallingly created and re-created, resulting in intricate cultural, artistic, and scholarly patterns." (Fazakas–T. Szabó 2020, 5)

2 In his paper examining the glocality of the *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum*, T. Szabó convincingly demonstrates the significance of such a shift. He reveals how the specific status of the journal's home university shaped the founders' unique concept of comparative literature, hitherto overshadowed by the cosmopolitan approach of international scholars, and proposes to "rethink the way the founders and the collaborators negotiated their locality with others', and how all of them negotiated the transnational and global, but also one other as part of the transnational and global." (T. Szabó 2020, 71)

The situation is intriguingly complex, especially since the possibility of Hungarian literary decadence has not been properly considered in Hungarian literary history until now. It is not entirely surprising, therefore, that the international academic community has also ignored the question. David Weir, for example, places the culmination of decadence in the first decade of the 20th century within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but his analysis is limited to Vienna and German-language literature (cf. Weir 2018). Despite the growing interest, it remains unclear how decadence is expressed in Hungarian-language literature, as local forms of decadence have remained completely invisible to both Hungarian and international research for various reasons.

2. Modernist Shame: What Happened to Hungarian Literary Decadence?

In the October 1938 issue of the famous Hungarian modernist review *Nyugat*, Antal Szerb confessed that two decades earlier, decadent literature held initiatory significance for him: "Living for beauty then meant opposing everything else, all Christian and bourgeois value systems. Modernity meant exactly this to me: decadence, satanic inclinations, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and dandy superiority. Dorian Gray, if you still remember him, poor soul." (Szerb 1938, 274) A prominent figure in Hungarian interwar belles-lettres and literary history writing, Szerb identified aestheticism, rebellion, and decadence not only as the starting point of his artistic-professional career but as a fundamental experience of modernity.[3] It appears that during World War I, the decadent worldview and artistic attitude, along with notable decadent authors, works, and topoi, were (still) present in Hungarian literary consciousness. However, if we search for answers in the scholarly works of the past century regarding how decadence was present at the turn of the century, in what sense, and to what extent it had modernizing power, we do not receive satisfactory explanations. Hungarian literary history has barely even posed these questions. In the canonical academic handbook *A magyar irodalom története* (The History of Hungarian Literature), published in 1965, the term "decadence" was mostly used

3 Szerb's accurate perception and representation of literary decadence are consistent with the later analysis of the fin-de-siècle phenomenon. *Five Faces of Modernity*, a staple work of research on decadence, confirms the views of the Hungarian author: "aesthetic modernity should be understood as a crisis concept involved in a threefold dialectical opposition to tradition, to the modernity of bourgeois civilization (with its ideals of rationality, utility, progress), and, finally, to itself, insofar as it perceives itself as a new tradition or form of authority." (Călinescu 2003, 10)

as a pejorative synonym for decline[4] or as a thematic-motivic marker.[5] The authors adopted a perspective that deemed decadence inherently unacceptable, immoral, and condemnable, thus trivializing and erasing it from the Hungarian literary-historical tradition.

How did this happen? And what does cultural forgetfulness reveal about the status of Hungarian decadence? It is surprising but symptomatic that even Szerb reported a sense of shame regarding decadence following his early enthusiasm, and while he wrote about it with lenient appreciation in 1938, in his 1941 article *A dekadensek* (The Decadents), he already wanted to leave it behind as an outdated phenomenon: "How far away all this is today! How out of fashion tiredness, illness, decadence have become! [...] The excessive refinement and »taste« of the fin de siècle today appears as tastelessness. I would feel ill in Des Esseintes' meticulously arranged orange and blue study; I wouldn't be able to write a single line" (Szerb 1941a, 368). In *A világirodalom története* (The History of World Literature), Szerb consistently deems the stylistic, thematic, and genre elements that he perceives as having "percolated" from decadence as outdated (cf. Freeman 2019). It is clear that he attempts to salvage important fin-de-siècle oeuvres (Wilde, Nietzsche, Rilke, Thomas Mann) from the – according to his view – obsolete tradition of decadence (cf. Szerb 1941b). His literary history writing is characterized by the same restrictive, concealing, and appropriating strategies that Nick Freeman and Kristen MacLeod discuss in relation to the *Times Literary Supplement*,[6] T. S. Eliot,[7] and Ezra Pound.[8] Their conclusions are also applicable to Szerb and his contemporaries' understanding of decadence. Freeman and MacLeod argue that the self-definitional acts of modernism obscured and erased earlier decadent traditions. Therefore,

4 "[Zoltán] Ambrus, in the types of his realistic short stories, embodies the disintegration, the struggle, and the inner decadence of the Hungarian middle class." (Diószegi 1965, 867)

5 "In the era of *Blood and Gold* [*Vér és arany*], [Endre] Ady's poetry presents numerous decadent themes." (Varga 1965, 107)

6 "In the years leading up to the First World War, the TLS constructed a version of literary history that confined decadence largely to the 1890s. It ignored significant work by figures from that decade who were still active [...], and when it spotted new outbreaks of the disease, it acted swiftly to snuff them out." (Freeman 2019, 75)

7 "During the first three decades of the twentieth century, the radical and experimental stylistic elements of decadent writing were appropriated in ways that divorced them from their (im)moral context, making them first challengingly modernist and then respectable. Cultural power brokers such as Eliot slowly convinced a learned minority that literature of this kind represented a redoubtable bulwark against other forms of decadence, the growing populism and concomitant erosion of standards intellectuals had feared ever since the educational reforms of the 1870s." (Freeman 2019, 84)

8 "Decadence, however, was alive and well in the 1920s, much to the chagrin of writers like Pound and Lewis, for whom it represented a threat […], it threatened the cultural authority of modernists who competed with these new decadents for the attention of publishers, magazine editors, booksellers, and readers." (MacLeod 2019, 229-230)

it is a fruitful question not only how the rejection and forgetfulness of decadence occurred but also what its dynamics and internal canon were, as all evidence suggests that decadence, in terms of its impact history, is an ineliminable phenomenon and a significant cultural driving force at the turn of the century.

If we look behind Antal Szerb's retrospective shame and distancing and examine the works he and other Hungarian literary historians concealed due to their decadent label, the internal structure of Hungarian literary modernity and modernisms also comes into new light. First and foremost, it is worth asking how the foundational text of decadence, the 1884 *À rebours* (*Against the Grain*), and its author Joris-Karl Huysmans were embedded in late 19th and early 20th century Hungarian literature. A reception history analysis can reveal numerous early sources from the late 19th-century Hungarian reception of decadence, providing relevant starting points for further research on Hungarian decadence.

3. The Early Hungarian Reception of Joris-Karl Huysmans and His *À rebours*

Hungarian literary scholarship knows little to nothing about the impact of Huysmans' cult novel.[9] Most authors date the Hungarian reception of *À rebours* from the publication of its translation in 1921,[10] which, however, had little resonance in the contemporary press – except for advertisements, only one review appeared in *Nyugat* (cf. Laczkó 1922). The work, translated into Hungarian rather late, arrived in an environment that, according to Antal Szerb's previously cited confession, sought to distance itself from decadence. Based on this, one might indeed conclude that decadence entered Hungarian literature as a phenomenon that had already lost its relevance. If it had any impact, it must have been brief and did not produce significant works. However, it is thought-provoking that Gyula Pekár,[11] as early as 1915, adopted a similar stance to Szerb: "The storm has not yet sufficiently cleared the musty air of our unventilated society through the open window of the war, nor has it sufficiently dispersed the decadent, stuffy atmosphere of pre-war moods. The wind

9 Although Ferenc Kiss analyses lengthily the influences of *À rebours* in Dezső Kosztolányi, the Hungarian translator's first novel *Nero, a véres költő* (Nero, the Bloody Poet) (cf. Kiss 1979, 117-125), the critical edition of *Nero* and more recent monographs of Kosztolányi only mention this essential connection in passing.

10 Even a work that acknowledges the importance and influence of *À rebours* supposes that the Hungarian reception of the "bizarre Bible of decadence" only began – and almost immediately ended – with the publishing of the Hungarian translation (Takács 2003). After the 1921 edition (Huysmans 1921), the book (*A különc* 'the excentric') was only reprinted once in 2002.

11 Gyula Pekár (1866–1937) was a prolific but little-known Hungarian writer, later a politician. According to Antal Szerb, Pekár started out with "fragile decadent subtleties" before becoming a "pillar of the conservative worldview" (Szerb 1935, 432).

has certainly swept through the main corridors of our lives beneficially, but in some corners, the air is still as cynically suffocating, sensuously, even perversely oppressive as before. [...] Huysmans' decadent »life artist«, the famous Des Esseintes comes to one's mind, whose greatest pleasure is to »train« a respectable bourgeois child into a thief. I ask, is it right to watch this social poisoning with folded hands?" (Pekár 1915, 4). The article's protest supports the hypothesis that decadence was a significant cultural and social phenomenon in late 19th-century Hungary; it was well-known, understood, and acknowledged – while often vehemently denied and condemned, especially during and after World War I. It also reveals that Pekár identified poisonous, corrupt, harmfully individualistic, and indifferent decadence with *À rebours* well before its Hungarian translation. This indicates that the translation is not an absolute measure of a work's familiarity and embeddedness, and it encourages searching for the Hungarian reception of Huysmans' novel in earlier and less straightforward but equally significant mediating gestures.

Between the 1884 publication of *À rebours* and its 1921 Hungarian translation, Huysmans' name appeared with increasing frequency in the Hungarian press. Initially, literary journals such as *Magyar Salon*, *Ország-Világ*, and *Fővárosi Lapok* published reports, reviews, and interpretations about Huysmans and his novel. These early texts often misspelled Huysmans' and Des Esseintes' names and the novel's title: Huysmanns (Lázár 1895), Huysmann (Kozári 1897), Huysémann (Kondor 1899), des Essemmtes (Justh 1894), des Enceintes (Justh 1888b), À retours (Justh 1886). This suggests that the Huysmans experience had an air of novelty, being significant but not self-evident, perhaps even second-hand. However, it is telling that when Huysmans' supposed (1898) and actual (1900) conversion to Catholicism broke through the press threshold, his name was rarely misspelled in journals. The consistently correct spelling of Huysmans' name and novel titles, along with the interest of non-literary journals, indicate recognition.

Although different authors held varying views on the authenticity of Huysmans' conversion, its disputability provided an opportunity to regularly report on him, publish news and gossip, and gradually incorporate him and his works into the broader (literary) public consciousness. One of the first reports neutrally quoted a *Le Figaro* interview with Huysmans (n. n. 1900a, 16), but the *Magyar Nemzet* correspondent shared a skeptical comment along with a *Le Figaro*-published Huysmans letter: "Huysmans is a rather interesting figure who, at the beginning of his career, was the wildest naturalist, then joined Sâr Péladan's camp and became a Satanist, and finally became a mystic and returned to the faith of his cradle. It is not impossible that after some time, he will start all over again" (n. n. 1900b, 6). On the other end, religious authors celebrated Huysmans' conversion as the failure of materialism and positivism: "In modern life, the failure of science, the failure of politics was followed by the failure of art and the

failure of life... suicide. / This is felt by the great sufferers of our age, the tormented artistic souls. / Hence the miracle of conversions, the converts" (Kozári 1900, 344).

Thus, the synchronous reception of Huysmans and *À rebours* was present in Hungarian literature and culture, albeit previously invisible and unexplored. The digital turn in periodical research has made press products searchable, and in this forgotten source material, Huysmans and his novels are conspicuously present: as controversial as in other European literatures. In many Hungarian fin-de-siècle journals, Huysmans is an author legitimized by even opposing viewpoints. Different readings shape the image of the decadent/convert Huysmans from various angles and purposes. Despite objections, they present him as an important author to the wider public: "True, even with such aberrations [as *À rebours*], Huysmans possesses such merits that place him among the most excellent storytellers and make him a phenomenon that cannot be overlooked with a smile" (n. n. 1898, 7).

Contrary to prior beliefs of Hungarian literary history, Huysmans and his novel are unavoidable references in the Hungarian fin de siècle, even if sometimes concealed behind reservation, irony, or judgment. By the time the Hungarian translation of *À rebours* appeared in 1921, readers no longer perceived the novel's subversive modernizing power. By then, the once dominant poetic and worldview tradition was more a significant memory treated with nostalgic rejection by the innovative intent. Therefore, it is essential to revise the perspective that dates the impact of *À rebours* from the publication of its translation. Given the delayed adoption of a closed, outdated tradition, such an approach cannot assume the existence of Hungarian decadence, while a dense, still scarcely researched Hungarian Huysmans reception can elucidate much about the complex inner logic of early Hungarian decadence.

4. Parisianism and Parisian Pessimism: Zsigmond Justh's Reading of *À rebours*

The first (documented) Hungarian reader of *À rebours* seems to be Zsigmond Justh (1863–1894), who wrote about the pathbreaking French novel with the deliberate intention of literary mediation and artistic provocation. The young writer and publicist, who admired France, was an extremely active cultural agent consciously shaping his extensive network of foreign and domestic contacts. He spent several seasons in Paris, where he met leading figures of the artistic elite: he was a close friend of Sarah Bernhardt and Rupert Bunny, often visited Mark Antokolsky's studio, and in 1888, he frequently visited Huysmans, who gifted him a signed copy of *À rebours* (cf. Justh 1977). Justh had certainly read the novel by then, as he provided an accurate description of *À rebours*' protagonist, Duke des Esseintes, in an 1886 article, seeing

him as a literary representation of a type in Parisian high society.[12] During Justh's 1888 Paris visit[13] this conviction evolved into the claim that Huysmans and his character represented the only noteworthy fin-de-siècle artist type.

In his diary, Justh introduces the first personal meeting by evaluating the Huysmans works he knew: "His most interesting books are »À Rebours« (the analysis of the character of Montesquieu-Fézensac) and his collection of critiques »L'art moderne«." (Justh 1977, 68) However, he relies not only on the author's artistic interests and habits in his imagination but also directs the portrayal of the individual through his reading experiences. Justh superimposes Huysmans and Des Esseintes, constructing the figure of the refined, crowd-despising artist who does not compromise for popularity from the novel: "Otherwise, the sophistication of his taste somewhat reminds me of *Des Esseintes* (the hero of À Rebours). [...] During the walk, he was very interesting, quite Des Esseintes-Huysmans, just as I had imagined from his books." (Justh, 1977, 69, 301)

This interchangeability, the interpretation of author and character in relation to each other, is also a characteristic element of later Huysmans depictions in the Hungarian press reports. Partly, perhaps, as a result of this correspondence, Huysmans gradually ceased to be considered a naturalist writer in Justh's view. By the end of the second meeting, he already decided to write about Huysmans because "it will do good in our country... faire connaître l'art pour l'art" (Justh 1977, 159). Justh, with excellent intuition, identified the shift in Huysmans' art and articulated the lack of l'art pour l'art ideology in the Hungarian literary context as early as 1888. Justh's *À rebours* references, in this light, can be seen as part of a conscious effort to introduce a new artistic direction. They are indicative of how the early Hungarian interpretation of decadence was partly possible through the less scandalous, pejorative notion of l'art pour l'art, which "tamed" decadent texts for many contemporary creators and cultural actors.

Justh's *Párizsi napló* (Parisian Diary), written in 1888, became accessible to the public only from 1939, so it did not directly influence the early Huysmans and *À rebours* reception. However, Justh's articles

12 "»Qui est pour être admire« (a decadent of the Faubourg). An overly refined race. Little blood, all nerves. Bound by mysticism, hereditary pride and blood [...]. He despises and hates the masses [...]. He does not believe in God, but he is religious in his way. There is something of the Trappist and of Sardanapalus in him. [...] He loves old Christian mystical literature [...]. He often spends hours poring over the Odilon Redon drawings that adorn his walls. It is one of his rare pleasures. On his writing desk lay the most extraordinary works of Baudelaire, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Mallarmé, and Verlaine [...]. This figure is immortalized in Huysmans' novel »à Retours« [sic]." (Justh 1886, 570)

13 Justh summarizes his experiences and impressions of the time in his diary – published posthumously under the title *Párizsi napló* (Parisian Diary). From these notes, it is easy to reconstruct how his artistic tastes and preferences were shaped by carefully selected new acquaintances.

contain traces of the artistic and aesthetic commitments that formed while writing the diary. In the Parisian Justh columns published between 1886 and 1888, Des Esseintes' character and the manner of his creation serve as recurring arguments, examples, and even goals.[14] These are not so much about the duke's tastes but about his artistic sensibility and ways of perception – *the deliberately realized unique aesthetic experiences*.

Justh perceives this ambivalent experience as specifically Parisian, where pleasure and disgust, delight and nausea, joy and fatigue, boredom and artificiality simultaneously prevail.[15] In his view, art-loving aristocrats capable of and willing to experience these "enjoy doubly" (Justh 1888a, 371), "on a second level" (Justh 1888b, 1922). Justh also highlights that this artist type is rare even in Paris, "like an *overrefined ornamental plant* that not only requires *greenhouse* air, special soil, and unique care but also an entirely unique, special, distinguished place and atmosphere" (Justh 1888a, 372, emphasis mine, T. D.). Justh perceives the exceptional artistic environment – described with a Huysmans metaphor[16] – as a lack in the Hungarian literary context. He considers the articles thematizing the new artistic sophistication, and the discourse about Huysmans and *À rebours* as suitable to fill this void.

Justh recognizes, presents, and analyzes distinctly decadent characteristics in his journalism. He emphasizes the epoch-making power of artists meeting Huysmans' standards[17] and uses unique terms in the Hungarian press to describe the significant fin-de-siècle phenomenon: *Parisianism* (Justh 1888c), *Parisian pessimism* (Justh 1888a). Several reasons can be assumed behind this terminology. Firstly, at that time, the words "decadent" and "decadence" were neologisms in the Hungarian language. Secondly, it is likely that Justh intended to separate the new artistic direction from the notion of decline and its associated prejudices: he perceived and appreciated decadence while freeing it from one of its significant and contested characteristics in the Hungarian context. Although he believed that artistic sophistication could only organically emerge in the specific social-cultural context of the "declining Paris", Justh's early (1886–1888) interpretation of *À*

14 "The famous Montesquiou-Fézensac, painted by Huysmans in his 'à Rebours des Enceintes' [sic], shows how far one can go in artistic refinement." (Justh 1888b, 1921-1922)

15 "At this moment, the Parisian is tired of all the pleasure this sultry, fragrant winter garden can give him. He is tired of the constant delight; all the oysters and champagne have spoiled his stomach. He is disgusted with the endless pleasure, and despite everything, he could not do without it." (Justh 1888a, 372)

16 Cf. "Then, there are flowers of noble lineage like the orchid, so delicate and charming, at once cold and palpitating, exotic flowers exiled in the heated glass palaces of Paris, princesses of the vegetable kingdom living in solitude, having absolutely nothing in common with the street plants and other bourgeois flora" (Huysmans 1922, 134).

17 "These are the most interesting figures of decadent Paris in the era of *Huysmans, the Baudelaire* imitators, *Sarah Bernhardt, Rollinat, Moreau de Tours* and *Haraucourt*" (Justh 1888a, 372).

rebours suggests that he considered decadent poetics and worldview productively adoptable.[18]

However, by the end of 1888, a change is noticeable in Justh's attitude towards decadent art. It is not entirely clear what causes the gradual shift. Perhaps the publication of his articles analyzing Parisian social and cultural life in a volume brought new insights (Justh 1889), or maybe his increasingly severe tuberculosis prompted him to reconsider his value system. The texts in *Páris elemei* (Elements of Paris), placed side by side, may have emphasized concerns previously expressed: the fear of social and artistic sterility, of emptiness.[19] Art detached from society, aestheticism, and decadence lose their relevance in the context of referentially understood decline. However, it is crucial that while Huysmans' name and novel title completely disappear from Justh's journalistic and literary writings, his arguments against decadence often use Huysmansian metaphors, allegories, and poetic solutions: "the orchid, which produces the rarest and most beautiful flower, usually destroys the plant from which it draws its delicate color, enchanting shape, and entire charm" (Justh 1888c, 650). Thus, the critique of decadence and its concealment are carried out using the tools of decadence itself, leaving a telling mark on many of Justh's journalistic and literary texts.

In conclusion, the first significant milestone in the Hungarian Huysmans and *À rebours* reception consists of Justh's texts discussed above. Although he committed himself to *Parisianism* for only a very short – albeit intense – period in his career, he played an essential role in the early history of Hungarian decadence. With his extensive network of artists – abroad and in Hungary –, assiduously curated interests, and conscious taste, Justh mediated his perception of the French author and his novel from a particularly suitable position, and with great impact. Unjustly and spectacularly quickly forgotten in Hungarian literary history, Huysmans and his influential character Des Esseintes were still heroes of early Hungarian decadence in Justh's writings. The value judgments, representations of Huysmans' character and work, and their utilization in Justh's writings prefigure the key points of later Hungarian reception.

18 In his 1887 collection of short stories, entitled *Káprázatok* (Illusions), contemporary critics recognized French models, but judged them incompatible with the Hungarian environment. Cf. "To draw the fall of the gentry, who lives for pleasure alone and boasts only of its ancestors: a grateful and modern subject. But then let us also look at our hero from a local point of view and not model him on a worn-out Parisian type." (Péterfy 1887, 156)

19 "And it is a disastrous symptom for the future of a nation when men and women alike reach beyond mediocrity in refinement, sensitivity, and spirit and are thus incapable of harmonious self-work and of all that goes with it: marriage, social and national aspirations. When a part of a nation has reached this stage, it begins to break up into individuals, fragments and parties. It is *the beginning of destruction [pusztulás kezdete]*." (Justh 1888b, 1922)

5. A Monumental Hungarian Decadent Novel from 1895: Dezső Malonyay's *Az utolsó* (The Last)

In the early 1890s, a French-cultured circle formed around Justh, whose members were all well-acquainted with Huysmans' name and novel. Gyula Pekár, upon meeting Justh in 1891, published a detailed review of *À rebours* in a widely-read political daily, the *Pesti Napló* (Pekár 1891). He was mainly interested in the sensational, scandalous aspects of Huysmans' work – Des Esseintes' *à rebours* nature and lifestyle – and made these visible to a broad audience. Later, news and gossip about Huysmans' private life created the icon of the decadent (life) artist in a similar fashion. Considering an article written two years earlier by another close friend of Justh, this attention is surprising. Péter Vay (1868–1948)[20] refers to the eighth chapter of *À rebours* to summarize the evolution of modern taste at the end of the century. Vay's starting point is the orchid-tulip dichotomy evoked by Huysmans' novel, to which he adds the modern-outdated value pair. In his argument, the orchid symbolizes and indicates the adequately cultivated sensitivity and understanding of decadent art. He believed that the delay and close-mindedness in taste and outlook characteristic of the Hungarian literary milieu misunderstood and failed to recognize the significance of Huysmans and decadence (cf. Vay 1899).

The embedding of *À rebours* and decadence in Hungarian literature was indeed neither homogeneous nor unproblematic. Critiques continuously questioned the artistic value of the French decadent novel from the perspective of bourgeois modernity, the cult of progress, a perceived canonical aesthetics, or morality. *À rebours* depicted "ugliness" (Apáthy 1887, 273), "filthy things" (Erdélyi 1895, 903), and Huysmans "delved into the psychology of perversion and recounted the horrific orgies of Satanism in his novels" (n. n. 1897). In his review of *Entartung*, Béla Kondor detailed the dangers Max Nordau associated with "degenerate" works and their indirect impact on society, citing *À rebours* as a prime example of a harmful novel "describing the life of an inhuman being who was physically sick and weak, morally vile, and intellectually idiotic, […] with anarchistic tendencies" (Kondor 1899, 4). Kondor, fearing for social order, condemned the Pre-Raphaelite, Symbolist, Parnassian, and decadent creators as "literary artistic bandits, procurers, and murderers" (Kondor 1899, 5).

In the context of strong stigmas of immorality, perversion, and madness, it may not be surprising that Hungarian decadence did not develop around such spectacular nodes and oeuvres as in the West. These fears and social stereotypes about the destructive power of decadence seemed to be validated by several fin-de-siècle life paths:

20 In a letter to Zsigmond Justh, Gyula Pekár refers to their mutual friend as a "Des Esseintes-like" man (Pekár's letter to Justh, Budapest, Dec. 5, 1891). Vay later studied theology and travelled the world as a missionary before being consecrated as a bishop.

Zsigmond Justh died early of tuberculosis; his youthful friend, Géza Batthyány, committed suicide;[21] Péter Vay chose a religious path with a Huysmansian turn. This does not mean, however, that important, valuable, and reflective Hungarian decadent works were not created at the turn of the century – even if they do not form a continuous narrative and remain invisible even to literary historians and experts. An excellent example of this is the 1895 "*Az utolsó*"[22] (The Last) by Dezső Malonyay,[23] an unjustly forgotten three-volume novel, likely one of the greatest literary works of Hungarian decadence. In the history of Hungarian decadence, it is crucial that in 1895, just a decade after Huysmans' typifying novel, a work appeared reflecting on the worldview and poetic characteristics of decadence and raising the question of how decadent art could survive itself.

In *Az utolsó*, Dezső Malonyay experiments with the self-expression and self-representation possibilities of decadent literature. He evokes, interprets, and fictionalizes the theoretical background of decadence, consciously shaping his self-narrator according to decadent models. Malonyay also questions the boundaries, functioning, and possible stakes of decadence. The family history and personal fate of his protagonist, the last descendant of the Kerbastik d'Azincourt family, provide a panoramic literary historical summary of how decadent worldview and art emerged and were conceived at the fin de siècle. The novel simultaneously encapsulates typical life situations and solutions of decadent literature and heroes interpreting these from an "external", reflexive perspective that critiques the decadent worldview.

Malonyay problematizes fears expressed against decadence – sterility and, consequently, the question of continuity – within the narrative framework of a fictional autobiography. The protagonist recounts his failed artistic attempts spanning roughly from April 1842 to May 1843, ending the story with the aftermaths of a near-death experience. The withdrawn young count's father dies during a black mass in their Parisian palace. The doctor diagnosing the heart attack advises the shocked heir to engage in a creative act – writing,

21 In his diary, Justh depicts Géza Batthyány in the same terms he had described Duke des Esseintes a few years earlier: "*A refined, almost overrefined race. Little blood, many nerves.* One of the most artistic personalities in Pest, without being an artist. Because to be one, one needs energy, and my good Géza lacks it completely." (Justh 1977, 327-328, emphasis mine, T. D.)

22 The novel was first published in *Pesti Napló* between 9 February and 27 June 1895. Although the title page of the three-volume book sets 1896 as the year of publication, the Bulletin of the Hungarian Booksellers' Association, *Corvina*, of 30 September 1895, already lists the novel among the recent publications (cf. n. n. 1895, 109).

23 Dezső Malonyay (1866–1916) was also a member of Zsigmond Justh's circle of friends and, just like him, shared an admiration of the Parisian fin-de-siècle culture. Although he was an active writer, Malonyay is now mainly known in Hungarian ethnography and art history as he published collections of folklore, biographies of painters and analyses of fine art, which are still influential today. While working on his novel, *Az utolsó*, he was on a scholarship in France.

painting, love – to avoid his father's fate. When the valet, knowing the secret, sets the palace on fire out of revenge and late rebellion, the last Kerbastik heir flees to his Breton estate, intending to follow the doctor's advice. However, his artistic and romantic attempts fail. The stake of these pursuits is to overcome the helplessness, decadence and madness perceived as paternal inheritance. The story's climax seemingly resolves the ontological crisis by eliminating art. The young count is severely injured as he breaks the glass of the idealized pastel portrait of a woman. Before losing consciousness, he throws his father's picture found behind the female portrait into the fire. After recovering from the amputation of his charred left arm, the last Kerbastik d'Azincourt scatters the colorful dust from the pastel painting into the sea. This ending is consistently interpreted by the sparse literature on the novel as expressing "the unfeasibility of aestheticism" (Németh 2022, 88), forgetting that the text's final act is not the double iconoclasm and symbolic burial but the reflective autobiographical act recording all this. While the story indeed concludes with the suspension of romantic and artistic desires and the experience of disillusionment, the poetic and narratological solutions of *Az utolsó* confirm the success and creative power of the decadent novel. Malonyay writes from a standpoint aware of the Des Esseintes model's failure, constantly questioning what could work if it does not and how decadent art should change. Ultimately, choosing first-person narration, he seems to argue that this failure does not matter. Despite the backdrop of a diverting history and the overwhelming expectation of social responsibilities, it is still possible to write a decadent masterpiece. Disregarding these constraints may be the only way of doing it.

The paradox of the artistic failures told within the autobiographical framework is that all attempts that failed in the past (e.g., the count did not compile the Breton legends collection, did not paint the numerous pictures he envisioned, and stopped writing a diary after a week) are realized in the retrospective narration. The memoir records the orally transmitted beliefs, the unpainted pictures are brought to life through ekphrasis, and the autobiography takes the place of the incomplete diary. This second, successful creative act not only produces a decadent novel – the one the reader holds – but also reflects on its writing challenges and obstacles and establishes a type of artist novel that the Hungarian literature on the history of the genre does not even assume existed at the time.[24] Malonyay not only writes a decadent artist novel but reflexively confronts his protagonist with issues criticized in contemporary reviews of decadent art: his hero repeatedly faces the notions of his existence being useless, amoral, and unsustainable.

Malonyay certainly knew *À rebours* well; his character reflects numerous traits and modes of creation reminiscent of Des Esseintes. Both are the last descendants of historically significant aristocratic families. Like

24 The recent literature on the history of the Hungarian artist novel does not mention *Az utolsó* at all. Cf. Harkai Vass 2001; Gergye 2004; Kardeván Lapis 2012.

the French author, Malonyay introduces the decline of the Kerbastic d'Azincourt family through portraits and programmatically evokes typically decadent conditions in his protagonist: boredom, disgust, weak will, fatigue, weariness, androgyny, mysticism, refinement, sensitivity, escapism, elitism. Just as Duke des Esseintes,[25] Malonyay's young count also seeks disembodied, "purely poetic" experiences expressible through abstract forms of colors, sounds, and shadows.[26] However the protagonist of *Az utolsó* struggles with his attributes and continuously searches for moods, forms of expression, and themes transformable into art within this framework. Regardless of the narrative level, the count repeatedly confronts the inadequacy of words to express his emotions, thoughts, and artistic ideas: "Sometimes I feel so much that I cannot find adequate words to express it. All the words I find are cold and empty" (Malonyay 1896b, 145). His attempts are often met with misunderstanding and distrust from his environment. For example, he abandons his symbolic play project because his audience's referential reading discourages him: "But this is just poetry, abbot! Don't you understand?" In the continuation, the abbot dismisses artistic work as a pastime for gentlemen (Malonyay 1896b, 152-153).

The question of the purpose and usefulness of art is a deeply concerning ethical dilemma for Malonyay, expressed not only in his letters to friends[27] but also at many points in his novel: "No matter how much I was moved by the almost animal sadness of this poor woman and how much my heart went out to her, my first thought was not to alleviate her bitterness. I watched her with a certain curiosity and [...] observed her demeanor like a painter his model [...] And instead of completely surrendering myself to this mood preceding artistic creation, I foolishly preempted it with self-criticism and, as if to justify myself before my conscience, I eagerly asked the priest to take care of that woman" (Malonyay 1896b, 86). Malonyay is continuously preoccupied with whether art that focuses on itself is justifiable and how it can be

25 "imperative need to escape from the horrible reality of existence, to leap beyond the confines of thought, to grope towards the mists of elusive, unattainable art." (Huysmans 1922, 163)

26 "Moods are breathlike, they could be conveyed like such! [A hangulatot csaknem lehelletszerűleg közölhetné az ember!]" (Malonyay 1896b, 148)

27 "My Dear friend, I can imagine how much this story shocked you. It is terrible. But see, in the depths of my soul, the heartless, insolent artist awakens, and I think what a splendid theme!" (Malonyay's letter to Justh, Paris, Dec. 21. [1893])

justified:[28] for instance, can the story of a life spent in inactivity and failure be interpreted as art.[29]

In the protagonist's consciousness, sights involuntarily take the form of landscapes,[30] still lifes,[31] or genre scenes,[32] and their subsequent linguistic representation gives the impression of descriptions of real paintings: the text lists the details of the framed picture, similar to the gaze traversing a painting. As the narration does not name any artists or titles, we might conclude that most of these ekphrases are fictional. However, there is at least one occurrence of depicting an actual painting. During his first sea voyage, Malonyay's protagonist leans over the edge of the sailboat and hopes to find something "extraordinary" underwater: "For instance, a man!… Yes, if a man was lying under one of those dark green bushes!?… / Or a woman!… / Sapho, the woman in love! / Perhaps she lies like this under a bush in a sea-forest. / What a beautiful picture one could paint!" (Malonyay 1896b, 54) As it happens, such a painting exists, and just around the time Malonyay started to work on his novel, he mentioned it in a review of an art exhibition he attended in Paris: "The favorite subjects of Ary Renan are visions and mirages and in his painting in [the Musée du] Luxembourg he painted Sapho lying at the bottom of the sea" (Malonyay 1894, 7). Malonyay anonymously borrowed the imagery of Ary Renan's 1893 *Sapho* to convey the artistic and sexual desires of his protagonist.[33] The idea of the dead poetess gives

28 The novel's clock metaphor also raises the problem of the autonomous nature of art "at the end of all things" ["minden dolgok végén"]. It expresses the protagonist's stagnant sense of time: "I am a clock that works but does not tell the time because its hands have fallen off." (Malonyay 1896c, 62) The count sees himself as an atemporal entity which, precisely because it does not move, cannot progress and, therefore, cannot be useful.

29 "reading through what I have written so far, I was almost shocked to realize that my anemic imagination, albeit with bitter effort, finally wants to assert itself: I am nearly creating! / If only I could do it!… Perhaps I would be doubly compensated. It is worth enduring, and I would endure life once more for a little truly artistic achievement." (Malonyay 1896b, 45)

30 "The harsh outline of the hills behind the town, the scattered houses and the rocks of the small bays harmoniously blended into the perspective of a painting" (Malonyay 1896b, 53).

31 "From one of the windows, a yellowish-red light filtered out onto the road – the sadly awake light of a small oil lamp. / The lamp stood on a table covered with waxed linen, two glasses beside it, one contained milk or some creamy medicine. A spoon lay over the glass […] what a beautiful, what a simple, honest picture it was!" (Malonyay 1896a, 33-34)

32 "How many times have I wanted to paint this painting: – the little grey old woman knitting in bed, carefully pressing the striped duvet over her partner's head so he wouldn't wake up, – the stove yawning in the gloom, – my grumpy coachman with the smoldering tin lamp in his hand, its yellow-red flame filling the dark kitchen with long shadows full of drying underwear…" (Malonyay 1896b, 18)

33 It is, of course, possible that the ekphrasis had multiple sources as the description also resembles the Pre-Raphaelite interpretations of Ophelia, and the well-informed Malonyay might have known John Everett Millais' 1851–1852 and John William Waterhouse's 1894 depictions of the theme.

way to the idealizing fantasy of the count, as he imagines an erotically charged vision of his female companion beneath the water's surface: "Or if Mathurine were lying there!… / Her shapely form would be clad in drenched clothing, her red hair floating spread around her head, covering her face and bosom, the tendrils coiling around her, small iridescent shells settling on her shoulders, and I would descend into her embrace like that jellyfish…" (Malonyay 1896b, 54). Although the delivery of this ekphrasis is much less detailed and dynamic than the ones of Huysmans in Chapter V of *À rebours* (Chapter VI in the English translations), it has a mirrored function. Art historian Laura Moure Cecchini argues that Gustave Moreau's *Salomé Dancing before Herod* "became a stylistic prototype of decadence in visual arts" because of Huysmans' novel (Cecchini 2019, 141-142). Malonyay likely incorporated a painting with many stylistic and thematic similarities to that of Moreau because he perceived it to be a decadent art piece. Even if it is improbable that readers of *Az utolsó* would have discovered this connection, tracing back Malonyay's text to Renan's painting further confirms the Hungarian author's ambivalent regard for decadent art. In the introduction of his review of the 1894 Salon du Champ-de-Mars, Malonyay relates his feelings of admiration and envy but also of fear, sadness and disgust, as he considers overrefinement an illness, an addiction – a conviction he carries on to his novel (cf. Malonyay 1894).

Malonyay resolves the central issue of decline versus creation in *Az utolsó* in the "sad poetry of the sea, the wind weeps among the mast ropes, and the waves carry the tale to the shore" (Malonyay 1896b, 116). In the novel, the Breton legends and ghost stories processing loss and aestheticizing death presuppose tangible experiences of demise, such as the disappearance of fishermen on the open sea. Similarly, the narrator's cyclical view of existence imagines the birth of a new, serene land opposite to the poetry of the old, decaying, dying earth.[34] The associative meanings condensed in the sea motif express that decline is not necessarily equivalent to death or, if so, creation is equally a necessary concomitant. Within the novel's world, creation (the narration of the self) legitimizes not only the protagonist's existence but also the legitimacy of the decadent art he represents.

6. Conclusions: Delight and Poison

Accusations and fears against decadence have been an integral part of its Hungarian emergence and literary historical judgment since the beginning of its reception. Stereotypes soon formed and spread, and

34 "These rocks were the ribs of the late earth. The Ocean eats them too, slowly, one by one, and one day, the seagulls will seek their usual resting place in vain. / Thus the earth dies here, and elsewhere, another is born in its place; the Ocean creates it from its tiny snails. How serene must the poetry of that new earth be if that of this dying old one be so sad!" (Malonyay 1896b, 130)

were later reinforced by World War I and totalitarian state structures. They suggested that decadence reduced to stylistic and thematic traits depicts the decline and fall of a useless social class, it is inherently aimless and unsustainable, even immoral and poisonous. It is unsurprising that Hungarian literary history published during state socialism avoided substantive research on decadence, but from both local and global perspectives, addressing this neglect is increasingly urgent.

Reading backward in the possible history of Hungarian decadence, the characteristic modernist denial first becomes apparent in the works of Antal Szerb, from which the significance of Hungarian decadence can already be inferred. His prominent, almost impatient critique between the two world wars strengthens the assumption that decadence was a significant impact phenomenon in the Hungarian fin de siècle and simultaneously indicates where it is appropriate to search for the beginnings of Hungarian decadence.

In the 1880s and 1890s, the Huysmans readings and representations by Zsigmond Justh and the artistic circle around him convincingly indicate that *À rebours* was already present with worldview and poetic force in late 19th-century Hungarian literature. These sources confirm that despite the aforementioned stereotypes, there is indeed an early Hungarian decadence, significantly connected to the synchronous reception of Huysmans and his novel, decades before the work's Hungarian translation appeared. However, even the most dedicated and determined interpretations are not free from doubt and uncertainty: they soften and "tame" the decadent text.

In a tone resembling his later 1915 critique of decadence ("social poisoning"), Gyula Pekár wrote in an 1893 letter to Justh that he did not recommend *À rebours* to Dezső Malonyay because, while it was a "delight" for himself and Justh, it would be "poison for Malonyay's delicate and slightly morbid sensitivity" (Pekár's letter to Justh, Paris, 23 November, 1893). It seems that a defining feature of early Hungarian decadence is this precarious act of balance; its authors both build on decadence, and also continuously question the legitimacy, artistic and social value, and sustainability of their art.

This is the position from which the forgotten Hungarian decadent masterpiece of Malonyay artistically renegotiates this uncertainty and dilemma in a highly reflective manner. The careful composition of *Az utolsó* is no coincidence: the story of the protagonist, representing the decadent artist, concludes with a failure experience and symbolic burial, narrated by a reflective, dual narrative voice. The monumental novel of Hungarian decadence not only adopts the characteristic solutions of French decadence but also reflects on its limits and incorporates related doubts, becoming more reflexive and skeptical than the latter, encapsulating both decadence and its critique.

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Women Artists of the Hungarian Avant-Garde and Their Connections to the Cobra Group

The Cases of Margit Eppinger Weisz and Madeleine Kemény Szemere

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ABSTRACT

One of the most fascinating examples of networked art groups in 20th century art history, the Cobra art movement (1948–1951), disrupted the logic of center-periphery relations in art through a model of cooperation between artistic hubs, in this case, Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, as the name of the group suggests. However, Cobra soon became a model that was easy to extend to further connections and hubs, including Scandinavia and East Central Europe. Unexpected and mutual exchanges occurred within this artistic network. The article explores these exchanges through two lesser-known episodes of Cobra's East Central European connections. Hungarian women artists like Margit Eppinger Weisz and Madeleine Kemény Szemere became involved with the activity of Cobra, and their case studies show specific models of circulating ideas.

Keywords: art history, circulation, Cobra, network, women artists

During the last decade an increasing number of publications discussed the works of women authors in the avant-gardes – a recurring aspect of these research papers was to explore strategies of women authors and of their critics that finally resulted in canonical inclusion. Meanwhile, these scholars highlighted the systematic border crossings of form and genre in women authors' works (Chadwick 2021, Watz 2020, Földes 2021, etc.). Specifically, in the context of one century of Hungarian avant-garde art, the delayed, partial and peripheral integration of women authors was also obvious. The reasons are complex, and it is beyond the

task of this article to discuss them in detail – it is nevertheless important to point out that, as suggested in the theoretizations of this status, women artists of the avant-garde were already confronted with a double marginalization in historical narratives, in relation with their gender and with their non-canonical, experimental poetics, as Susan Rubin Suleiman argued in her article *A Double Margin: Reflections on Women Writers and the Avant-Garde in France*. (Suleiman 1988) Thirdly, the aspect of spatiality also contributed to the processes of marginalization: twentieth-century Hungarian culture, as many other East Central European cultures, struggled in addition with an extraterritorial layer: the culture of emigration, and generally, the phenomenon of Hungarian culture beyond the territory of Hungary. The reintegration of artists of the diaspora into the Hungarian cultural memory faced multiple difficulties by the end of the 20th century (Hites 2009, 525), and in the case of exiled women artists of the avant-garde, critics had to overcome a process of threefold marginalization when attempting to fight the structures of oblivion.

In my article, I will explore the activity of two Hungarian women artists whose work entered progressive cultural networks beyond the Hungarian art scene, and circulated in the field of international avant-garde art. Madeleine Kemény Szemere and Margit Eppinger Weisz adopted specific roles in this art field, and I consider that in the context of interartistic creations, and the program of total art (Bru 2018, 9-64) in the avant-garde, the relevance of such stories may cross disciplinary borders as well, opening up possibilities of exploring the circulation of ideas between the fields of visual arts and literature, and art history and world literature studies, respectively. The activity of the Cobra art movement (1948–1951), to which both women artists whose works I discuss, connected in a loose manner, offers a networked model of circulation that has beyond its spatial dimension also a more general claim for interconnectedness.

Margit Eppinger Weisz (1902–1989) is present in the reference works of Hungarian art history because of a special episode: in her story, a rarely discussed phenomenon is condensed, which helps us reevaluate the traditional West-East directions of influence within European art, which in her case should be adjusted to a model of mutual exchanges. Moreover, in the narratives about her activity, the histories of the Budapest-based European School (1945–1948) and of the Cobra (1948–1951) artist groups connect. The key event is the arrival of two future members of the Cobra group to Budapest, in 1947.

Cobra was founded by mainly Danish, Belgian, Dutch and French artists. Corneille (Belgian-Dutch painter, 1922–2010) and Jacques Doucet (French painter, 1924–1994), arrived in Budapest and Szentendre respectively in 1947, and lived and worked in Hungary for several months (Küssel 2002, 28). They were both invited to Hungary by Margit Eppinger Weisz, with the involvement of the Hungarian Arts Council of the time to arrange the formalities of their travel. Corneille

and Doucet met members of the European School group during this period, and had solo exhibitions organised for them in Budapest as part of the European School exhibition series. Retrospectively, they both described their stay in Hungary as a pivotal event in their careers, arguing that the European School members made their guests familiar with visual artworks created by innovative artists like Klee and Miró. In addition, the works created by the European School artists, combining techniques of abstraction and surrealism, became a further inspiration for the visitors. A certain hybridization of these elements define their later works of the Cobra period.

I have discussed the relevance of the Cobra model for Hungarian art in a separate paper (Balázs 2021). This time I will focus on the role of Margit Eppinger Weisz in this story, and on how her person is present in the narratives about Corneille and Doucet. I will then examine the early stages of Madeleine Kemény Szemere's career that unfolded in Hungary during the 1920s and 1930s, and then her work abroad, that continued to develop within French-Swiss-Dutch networks, as part of the Cobra group's sphere of influence.[1]

Margit Weisz studied fine arts in the 1920s under the supervision of Adolf Fényes, then she went on a study trip to Berlin and Paris. She returned to Budapest in 1930, where she married textile manufacturer Loránd Eppinger in 1932. During the 1930s, they had two children, Marion (1933) and Ervin (1936). In 1944, the family home and the factory that provided their livelihood were bombed – subsequently they took refuge in Banská Bystrica. The family returned to Budapest in 1945, the couple becoming involved in the art scene as financial supporters and mediators, and their new home became a meeting place for artists. It was also during this period that Margit Eppinger Weisz met the artists of the European School and, during some trips to Western Europe, also Corneille and Doucet. The fact that Margit Eppinger Weisz assisted Corneille in promoting his own works is reflected in the contemporary press. One of these newspaper articles refers to the host herself as to a painter:

> "We visited the young artist, who works in the studio of an artist friend in Budapest.
> 'How did you end up in Hungary?', we ask.
> 'That's a nice story! It was back in winter when I was preparing for my own big exhibition in Amsterdam. My studio is on the fifth floor. I mainly paint large paintings, so I thought it would be most effective to let the paintings down through the window to the street. 'I've made the delivery down on thick

1 The biographical information on Margit Weisz Eppinger, where not specifically indicated, is based on the website created by her heirs in her memory: https://www.margit.org/cronologia

> ropes, much to the amusement of passers-by. With one of the paintings I almost hit a lady passing by, who responded to my profuse apology with a kind smile, telling me that she was a painter herself, who liked my work so much that when she came home she invited me to Budapest in partnership with the Arts Council.' … We look around in the apartment hosting the Dutch painter. Paintings by Rippl-Rónai, Czóbel, István Farkas, Kmetty, Egry, Diener-Dénes on the walls, a real small museum. A whole room full of paintings by Adolf Fényes." (Fehér 1947, 12)

Corneille later told another, simpler version of the story about transferring the paintings to his own exhibition, in which the paintings were transported by tricycle in the streets of Amsterdam, and the unknown lady addressed him on a bridge as the painter was struggling with the somewhat precariously stacked paintings on the tricycle. Nevertheless, the improvised exhibition of pictures on the Amstel bridge in this story is as wildly romantic as the pictures lowered through the window in the other version (Küssel 2002, 28).

The surviving Eppinger Weisz paintings of this period are characterised by a moderately modernist approach, clearly connected to figurative language, but one that moves away from the formal technique of realism as a result of the use of colour and a certain crudeness and minimalism. Veronika Pócs describes the works of this period as follows:

> "Eppinger Weisz' painting style shows a closer resemblance to that of her friends Béla Czóbel and János Kmetty, who carried on the post-Nagybánya style in their works based on nature. Czóbel's works, as well as Eppinger Weisz', show the influence of both the French fauves and the expressionist artists. In the intimate lyricism of her paintings, traits of an inclination to some sort of melancholy and contemplation can be appreciated. At the same time, whether it is a portrait, a landscape or an interior painting, she rekindles and highlights the expressiveness of the details in her compositions with paint patches and lines in more vivid color." (Pócs 2019)

During these years, Eppinger Weisz was present as a painter at the group exhibition of Socialist Artists in December 1945. In August 1946, her paintings were exhibited at another group exhibition in Szentendre,

in the company of Béla Czóbel, János Kmetty, Dezső Korniss, Jenő Gadányi, Vilmos Csaba Perlrott, among others (Verba 2003, 76). The list of names suggests that her network of contacts at the time linked her to the artists of the Szentendre Artists' Colony and the European School.

The bibliography concerning Jacques Doucet also highlights Eppinger Weisz's dynamic social skills and her familiarity with contemporary art. As we have seen, Corneille met Eppinger Weisz in Amsterdam. The meeting with Doucet took place at the Kahnweiler Gallery in Paris – and led to another invitation to Hungary: "it is then that Doucet met Corneille, who, like him, was here due to the invitation of Margit Eppinger Weiss. They shared an enthusiasm for Budapest, gypsy music and Hungarian art", wrote in retrospect Andrée Doucet, Jacques Doucet's wife (Küssel 2002, 59-60).

Corneille's letters to his circle of friends in 1947 also reveal Eppinger's role as a caring housewife and patron. In one of the letters, the inspiring space of Szentendre is represented as a crucial space: "My host sent me to this village to rest in his summer house after my hard work. But this morning, wandering around this picturesque village, I was so taken by the motifs that I ran back for paper and pencil." (Küssel 2002, 86). In another account, it is the personal environment and presence that is crucial, the way the host couple introduce him to new and interesting people, balancing the need for an eventful lifestyle with the need for immersion in the art of creation: "Hungary has sunk into the swamp of politics, and my host who owns great textile factories, began having trouble with the occupying forces (…). Her wife, a very caring woman, seems to have sworn to cure me out of my melancholy (…) She has a wide circle of acquaintances, so wherever I go I find the most charming company" (Corneille's letter to Louis Tiessen, 20th June 1947, Küssel 2002, 58). Both personal and artistic inspirations influenced the development of Corneille's later career and his specific visual universe, and this valid also for his paintings from the Cobra period.

Margit Eppinger Weisz and her family held regular art meetings in their home on Sas Street until 1947, and actively participated in circulating novelties about art. Marion Eppinger's memory notebook, written and drawn by several guests including Corneille and Doucet, is an important record of the period and of the network of contacts (Pócs 2019).

In 1947 the family left Hungary, and after a short stay in Switzerland, they settled in Argentina beginning with August 1948. Here Margit Eppinger Weisz continued her work as an applied visual artist, producing textile designs for her husband's business. From 1964 she also worked as a painter again, producing portrait studies and sketches, creating a visual world that moved further away from realism. In 1975, the Martina Céspedes Gallery exhibited her works in Buenos Aires in a solo show. After her death in 1989, her family took care of her legacy and made it known, with the involvement of local and Hungarian art historians,

the most important moment being a representative exhibition in 2019, *Travesías* [Journeys], at the Fundación OSDE.[2]

The career of Margit Eppinger Weisz underscores the significance of exploring Hungarian experimental art of the 1930s and 1940s in its original context, in connection with its informal and institutional networks. Eppinger was at once an artist figure, a sponsor, and a contact person among artists of the time. Her surviving oeuvre shows that she was a skilled artist, well versed in the visual language of the period, who participated in exhibitions of progressive art of the time, but her social position and perhaps her female role tended to push her towards a promoting and sponsoring activity. It is in this role that most traces in the bibliographies of art history represent her. The story might have ended in a different way without the episode of emigration.

Madeleine Kemény Szemere (1906–1993) has a slightly different career story. From the 1920s onwards, Lenke Szemere's early work received a lot of attention in magazines such as *Színházi Élet*, *Magyar Művészet*, *Nyugat*, *Népszava,* all of them praising the young woman artist for her original vision and for the social dimension of her art.

A 1925 article in *Színházi Élet* included her name in the title (*Who is Lenke Szemere*), and described the young artist, who started out as a child prodigy and grew more and more mature, as a pupil of Adolf Fényes and later István Réti, with the following keywords: "Her socialist world view drives her towards the abandoned, the hunchbacked, the pariahs, the spiritual clowns." (Lázár 1925, 52). In *Nyugat,* Artur Elek spoke of the meticulous details of her paintings, and of the harmony of their form and meaning (Elek 1925, 98). In 1927, the critic of *Népszava* praised the unfolding of the social meaning of her works and placed the artist's activity in an international context. "She is the first Hungarian representative of the art of the proletariat. In this respect, her name has joined the list of those headed by Millet, Meunier, Laermans and other immortals." (I. E. 1927, 7).

The discussion about a certain kind of 'ugliness' of the depicted figures seems to be typical of the Hungarian art field of the period, as represented in an article written by Herman Lipót, who seemed to prefer a more classical, conservative type of beauty: "Typically for young artists, she boldly seeks for interesting themes in the ugly and the sad, and does not seem to accept our good-willed aphorism: – Dear artist, believe me, it is not only the ugly that is beautiful in the fine arts." (Herman 1931, 577). What is even more interesting is how this 'ugliness' or grotesqueness will soon develop in Szemere's work from an individual trait into a more general, mask-like figuration – a step that was necessary in this artistic career to become relevant for the visuality of the Cobra group.

After a promising artistic career in Hungary, Lenke Szemere moved to Paris in 1930, where she adopted the name Madeleine. Her future

2 *Margit Eppinger Weisz: Exposición*, accessed 28/04/2023, https://www.margit.org/la-exposicion

husband, Zoltán Kemény, a painter of Transylvanian origin, also settled in Paris in 1930, and married Madeleine Szemere in 1933. They were both working in the fashion industry at the time, for the Zurich fashion magazine *Annabelle*. When the Second World War broke out, they fled to Marseille and then to Switzerland. During the war, they were interned separately, and then reunited in Zurich in 1945. After the war, inspired by the works of Jean Dubuffet, the Kemény couple began to experiment with incorporating children's creativity and vision into their work. In 1947, Madeleine Kemény Szemere sent Dubuffet an exhibition catalogue of her own work – as a result, the Kemény couple were invited to the Compagnie de l'Art Brut, and Dubuffet invited Madeleine to exhibit at the Foyer de l'Art Brut in 1948. Here, Corneille, recently returned from Budapest, saw the works, and invited the Kemény couple to participate in Cobra's 1949 international exhibition of experimental art at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. His involvement led to the publication of both their works in the fourth issue of the *Cobra* magazine (Wingen 2002).

Their careers then followed a somewhat prototypical pattern in terms of male/female artistic careers in the international art scene: Zoltán Kemény's career was clearly heading towards international fame: he participated in two editions of Documenta in Kassel (1959, 1964) and won the International Sculpture Grand Prix at the Venice Biennale in 1964. He died a successful artist in 1965. Madeleine Kemény Szemere, on the other hand, gave up painting in 1956, and her works were only rediscovered in the later years of her life by the art collector Karel van Stuijvenberg (N. Mészáros 2008). After her death in 1993, a retrospective exhibition of her work was held in St. Gallen in 1995, and since then her paintings have been repeatedly spotlighted as the work of a notable female artist of the Cobra group (Jacques 2019).

When we compare the world of Lenke Szemere's early works with the vision of Madeleine Kemény Szemere, we find many exciting connections. Most strikingly, *Mère et enfant* (1947) and *Mother and Child* (*Anya és gyermeke*, 1931), still created in Hungary, show common motifs. The positions of mother and child are almost identical in the two paintings, but the early attitude towards a kind of sociographic, emotional approach shifts towards grotesque in the later painting, through a technique showing gestures of detachment. The painting from 1947 represents the mother/child relationship as a kind of homology: the child's body repeats the mother's body forms in a kind of grotesque miniaturisation. The body curves are deliberately rougher, so that the emotive gestures of tenderness in the previous painting become simplified. The perspective shifts towards a kind of universality beyond the human world, and, therefore, can be extended to non-human existence.

It is precisely this aspect that will be meaningful in terms of Cobra's interest in abstraction, archaic imagery, animal dimensions: in Madeleine Kemény Szemere, it is the "primitivism" characteristic of

Cobra that art critics highlighted as the most important element of her organic connection to the movement (Jacques 2019).

One of Cobra's organisational characteristics was that it did not document who belonged to the group through member lists or meticulously kept records: it was publication in the periodicals of the group, attendance of group exhibitions, that defined who belonged to Cobra (Kurczynski 2021). Although the Kemény couple were not among the most frequently exhibited Cobra artists, the history of the movement records their presence, and curatorial and interpretive works repeatedly list and characterise them in the context of the experimental artists' group.

The story of Madeleine Kemény Szemere is framed in the more recent interpretations in a male/female dynamics, from a feminist perspective, where the interruption of her own painting career for a longer period of time becomes meaningful. In the context of curatorial and historical works that explore and recontextualise the work of twentieth-century women artists, the oeuvre of artists like her is presented as part of ai increasingly dynamic field, and therefore the issue of her position in art history is far from closed.

Conclusions

To conclude, we may argue that the proactive gestures that can be documented in the case of both Margit Eppinger Weisz and Madeleine Kemény Szemere (active search for contacts with the Hungarian and international art scene, invitations, mediating activities, recognition and adaptation of Dubuffet's art brut, etc.) show both of them in roles that are exemplary in the contextual histories of art or in the operational logic of *world literature studies*. As we have seen many times, methodological innovations come precisely from the exploration of new, previously neglected types of contexts and of new kinds of sources. The contemporaries clearly appreciated Lenke Szemere's works, and Margit Eppinger Weisz's mediating efforts – the task of art history and cultural history in this case is to rediscover traces that have faded over time, to reclaim objects and texts buried by the sediments of historical time.

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Economics of Survival

Imre Kertész*: Fatelessness*

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, I aim to analyse Imre Kertész's *Fatelessness* from the perspective of its economic systems. In Kertész's work they form a discursive network that permeates the entire novel (Szirák 2022). It is also important to see that the circulation of symbolic and material values also plays a key role in the demarcation of the boundaries between the concentration camps and the world outside. However, in the novel's memorable yet perplexing conclusion, this distinction turns into a speech about the relative purity and simplicity of life in the camp. In an attempt to answer the questions arising from this statement by György Köves, I will argue that understanding of the economic models and the differences between them in the worlds of the inside and the outside is essential to the interpretation of *Fatelessness*.

Keywords: Imre Kertész, 20th century Hungarian literature, economics, systems of language, history, subjectivity

1. World outside the camp

"Yes, in a certain sense life was purer and simpler there" – reads György Köves' enigmatic statement in the conclusion of *Fatelessness* (Kertész 2004, 262). After having returned home to Budapest and after unsuccessfully trying to find Bandi Citrom, the broke Köves, wearing a prison uniform, takes the tram where an inspector insists that Köves should buy a ticket. During the scene, the protagonist is caught in the crossfire of two looks. On the one hand, he is observed by the old woman dressing in the fashion of an earlier age who initially shies away from him, and later turns away in offence, and on the other hand, by the ticket inspector in uniform, who is also reacting – at least implicitly – to the old woman's behaviour. Of these two rather unsympathetic characters, the narrative is not able to interpret the first, but only the second – not only

the old woman's dress is "queer", but also her reaction to the dialogue between Köves and the inspector is mysterious and cannot be explained by reasons. The ticket inspector confronts this incomprehensibility with the authority of the law and even to clarify his own position as regards access to the law: "Soon a man in cap and uniform came along and asked me to show my ticket. I told him I didn't have one. He suggested I buy one so I said I had just got back from abroad and didn't have any money. He inspected my jacket, me, then the old woman as well before informing me that there were travel regulations, they weren't his rules but had been brought in by his superiors." (Kertész 2004, 246)

Here the horizon of the legal order coincides with that of the economy: one must possess the ticket or be able to buy it (this connection is forgotten by Köves, who is temporarily out of the jurisdiction of the legal order, but, as it is seen, he refuses the idea of taking the next tram from this direction [Kertész 2004, 261]). The assessment of the cause of the lack of money and the potentially resulting morally based possibilities for action are outside this framework and, as the example of the old woman shows, it is far from clear that this problem, which deeply affects György Köves' homecoming, is neutralized by socially corrective mechanisms (a similar example can be found in the reaction of the woman who opens the door when the protagonist returns to her former apartment: after she declares that Köves, who thinks he lives there, is mistaken, she locks the door on him without further explanation [Kertész 2004, 253]).

That fairness to Köves would have been conceivable at all in this situation is only made clear by the journalist's appearance in the novel who, after paying for our protagonist's ticket, tries to confront the participants with the shamefulness of the proceedings. Although this proves ineffective, it again highlights the intimate relationship between the conductor and the old woman, between the power that acts and the non-acting individual who not only provides the space for this power to operate, but also maintains and legitimises it. The journalist then asks the boy a series of questions which, still on the tram, lead to one of the novel's famous outbursts:

> He fell silent, this time for a longer period, before starting up again: "Did you have to endure many horrors?" to which I replied that it all depended what he considered to be a horror. No doubt, he declared, his expression now somewhat uneasy, I had undergone a lot of deprivation, hunger, and more than likely they had beaten me, to which I said: naturally. "Why, my dear boy," he exclaimed, though now, so it seemed to me, on the verge of losing his patience, "do you keep on saying 'naturally', and always about things that are not at all natural?" I told him that in a concentration

> camp they *were* natural. "Yes, of course, of course," he says, "they were *there,* but …," and he broke off, hesitating slightly, "but … I mean, a concentration camp in itself is unnatural". (Kertész 2004, 247)

The two perspectives that clash here, from Köves's point of view, are that of ignorance, childishness, and, implicitly, at the opposite pole, that of knowledge, adulthood (Kertész 2004, 247) – the irony of which lies in the reversal of roles. While the individual with the knowledge produced by the concentration camps is able to think of a different meaning of the word "naturally" than the ordinary one, the childlike thinking without this knowledge only recognises the primary use value of the word. The journalist's outburst about Köves's use of "naturally" thus points out that the use of language is, so to speak, not at all natural. The order of the concentration camp intrudes into language (Erdődy 2008, 21) and modifies the conventional system based on differences that determines the existence of linguistic value ("in a concentration camp they were natural"), which makes the journalist's desperate attempt to restore the system nothing but a tautology ("a concentration camp in itself is unnatural") (e.g. Szirák 2003, 11; Pór 2004).

Köves's speech, seen from this point, is a break in the linguistic system of the world outside the concentration camp (Schein 2002, 1303). The journalist, who seems very understanding until his outburst, tries to bridge the gap, although in a way that makes the protagonist aware of their basic inability to dialogue (child/adult). The journalist, upon being confronted by Köves with the threat represented by language's unnatural nature, clings to the boy's explanation. During this, he simultaneously distinguishes between the worlds of outside and inside, and establishes a quarantine for the pole of the concentration camp. The inoperability of these processes is, however, obvious (as indicated by the repeated hesitation in the journalist's words). Köves cannot and does not want to leave behind the reality of the camp, which has shaped his language, his view, his thinking. For him the distinction of the journalist is meaningless, because the *there* to which the latter refers has always remained *here*, inseparably part of him. For the journalist the distinction between the here and the there is at the same time that of the camp, which can be understood as the suspension of natural states, and of the normal state based on nature. For Köves, in contrast, due to the impossibility of a distinction between the natural and the non-natural, the camp becomes interpretable not as a suspension of the normal course of things, but as a consequence (Földényi 2007, 174).

The scene may point to the fact that György Köves' way of speaking, when he returns to Budapest, generates a conflict between two economics of linguistic values that establish themselves in different contexts. Already in this scene, one of the typical insights of *Fatelessness* is thus revealed, according to which the experience of the camps, as well

as Köves' language and vision, prove to be unintegrable for those who have not had this experience, while, nevertheless, they attempt to tame their subversive power.

This is also implied by the journalist's insistence on imagining the world of the camps through the use of a linguistic cliché (which is one of the main features of his use of language [Szegedy-Maszák 2003, 131]): the trope of hell ("Can we imagine a concentration camp as anything but a hell?" he asked.). The boy in turn, however, implicitly asserts the primacy of the literal name ("I was not acquainted with hell couldn't even imagine what that was like", "I could only imagine a concentration camp, since I was somewhat acquainted with what that was, but not hell" [Kertész 2004, 248-249]). Köves not only rejects the idea that the camps are imaginable, but also points out that even his own imagination would lead him astray (see also: Kertész 1993, 22). The preference for literal naming and the avoidance of figurative language are therefore connected to the contrast between imagination and experience. Although Köves makes an attempt to convey the experience of the camps by describing in detail the specific form of the relationship to time, the journalist finally declares it unimaginable ("No, it's impossible to imagine it. For my part, I could see that."). From the perspective of the aforementioned distinction, figurative language can be understood as a compensatory act that – as a kind of counter-pole to the literal use of language, erasing its own origin – makes the unimaginable imaginable ("and I even thought to myself: so, that must be why they prefer to talk about hell instead" [Kertész 2004, 250]).

Stepping off the tram, now sitting on the bench, Köves realises that the journalist's real purpose is to use his story in a series of articles, in his newspaper. According to the journalist, this would be beneficial to Köves for two reasons. Firstly, it would give the boy "some money" (Kertész 2004, 251), and secondly, it would have a healing function on an individual level and a restorative function for justice in the world. From the journalist's point of view, Köves' story is no longer a private matter, since it belongs to him as much as to the world (Kertész 2004, 252), which also means that the boy cannot treat it as his own property. The journalist's strategy of persuasion thus not only appeals to the satisfaction of individual interests (money and supposed desire for revenge), but also highlights the imperative of responsibility towards the community. This strategy obscures his actual interests and ambitions, presenting him as a neutral intermediary with a purely mediating function – as someone, who serves both the protagonist of the series and the political community (Vári 2003, 70). The story of the protagonist, which the journalist promises would be published on the basis of Köves' own words (Kertész 2004, 251), here clearly would become a part of the world of means and ends. Not only a product to be bought, but also a part of the novelty-based press economy of modernity.

While the journalist seeks to exploit, make use of and consume the experience of the concentration camps, Uncle Fleischmann and Steiner,

at the end of the novel, urge its isolation and oblivion ("»Before all else,« he declared, »you must put the horrors behind you«"), so that Köves can be free and thus truly begin a "new life" (Kertész 2004, 256). The boy rejects this partly with mnemonic and partly with semantic arguments. On the one hand, he draws attention to the uncontrollability of memory, which in itself may call into question the conception of a free life – freed from its past – that appears here, and on the other hand, he expresses doubts about the possibility of a "new life". Of these doubts, the first one once again brings into play the conflict between the figurative and the literal aspects of language, offering an interpretation of Uncle Fleischmann's idiomatic use of language from the latter direction. However, the second, to the consternation of his interlocutors, outright denies the experience of horrors.

Köves highlights a recurring turn in the language of the "two old men" ("so, for example, 'the yellow -star houses »came about«', 'October the fifteenth »came about«', 'the Arrow-Cross regime »came about«', etc.") and criticises it ("but it was not quite true that the thing 'came about': we had gone along with it too" [Kertész 2004, 255; 257]): the spatial metaphor of "came about" presupposes a subject who is reached by something beyond his own possibilities of action, in contrast to the cognitive model of "steps" proposed by Köves, which links the relation to the present – and thus the life lived in the present – to the acts of the survivor (Kertész 2004, 257-258). In Kertész's novel, the steps, understood as a metaphor for survival, represent a form of action that (1.) is both representative and devoid of freedom of choice, (2.) as it both has and has no alternative, and (3.) as such becomes both rational and irrational to the greatest extent possible ("But what could we do?! [...] I said to him: nothing, naturally; or, rather, anything, which would have been just as senseless as doing nothing, yet again, and just as naturally." [Kertész 2004, 258]). This form of action, which Köves thematises as a general paradigm of action, is thus based on the impossible.

From the perspective of Kertész' novel historical narratives (Molnár 1996) necessarily ("naturally") produce a causal idea of the succession of events (Kertész 2004, 257-258). This is what excludes singularity – the impossible, or in other words: freedom -, which cannot be integrated into this order, from history ("if there is such a thing as fate, then freedom is not possible [...], if there is such a thing as freedom, then there is no fate; that is to say – and I paused, but only long enough to catch my breath – that is to say, then we ourselves are fate" [Kertész 2004, 260]). In contrast, Köves's account presents a contextualization of the relation between subjectivity and history that, at its most fundamental level, threatens the determinist model of this relation. This is because it eliminates the pure possibility of passivity in any context:

> I took the steps, no one else, and I declared that I had been true to my given fate throughout. […] Did they

> want this whole honesty and all the previous steps I had taken to lose all meaning? […] It was impossible, they must try and understand, impossible to take everything away from me, impossible to for me to be neither winner or loser, for me not to be right and for me not to be mistaken that I was neither the cause nor the effect of anything; they should try to see, I almost pleaded, that I couldn't swallow that idiotic bitterness, that I should merely be innocent. But I could see they did not wish to understand anything, and so, picking up kit bag and cap, I departed in the midst of a few disjointed words and motions, one more unfinished gesture and incomplete utterance from each. (Kertész 2004, 260-261)

The position of the interlocutors and the form of the relation between subjectivity and history they outline do not simply offer another experience of human existence, but – from Köves' perspective – diminishes the survivor, depriving the fact of survival of any meaning. At stake, of course, is subjectivity itself, which Köves conceives precisely in terms of freedom, the impossibility of action and, ultimately, the responsibility for one's own fate. To this extent, subjectivity can be lost, which nevertheless also means that it is something that can be, and even must be, possessed: subjectivity is grounded in this relation of possession, and as such could even be said to be identical with this relation. For Köves, then, to enter into the symbolic economy of the world outside the camp would be to give up the self. The forgetting that family friends encourage him to do is therefore also a forgetting of self. The conflict that emerges here is structurally similar to the debate about the word *natural*. As Köves' use of the word breaks into the linguistic system of the world outside the camp, the impossibility of integrating the boy's insights into the horizon of Fleischmann and Steiner becomes obvious. The survivor's language, his view of subject and history, has a subversive power and as such poses a problem to be dealt with, since it interrupts, suspends and repositions the acts that establish a clear distinction between outside and inside, activity and passivity, guilty and victim. While the journalist perceives and thematises this as a linguistic problem which is dissected in the figural dimension of language, the two uncles are unable to do the same, since for them it is not a linguistic problem, but one that problematizes the essence of the selfhood that is separated from it, and which profoundly determines the conceivability of their own and the community's identity.

It is also of paramount importance to analyse the discrepancies between the two scenes in question. The journalist, after he exhausted the dialog's potential, leaves the scene himself, expressing a hope of future contact, in contrast to Köves' elderly, agitated discussion

partners, whom the boy leaves in a similarly agitated state, rejecting the possibility of dialogue. In light of the above, we can note the latter scene's de facto incompleteness: the suspension of gestures and sentences, which is embodied in the sudden cessation of linguistic and non-linguistic communication. In the light of the foregoing, the most important difference between the two scenes is, at a structural level, whether the force inherent in Köves' language, his view of the subject and history, which is perceived as pure negativity from the perspective of the world outside the camp, and which disrupts the formal order of conceivability itself, is intended to be used by those confronted with it for some purpose, and whether they have the means to integrate the unintegrable. However, it is also important to pay attention to the similarities between the two scenes. While the journalist ultimately hopes for material and symbolic gain from the sale of Köves's story, the family friends also hope that the formal structure of subjectivity, and thus the relationship between the individual and the world, will remain intact by forgetting the horrors they have experienced. As the scene progresses, the increasingly indignant rejection of the boy's speculations become increasingly interpreted as a defensive operation of self-positioning, uninfluenced by the camp's experience. Either Köves gives himself up, or Fleischmann and Steiner do; either the position of continuity between the camps and the outside world, or the position of radical separation loses its legitimacy.

What the two scenes have in common, therefore, is that in the case of Köves' interlocutors, neither in the former nor in the latter, do the interests that determine the relationship between the boy and what he has to say, and the strategies to be employed in dealing with it, become transparent (as Péter Szirák has pointed out, this is also typical of the world outside the camp in general, just think of Sütő's figure, for example [Szirák 2022, 394]). The discursive digestion and containment of the survivor's experience – connected to forgetting – is linked to the same economic imperative: utilise it if it can be utilised, and erase, lock it up or put it out of reach if it cannot. From this point of view, the journalist and the uncles embody two sides of the same paradigm.

2. The world inside the camp

Kertész's novel places great emphasis on the economics of the concentration camps which is characterised above all by the quest for physical survival. The organizing principle of the camps' exchange is an extreme, unprecedented degree of hunger, which, as Köves testifies, affects every action carried out in the camp:

> But neither stubbornness nor prayers nor any form of escape could have freed me from one thing: hunger.

> I had, naturally, felt – or at least supposed I felt – hunger before, back at home; I had felt hungry at the brickyard, on the train, at Auschwitz, even at Buchenwald, but I had never before had the sensation like this, protractedly, over a long haul, if I may put it that way. I was transformed into a hole, a void of some kind, and my every endeavour, every effort, was bent to stopping, filling, and silencing this bottomless, evermore clamorous void. I had eyes for that alone, my entire intellect could serve that alone, my every act was directed toward that; and if I did not gnaw on wood, or iron or pebbles, it was only because those things could not be chewed and digested. […] As much as two slices of bread was the asking price for just one small, pointy onion bulb, and the fortunate well-offs sold beets and turnips for the same price. I personally preferred the latter because they were juicier and usually larger in volume, though those in the know consider there is more of value, in terms of contents and nutrients, in sugar beets […]. (Kertész 2004, 162-163)

The economic context detailed here is not entirely unfamiliar in Holocaust discourse. Primo Levi directly refers to bread as the "currency" of the camp (Levi 1988, 50; 83). Bread, as Kertész's novel testifies, can be cast in this role because in the exchange economy of the camp it not only represents value, but is itself posited as value, a value, moreover, that everyone is free to dispose of. Bread can be consumed, but it can also be exchanged for other goods that are more difficult to obtain: the symbolic order of exchange between them – the comparability of values – is determined by the extent to which the common knowledge of the camp is seen as conducive to survival. However, as the comparison of sugar and beef beet shows, these values are not stable, as they are based on the individual considerations, value choices and preferences of the participants in the transaction. For this very reason, buying potato peelings later can lead to unforeseen difficulties (Kertész 2004, 164). While, as shown in the quoted section, beetroot is larger and its juice can be expected to provide some hydration, sugar beet is still perceived to provide a higher energy intake due to its higher sugar content – their price, as their markets are not governed by objective facts but by the perceptions attached to them, are nevertheless the same, which suggests that demand for beef and beet is approximately the same. From the buyer's point of view, the benefit of these transactions is above all a greater chance of survival, after Marx's "use-value" (Marx 1996, 72), a kind of survival value. This also means, however, that the pursuit of a greater profit, of better chances of survival, may in some cases

serve the trader who exchanges his bread better, since the exchange value he assumes and accepts may not be proportional to the extent to which the good can actually help him to survive (an example of this might be that Bandi Citrom, according to Köves' assumptions, would protect him from buying potato peels). In this process, even though it may be dangerous (the food may even become more important than medical care for the protagonist when he has problems with his knee [Kertész 2004, 173]), it is, by implication, extremely difficult not to get involved, since, as we read in the novel, even with the consumption of the rationed food, the extreme degree of hunger that Köves speaks of occurs, so that the rationing and exchange of bread may seem in a sense to be an equally rational course of action, which enhances the value of knowledge, which thereby becomes a commodity itself (Levi 1988, 121). (From this point of view, Bandi Citrom's selfless words of a tutor-instructor can be interpreted as a pointwise break with the economic order, although it should be added that, in exchange for his knowledge, he also receives knowledge, "since he does not speak German" [Kertész 2004, 130]).

In this context, hunger is the motivation for action, an inalienable part of it, and in a negative sense, if the action is aimed at its elimination, also its goal. Hunger disconnects the body and the mind and rearranges their relationship. As a result, it transforms Köves' (felt) body (Schmitz 2011, 66) into a kind of void, a condition that consciousness is called upon to eliminate. In this extreme situation, the task of consciousness is primarily to limit the body's autonomy by obtaining food, its independence from itself, which inverts the classical hierarchical relations between body and consciousness ("my entire intellect could serve that alone, my every act was directed toward that"). Although the partial autonomy of the body is posited as something to be restrained for the consciousness, it is still meant to facilitate survival– which is precisely when the hunger that produces the body's experience of alienation, the conflicting relationship between body and consciousness, in the company of all the life-sustaining senses, is gone (Kertész 2004, 171-172). It is extremely important to note that Köves enters this state, which the novel associates with tranquility and relief, after he exploits himself to the limit in the scene of packing cement bags in exchange for the recognition of a soldier. Köves then drops a bag of cement, to which the guard responds with a beating and a promise:

> He then hauled me to my feet, swearing he would teach me […] so I would never drop a bag again in the future. From then on, he personally loaded a new bag onto my shoulders each time it was my turn, bothering himself with me alone; I was his sole concern, it was me exclusively whom he kept his eye on following me all the way to the truck and back,

> and whom he picked to go first even, by rights, there were others still ahead of me in the queue. In the end, there was almost an understanding between us, we had got the measure of one another and I noticed his face bore what was almost a smile of satisfaction, encouragement, even dare I say, a pride of sorts, and from a certain perspective, I had to acknowledge, with good reason, […] by the end of the day I felt that something within me had broken down irreparably; from then on, every morning I believed that would be the last morning I would get up; with every step I took, that I could not possibly take another; with every movement I made, that I would be incapable of making another; and yet for all that; for the time being, I still managed to accomplish it each and every time. (Kertész 2004, 170)

The guard's promise establishes a special relationship between him and Köves, which puts the protagonist in a privileged position and which, at the same time, places a particularly heavy burden on him, since the guard's promise can only be fulfilled through his work. The guard's behaviour encourages Köves to stop dropping the bag; to stop disappointing the guard, to follow his gaze, watching his every tiny movement, just as the guard follows his movements. In this two-way relationship, a kind of complicity develops between the guard and the prisoner ("In the end, there was almost an understanding"), which might lead us to conclude that Köves' self-exploitative effort is based, as if in a self-exciting way, precisely in the guard's perceived satisfaction, encouragement, pride, i.e. it becomes conceivable as a function of the recognition he receives for keeping his promise. The symbolic exchange relations that emerge here between Köves' willpower and his perceived recognition of it override Köves' physical capacity for performance. This is why the fulfilment of the guard's promise can only be achieved at the cost of the protagonist's future. In other words, the soldier's promise can only be fulfilled if he sacrifices the promise of survival. The way in which the promise is fulfilled here, manifesting an asymmetrical structure, creates a break between the present and the future of Köves, presenting the latter as unthinkable. The break that occurs in the scene of the cement sack is thus the result of the fact that Köves –whose camp behaviour is influenced by the striving to become a model prisoner plays a very significant role (Szirák 2022, 393) – is dominated by a cycle of purely symbolic values (will, aspiration – satisfaction, encouragement, pride). This temporarily blurs the position of the prisoner, imprisoned in a concentration camp and deprived of his rights, and the guard who supervises and controls him, making their relationship "almost"

perceived by the protagonist as a human bond, outside or beyond the real context.

The break between present and future in Kertész's novel threatens the basic structure of survival, the structure of metalepsis. What is "broken down irreparably" in the protagonist is, from this point of view, nothing other than the capacity to make the present accessible through the operation of interchanging the present with the future, life with survival, thereby establishing the possibility of the latter.

The drastic deterioration of Köves' condition from this point onwards brings the protagonist closer and closer to the "Muselmänner" in the camp. One of the crucial questions concerning the meaning of the novel is whether he crosses the border and becomes a Muselmann himself. In the *Gályanapló,* as in the diary entries on which it is based, Kertész answers this question with a clear yes (one may also note, however, that *Fatelessness*, as in the *Gályanapló*, the Muselmann appears in an increasingly broader range of meanings), which means, among other things, that this state of affairs is reversible and survivable (Sipos 2021, 199-200). Agamben, in analysing various testimonies, sees the difference between the Muselmann and the survivor however in the fact that while the former cannot bear witness to the horrors they have experienced, the latter can. This is due to the fact that the paradox of the testimony put forth by Levi is precisely that only those who have undergone the experience of being murdered at Auschwitz can provide a "complete" testimony about the camp, as the experience of those who were murdered was lost with them (Levi 1988, 42; 70; 103).

At a point in *Fatelessness*, already discussed from another angle, in the heat of the debate, Köves seems to be discussing similar things, implicitly thematising both the "shame of the survivor" (Levi 1988, 64) and, in Levi's words, the "incomplete" nature of the testimony: "I took the steps, no one else, and I declared that I had been true to my given fate throughout. The sole blot, or one might say fly in the ointment, the sole accident with which they might reproach me was the fact that we should be sitting there talking now – but then I couldn't help that" (Kertész 2004, 259). Köves' survival, as seen, is a "blot", a "fly in the ointment", an "accident"; something that could be turned against him, as if the knowledge he possesses and testifies to in relation to the camp is not complete to the furthest extent. As if it lacks the authenticating moment of death, or of Levi and Agamben: the Muselmann as a counter-signature marking the threshold of human existence (Levi 1988; Agamben 2017; Farrell 2011), and thus the indistinguishability of life and death, the human and the non-human, which according to Köves's interpretive linkage, Bandi Citrom might have saw in Köves' eyes (Kertész 2004, 172-173).

In Agamben, the figure of Muselmann is first and foremost a position produced by the camp (a historical form of bare life), which makes sense at the structural level of the intertwined philosophical problem of biopolitics and testimony, as the final point of biopolitical operations.

As an "absolute biopolitical substance", the "*Muselmann* of Auschwitz is […] defined by a loss of all will and consciousness" (Agamben 2017, 817, 790). The complete transformation into a Muselmann, from this perspective, disconnects body and consciousness, even eliminating the possibility of self-reflexivity, and thus, by smashing all the economic systems and acts that could potentially be established for the sake of survival (exchange is always a relationship of trust existing in temporal slips, and therefore never without a future horizon [Fogarasi 2022, 101]), eliminates the self. In this context, the most important dilemma concerning the Muselmann is not how to interpret Bandi Citrom's gaze, but, in the depiction of Köves's subjectivity, whether the event of transformation actually occurs in Kertész's novel (Sipos 2021, Zsadányi 2019) or not (Szirák 2022).

In the seventh chapter of the novel, when Köves is transported back from the hospital to the concentration camp, his body's previously established non-self, which is deepened both by its character as an object – already beginning in the hospital – and by its designation as "earthly remains" (Kertész 2004, 184), is reversed in a crucial sentence of the novel. This occurs after a prisoner, whose voice is familiar to the protagonist, and whose voice he hasn't heard for a long time, saying ("I... p... pro... test..." [Kertész 2004, 187]), signalling his life and thus drawing the attention of the workers, who have come to collect the lifeless bodies, to Köves. The testimony to the will to live, which Köves experience, in this situation is directly linked to the perception of a very specific sight and a corresponding smell. The narrative tells us that they trigger the protagonist's relief and then his affirmation of life:

> Here and there, more suspect plumes of smoke mingled with more benign vapors, while a familiar-sounding clatter drifted up faintly my way from somewhere, like bells in dreams, and as I gazed down across the scene, I caught sight of a procession of bearers, poles on shoulders, groaning under the weight of steaming cauldrons, and from far off I recognized, there could be no doubting it, a whiff of turnip soup in the acrid air. A pity, because it must have been that spectacle, that aroma, which cut through my numbness to trigger an emotion, the growing waves of which were able to squeeze, even from my dried-out eyes, a few warmer drops amid the dankness that was soaking my face. Despite all deliberation, sense, insight and sober reason, I could not fail to recognize within myself the furtive and yet – ashamed as it might be, so to say, of its irrationality – increasingly insistent voice of some muffled craving of sorts: I would like to live a little bit

> longer in this beautiful concentration camp. (Kertész 2004, 189)

The will to live manifests itself as a kind of shame (e.g. Kertész 2004, 200). The survivor feels shame for wanting to survive; for having made what he considered to be a rational choice about his life (Köves responds to the survivor's protests by saying, "I resolved than that I, for my part, was going to be more sensible." [Kertész 2004, 187]), is overridden by a program of self-preservation that is not rational, but which undoubtedly has an effect on consciousness and which guides it, manifested by the sight of soup-carriers, the smell of soup, and by the emotional reaction to it, the interplay of senses and affections. From this point of view, not only does Köves not become a Muselmann, but, as can be seen, the smell of the soup and the sight of its carriers are able to override the temporary suspension of the metalepsis of survival (already anticipated by the formulation of the desire to avoid a painful death [Erdődy 2008, 32]), caused by the prevalence of symbolic exchange relations in the scene of the cement bag carrying. The shame of the surviving witness, Köves, lies precisely in the fact that his words are not authenticated by his own death; that they are not, and can never become, the words of the Muselmann; and that life, as the novel's memorable conclusion points out, cannot be continued, yet it must continue (Kertész 2004, 262). The Muselmann defines the language of *Fatelessness* precisely by making the protagonist's incessantly flowing speech accessible from the direction of the impossibility of speech, at the same time as drawing attention to the fact that the witness can only speak through the impossibility of speech (Agamben 2017). The Muselmann is the silent domain of language, a language without language, present in all testimony, always reminding us that the one who speaks, speaks for others, but not for those whose destiny is to become a Muselmann – a "full-fledged" but silent witness.

The second hospital, to which the protagonist is taken in chapter eight, after he is discovered to be alive among those lying on the ground, is a kind of transition zone between the two great economic systems of the novel. Here, Köves encounters no operations primarily characteristic of either the camp or the world outside the camp. The hospital and the road leading to it, whose relations the protagonist does not really understand and only slowly gets used to the norms prevailing there, can be understood as a place of give-away, where Köves, as the novel emphasizes, receives goods for no consideration, "without any interest" (Szirák 2003, 56; Spiró 1983, 5): "Then [...] they pushed two objects into my hands. One was a bowl of warm coffee, the other a hunk of bread, roughly one-sixth of a loaf, I estimated. I was allowed to take them and consume them without payment or barter." (Kertész 2004, 191-192) This odd event is followed by a scheduled sugar lump from the doctor, which he places on the beds of the patients, and then, in the hospital room in one of the "neat green barracks", since the nurse, Pyetyka, is

interested not in Köves' number but in his name, it is the return of the name – albeit written down in a corrupted form ('Kevisztjerz') – that takes place (Kertész 2004, 201), only to be followed by another nurse, Bohús, who does not even wait to be thanked. The "aneconomic" (Derrida 1992, 7) world of the hospital, that is breaking the circulation of symbolic and material goods, of giving and receiving, and that is more human than anything previously known, is interpreted by the protagonist as a miracle ("I have to say that over time, one can become accustomed even to miracles" [Kertész 2004, 225]). From this point of view, the miracle does not simply consist in the temporary suspension of economic systems at points or over a longer time span, but in the norming of aneconomic relations, which at the same time leads to the habituation of the miracle, and ultimately to its profanation.

3. Conclusions

Three scenes, three economic models: one that hides its own organising principle (home); one that makes it explicit (camp); and one that opens up a zone on the border between the two that, by its aneconomic nature, puts both into critical perspective (hospital). While in the first case, Köves refers to himself repeatedly as a parental property in relation to a possessive relation, in the context of the second, he defines himself in relation to different camp functions (Kertész 2004, 25, 31, 113), while in the third situation he defines himself as an agent who participates in the miracle, and at the same time, an agent who inevitably consumes the miracle.

"Yes, in a sense life was purer and simpler there." But simpler and cleaner from what? What, in these contexts, would be the meaning of simplicity, and even more worrying, the concept of purity? It is impossible to give a reassuring answer to this question, and yet, from the perspective of the above, it could even be argued that it is above all the nature of the exchange relations between people in different contexts, and the interpretability of these relations by the protagonists, that is worth reflecting on here. Reflecting on the fact that the world outside the concentration camp in *Fatelessness* is emphatically unknowable and inaccessible, cannot be rationally explained, since it is governed by causal relations that constantly conceal their own operationality. Just as the aesthetics of the "more attractive" (Kertész 2004, 10) stars at the beginning of the novel obscure the inhumanity behind them; just as Sütő's assistance masks the family fortune and the later acquisition of Köves' stepmother (it is telling that the uncles thematise this as a kind of absolute debt repayment: "She owes her a lot, »everything, as a matter of fact«" [Kertész 2004, 254-255]); the way the gendarme who takes valuables from the deportees invokes patriotism and the ticket inspector later refers to the law; the way the journalist creates the appearance of altruism in order to achieve his own ends; the way the words of

Fleischmann and Steiner are used to neutralise the threat to the basic structure of subjectivity; or more generally: just as the protagonist becomes conceived of as a possession as a result of the legal proceedings brought about by the conflict between his father and mother, Köves constantly finds himself in a context in which the underlying causes are not made visible or comprehensible.

By contrast, the basic relations of the camp, which can only be revealed in the novel as forms of the means-ends relation, are organised by the economics of survival. The latter transforms human relations into immanent exchanges, seen from the direction of the economic system (e.g. Kertész 2004, 154), whose transactional organization must remain transparent in order to remain functional (the cement bag scene is precisely an example of what happens when this requirement is not met). The manifestation of the aneconomic world of the hospital shows precisely how Köves is awed, even distrustful, of the breaking of the immanence of exchange relations, which leads him to interpret this event as a manifestation of transcendence: the breaking of the economic order is a miracle, since it is not of this worldly origin and thus establishes relations that cannot be integrated into the protagonist's paralysingly rational discourse.

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Land: Distribution, Concentration, and Social Meanings

Global contexts and local perspectives

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ABSTRACT
The analysis argues that the social history and meaning of landed property is far from a closed process, and makes the important point that land should be seen as an integral part of the human world, society and culture. As such, we need to map out the roles and meanings that land assumes in particular social situations. In this sense, the land is a kind of social actor, not an entity outside society, independent of it, *behaving* and *changing* in a certain sense. Thus, the study sees land as endowed with agency in relation to human society, a land that can be seen as elastic even in its physical extent, as the wrangling over restitution has shown. The first three parts of this paper will review the social meanings of land and the issue of land reform. The fourth part illustrates the evolution of these meanings through some concrete examples of Transylvanian rurality.

Keywords: land, property, land reform, social meanings, agency

1. Introduction

The distribution of land and access to it was one of the central issues and driving forces in peasant society. In the emerging capitalist economy of the 18th and 19th centuries – when peasant groups gained access to land and could own it with few restrictions – a distinct 'hunger for land' became apparent. Beyond cultural horizons, this desire for land may have been the unifying factor across the various strata of peasant society, which was otherwise divided in many ways. The landless peasants and agrarian proletariat sought land to gain independence, while those already owning land, regardless of its size, sought to acquire more.

This land hunger, in many ways, defined the peasantry over long periods, influencing decisions on marriage, forcing peasants into poverty, self-exploitation, and even emigration in search of work overseas. Peasants were willing to go to great lengths to acquire land – though within the moral and practical boundaries that shaped peasant societies (see Szabó 2006). The 20th century disrupted this process, and the intense desire for land, often portrayed with a pejorative tone, was relegated to literary and cinematic representations. However, it did not entirely vanish; it transformed. In this paper, I argue that while the interest in land has persisted, the actors and contexts driving this interest (or 'hunger for land') have shifted. To understand this transformation, we must undertake a contextual, historical, and contemporary analysis of the complex social and political processes that have shaped our ideas and practices around what was once the primary means of production: the land.

Building on the above, this paper focuses on two key aspects: the peasant world[1] and the evolving and changing social meanings of land ownership.[2] It begins by reviewing historical dimensions of land tenure, followed by an analysis of these meanings in contemporary contexts. By employing both diachronic and synchronic approaches, the paper integrates global frameworks with local perspectives, arguing that the social and symbolic history of land tenure is far from a concluded process. Additionally, land carries significant symbolic content, which is crucial to understanding recurring land-related phenomena. This dual perspective is essential because the distribution and inheritance of property within families appear to be closely tied to state policies (Hann 1998, 4), highlighting the interaction between local and broader external influences. Furthermore, I contend that land should be understood as an integral part of human society and culture (cf. Micu 2014), requiring us to map the roles and meanings that land assumes in specific social contexts.

In this sense, land can be viewed as a kind of social actor: a source of subsistence and a connector within society (Micu 2014, 133). It is not

1 Given the limited space to review the various works and definitions of peasantry, I will define 'peasant' here in a simplified way as an agricultural worker who owns part or all of the means of production and organizes production within family units aimed at self-sufficiency. This definition primarily applies to the peasantry that existed from the emancipation of serfs until the end of World War II and the onset of collectivization in Eastern Europe. However, I must emphasize that traces of peasant society in Transylvania, as I also argue in the next chapter, can be observed even after this period (and that the legacy of the estate-based society also plays a role in the development of these patterns).

2 The paper focuses on land tenure, land under or capable of being under production, although it would be tempting to explore these meanings in other contexts such as the nature–culture divide, situations of cultivation and natural state which are not always self-evident (e.g. in the case of land under forest management, or pastures and meadows turned wild), land as landscape, national land or national landscape.

an entity separate from society, nor independent of it. In certain ways, it behaves, changes, and influences its surroundings. More precisely, the human relationships and interpretations surrounding land imbue it with additional meanings, giving it an almost behavioral capacity. In this regard, we can say that land possesses agency. Of course, this is only valid if we accept the concept of more-than-human agency (Cianchi 2015). Here, I consider two aspects of agency: intentionality and impact. If we recognize human agency in relation to nature and the ecological environment – indeed, to life on Earth in general (as the widespread use of the term Anthropocene suggests) – then we must acknowledge that human intentionality has been questionable over the past 150 years; while its impact in the last 20-30 years has been minimal (Otto et al. 2020): we never intended to harm nature or cause climate change, and now that we are trying to reverse it, the challenge has become difficult to overcome. In this framework, I attribute agency to elements of nature, including land, as they influence the development of relationships within the human world.[3] I want to emphasize once again that I do not attribute agency to land itself, but rather to the systems of relationships that emerge from the interaction between land, human society, and culture. In this sense, land influences these relationships: it becomes a source of competition and conflict, shapes identities, and fosters alliances.[4] Furthermore, land can be viewed as elastic even in its physical extent, as demonstrated by disputes over restitution (Verdery 2003) and recent changes.

Keeping the issue of property central to the argument, the first part of the paper will examine key features of land tenure, highlighting how one of the main drivers of change lies in the duality within both the broader peasant framework and the transformation of agricultural systems. In the next section, I will explore the social meanings of land, drawing on economic anthropology's approaches to distribution and production, with a focus on property rights. The third part will address land reforms from the perspective of the state, group formation, and legitimation, as well as market mechanisms, and will outline the long-term fluctuations I observe in land tenure relations in Transylvania since the emancipation of serfs. Finally, in the fourth part, I will illustrate the local development of these meanings through concrete examples from rural areas in Transylvania.

3 A good example of the agency of nature – although the author himself does not seize the opportunity to exploit this aspect – is that in the border dispute between Vrancea communities and Ojdula, the Vranceans who won the case invoked rivers and ridges as natural boundaries that, unlike the changing boundaries of empires and administrative units, do not change (Măntescu 2014, 109-110).

4 It is far from my intention to view land – whether through a materialist lens or a Stewardian core approach – as the sole or even the primary factor shaping these relationships.

2. The question of land tenure from the point of view of the disintegration of the peasant world and changes in agricultural systems

Some estimates suggest that without modern agriculture – relying solely on gathering and hunting, the energy extraction methods that preceded the first agricultural revolution – the Earth's carrying capacity would be approximately five hundred million people (Mazoyer–Roudart 2006, 19). In contrast, the current global population is around eight billion, which is sixteen times that figure. This population requires sustenance, necessitating access to land. From this somewhat simplistic perspective, we can grasp both the historical changes related to land ownership and the contemporary conflicts, including explicit struggles over land acquisition. Initially, land tenure systems were relatively flexible, but they have evolved into increasingly rigid frameworks globally and in specific regions due to rising population demands and food needs. The Anglo-American journalist Simon Winchester addresses this topic in detail in his book (Winchester 2021), where he identifies the first significant demarcation and maintenance of boundaries in the Bronze Age, when two farmers established strict separations between their plowed and cultivated lands (Winchester 2021). These boundaries, which have varied across eras and cultures, have shaped our understanding of land ever since. Two additional examples of differing land tenure concepts across time and culture include the conflicts between colonizers and indigenous peoples (Winchester 2021) and the transformations in feudal land tenure relations in the Carpathian Basin, from initial occupation to the emergence of private property (Fülemile 1987).

This study employs a dual perspective, global and local, to examine the characteristics of land-related processes. It highlights the existence of intense competition for land at the global level and the simultaneous occurrence of land abandonment in specific contexts, such as Transylvania. It is evident that the question cannot be examined in isolation; it must be considered within the context of other factors. It is therefore proposed that the issue be examined from the perspective of the disintegration of the peasant world, the changing relationship between state power and the inhabitants of rural areas, and the question be asked as to how we have gone from land-hungry peasants to the rural households of today that are giving up the land. The framework is thus constituted by two interrelated dimensions: firstly, the transformation of the peasant world in general, and secondly, changes in agricultural systems. In this context, I wish to highlight a duality that characterises both our perspectives, namely the transformation of the peasant world and the change in agricultural systems. From this dual perspective, it is necessary to inquire as to the underlying causes of the observed changes in land transaction patterns, including acquisition, retention, and transmission.

A substantial corpus of literature has been produced on the subject of the peasantry (and its dissolution). This protracted process has been and continues to be a significant area of concern for scholars engaged in the study of peasant groups in Eastern Europe (see, for example, Cartwright 2001; Dorondel–Șerban 2014; Fox 2011). As there is no consensus on the definition of 'peasantry', there is also considerable debate on the process itself. While some argue that the term is no longer applicable, there are still those who advocate the perpetuation of peasant practices. It is not my intention, nor is it feasible within the confines of this paper, to further this debate or even to resolve it. It is this very quality of being situated between two extremes that we find of interest, and which also provides the framework for our approach to land tenure. I concur that it is no longer possible to speak of peasantry in the context of the significant social reorganisations and modernisation efforts (chiefly serf emancipation and collectivisation) that have occurred in recent history. However, it is evident that the peasant mentality and associated practices, which were a fundamental aspect of these socio-economic systems, have demonstrated remarkable resilience. State reforms could hardly eradicate them. The barrel analogy proposed by Ferenc Erdei has been used to illustrate the longevity of peasant practices across historical periods (Erdei 1942, 60-61). In light of the aforementioned evidence, it can be argued that Transylvania still exhibits a dualistic heritage, comprising both peasant traditions and practices centred around the household, which are becoming increasingly marginalised, and large-scale farming operations. This is one of the dualities (or in-betweenness) that is of interest to us.

A similar dichotomy can be observed in the transformation and spatial distribution of agricultural systems. This also fits into a broader framework, namely that of the two principal regional approaches to agriculture in Romania. One region is that of historical Transylvania and the Carpathian Mountains, where a mosaic landscape structure is maintained in agricultural systems that are based on traditional peasant practices. The other region is that of large-scale monoculture agriculture, which is located outside historical Transylvania (Meikle 2012). It is also necessary to consider the natural and geographical aspects. The hilly-mountainous areas of Transylvania have never been conducive to large-scale agriculture, whereas the lowlands outside Transylvania and the Carpathian region were particularly suitable for it. It is also important to note that these regional differences are often highly variable. In this sense, Transylvania can also be divided into several internal regions, which also influences the distribution of land holdings and the relationship between them. In the floodplains of the larger rivers (Mures, Olt, Someș, Târnava Mare, Târnava Mică), and in the agriculture of the eastern Transylvanian basins (Ciuc and Covasna), we can observe the aforementioned localised practices outside Transylvania. In contrast, the hilly and subalpine regions exhibit a greater degree of continuity in peasant practices. However, both areas are characterised by

the expansion of large farms and the abandonment of agricultural land. As József Gagyi aptly observed, there has been a process of detachment from the land, which he described as the detachment from the land's umbilical cord (Gagyi 2009, 141).

Consequently, while global land grabbing is a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly visible, a parallel restructuring of attitudes towards land is also taking place in Transylvania. The abandonment of agricultural land, the afforestation of former pastures, the conversion of meadows and ploughland into pasture, and the blurring of boundaries between parcels are among the most notable changes. Additionally, the legal or semi-legal acquisition of land by large farmers and agricultural entrepreneurs – in short, the narrowing of the fields – can be observed in many locations. However, a comprehensive analysis of this issue has yet to be conducted. Nevertheless, its significance is beyond question. Land was the central factor in the social structure of peasant societies, and contemporary social scientists are observing a radical transformation of this central role. It is evident that regional variations may exist with regard to the manner in which this separation occurs. However, it is typical that land cultivated prior to the implementation of collectivisation or during the existence of collective farms is either taken out of cultivation or, at best, left in pasture. However, for those engaged in this process, it is imbued with significant meanings, as land is not merely a means of production but also a fundamental aspect of identity.

3. Land: a means of production and a social form

It can be reasonably assumed that all scholars would concur that land, in addition to being a vital resource and a means of production, is a highly intricate social entity in its own right. For those engaged in agricultural pursuits, the social implications of land may not be a primary concern. Nevertheless, these implications cannot be ignored, as they shape ideas about land, the distribution of land as a resource, rights of access and their limitations in ways that vary across different eras and cultures.

It is important to state at the outset that the intention of this article is not to challenge the fundamental premise that land, irrespective of its historical and geographical context, serves as a primary source of food. This is the case for hunter-gatherer bands, horticultural tribes, nomadic pastoral societies, peasantry and industrial agriculture, as well as for alternative forms of production that have emerged in the post-industrial era, such as organic farming, permaculture and community farming. Nevertheless, this enumeration demonstrates that the meanings of land can be highly diverse. For instance, consider the case of a large agricultural enterprise and an alternative form of farming that entails a certain degree of commitment. It is evident that significant shifts in agricultural practices, such as the advent of productive farming, animal husbandry, and ploughing during the first agricultural revolution, and

the subsequent renewal of agricultural production technologies in the era of the industrial revolution, are inextricably linked to land.

The concept of land can also be examined in terms of its association with common and private property, [5] as well as in broader terms of property and disposal (Tárkány Szücs 1983). The question of common and private property, and the assumption of communistic and individualistic societies, has been a significant topic of discussion in the history of cultural anthropology. Furthermore, given that land constituted the primary means of production up until the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the ownership, rights and restrictions associated with land were pivotal in determining the functioning of society (Winchester 2021). Consequently, the meanings of land can be examined in terms of the principles of distribution (Polányi 2004), as well as in terms of the modes of production (Wolf 1995).

In the view of Károly Polányi, the different distribution principles can be distinguished precisely in terms of the integration of land and labour. In his analysis, Polányi posits that kinship provides the institutional framework for reciprocity, while redistribution is provided by chiefdoms and the market is disembedded from the framework of social institutions. He is aware that these systems of distribution emerged concurrently with the advent of agriculture and are present in all cultures. However, he considers them separable precisely on the basis of their dominance. The foundation for this assertion is the degree to which the systems of distribution and the social institutions that underpin them integrate and mobilise land and labour. In a system of reciprocity, the kin group assumes the role of proprietor and exercises control over access to the land. The group offers its members the opportunity to engage in labour on the land and provides them with other resources. In redistributive systems, this function is assumed by leaders or, more broadly, by a central authority that distributes land entitlements, occasionally revoking them or imposing limitations, while mobilising labour. Ultimately, the ascendance of the market leads to the commodification of land and labour, whereby no social institution is able to exert control over them.[6]

It is evident that for Károly Polányi the schemes of distribution are pivotal in the formation of his system. Similarly, for Eric Wolf (and for Karl Marx on whom he is based), it is production that serves as the foundation for the division. However, it can be postulated that the

5 Property: the ability to own objects, things; but also, the relationship between people mediated by objects. It is worth noting, however, that the notion of property as we know and practice it, which is applied in most cases and which prescribes the exclusive access of a person and the exclusion of others, is a Western concept and results from modern development (Hann 2005). This also puts questions of common and private property in a different light (see Berthoud 2014; Barnard 1993) and offers the opportunity to have a different look at the questions of different property regimes regarding land in Transylvania.

6 Although we do see some form of social regulation of land in many market-based societies. But more on that later.

aforementioned division is also correlated with the modes of production, for the sake of simplicity, the kinship, the tributary and the capitalist modes of production. It is not my intention to base my argument on the foundations of neo-Marxism. Nevertheless, if we accept, beyond class conflicts across historical periods, that the ways in which productive forces (labour and labour tools) and relations of production (forms of property and property relations) are organised can determine the social structure of particular periods, or at least form part of it, we cannot ignore the fact that in a given historical context production was organised by kin groups, in another historical period it was subordinated to different powers, and in still other periods it was based on purely market-based economic logics. Moreover, land played a pivotal role in these processes.

A consideration of the example of the Hungarian society of estates and the question of ownership reveals that land ownership systems permitted the conferral of disparate entitlements upon the various social orders. In regard to land ownership, serfs were granted only the right of use. The physical or legal persons above the serfs already had the right of possession, but the right of final disposal belonged to the top of the social hierarchy. This was evidenced by the fact that the king could grant and take away estates (Tárkány Szücs 1983). The circulation of land in society was relatively limited, and apart from donation and inheritance, it was only infrequently subject to market transactions (just as the market itself, although present, was marginalised alongside the mechanisms of redistribution). The use and ownership of land in feudal systems was surrounded and described by an extraordinary number of rules and legal customs at various levels, given that land was indeed the most important means of production and embedded in the hierarchical structures of power that characterised this period. Those engaged in contemporary land-related activities would be well advised to take account of the historical context.

4. Land reforms, market mechanisms and counter-processes

Chapter 25 of Leviticus is one of the first land reforms (Leviticus 25). While the law of land restitution was arguably never fully respected, it is notable that there was a religious and ecclesiastically codified text that land should be returned to its original owner every 50 years (Fager 1987). Similarly, servants and slaves must be released from their obligations. Furthermore, the law addressed social justice, equality and economic considerations (Warriner 1969). In his 1987 publication, John Powelson provides a comprehensive historical overview of land reform, tracing its evolution from ancient high cultures to contemporary contexts in Brazil and India. He makes the intriguing observation that the institution of land ownership is contested when there is a surplus of land, but emerges when land becomes scarce. Or, at the very least, they indicate

the necessity for such a reform (Powelson 1987, 308). Furthermore, scarcity was a defining feature of medieval and subsequent modern Europe (Powelson 1987, 309), compelling authorities to implement land distribution policies. However, from the end of the Middle Ages onwards, we can also consider the emergence of the capitalist market and its effects on the land tenure system, as evidenced by the practice of enclosures. In response, there were a number of central initiatives aimed at maintaining small peasant production (Powelson 1987, 80-81). England's history is, of course, particularly relevant in this context. A similar pattern can be observed in the history of France and Spain, where the growth of large estates has resulted in the decline of smaller holdings (Powelson 1987, 82-88).

It can be argued that the history of land reform is as old as that of human settlement and agriculture. This also indicates that those in positions of authority have historically sought to regulate land tenure as a means of influencing the functioning of society. If we consider the long history and broad geographical scope of land reform, it becomes evident that the end of estate-based societies marks a pivotal point in this historical trajectory. The Habsburg Empire provides a suitable geographical framework for analysing this phenomenon across the Carpathian Basin. A comprehensive examination of this region reveals a discernible pattern of land concentration, irrespective of the distribution systems in place. This concentration can be observed in both administrative and market-based systems. Furthermore, it appears that those in power are frequently interested in either halting or, if feasible, reversing the concentration of land. This is a fundamental aspect of contemporary land reform. In the context of the past 250 years, this has resulted in a distinctive dual fluctuation of land, shaped by both administrative measures and capitalist influences.

The Carpathian Basin offers a good opportunity to investigate these issues: in the 18th century, in an effort to curtail the expansion of noble estates, which were also engaged in trade, the Habsburg monarchy sought to either halt the growth of these estates or, at the very least, to establish a framework for the relationship between serfs and the nobility. The serf emancipation of 1848 constituted the final stage in this process, effectively halting the expansion of large estates while also facilitating the redistribution of land. By the end of the 19th century, however, the relatively free commodification of land led to a strong concentration and the emergence of a new unequal land tenure system. This system was characterised by a few large landowners and their large estates, or a large number of small landowners and the little land they owned, or even a landless agrarian proletariat. In Transylvania, this process was concluded at the conclusion of World War I with a change in governmental authority and the implementation of a land reform initiative. The land formerly belonging to the extensive estates (which were primarily under the ownership of Hungarian churches and noble families) was distributed among small peasant farmers, war veterans,

and other social groups. Following the conclusion of the World War II, a further land reform was enacted, which was swiftly followed by the implementation of collectivisation, namely a new consolidation of land ownership. Following the political changes of 1989, the Romanian authorities initiated a programme of land redistribution, which resulted in the re-emergence of numerous smallholdings. The fragmentation and household-associated small-scale production were subsequently halted by market mechanisms and EU measures, and then reversed at some point in the mid-2000s, when the creation of large estates became dominant once more (with, it should be noted, regional variations and differences).[7] The asset that was subject to these fluctuations was the land. It formed the basis for power arrangements and peasant aspirations, shaped identity and the structure of villages, and represented inheritance chains. The subject in question is imbued with meaning, significance and agency; it has the capacity to affect people's lives.

The transformation in land tenure cannot be adequately characterised by the notion of capital accumulation alone (Piketty 2014). It is not sufficient to consider land as an arbitrary form of capital, as it cannot be transferred freely in certain periods, [8] nor can it be moved. Furthermore, land is a vehicle for the accumulation and representation of social meanings, symbolic capital and prestige. The symbolic content was also recognised by the Kabyle peasants, who were the subject of study by Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1978). Furthermore, these symbolic contents have been observed in other contexts, including the Transylvanian Szekler examples (Oláh 2004) and the case of the Romanian peasantry (Micu 2014).

Furthermore, land can be defined as a fictitious commodity, along with money and labour, in accordance with the terminology proposed by Károly Polányi. It is not produced by us. In this sense, land is a given, part of nature, [9] and it is only under the influence of market conditions that we perceive it and treat it as a commodity. [10] Nevertheless, it is somewhat paradoxical that despite the dominant definition of value in economics and economic anthropology being that of labour, [11] the value of land in this sense is particularly challenging to define. The land is not a result of human activity or work. However, the land itself and the status of use are often linked through work. In traditional peasant societies,

7 Fort a somewhat more detailed description of these reforms, see the end of this subchapter.

8 Even after the capitalist transition, at the end of 19th century Transylvania still had a high proportion of land holdings (especially: pastures and forests) with limited transaction potential (Egyed 1981, 201).

9 Although, as we know, the question of where to draw the line between nature and culture remains (see Hirsch 2005).

10 Just as human labour is an integral part of a person. But here too the market separates the two dimensions.

11 The theory of one of the founders of classical economics, Adam Smith, is further elaborated by Chris Gregory (2009). Value in the Marxian view is also mostly labour value.

the ability to work and the actual work itself have been seen as the means by which economic agents are entitled to use a given piece of land. Consequently, in both medieval and modern Hungary, the additional labour invested in the cultivation of vineyards was compensated by the fact that these were not subject to the system of feudal obligations. As long as the user and/or proprietor could work the land, their right to it was not challenged (Égető 1985). Similarly, members of the Szekler communities who were engaged in land clearance asserted that they should not be required to relinquish their holdings to the community (Imreh 1973, 135-136).

The concept of land is often regarded as a mere commodity; however, this perception fails to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of this phenomenon. Furthermore, land can serve as a conduit for the formation of groups and the establishment of legitimacies (and their subsequent delegitimisation) at various levels. Consequently, the distribution and concentration of land hold multifaceted meanings (cf. Micu 2014). The boundaries of the Szekler forest estates, which were used collectively for an extended period, even by multiple villages, began to be defined in the 17th-18th centuries. This was due to the fluctuating size of the communities and the diverse utilisation of the forest (timber and firewood for domestic purposes, charcoal and lime production, grazing, hay-making, and gathering). These factors rendered the establishment of fixed, rigid borders impractical. From this period onwards, there is a growing body of written evidence attesting to the existence of conflicts over access rights, which often gave rise to significant tensions (Kolossváry 1975). In the village of Cobățești/Kobátfalva in Harghita County, local memory preserved the story of a conflict over a forest estate in the early nineteenth century until the early 2000s (Pap 2007), which serves to illustrate the importance of forest land.

Furthermore, the role of land in the relationship between the state and the everyday people is worthy of consideration. The state may initiate the redistribution of land use rights, the distribution of land (cf. Micu 2014), or even its concentration (Verdery 2004a), or it may oppose or at least criticise the market-based concentration of land. The absolutist monarchies of the 18th century, including the Habsburg dynasty, were acutely aware of this, despite the often unsatisfactory outcomes of their urbarial reforms (Fülemile 1987, 56). Their policy of protecting the peasantry entailed both the regularisation of the status of land held in common by nobles and peasants, and the central codification of the – often vague – serf obligations that were recorded only in local customary law. This was not, however, a land reform in the strict sense of the term. Among other consequences, it resulted in the creation of a new category of commons in forests and pastures, comprising individuals who had previously been serfs (Petercsák 2008, 23).

The argument is situated within a broader context through the lens of enclosure in England. In an industrialising England, which was also undergoing the expansion of market distribution systems, enclosure

served as a means for landowners to transition to capitalism, displace smallholders, and facilitate the emergence of free labour, which was a prerequisite for industrial production systems (Polányi 2004, 62-63; Thompson 1963, 217-218). It is perhaps unsurprising that during the Tudor period, there were multiple efforts to counteract the practice of enclosure (Polányi 2004, 63-64).

The serf emancipation of 1848 constituted a significant turning point in the history of land reform. It should be noted that not all classes living under feudal subordination gained access to land. For example, the cottars were excluded, as they did not have the same rights to land as serfs under feudalism. However, the reform did create the possibility of ownership for large swathes of the peasantry. The equivalent of the 1848 reforms in the Romanian principalities was the serf emancipation and land reform of 1864, which also contributed to the strengthening of the small landowner class. Concurrently, the latter half of the 19th century was marked by a rise in capitalisation, with land, now regarded as a market commodity, also entering this cycle. Ákos Egyed's analysis of the situation in Transylvania at the end of the nineteenth century reveals a notable consolidation of land ownership, encompassing both peasant–landlord and smallholder–rich peasant relations (Egyed 1981, 193-199). The land distributed in the mid-19th century began to concentrate in the hands of a few owners.

The next significant land reform in Transylvania occurred under the new Romanian rule. Following the conclusion of World War I, the newly established Romanian state employed land reform as a means of bolstering the economic position of the small and middle classes, while also providing compensation to war veterans and war widows. In addition to the social interpretation of the reform, there is also a national-ethnic reading. In Hungarian historiography, the reform was not simply aimed at breaking up large estates and strengthening small and medium-sized estates. It was also concerned with the distribution of Hungarian secular and ecclesiastical property. However, the official position denied the ethnic aspect and simply referred to the structure of the distribution of landed property (Bíró 2002; Cartwright 2001, 55).[12] In this instance, land serves as both a social and a national legitimation tool (cf. also Giordano 2014). Furthermore, the 1945 land reform can be regarded as a means of establishing social legitimacy. The newly established power structure, which had been shaped by Soviet influence, sought to establish its legitimacy. In a country that was still predominantly agrarian at the time, the distribution of land to the peasantry, or alternatively, to war veterans, appeared to be an appropriate means of achieving this. Furthermore, it served as a means of temporarily deflecting suspicions of collectivisation. The land reform was accompanied by the nationalisation of large estates, including

12 This is underlined by the fact that, in addition to specific local examples, two different laws applied to the Old Kingdom (the two principalities) and the newly annexed territories (cf. Szabó 2013a, 74).

commons. Once more, this can be interpreted from a national-ethnic perspective. The Hungarian aristocracy, the churches and the Szekler commons were stripped of their remaining land holdings.

Nevertheless, the distribution of land was swiftly followed by a period of concentration in the aftermath of World War II. This was no longer a market-based phenomenon; rather, it was embedded in the administrative, centralising policies of a redistributive system. The process of collectivisation transformed property and property rights in several waves, creating a hierarchy of property rights (state property, collective property and private property, cf. Verdery 2004a). At the same time, state authority was no longer built solely through the manipulation of land tenure; instead, it was established through direct means of fearmongering (conceptual trials, labour camps). The state extended the concept of administrative tenure (Wolf 1973, 389) to encompass both state-owned and collectively owned land. Furthermore, it intervened directly in the management of agricultural holdings, given that agriculture and the rural population constituted the primary means of centralised resource extraction for state purposes (Verdery 2003, 41).

The land reforms that followed the changes of 1989 also had significant political implications. There is a consensus in social science that restitution, and in particular the manner in which it was implemented, was primarily political in nature, rather than driven by economic considerations. The land reform re-established a multitude of small and middle peasant estates, while also serving as a gesture of compensation for the adverse experiences of the socialist regime (Cartwright 2001; Verdery 2003). In this manner, the socialist system was placed in a kind of parenthesis, as if the moment of a new beginning could be set in the pre-socialist era (Giordano–Kostova 2002, 77). However, this land reform was also followed by a process of concentration, both at the national and local levels. In Romania today, a small number of landowners possess a considerable proportion of the country's land, while a significant number of landowners have a relatively modest holding (Fox 2011, 51-52).

Concurrently, market-based concentration is reinforced by global processes in which land tenure is becoming increasingly significant due to food production, food crises, subsidies for cultivated land, capital inflows from Western/developed countries and land grabbing in the Global South (Sassen 2013; Borras et al. 2011). This is occurring alongside the struggle of smallholder farms, which advocate sustainable development, with agricultural corporations promoting cheap mass production as the sole solution to overpopulation (Ploeg 2008).

5. Local perspectives on land and land tenure relations

In the two preceding sections, an attempt has been made to present a historical and global context in which land becomes the object

of social programmes and a social actor to which we ascribe agency. It is important to note that the presented picture is, by necessity, an exaggerated one, due in part to the constraints of the available space. The following section seeks to address this oversimplification by examining some local interpretations of the significance of land. It should be noted that the list is not exhaustive. The location is Bahnea/Bonyha, a settlement situated in the valley of the Târnava Mică/Kis-Küküllő river, which has experienced a decline in prosperity in recent times. Of the aforementioned major processes, the villagers recall collectivisation and reprivatisation with the greatest clarity, and both subjectively and objectively, these had the most significant impact on their lives. In addition, the effects of the 1945 and 1921 land reforms must be considered, albeit in a non-personal, tangential manner. In an interview, one of the interviewees, who was born on a farm of tens of hectares created by the commassation, also mentioned the processes of the late 19th century. The articles of law, regulations and decrees are thus reflected in the lives of everyday people, and even at this level, we can observe the double effect: the authorities both grant and revoke land ownership, and land can be bought and sold on the market.

5.1. Land divisions, collectivisation and (hidden) ethnic meanings

The aristocratic family of Bahnea/Bonyha was subject to the same changes in the social meanings of the land as the ordinary inhabitants of the village. The Bethlen family[13] was affected by both the Communist Party's pursuit of power and the ideological conflict it engaged in with the former establishment during the construction of the regime. Additionally, the Romanian state's efforts to utilize land control as a means of establishing social and national legitimacy preceded and coincided with this period. As previously stated, an ethnic interpretation of the 1921 land reform suggests that one of its objectives was to disintegrate the Hungarian noble and ecclesiastical estates. Furthermore, the history of the Saxons in the area must be taken into account when interpreting this situation. The post-World War II regulations, which also affected property rights, made the existence of this ethnic community virtually impossible (cf. Cartwright 2001, 55; Verdery 1985). It is therefore unsurprising that, in the (secret) inter-state pacts established from the 1960s onwards, a significant number of people sought to emigrate or resettle (Verdery 1985). This process was then massively and apparently definitively completed after 1989 with the opening of the borders.

13 At the end of the 19th century, the most important owners of Bahnea/Bonyha were the Bethlen family (their presence and farming in the village can be documented from the 16th century). Their holdings of well over 1,000 hectares at the end of the 19th century, with estates in other villages reaching almost 1,500 hectares by 1910, were also significant at Transylvanian level. I refer to the exact source of the data on them in my book. On the family see Szabó 2013a.

Prior to the implementation of the land reform legislation in 1921, the Bethlen family possessed a considerable estate, comprising nearly 1,500 hectares of land, of which 200 hectares were kept in their possession for agricultural purposes. This remained a substantial estate within the local area. However, as a result of the family's inability to maintain it, one of their mansions in the village was demolished and their distillery was sold. Some of the estates (both arable land and plots inside the village) that had been dispossessed were distributed to villagers. Subsequently, a number of individuals were allocated plots for houses, and new thoroughfares were established. The land distribution list, compiled at this time, includes both Hungarian and Romanian families. On the correction list, which removed families from the original list, there are predominantly Hungarian names. In 1945, the remaining property was confiscated, and the family was exiled to a forced settlement. The new streets that were subsequently established in the village, the houses that were allocated, the land that was distributed, and the collective farm that was being established were located and operated on the land, in the estates, and in the castles of the Bethlens. The transformation in the social function of the land in the village had both beneficiaries and sufferers. The Bethlen family did not return to the village. The castle, which is still standing, is currently under the purview of the Transylvanian Reformed Church. The edifice underwent a comprehensive and extensive restoration in 2020 and is currently utilised as a cultural and event centre, an exhibition space and a castle hotel.[14]

In the context of property rights (and within this, land ownership) as an administrative instrument and its ethnic implications, it would be beneficial to provide a more detailed commentary. The term 'land reform' or 'nationalisation' is used in historiography to describe the events. But these measures must be interpreted in the context of a specific family. A documented history spanning at least four centuries was disrupted following World War II, a period during which shifts in the conceptualisation of land assumed a significant position. In 1921, the newly established state apparatus overthrew the previous aristocratic social order by seizing control of the most important resource, land, and subsequently reinforced the new order by distributing land. Following the World War II, the consolidation of power was achieved through a dual process of nationalisation and land redistribution. The pursuit of total power then led to the implementation of collectivisation and the attainment of total administrative control of land. It could be argued that the process of land titling, the removal of land from the control of peasant society, the abolition of the possibility of autonomous control over land, and the creation of new administrative boundaries, initiated the process described above by József Gagyi as the 'detachments from the umbilical cord of land'.

14 See *castelbethlen.ro*. Accessed 9 August 2024.

5.2. Unfinished reprivatisation and the legacy of socialism

It is often the case that land reforms fail to achieve their stated objectives, despite the laudable intentions that underpin them. Rather than functioning as instruments of equity, as they should, they frequently fall short of this goal (Powelson 1990, XIII). In addition to the fact that land reforms are frequently designed to increase state control and extract surpluses (Powelson 1990), there are also numerous shortcomings in their implementation, which can even lead to conflict (Rusu et al. 2011; Verdery 2004b). This was particularly evident in the context of the land reform in Romania following the 1989 political transition (Verdery 2004b).

Collectivisation and reprivatisation can be seen as the most significant period in the 20th century of changes in the meaning of land. Neither of these can be considered simply as changes in (property) rights. We know that, although peasant households had been the actual owners of their land for just over a hundred years at the time of collectivisation, over the course of these few generations strong emotional attachments had developed between owners and their land that placed land tenure above simple patterns of ownership.[15] It is therefore important to understand collectivisation in this context. The land, desired by peasant society (and it is crucial to emphasize that it was precisely this desire, the goal of acquiring land, in addition to the way of life) bound together peasant society; a society that was already highly stratified by the end of the 19th century. This same land, in the context of collectivisation, could become a burden and could serve as a basis for the accusation of being anti-establishment.Mentalities regarding land underwent a significant transformation. As the highly sought-after assets rapidly transformed into a burden, many individuals opted to formally transfer the land to another party. Furthermore, the process of reprivatisation was not without its own set of implications. It introduced a new set of rights and obligations, which not all individuals were willing or able to assume (Verdery 2004b). The issue of land restitution also evokes a complex array of emotional responses. In conversation in Bahnea/Bonyha, the once flourishing farm and cultivated fields are frequently mentioned, whether in reference to the count's time or to the period of the operation of the collective farm. This defines the way of talking about land in a kind of nostalgic framework. The use of idioms such as "waste fields" and "rabbits grazing" imbues these descriptions with a moral dimension. The land, the ideal cultivation of the land, respect for the land, and work were central tenets of village morality, and may still hold normative significance.

This is why there is so much discontent among the general public when they perceive the process of reprivatisation to be unfinished, frequently accompanied by a pervasive anti-elitism (Szabó 2016). In the majority of cases, the process of reprivatisation is perceived as technically

15 Which, obviously, is nuanced by the status of cottars, serfs or free peasants: for example, free peasant communities owned land before serf emancipation, so their ties may have been earlier.

incomplete, with the relevant authority failing to issue title deeds or provide clarification on the matter.

> *And I went to the council and said why don't they do titlu (title deeds). They made titlu for everyone, everyone has titlu. I went and told all of them that they should make a titlu for him, that there should be a titlu, because it was like that for young married couples [...] The land had not even been measured. I was there last winter, I even annoyed the person who deals with the land, he photocopied the little paper I brought, but there is no titlu, even now, even today they have not made a titlu for me.*

Some land was also returned to the Bethlen family. The family's lands also appear in the narratives of land restitution, in the discontent, in the descriptions of alleged speculation that go beyond simple technicalities. The land has been reclaimed by the family. But the fate of the land is still not settled in a reassuring way: *The [count's] pasture was rented out for a smoke. A... now present [...] here. And gave it away to another. They call him [...], he keeps animals.* This detail gives an interpretation of incompleteness embedded in local contexts. The next one evokes both local and external contexts: *52 hectares of the [count's] forest have been measured out. The head of the forestry office in [*the nearby city*], [...] out of mockery, some steep slopes there and such useless land that goes to the forest, measured out 52 hectares there. The gypsies are stealing the wood from it.*

However, reprivatisation is not only legally and technically questionable and incomplete. Neither do mentalities allow socialism to be put in a bracket (Giordano–Kostova 2002), socialism lives on, defining life as a kind of inertia (Skalnik 1993): *How many times have I repeated it, it's not your land, you can't step on it. They got used to it, communism had beaten it into them, the tractor too, as it turns around, here is my land, it turns around, go through it, because that's what we were used to in the collective. All I'm talking about, because the former tractor drivers in the section, he turns around, because that's how he's used to it.*

All the above, the legacy of socialism and the incompleteness of the process of restitution is compounded by the fact that the state of affairs recorded at the time of collectivisation was taken into account during reprivatisation. While the land of the Saxons had been taken away by the state power before collectivisation, and they were thus not only slaves on their own land like everyone else after collectivisation (...*the unfortunate ones had everything taken away from them and were working as day labourers for the state farms. On their own land*), but they did not even receive the (partial) social justice that members of other ethnic groups did.

5.3. Land and ethnicity after the regime change

The relationship between land (including land distribution and land use) and ethnicity has also been highlighted in peasant studies (see Cartwright 2001). It has been proposed that land acquisition may also be associated with an increase in ethnic tensions (Krieger–Meierrieks 2016). Furthermore, ethnicity has been a factor in land reforms in Eastern Europe, whether overtly or covertly (Giordano 2019; Verdery 2004b). In Bahnea/Bonyha, the ethnic composition of land tenure in the post-regime change context can be elucidated in relation to the interactions between the Roma and non-Roma populations, as well as the dynamics between Hungarians and Romanians.

The first issue is more openly critiqued by locals from both directions. The Roma population has expressed discontent, citing a lack of land allocation (and a general exclusion from resource utilization). Conversely, non-Roma residents have attributed the inability of the Roma to maintain the fifty acres of land they received in the land distribution to the aforementioned factors. The analysis does not merely concentrate on land-related conduct (specifically, the sale of the land in question), but also on the local moral attitudes towards work (specifically, the assumption that Roma people are unwilling to work). In other words, it refers to the centuries-old practice of the ability to work and to use and keep land, whereby the right to use and keep land is contingent on one's capacity to work it. Despite the evolving connotations of the term, the land remains a pivotal aspect of the local work ethic. *Here, every Gypsy was given fifty acres of land. And they sold them. (...) And I say to them: when you were in the collective farm, you had fifteen [acres of land]. And you had pigs and chickens. We can't work it. And I say: how big is your family? Well, four people. Okay, I say, if you buy four hoes, in two days you'll get fifty acres hoed.* This excerpt from an interview illustrates the continued prevalence of subsistence agriculture in local household farming practices. Maize, which is perceived by local communities to be able to be produced almost entirely by human labour, plays a significant role in this system (cf. Cartwright 2001, 198). This is why the Roma's renunciation of the fifty acres plots is of particular significance in this context, as they have effectively relinquished the potential basis of their household. Once more, the concepts of work and land ownership are inextricably linked in these views.

With regard to the second relationship, namely the land tenure aspects of the Hungarian–Romanian issue, it was only possible to obtain passing remarks, given that the discursive ethos of local life is organised around peaceful coexistence.[16] It is also important to consider the local discourse regulating coexistence, as this is informed by the question of primacy, which continues to be a recurring issue in relation

16 This does not mean that the locals do not recall ethnic conflicts. But remembering them does not dominate public discourse.

to Transylvania. This is also linked to the concept of territoriality.[17] The debate is also evident at the local level, where the question of "who came first" – from which the right to a place is presumed to derive – is a common topic of discussion. While not a daily occurrence, this debate is nevertheless frequent in local discourse. They provide legitimacy and, conversely, delegitimise. It is evident that Hungarians envisage Hungarian primacy. In order to challenge the legitimacy of this, the Romanians frequently invoke the Saxon primacy, which is also based on the village's former Hungarian name of Szászbonyha (Saxon Bonyha).[18] Both Hungarians and Romanians are maintaining the narrative of the late arrival of the Gypsies.

For local Hungarians, land is the centre of identity and local survival, and the basis of a legitimate (and primordial) presence vis-à-vis the other ethnic group. *...I always tell my people that land should not be sold. At least not that, because if there is no land, there is nothing. You are a tramp... if you have land, you have food! Right, professor? I say to my people, I don't care about the others, they didn't have any.* Land is an important component of group formation: those who own land belong to an ethnically definable group.

5.4. Land and non-locals: globalization, colonial aspects

The question of land and non-locals/foreigners provides an additional lens through which to examine the aforementioned issue, facilitating a more nuanced understanding of its complexities. As previously stated, on the basis of Károly Polányi's work, land can be considered a commodity only in a fictitious sense. It is a given, not the result of human activity. Furthermore, land is linked to the nation, and thus its trade is subject to regulation in many cases, just as the flow of labour is often regulated by national policies. The ownership of land, or the potential for acquiring such ownership, is frequently associated with citizenship. Furthermore, in a broader historical context, it is linked to membership of a particular group. Nevertheless, land is currently one of the most sought-after commodities on the international market. Its acquisition, although a regular occurrence, often attracts the attention of analysts (Wolford et al. 2024). Furthermore, various forms of land acquisition can be observed at the Romanian level (Ciutacu et al. 2017).

The region of Bahnea/Bonyha and its surrounding area is home to a significant number of foreign entrepreneurs (involved in the wine

17 At the beginning of this paper, in Footnote 2, I said that I would not go into the relationship between nation and land, but I must stop here for a moment: territoriality is in most cases a *sine qua non* of nationalist aspirations. The cardinal question of the existence or non-existence of a nation is whether it has a territory over which it has exclusive (i.e. exclusive to the exclusion of other nations) rights. We all know this question well in relation to Transylvania.

18 Nevertheless, the primacy of the Saxons cannot be proven on the basis of the current sources (cf. Szabó 2013a).

industry and the catering sector, for instance). These individuals are typically the most economically successful, yet they often limit their interactions with the local population. Additionally, the region has witnessed the emergence of entrepreneurs with a keen interest in agricultural pursuits. In any case, their activities with regard to the acquisition and utilisation of land can be seen as introducing new incentives within land value systems. Such actions have given rise to discussions that encompass resentment towards outsiders, both at the local and national levels, as well as concerns pertaining to potential speculation. *Oh, yes. Well, the German took it out, but the people were fooled by him too. The fourth or fifth contractor to come out of here, we had an Italian and then a German, now the second German, and he also fooled the people. What was the point of that? He rented the land and cultivated it in the first year, it was beautiful, everything was fine, but he had to sell the harvest, because he had to use rented machines, and he had to pay the labourers to come here to harvest and plough. And the crops were taken away, and he couldn't pay the people.*

As previously stated, collectivisation introduced a novel system of relations with the land, transforming what was previously a source of aspiration into a liability. A comparable transformation transpired following EU accession, whereby land has become a liability for numerous individuals within the context of evolving global patterns. These same global dynamics render small-scale farming unsustainable (due to global competition and agricultural prices) and even morally devalued, given the emphasis on development, innovation, and creativity in the new economy.[19] In the context of ongoing technological advancement and an increasingly uncertain profitability landscape, those who have traditionally engaged in agricultural activities, the descendants of former peasantry have limited options for maintaining their livelihoods. This has resulted in a shift towards alternative forms of land acquisition and concentration. The theme foreshadows the contemporary issues of land grabbing[20] (Sassen 2013), while referring also to the national context: *The whole county of Timiș[21], and most of Romania, is now foreign property. Every thousand hectares of land is sold. [...] It is no longer part of Romania, it is no longer Romanian agriculture. It is foreign agriculture.*

The evolution of the concept of land (estate) and productive land is clearly a matter of national interest. However, it also has a global perspective, which is complemented by a strong future-oriented aspect.

19 We also observe counter-processes in Transylvania, though they remain sporadic, and their reach and success are uncertain. A future study could focus on critically examining these reform efforts, which, in reality, attempt to revive traditional peasant practices.

20 Locals perceive foreign investors as having different financial resources, which they use to secure dominant positions, often raising doubts about their intentions. The entire process is commonly described by the locals as unfair.

21 The special importance of Timiș county is also highlighted by researchers. See Ciutacu et al. 2017, 149.

Land, like any other commodity, is becoming increasingly traded on a global scale, despite the fact that it is subject to various forms of protection in many states. The global trade in land, which is often conducted in a manner that is not entirely equitable, and the expansion of large corporations, have now become significant subjects within the social sciences (Ploeg 2008; Sasken 2013). Furthermore, the local population also perceives their own circumstances within the broader global context, including international policies, the Cold War, and an overall sense of a bleak future.

> *It wasn't necessary to use the nuclear arsenal to buy off the former socialist countries; they were bought with money instead. They devised a plan to give young people a short-term job abroad while the elderly stayed here, and then the old ones would say to each other, "What should we do with the land? Let's sell it, my son. There's nothing else to do because the young don't need the land." Meanwhile, someone else arrives – the one who employed the young abroad – and comes here to buy up the land. [...] They collect the lands; the foreigners buy them up. After a while, the young people won't have jobs abroad anymore, and they'll come back home. But then the grandchildren come along, and where will they work? What will they do? They'll ask, "Didn't my grandfather have anything?" And they'll wonder, "Where should we go now, west or east?" The local industry isn't functioning, there's no agriculture, and my grandfather gave away the land.*

The local opinion, which considers the duality of the situation at two levels (the abandonment of agriculture and the departure of the locals from agriculture, on the one hand, and the activities of investors and the resulting loss of job opportunities in agriculture, on the other, as well as contrasting family farming with large-scale industrial agriculture, and highlighting the tensions between the West and the East), is in alignment with the existing literature. This literature posits that family farming would not only provide jobs for younger generations but would also connect them to a long tradition that involves not just production but also landscape management (Ciutacu et al. 2017, 148). The involvement of foreign investors in Romanian (and, more broadly, Eastern European) agriculture is a matter of significant concern (see Ciutacu et al. 2017).

6. Conclusions

The importance of land is a concept that has been central to human thought and practice across a vast span of time and cultural contexts. The primary meanings of land are obviously tied to food production, as is the case in Bahnea/Bonyha. However, in recent times, due to global contexts, this very connection has been challenged. The discourse of "we feed the country" is now only sustainable at a normative level; the contribution of Romanian agriculture, particularly small farms, to the country's food production is increasingly declining (cf. Szabó 2013b). The significance of land is subject to change in accordance with the evolution of human society. We are currently witnessing a radical transformation of a long-standing historical process. The ownership of land has traditionally played a central role in rural societies, but this is now undergoing a significant transformation. Nevertheless, the associated knowledge remains discernible, and the connection to the land continues to be anchored in these long histories. However, as societal structures evolve, alongside global relations, consumption patterns and numerous other factors, the meanings attributed to land are also subject to continuous evolution and adaptation.

In this sense, one could argue that land is also a social actor (which could be further elaborated by perspectives that are necessarily omitted in this study, such as those related to landscapes, the nature–culture axis, and national landscapes/land). The concept of land gives rise to a number of significant issues, including those pertaining to ecology (Hirsch 2005; Măntescu 2014), property rights (Măntescu 2014; Micu 2014), political regimes (Verdery 2003; Ploeg 2008) and the globalisation and postcolonial relations (Sassen 2013). It constitutes an integral element of significant social ideologies and legitimations (Polányi 2004; Wolf 1995; Verdery 2004b), exhibiting a tendency towards fragmentation and concentration. This is exemplified by the observation of land reforms, which invariably demonstrate fluctuating periods of fragmentation and concentration. It is beyond dispute that land is integral to social relations and human–nature interactions. It has the potential to influence these relations, and thus may be regarded as a subject with agency.

This agency also implies that land is an integral component of local communities, encompassing social structures, moralities, and ethical concepts. It was previously regarded as an integral component. Nevertheless, this appears to be undergoing a process of dissolution in the present era. The long-term conceptualisations of the significance of land, its symbolic meanings, and the nature of relationships between the state and the local population, and among the local population itself, are being subjected to scrutiny. There is a tendency among people to revert to older forms of knowledge and understanding in discussions about the land, which they perceive to be more stable than the current

situation. Nevertheless, the very foundations of these positions are being challenged as new economic regimes reshape the very meanings attached to land. A lack of connection with the land can result in a loss of identity. The knowledge presented here is becoming increasingly marginalised as the land is becoming less and less a part of the local, everyday worlds, thereby preventing the actors in these worlds from establishing connections.

In local contexts, it is primarily entrepreneurs who continue to seek land ownership. However, the context of this new phenomenon, which has been dubbed "land hunger," is already that of global demand. In this context, national and international aspects, as well as the struggle for land in connection with food security, become prominent. In this sense, the desire for land remains, albeit in a transformed form. Furthermore, upon reconsideration of the previously presented fluctuation of fragmentation and concentration, it becomes evident that such a phenomenon is entirely natural.

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Sent from the Heavens, Received in Budapest

The circulation of Himmelsbriefe

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ABSTRACT
The paper examines heavenly letters by combining folkloristic, historical, and anthropological perspectives. First, it analyses and compares variations collected by Hungarian folklorists, critically evaluating their findings. Secondly, to reframe these interpretations and explore the character and late modern uses of the letters, the paper traces the origins of this tradition, and looks at the early medieval counterparts of the letters. Based on this brief review of their original form and function, the paper offers an anthropological reading of the communicative role of the letters. My central argument is that through the mere act of copying the metonymic relationship between the letter and the divine power is metaphorically altered, and that the act of copying gradually became an expressive, rather than a technical action. As a result, the changes in their character, the various protective functions incorporated into them or associated with their possession, can be understood as part of a process in which heavenly letters shifted from being indexes to signals.

Keywords: heavenly letters, anthropology of writing, folkloristics, anthropology of religion, religious history, Sunday observance

1. Introduction

The textual tradition of heavenly letters flourished through hand-copied manuscripts and mass-printed chapbooks, from late antiquity to early modernity, and within a religio-political context of both official support and interdiction. These texts circulated across various cultural and societal layers, traversing the barriers that typically separate elite, popular, and national cultures, while challenging the validity of a strict distinction between magic and religion.

While a close investigation of these various contexts goes beyond the scope of any single paper, the core features of the textual tradition can be defined by a few common elements: an introduction that establishes the letter's authenticity and divine origin; the adoption of formal and stylistic features typical of religious texts; the use of prayers, curses, and blessings; and exhortations to follow various moral and religious practices, especially the observance of Sunday (Keszeg 2008, 116-117; Frauhammer 2012, 38; Rauchegger 2013).

The relatively intact nature of this genre allows for a close reading of specific examples. While it may be true that the entire ocean can be found in a drop in the case of heavenly letters, I will compare the few 20th-century letters collected by Hungarian folklorists, critically evaluating their findings. In the second part of the paper, I intend to explore the roots of these late variations to better understand the meaning, function, and textual characteristics of these letters. My aim is to look beyond the commonly investigated role of modernity and printing in the tradition's spread, comparing these relatively original and undoubtedly ancient versions to their younger counterparts. Finally, in the third section, I will connect these folklorically and historically oriented analyses and offer an interpretation of the textual tradition within an anthropological framework. My overarching claim is that, over the centuries, heavenly letters have undergone a textual and functional transformation, shifting from being expressive and abstract to becoming more technical, practical, and "magical" in nature.

2. The heavenly letters of modernity: a folkloristic review

The written textual traditions of the peasant society have been somewhat overlooked by Hungarian folkloristics and ethnology, as the mission of the science was commonly understood as the study and documentation of the culture of the peasantry which "was almost entirely defined as something almost purely oral" (Keszeg 2000, 131).

Folklore was typically viewed in a dichotomy of rural versus urban, oral versus literal, organic versus organized, collective versus individual, and as two distinct textual worlds of fixed corpuses and fluctuating variations. Navigating these rigid categories, it became axiomatic that folklore and folkloristics did not pertain to the written word (Bakos 2018, 279-280).

While some overlapping phenomena were noted by influential folklorists in the 1930s, these were not seen as challenges to the established dichotomies but rather as symptoms of acculturation—indications that foreign elements were entering intact folk culture. Thus, such observations reinforced the mission of collecting and documenting oral culture. Gyula Ortutay, a prominent figure in this field, exemplified this attitude by interpreting calendars and chapbooks as "corrupting" influences on peasant culture as these transferred "pitiable" cultural

elements (Ortutay 1936). Similarly, genres like peasant memoirs were labeled as "half-folk" cultural products, falling outside the scope of both folkloristics (as written products influenced by bourgeois culture) and literary studies (as artistically insignificant works by "common writers") (Katona 1994, 73; cf. Lyons 2023).

Regarding the heavenly letters, it is also important to briefly note, that those elements of folk culture, that showed "foreign, middle-class and urban" influence were overlooked within the research of religious beliefs and customs (Tüskés 1986, 18-19). Therefore, it is no wonder that the collection and investigation of the heavenly letters was never considered a priority, as it was clearly a Christian tradition and a cultural product bearing the sings of German influence. As such, these letters make no promises in discovering the ancient pagan religion of the Magyars, that emerged in the second half of the 19th century as a most prior and remains even today a much-debated question in the study of folklore (cf. Pócs 2018; 2023).

Understandably, the omission of the written and the emphasis on the "pagan" was something that gradually, at least since the 1960s changed in the study of folk culture. Still, it was a slow and gradual mapping of this previously unknown part of folk culture, leaving blank areas especially on chapbooks, religious leaflets and heavenly letters (Jung 1978, 130; 1988, 363).

Based on these, it might not come as a surprise that all known textual, handwritten examples and data regarding the function of these letters come from the socialist period. It is intriguing to see that even in that time period such a tradition was collectable and alive. While this might be interpreted as a form of resilience (cf. Majtényi 2015), it might also indicate how widely spread this tradition was. Already after 1910s and 1920s the output in the mass printing of such apocryphal texts significantly dropped (partly due to the legislation of the Roman Catholic Church and the new policies regarding publishing defined in the *Codex Iuris Canonici*), and the largest supplier of these leaflets abandoned this branch of business in 1939 (Lengyel 1999, 170-171). Still, we can only speculate how common these texts were in everyday culture, as some of the collected letters are rather the outcomes of chance encounters, than well-planned research programs.

The literature leaves no doubt that this tradition spread in the 19th century and makes evident the intermediary role that German culture played in its distribution (Keszeg 2008, 116-117; Frauhammer 2012, 38; Fülöp 2013, 56-57; Ujváry 1964, 393-394.; cf. Zsupos 1985, 59). While in Estonia the tradition was presumably transmitted by the missionaries of the Moravian Church, or in the New World, where it arrived with the German immigrants (Fogel 1908; N. N. 1917; Hand 1959; Beyer 2011, 35), presumably it was the army of the Habsburg Empire and later the Common Army (*Gemeinsame Armee*) of Austria-Hungary that played an important part in popularizing this genre, with the First World War as a culmination of such texts of protective function (cf. Jung 1988).

Understandably, the gradual decline of illiteracy in the 19th and most importantly in the ranks of the peasantry (Keszeg 2008) was an evident condition that enabled the widespread use of these letters. What is less obvious, is the role that peasant prophets of the 19th century might have played in the spread of the heavenly letters (cf. Bárth 2021, 101).

The very first actual known handwritten copy of a letter is in the collection of the Museum of Ethnography, Budapest. It was collected in 1967 by Klára Csilléry (inventory number: 67.104.48) in the village of Harta (in German: Hartau). It is a settlement that was repopulated by German *hospites* in the 18th century after becoming uninhabited during the Ottoman occupation of the region. While this particular letter is in German, Csilléry notes that it was common to have both German and Hungarian copies in the same household. The belief in the power of letters was not only widespread, but strong in the sense that the donator was quite reluctant to give away the letter as she was afraid of the potential consequences. Locals in Harta held that such letters protected the house, the traveler, and the boatman.

Regarding other uses of the letters, many potential methods and benefits are already outlined in the text, resembling a manual. The limited data we have on actual practices largely reflects these. "For instance, Sándor Bálint's pioneering work reveals that the letters were carried under the belts of pregnant women (Bálint 1980, 22, cf. Jung 1988), over their right breasts (Jung 1978, 131), and worn as necklaces during wartime (Inczefi 1942, 232). While these practices mostly align with the texts of the letters, one curious exception comes from the village of Banatsko Aranđelovo (Oroszlámos), Serbia: the letter used during the Second World War was later employed to protect cattle (Bartha 1987, 24).

The other letter of the Museum of Ethnography was collected just a few years later, in 1972 (inventory number: 72.69.1). Interestingly, it came to the museum from the southern outskirts of Budapest, under peculiar collecting circumstances. Its donor, Attila Nagyághy, discovered it in a lost wallet placed over a bin. Zoltán Lánczos, a colleague at the institution, recognized its value and handed it to Erzsébet Györgyi, the curator of the Collection of Religious Objects. For this reason, we can say little about the use of the letter, except that its original owner followed its instructions and carried it with him.

Textually speaking, the first line of this letter, Holy Image [Csodálatos kép] reflects the circulating character of this tradition. This seemingly banal line takes on new significance when we consider that under this title, one-page decorative prints were sold (Lengyel 2003, 243). The letter not only transferred the printed text to handwritten form but also "mobilized" it, making it carriable in one's wallet or pocket.

Regarding its content, the text is not much different than its German counterpart from Harta. The letter opens with a claim on its origin. However, a miswriting changes this original introduction in a pecurious way, as the mountain [hegy] is written as blessing [kegy], and

the placename thus denotes a personal name. Unlike in the original version, then the object is not *on* the mountain, but dependent *upon* the holy power of this person. After the origin story of the letter is summarized in a rather short way, the text introduces the prohibitions connected to Sunday, then again reinforces its authenticity by claiming that it was written by Jesus Christ himself. This part is followed by a lengthier section echoing the ten commandments, and closed by an emphasis that the letter was handwritten by Jesus Christ himself (mimicking Philemon 1:19), and curses those who dare to question this. The next, elaborative section covers the uses and benefits of the letter: if it is carried under the right arm, you could overcome any foe; if you keep it in your house it protects you during the war of the heavens and fires; if your property was confiscated by a nobleman, you could regain it; all your sins could be forgiven; a woman will happily give birth; if you ask for something, you will get it; and finally if you call for Jesus Christ and say a prayer, you will be forgiven and redeemed; and finally, if you say the Lord's Prayer in St. Michael's name you will indulgence of a hundred days. The letter is closed by an authentication, stating that it was found in 26 January 1813, in the city of Velz, Germany.

It is intriguing to see that the letter itself reflects the above mentioned German cultural connection. Besides our first example which originated from a Swabian-Hungarian village with a bilingual textual tradition, the Hungarian letters often refer to German or Austrian places. The printed editions, however, apply the more obvious references of Jerusalem or Rome (Soós 2018, 68).

The text mimics a rather archaic tone with a handwriting style that reflects clear esthetical efforts on the part of the copier. However, the recurring grammatic and spelling error make it clear that the scribe was not a man of letters, but we might also assume that he copied an already corrupted, altered version of textual errors.

Zoltán Zsupos's communication presents two similar letters of St. Michael from Darvas and Bakonszeg, which are in the collection of the Bihor Museum (Zsupos 1985). The two letters differ very little from the Budapest one, the only differences are some textual deteriorations, copying inaccuracies, omissions and insertions.

A much more fragmented version of the heavenly letter can be found in Elek Bartha's study, in which he publishes two manuscripts from Oroszlámos (Bartha 1987). The first is a variant the letter published by Károly Jung (1978, 129-130), while the second one is actually composed of fragments from several chapbook editions. The corpus opens with a more fragmentary transcription of a booklet entitled The Prayer of the Seven Heavenly Locks (cf. Soós 2018, 73-75), followed by various prayers, notes on protective texts, and ends with a rather abbreviated version of the Letter of St Michael. The various passages are sometimes separated by titles, but the letter of St Michael is a continuation of the text. The material presented illustrates that the different letters, prayers, protective texts are quite freely combined and copied by their users.

A similar phenomenon is illustrated by the manuscript of Sabolcsveresmart collected in 1979 and published by Zoltán Ujváry (1980). The beginning of the text is a widely known list of unlucky days. As in the other copies, the manuscript refers to a certain János Szőke, who supposedly found and copied the text in a library in Vienna. The letter is then followed by a list of forbidden days and a detailed description of the punishments for those who violate the prohibitions (Ujváry 1960; Bernáth 1978). However, unlike other known versions, the manuscript continues with the introduction of the letter of St Michael: "this letter hangs on the mountain of Mohács...". The mere fact that the placename (Michaelis) was changed and "magyarized" clearly indicates that this is a "worse" variant then the previous examples. It might be worthwhile to note that the height above mean sea level in Mohács is 82 meters, therefore it would a real miracle to find mountains or even hills there. Most probably the copier associated to a well-known historical name (the Battle of Mohács in 1526 was a cornerstone in the history of the country). Still, this invariant of the two combined letters raises more doubts regarding the place of origin: is it from a library in Vienna (as indicated in the first section) or from a mountain in Mohács?

A further question is whether the above-mentioned mix-ups and contradictions are to be explained by the character of vernacular literacy, or whether similar problems can be found in the "pure" texts as well. To answer this question, let us go back to the letter from Budapest, as it is not an invariant created by the combination of different textual traditions, but a copy of a chapbook edition.

The structure of these texts is obviously clearer: from the introduction we learn the origin story of the letter, followed by the moral propositions, the exhortations to pious practices, and finally the rewards to be gained by the possession and use of the letter. If we compare these different sections, the fundamental difference in the logic of the two parts becomes striking: the first links salvation, heavenly rewards to a virtuous life and divine grace, while the second links it to the possession, use and distribution of the letter (cf. Orosz 2016, 183). The first follows an indirect logic, the other a direct one. According to the first section salvation depends on one's life, while according to the second part it is a question to be solved by a particular act. Lastly, the first section promises rewards in the afterlife (or the afterlife is the promise itself), while the other one lists earthly benefits (cf. Soós 2018, 58).

A closer reading of the text reveals two different, contradictory logics, one that could be described by the religion-magic dichotomy (see Ujváry 1964, 393-394; Jung 1978, 128; Szojka 1990, 186; Fülöp 2013, 57; Frauhammer 2018, 182; Soós 2018, 67).

With these terms we could describe the difference between the two parts on an analytical level, however, this terminology does not necessarily explain why and how two passages of such opposing logics can form a single text, and also and why texts of different logics and genres could be so freely used and combined. The criticizable, revisable

religious-magical conceptual pair (Meyer–Smith 1999, 3-5) suggests a clear dichotomous separation, whereas the presented examples are compact units. While we can use concepts to pair to describe and separate these layers, we do not necessarily come closer to answering how the unity of the letters can incorporate this duality.

The obvious solution to this question might be to equate these two logics with two historical layers and analytically separate them. This method is followed by several authors, for instance Jung Károly states that in the elements of the second part "we may suspect a Christianised version of much older folklore traditions, probably antedating he advent of Christianity." (Jung 1978, 128; cf. Soós 2018, 67). These speculations one the hand echo the well-known historical fact that several Christian traditions have pagan background (Fletcher 1998), but also resonate the evolutionary theories of James George Frazer (1994) in the sense that magic necessarily predates religion. In what follows, I would like to argue that in the case of heavenly letters this relationship is in fact reversed.

3. Heavenly letters of late antiquity: a historical review

In Hungarian folkloristics – apart from Sándor Bálint's short remark on their Baroque background (see Jung 1988) – primally it was Emese Szojka (1990) and later Krisztina Frauhammer (2019) who elaborated upon the century long history of the heavenly letters. Considering these, we could divide them into two stages or groups, depending on whether we are discussing certain prefigurations, i.e. texts from beyond the earthly sphere, or heavenly messages that contain a call to reproduce and transmit: in the former case, we can associate more freely, and biblical scenes such as the sending of the tablets of the law might come to our mind (2 Moses 34, 1–28), while in the case of the more narrowly defined genre, the texts appear around the sixth century (Rauchegger 2013, 247). Robert Priebsch, who also dates the genre to the sixth century, identifies a wide geographical area regarding the distribution of the texts, bounded by Iceland to the north, Ethiopia to the south, Ireland to the west and Syria to the east (Priebsch 1907, 138). This tradition of texts is spread over a very rich linguistic area, for example, Maximilian Bittner published volumes of Greek, Armenian, Syriac, Arabic, Ethiopic, etc. (Bittner 1906). Obviously, we have neither the space nor the means to present this extremely rich material, to explore this geographically and historically vast area. To demonstrate the point, therefore, let us simply take a Western and an Eastern example of the early appearance of texts. Priebsch's already cited paper describes an early medieval Old Irish text. The source makes it clear that the features of the heavenly letters which we have already listed in the introduction and which we have seen in the previous section are present in this version as well. In the text published by Priebsch, the letter attributed

to Jesus Christ arrives in a setting reminiscent of the Passion: the earth trembles, the tomb of the Apostle Peter opens in Rome (cf. Matthew 27, 51-52). After these opening lines alternating images of apocalyptic scenarios and heavenly promises follow, a list of the rewards of those who observe and the punishments of those who do not observe Sunday, concluded by images of earthly prosperity and suffering, and finally of heaven and hell. In the last section, the text shifts the attention back to the letter itself, applying the same dual system of punishment and reward to its use: it promises salvation to its copiers and distributors and damnation to those who ignore it: "Any cleric who shall not read it aloud conscientiously to the peoples and nations of the world, his soul shall not attain heaven, but it shall be in hell forever. Whosoever shall read it aloud, and shall write it, and shall fulfil it after hearing it, he shall not only have pros- perity in this world, but the kingdom of the other world for ever yonder." (Priebsch 1907, 144).

Turning to the East, we can take as an example Georg Graf's communication, in which he quotes an Arabic text dating back to the ninth or tenth century. The text, like the above-mentioned example, revolves around the observance of Sunday: it links both past and future blessings and difficulties to the observance and violation of this ecclesiastical law. The text also makes it clear that the Tablets of Stone allusion mentioned above is not necessarily a distant religious historical parallel, but an element used by the texts themselves: "Ich habe das Gesetz den Juden durch die Hände des Moses herabgegeben, und sie kennen ihre Satzungen und Almosen. Und ich, Gott, habe euch mit meiner Taufe bekleidet, und mit meinem Namen, der für euch geheiligt ist. Und ihr widersetzet euch mit mir euren Werken und eurer Widersetzlichkeit am Sonntage (und durch) eure Streitsucht mit einander, und werdet wortbrüchig und verkaufet und kaufet am Sonntage, dem tage meiner Auferstehung" (Graf 1928, 20).

The list of examples could continue, as we are dealing with a remarkably rich textual tradition (cf. Stegmüller 1981). However, expanding it further may be pointless, as it wouldn't aid in exploring the complex and varied paths each variation took over its long history. Without examining the intermediate steps that connect a tenth-century Arabic letter to a twentieth-century Hungarian text, any conclusions we draw will remain hypothetical. Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile to make some assumptions about the historicity of the texts and return to our original question regarding the double logic of the texts and their background.

What we can conclude with relative confidence from the examples and studies above is that these early documents, at least textually, do not promise good outcomes from possessing the text, as seen in modern variants. Instead, the manuscripts emphasize the importance of observing Sunday. Generally, only the last section of the letters addresses the distribution of the letter, the transmission of its message, and the rewards for doing so. Furthermore, the texts make it clear that

blessings are granted only to those who transmit the letter and follow its instructions.

It is important to emphasize that these statements apply only to this specific tradition. In addition to various votive tablets and inscriptions used as talismans, we also have Coptic letters that resemble the heavenly letters in some respects. Dated to the sixth or seventh century, these letters name Jesus Christ as their author (Meyer–Smith 1999, 113-114; 320-322). However, the parallels between these two types of texts are minimal; there is no mention of Sunday or an implicit imperative regarding copying, and the texts are solely intended to ensure individual well-being.

Returning to the heavenly letters, we can conclude that their central motif is the sanctification of Sunday and the prohibition of work. This invites us to consider their role in late ancient and early medieval Europe. On one hand, the letters promoting the feast day and their linguistic diversity can be understood within a political and economic system that became increasingly intertwined with the Christian churches during the late imperial period and the centuries following the fall of the Western Roman Empire. As Europe gradually converted to Christianity, new Christianizing and Catholicizing states (for example, the conversion from Arianism under the reign of the Visigothic king Reccared I) emerged on the ruins and borders of the Western Roman Empire. Meanwhile, the Mediterranean world of antiquity opened up to the north, integrating regions like Ireland, which was once on the periphery of the ancient world, into this evolving landscape (Brown 2013; Mollat du Jourdin 1996).

It is within this geographical-historical context that the sanctification of Sunday, the organization of daily life according to Church teachings, the promotion of customs, and the enforcement of laws take on special significance. For instance, in a Hungarian context, one might consider the seventh chapter of the second book of St. Stephen's (reign 1000–1038) decretums regarding the observance of Sunday.

According to Samuel Bacchiocchi, the institutionalization of Sunday as a day of celebration in opposition to the Sabbath began in the second century. This process may have been influenced by the Church's anti-Judaism, its desire to distance itself from the persecuted Jews (see for instance the above cited letter), the hostility of the Jews towards Christians, Jewish apocalyptic images of the cosmic week, pagan sun cults and, of course, Christian theological interpretations (Bacchiocchi 1977, 312-313).

Without delving deeply into the early Christian debates surrounding Sunday and the Sabbath, it's important to note that Bacchiocchi's position is controversial. Some authors argue that Sunday was already a cultic day for early Christian groups, suggesting that we cannot speak of a clear change or break in this tradition (Hartog 2014, 114-115). It is worthwile to mention here, that in the sixth century, St. Caesarius of Arles, condemns the observance of the pagan-origin work ban on Thursday, the day of Donar

or Thor (Haines 2010, 10). This example indicates that Bacchiocchi's argument regarding pre-Christian sun cults is not universally applicable. Interestingly, as Eviatar Zerubavel notes, Thursday, the day of Taara, remained the most important cultic day among Estonians even in the late nineteenth century (Zerubavel 1985, 24).

What we know for certain, that the question of the sanctification of Sunday did not arise in the second century; the institutionalization of the work ban began only in the fourth century, marked by Emperor Constantine's decree in 321 (Bacchiocchi 1977, 317; Hartog 2014, 129). However, Constantine's decree was just the start of a process that would culminate around the sixth century with the introduction of a Sunday rest day modeled on the Sabbath, dedicated to the life of faith (Haines 2010, 4). Even then, the concept of Sunday remained malleable, as illustrated by King Edgar's (reign 959-975) lawbook, which defined it as the period from Saturday noon to Monday daybreak (Keynes 1990, 233).

While there are biblical passages that can be seen as a first-century imprint of the Sunday cult (see Acts 20,7), there is no passage that explicitly makes Sunday a day of prohibition.

Understandably, this is not a universal issue; however, the lack of textual references for the 'people of the book' presents an inescapable challenge within the religio-cultural system of Christianity, which is founded on written revelation (cf. McKitterick 1990, 6).

According to Dorothy Haines, heavely letters are intended to fill this gap, and it is no coincidence that they appear in a century when the question of Sunday work was a very strong preoccupation of the churches (Haines 2010, 14). These texts associate with the dogmatic tradition of the Church a much stronger revealed truth and law, comparable to the Bible: God's will is thus not a matter of interpretation, but a truth that is fully explicit, not inferred, but directly readable, not a manifestation of ecclesiastical authority, but of the divine will.

In his capitular *Admonitio generalis* of 789, Charlemagne (reign: 768–814) condemns the heavenly letters precisely because of this external authority, independent of the world of men, the church and the state. "What is significant is the extent to which the General Warning reveals a vigorous, »vernacular« Christianity which, just because it was largely oral, expressed a Christian piety which experts such as Alcuin found difficult to control. Far from being untouched by Christianity, much of Carolingian Europe was characterized by intense religious curiosity and by luxuriant forms of Christian practice. The experts considered these to be in need of constant pruning. It is characteristic that, once again, the General Warning condemned the notorious Letter from Heaven, which was said to have beenwritten by Jesus and placed by him on the altar of Saint Peter at Rome." (Brown 2013, 450).

The provision reflects an imperial intention to unify the fragmented Christian microcosms and peripheral pagan areas, modeled on Frankish micro-Christianity, by categorizing written texts as either right or

wrong, welcomed or persecuted (Nelson 1990, 295-296; Brown 2013). In this system of legislation and centralization, heavenly letters are to be burned rather than copied.

In any case, the example of the Franks suggests that during this period, the textual tradition was marginalized not for theological reasons, but for political ones, beginning to be excluded from official church culture. However, this ban did not prevent the tradition from developing in linguistic diversity across a broad geographical framework, becoming part of various Christian microcosms.

The vast geographical area and the absence of printing underscore that the dissemination of texts relied on transmission and copying. In this context, it is primarily a technical issue – the only way to share letters and make them accessible to others.

At this early stage, copying is associated with the notion of indirect reward and punishment, as it serves to spread the heavenly message, functioning as a form of evangelization, a pious act. In this sense, the focus is not on the object itself or its possession, but rather on the transmission of the message. As noted earlier, the distribution of the letter alone is not a sufficient condition for salvation. Consequently, the letters maintain coherence, as the promises tied to acts of piety – particularly to the observance of Sunday – do not conflict with the rewards associated with the copying, possession of the letter, which became intergral part of the letters of the 19^{h} and 20th centuries.

4. Heavenly letters: an anthropological interpretation

To strengthen my general argument and clarify the historical development, it is essential to define what I mean by describing the early copying of letters as a technical act. I am using the term in the sense articulated by Edmund Leach in his rethinking of the concept of magic in relation to expressive actions (Leach, 1976). According to Leach, a technical action involves a direct connection between the instrument and the aspect of reality to be altered. In contrast, expressive action seeks to change the world from a distance, without direct physical contact (Leach 1976, 30).

According to Leach, however, the two types of action can easily overlap in practice, much like communication through symbols and communication through signals (Leach 1976, 29). Notably, Leach begins his description of communication processes with a dichotomy, using the term 'signal' to refer to forms of communication where the message and the entity carrying it are inseparable – essentially, A causes B as a kind of conditional reflex. In contrast, he categorizes a broader group of indices that share the property of being signifiers, where A signals B. So, while indices are static and descriptive, signals are dynamic and causal (Leach 1976, 12).

Without delving deeply into Leach's terminology, I will apply his concepts to the letters. I argue that the copying of letters in the early Middle Ages was primarily a technical act aimed at transferring the content and message of a letter to another medium, to a new physical carrier. In this context, a letter serves as an index, and its possession simply signifies the religious merit of its holder or distributor. In contrast, when a letter is copied for protection against a bullet (cf. Inczefi 1942, Jung 1978), the action becomes expressive. Here, the intent shifts from affecting the content to establishing a causal relationship with the object of concern. The letter no longer functions as an index but as a signal, moving from indicating immunity to actively establishing a connection between possession of the letter and the ability to resist a bullet. Thus, while in the former case the letter signifies that its possessor enjoys God's protection, in the latter case, it becomes an agent of a casual relation.

To elaborate on the mental operation, it is helpful to consider the opening lines of the letters: they assert that the letter was written by God with His own hand. Consequently, the believer recognizes a metonymic relationship between God and the original letter. However, once the letter is copied, this relationship becomes purely metaphorical and symbolic. The text merely indicates that it is God's handwritten letter, linking it to God through the act of copying, which creates this symbolic relationship.

In other words, the act of copying breaks the metonymic connection, as it relies on a principle of association, the part-part relationship. This allows for a rational explanation that something belonging to God possesses divine power. Thus, when letters are used for protection against bullets, the metaphorical symbol is treated as a metonymic sign, ultimately regarded as a signal capable of producing distant effects (cf. Leach 1976, 31)

Finally, it is important to emphasize that this analysis presupposes a cultural context in which the boundary between expressive and technical action can become blurred. In this context, one can influence something distant through verbal instruction, allowing the recipient of the message to interpret it as a signal. A fundamental aspect of Christianity's image of God is that the separation between expressive and technical action within the word of God is fundamentally unintelligible. Thus, once this truth of faith is accepted, it becomes plausible that the word of God acts as a signal in the created world.

5. Conclusions

In this study, I began with the endpoint, the letters from the second half of the twentieth century and traced their development back to the late antique and early medieval letters. To interpret these texts, I briefly outlined the historical, geographical, and religious contexts in

which writings advocating Sunday observance were composed and disseminated in various languages. I noted that, compared to these early forms, the long passages on Sunday observance in the versions discovered by ethnographers – part of the vernacular literature circulated in printed or manuscript form – are significantly shorter. This brevity likely reflects the diminishing message value of the original letters over the centuries, as the custom they promoted became, by and large, an established fact.

As the relevance of the letters' messages waned, so too did the encouragement to copy them as a technical act, particularly in light of technological advancements and the printing revolution, a shift that allowed copying to transition from a technical to an expressive act. In addition to, and at the expense of the passages emphasizing the importance of Sunday observance lengthy instructional passages were incorporated into the letters. These sections outlined the benefits of possession and copying, offering detailed descriptions of how the holder could use the letter to manipulate the beings of the outer world. The unoriginal elements introduced later are inconsistent with the original content of the letters regarding their message. However, since letters primarily functioned as signifiers – tools rather than indexes or forms of expression – these inconsistencies became largely irrelevant compared to their practical use.

As in a circular motion, the letters rolled through the centuries, shedding some elements while new ones clung to them. Thus the textual tradition evolved, adapted, and transformed. While the core of the letters textually remained unchanged, their meaning, function, use shifted. As objects, the letters transformed from being barriers of divine messages to sources of otherworldly power.

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