

JUDIT GÖRÖZDI: Dejiny v súčasných maďarských románoch
[History in Contemporary Hungarian Novels]

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The evolutionary stages of the Hungarian historical novel can be characterized by those strategies which were operated by the authors of certain eras as they were recounting the past.

The first era can be identified as the 19th century. Besides the typical features of romanticism, works which belong to this era integrated many of the characteristics of the epic as well. Their most defining feature was national commitment, since many authors wanted to take part in the process of building a nation by expressing this commitment (e.g. Mór Jókai, born in Komárno). In his book *Literatúry v kontaktoch* (Literature in Contacts, 1972) Rudolf Chmel draws a parallel between this era and the period described as the beginnings of the Slovak historical novel. The second era can be put in the 20th century, with its prime period in the first decades of the century. Its influential authors were Géza Gárdonyi, Kálmán Mikszáth, Zsigmond Móricz who reinterpreted the genre in terms of realism. The expectations of historical novels of the era were summarized by the Marxist philosopher György Lukács. He assumed the given era's objective reflection, the avoidance of exoticism, the depiction of characters in social connections, and the presentation of history as the antecedent which has led to the processes of the present. This perspective and the iteration of the form outlined above led to a crisis within the genre from the 1970s onward.

It is the third era, which is interesting to us now, which Judit Görözdí focuses on in her monograph *Dejiny v súčasných maďarských románoch* (History in Contemporary Hungarian Novels). As an effect of the results of international postmodern literary studies and history, Hungarian novels dealing with

the narratability of history and the problem of narratability have been continually published since the turn of the millennium. "Although they apply very different text-composing procedures and narrative modes, they share the feature that their goal is not primarily to narrate a self-aware historical plot, but to use the story to point to the patterns/schemes/shifts/empty places of the contemporary interpretation of history" (11; trans. L.P.B). This is why it is not possible to talk about a uniform perspective in their case, but rather about a kaleidoscope through which we observe history itself. This is why the historical novels in the classical sense of the word are not and cannot be the focus of this monograph. Those latter works reposition themselves in the territory of popular literature, since they do not expose themselves – nor the past – to self-reflection.

If we created a list of those literary scholars who have contributed the most to the Slovak-language reception of contemporary Hungarian literature, Judit Görözdí's name would have a distinguished place. Her first monograph was *Hangyaírás, csillagmora-jlás: elhallgatásalakzatok Mészöly Miklós írásművészetében* (Ant-crying, Star-rumbling; Concealment Formations in Miklós Mészöly's Writing Art, 2006), whose revised version *Figúry odmlčania v próze Miklósa Mészölya* (Concealment Figures in the Prose of Miklós Mészöly, 2010) is available in Slovak language as well. Both works focus on the still-poetics of Mészöly's prose which, through the concealment figures, confronts us with the unnarratable as well as with the limits of language. Not incidentally, the late work of Mészöly functions as the foundation of the pseudohistorical novels discussed below. Görözdí's prominent editorial work includes the volume titled *Priestory vnímania*.

O tvorbe Pétera Nádas (Spaces of Perception. About the Work of Péter Nádas, 2011) which plays a central role in the Slovak language reception of Nádas's fiction. We should also mention the 2014/2 issue of *World Literature Studies* with the theme "Súčasný stredoeurópske podoby historického románu" (Contemporary Central European Figures of the Historical Novel) which can be considered as an important antecedent and context of the volume introduced here. The issue sheds light on the fact that the problem of the narratability of history is a common feature in the literature of Central European nations.

The following two works, often referred to by Görözdi as well, can be considered as the basic works of international literature dealing with the historical perspective and poetics of postmodern literary works: Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) and Linda Hutcheon's *The Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory, Fiction* (1995). McHale points out that postmodern novels give space to the historical experience of previously marginalized groups, which central history, functioning as the great narrative, does not deal with, such as the female horizons of the eras, or the perspectives of ethnic, racial, or sexual minorities, etc. The *apocryphal history* arising in this manner often puts the historical eras and events under a very different (spot) light. Linda Hutcheon introduced the notion of *historiographical metafiction*, by which she means that in postmodern novels the emphasis is not on the plot, but on the narratability of history; how they are organized and which model the individual history representations follow; which ideology they reveal and what role they play in forming identity.

Both the validation of the marginalized perspective and the deconstruction of history are key moments in the works analyzed by Görözdi. *Dejiny v súčasných maďarských románoch* investigates works which have also had a foreign reception, fit into the broadly interpreted postmodern period, share the common feature of approaching the past in a novel way, and be-

sides one or two exceptions they are all available either in Slovak or Czech, which means that the Slovak/Czech reader can have direct access to the texts beyond the monograph.

Beyond the context provided in the introduction, the volume consists of six chapters, each analyzing the works and novel poetics of different authors. Görözdi does not approach her investigation with a central theory, but she assigns relevant theoretical literature to the works based on the questions, poetic solutions, recommendations and answers to the narratability and approachability of history these novels raise. In our judgment it would be useful to publish the monograph in English or even in Hungarian, since there is no other comprehensive work using a similar investigative horizon available in the latter language either. Maybe we could mention Péter Bokányi's monograph titled *Ahogyan sosem volt. A történelmi regény változatai az ezredforduló magyar irodalmában* (How It Has Never Been. The Varieties of the Historical Novel in the Hungarian Literature of the Millennium, 2007), many of whose sections resonate with Görözdi's volume.

The first chapter analyzes two novels of Péter Esterházy which are immersed in historical memory, in our inherited substances, and in the deconstruction of the traditional structural features of the historical narrative. As Görözdi describes, the first book of *Harmonia Caelestis* (2000; *Celestial Harmonies*, 2004) applies the features of the collective and cultural memories (which drive the codes of the self-determination of a group), defined by Jan Assmann, and the second one uses the features of communicative memory (direct, experience-like mode of voice): "While the first part of the novel disrupted the 'significant' historical events with the first-person narrative (thus it is about destruction and deconstruction), the narrative of the second part of the novel, by adding a new perspective, is based on the reconstruction of how historical events are formed socially" (34; trans. L.P.B.). The *Egyszerű történet vessző száz oldal – a kardozás változat* (Simple Story Com-

ma One Hundred Pages – The Mark Version, 2013) ironically confronts us with the victim position perspective of Hungarian history, in the case of which the contradictions and inconsistencies of its sections prevent the formation of a version which is self-reinforcing from the national perspective. According to Görözdi, the features of the texts are: the elimination of plot, the description of possible historical narratives, and the rejection of the patterns of thinking about history – meaning the ideological content connected to form and identity as well.

The second chapter focuses on the Hungarian pseudohistorical novels, which Görözdi approaches from the results of the literature of magical realism. László Darvasi's *A könnyemutatványosok legandája* (The Legend of the Tear Jugglers, 1999), László Márton's *Testvériség* (Brotherhood) trilogy (2001–2003), and Lajos Grendel's *Galeri* (Gang, 1982) all are about disintegration and rebuilding of the historical, linguistic and narrative tradition: “[T]hey shocked the logic of historical narrative among others by crossing the border of historical referentiality and turning into the direction of the supernatural/magical as well as towards the mythical” (46; trans. L.P.B.). Their features are: the melting of reality and fiction into one, the breaking up of the consistency of cause and effect, the investigation of the problem of authenticity and certifiability, the validation of marginal existence as well as its horizon, and the elimination of heroism. Görözdi points out that Grendel's novel – similarly to many other minority novels of the period written in Hungarian – can be approached with post-colonialist theories by the inter-ethnic minority environment of its world and also by its self-conflicting interpretations, mentalities, and identity constructs.

The third part analyzes works validating female and minority horizons which were left out of the “historical great narratives”, and also which – according to McHale – generate *apocryphal histories*. Usually they have an observer contemplating the events from a worm's eye view and are in connection with

writing micro(hi)stories as well. Görözdi's analyses confirm Mary Gergen's results about female narratives according to which “they are characterized by a spreading structure and they depict the individual in the context of their emotional ties, which makes the story labyrinth-like and eliminates the linearity typical for male narratives” (85; trans. L.P.B.). In her work *A kígyó árnyéka* (The Shadow of the Snake, 2002) Zsuzsa Rakovszky writes about the struggles of a girl who is a German citizen, and Judit Kováts in the *Hazátlanok* (Countrymen Without Homeland, 2019) tells the story of the Germans of Kézsmárk in the time of adversities after the World War II. Éva Bánki in her work *Esőváros* (Rain City, 2004) and Anikó N. Tóth in her novel titled *Fényszilánkok* (Light Splinters, 2005) depict the everyday life of the 20th century Hungarian minority rural families in Slovakia. In the former one we can follow a family in Žitný ostrov as they are building their dynasty. The latter three narrative modes let us observe everyday life through the perspectives of the punctuation-free grandmother, the son operating with photos, and the little girl with the tendency to collide reality with a tale. Vulnerability is a recurring element of the works in male–female, majority–minority, winner–loser, and rich–poor correlations alike.

The last three chapters each focus on a certain novel by a certain author. Péter Nádas's *Párhuzamos történetek* (2005; *Parallel Stories*, 2011) provides a view on the inhuman ideologies and their self-belying systems of the 20th century from the viewpoint of the body and body ideology. Based on Klaus Theweleit's results, Görözdi points out the connection between masculine sexual fantasies and the violent abuse of power in the work. As its title suggests, the novel is comprised of multiple stories, which are only connected to each other through certain structural features and fractal-like repetitions. Pál Závada's *Természetes fény* (Natural Light, 2014) experiments with the parallel use of two forms of media, text and photo, in order to revive the past which, howev-

er, can never fully be accomplished. According to Görözdi, while at the beginning of the work the two forms of media strengthen and supplement each other, moving forward in the story they generate contradictions and deficiencies. By this they draw attention to the intentional and unintentional forgetting, as well as to the doubts about the authenticity of historical documents. The last analyzed work is László Krasznahorkai's *Háború és háború* (1999; *War and War*, 2006) which considers whether there is any sense to history and historical development. In Görözdi's view, while going through the eras, the dynamism created in the work wishes to disrupt the Judeo-Christian traditions which are the bases of western culture. The apocalyptic nature of the work arises as the result of rendering redemption and the divine being uncertain, as well as presenting the battle of darkness and light as the continuous escape of the latter.

Although the chapters refer to each other, they can also be read as separate case studies, and the kaleidoscopic nature of the book allows it to be expanded by additional (literary) historical interpretations as well. A potential chapter, for example, could be written about the Hungarian alternative history, similar to Erik Gilk's article in connection to Czech allohistoricism in the 2014/2 issue of *World Literature Studies*, with the title *Kontrafaktuální historická fikce v současné české próze* (Counterfactual Historical Fiction in Contemporary Czech Prose). According to the theorist of the counterfactual school, Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, alternative history is presentist, revealing more about us, the thinking of our era (*zeitgeist*) and its estimation about the past, than how convincingly it manages to build an alternative universe. Such novels as András Gáspár's *Ezüst félhold blues* (Silver Half-Moon Blues, 1990), Gábor Trenka Csaba's *Egyenlítői Magyar Afrika* (Equatorial Hungarian Africa, 1991), Imre Horváth László's *Lett este és lett reggel* (There Be Evening and Morning, 2014) all provide exciting answers to the question of "what (would have happened) if" and might

be a good basis for such a chapter. The latter two also focus on the autocratic systems and ideologies of the 20th century, whose literary accomplishment might even contribute to the reevaluation of our present.

Dejiny v súčasných maďarských románoch is a monograph which has an exceptionally wide perspective, many layers, and is written in an especially concise style. Not only can the book be read successfully by the audience as a source of the significant results of contemporary Hungarian prose, but the investigative perspectives suggested by the author and the integrated relevant literature can also be successfully applied in the analysis of other postmodern novels focusing on history in Hungarian, Slovak or any other language. In addition, they can function as the basis of comparative works similar to Rudolf Chmel's or some of Görözdi's earlier studies, since facing the past is a mighty challenge, especially today, when previously marginalized voices are finally gaining some space and letting us see history in a new light.

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