

**CONTEMPORARY AND RECENT HUNGARIAN FICTION:
RECEPTION AND CROSS-CULTURAL INTERPRETATIONS**

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Book of Abstracts

MÁRIA BARTAL

The Spectacle of Intimacy: Exposed Corpses in Miklós Mészöly's Short Story "Winged Horses"

"Winged Horses" (1977) stages from the perspective of an anonymous narrator the drama of Teleszkai discovering the corpses of his wife and her lover on the straw scattered at the bottom of the tub as the cellar air had stifled them during love-making in Teleszkai's wine-pressing shed. My lecture addresses the different contexts of the signifying cadavers in this short story: the social, especially the religious and criminal references, the mythological and the metapoetic recontextualizing of the trauma. The compulsive setting and stabilization of their corpses by Teleszkai and the narrator make and manipulate photographic memory and force viewers and readers to consider experiences that resist integration into larger contexts. The exposed cadavers activate necroerotic yearnings, create the framework for the stages of grief and establish a posthumous relationship between them. The interpretation of space-time structure, the focalization and the elaborated descriptions of the face-to-face interactions in "Winged Horses" are tinged with philological references to the works of Mészöly's wife, Alaine Polcz, a thanatologist, and the considerations of Ulrich Baer, Marianne Hirsch and Suzanne Ashworth.

LÁSZLÓ BENGI

Simulation and Interpretation as Narrative Strategies in László Krasznahorkai's *War and War*

While Krasznahorkai's novel, originally published in 1999, explicitly alludes to the narrative of the Tower of Babel, it centers not so much around the confusion of tongues but rather around the millennial experience of proliferating transmedia transpositions. Publication of the novel itself was already embedded in a transmedia context by the author and was completely in line with the story, in which the protagonist strives to convert a rare manuscript into a digital form that can be spread throughout online networks. The ambiguity of these transpositions, the absence of stable and determined order, and the virtual eternity of digitally multiplied existence all resonate with the dual character of human history that is evoked in the manuscript as the conflict between apocalyptic changes and perpetual peace. Nevertheless, the novel also transcends the limit of a metahistorical allegory by connecting the fictive manuscript with the subtle narrative construction of the protagonist's fictional mind and, thus, with the dual drive for acculturation and autonomy.

STEPHANIE BIRD

Imre Kertész: Complicity and Comedy

This paper considers how Imre Kertész's work challenges our understanding of complicity. We might consider two ways to think about the relationship of literature (and art more generally) to questions of complicity. In one, literature allows us to understand complicity with wrongdoing and how it occurs, not least by exploring the complex motivations and emotional dispositions of characters and how they are situated within and respond to their social context. Novels can expose the tension between individual actions and the social processes that normalise types of thought and behaviour. Another tradition of thinking about complicity, in which Adorno has been so influential, holds literature itself up for scrutiny, looking at the complicity of culture and scholarship in sustaining relationships of power and shoring up an undesirable status quo. In this tradition, aesthetic production and reception do not stand above any analysis of complicity, and textual analysis exposes the power dynamics within which the text is situated and which it perpetuates.

Kertész's work is a daring and provocative engagement with both these traditions not least because his writing resists assimilation to narratives of victimhood or moral agency. Indeed, Kertész criticises conventional notions of choice or agency. He insists that crimes like 'Auschwitz' are an organic and necessary part of the wider society and culture. He sees mass complicity and the seductions of resistance movements as equally refusing to recognise the deceptions that they sustain. The only authentic choice that is available under a dictatorship is to assume one's own fate, which in his case was to write and to transform the self aesthetically into a generalisable truth. Yet if the necessary choice to assume one's own fate is the only form of freedom available, what alternative possibilities are there for evading the determining state of affairs that deprive individuals of their fate? One answer to this question is that the glimpse of another world comes through the abstraction of the self through writing. I argue that the repeated aesthetic transformations of the self that constitute Kertész's work generate a strong comic aesthetic and ironic tone that guard against the political appropriation of his work. At the same time, his appeal to truth as the legitimizing force of his writing seems to fall back into the very moralizing he deplors in the Islamophobic utterances of his final work.

ENIKŐ BOLLOBÁS

Carbonaro's Stories that Heal and Amuse: Local Character Anecdotes in the Short Fiction of Géza Szócs

The loosely structured anecdotes collected in Géza Szócs's *Carbonaro éjszakái* (Carbonaro's Nights) and *Ha polip szuszog Kolozsvárott* (Octopus Snuffles in Kolozsvár) convey a *joie de vivre* grounded in the pleasure of unearthing stories of nonconformist characters that lay underground for centuries, never included in official histories. Told in situations of familiarity or even intimacy, by the sickbed of a poet friend or the marriage bed taken from Sultan Shahrayar, and self-reflectively co-created in dialogue, these miniature narratives are local character anecdotes that rhetorically enact the community's self-understanding by expanding history to include the unknown, unrecorded, and unbelievable or surreal.

MARKO ČUDIĆ

László Krasznahorkai's Short Story Collection *The World Goes On* from the Translator's Point of View

The works of László Krasznahorkai, who is, beyond any doubt, one of the best-known contemporary Hungarian writers worldwide, are translated at an ever increasing pace also in the territory of former Yugoslavia, especially in Serbia and Croatia. This paper focuses on the problems of translating into Serbian one of his more recent books, the short story collection *The World Goes On* (*Megy a világ*), published in 2013. Since the author of this paper already has some experience with the translation of Krasznahorkai's prose – he has translated and published a novel by this famous Hungarian writer and has written a collection of essays on

the different aspects of Krasznahorkai's prose fiction – in this paper, the focus is turned onto some types of translational problems he did not face while translating Krasznahorkai's early novel *The Melancholy of Resistance* into Serbian. While consciously avoiding applying ambitious and comprehensive theoretical concepts, the author mainly stays on the level of linguo-poetical micro-analysis, trying to describe and somehow justify some of his own solutions.

TIBOR GINTLI

“Satura quidem tota nostra est” (?) – György Spiró's *Captivity*

At the time of the publication of György Spiró's novel *Captivity*, it was a great success, and it was received with acclaim by readers and critics alike. The explanation for this certainly lies in the fact that the book successfully meets the various expectations of readers. On the one hand, the book can be read as a twisted, eventful historical novel, and on the other hand, it has a distinct layer of intellectual meaning. It meets the need for entertainment at a high level, but it also touches on issues that fall within the scope of philosophy of history, the history of religion, or the history of human thought. Among the historical scenes, contemporary social, political, and moral problems also emerge. The novel discusses these topics, sometimes in a complex analysis, sometimes in a satirical way. The lecture seeks to answer the question of whether the alternation of satirical perspective and in-depth analysis can be considered a successful solution in the novel's narrative.

PÉTER HAJDU, ZOLTÁN Z. VARGA

Microcosm and Identity in Hungarian Literature as World Literature

Bloomsbury Academic Edition's "Literatures as World Literature" series, launched in 2014, offers a notable opportunity to the literatures of the so-called "minor languages" to put themselves on the prestigious map of world literature. The series, among other things, aims at the "re-visioning of a specific 'national' linguistic canon as a particular nodal point of world literature's international, intersystemic relations" (Beebee 2014). The forthcoming Hungarian volume – while proposing a deliberately non-comprehensive historical view of the evolution of the national literary system in relation to its transnational exchanges – tries to disclose multilateral comparative correlations, such as the local transformations of supranational poetical or ideological movements and their feedback into the world system, the geopolitical contexts behind poetic forms and narrative constructions, according to four major avenues of research:

1. Reception/Circulation: how can we trace the paths taken by Hungarian literature in the world?
2. Microcosm: in what ways has world literature shaped Hungarian literary culture?
3. Assemblage/Multivariant Nodes: where are the intersections of language, culture, ethnicity, territory, and identity in Hungarian literature?
4. Region: what aspects of Hungarian literature could be seen as paradigmatic for Central European literature as world literature?

Besides presenting the theoretical and methodological principles of our enterprise, our paper aims to illustrate these four axes of research by two examples, tackling, on the one hand, the question of identity and literary production/culture, and, on the other, issues of literary microcosm:

1. Hungarian literature contributed to and was part of the nation-building project, and the Hungarian national identity was (or still is) an important topic but arguably also the result of literature. Identity is a systemic issue that depends on sameness and difference in comparison with others, and the demonstration of Hungarian uniqueness in literature was based on foreign literary models. It is surprising that authors canonized as national (the national poet Petőfi or "the nation's storyteller" Jókai) could achieve remarkable success in translation. Jókai's success at home and abroad might have been due to the same (Romantic)

features of his writing, while his canonical status depended on features unmarketable as world literature.

2. Endre Ady's *Új versek* (New Poetry) of 1906 was a landmark for modern Hungarian literature, and the volume sets up a mythological landscape of Paris in opposition to the cultural "belatedness" of the *Globus Hungaricus* at that time. From that moment, generations of young Hungarian writers made their pilgrimage to the French capital seeking the consecration to be a modern artist, and often importing innovative artistic and cultural ideas to their homeland. The paper outlines the changing meanings of Paris in Hungarian literary texts and the ambiguous effects of striving for literary and social-cultural modernization from the *fin de siècle* to the late thirties.

ANDRÁS KÁNYÁDI

Games of Power: Chess and Totalitarianism in the Contemporary Hungarian Novel

The paper focuses on three important texts rooted in a similar totalitarian experience. *The Sinistra District* (1992) by Ádám Bodor, *Tranquillity* (2001) by Attila Bartis and *The White King* (2005) by György Dragomán all articulate the chess game as a symbolical representation of terror in fiction by three autonomous rhetorical patterns, such as ellipsis, dream work and ekphrasis. These authors make not only a significant contribution to the poetic renewal of a modern literary theme, but they also introduce a new way of thinking about alterity, space and freedom.

JÁNOS KENYERES

Bluebeard in Cross-Cultural Exchange: Péter Esterházy's "The Miraculous Life of Prince Bluebeard" and Yann Martel's *Self*

This paper investigates cross-cultural exchange deriving from the centuries-old fairy tale motif of Bluebeard, in particular two versions of it written in the 1990s. One is Péter Esterházy's short story "The Miraculous Life of Prince Bluebeard" (1991) and the other Yann Martel's novel *Self* (1996), which incorporates Bluebeard as a key episode in its plotline. As there are dozens of adaptations and even more interpretations of the Bluebeard story worldwide, the two versions examined are based on transculturality. However, when compared with each other, they themselves show signs of cross-cultural exchange, as well as features specific to the geographical locations in which they were created. The presentation explores some of these common and divergent traits.

TIBOR KOSZTOLÁNCZY

Ethical Dilemmas in the World of Iván Mándy

Iván Mándy is often characterized as an observer of unsolvable situations as well as hopeless human destinies. In this lecture, I seek to demonstrate that Mándy wrote a series of short stories which conveyed a sharper message. In his more active world, the conflicts between the protagonists ended up in open, dramatic confrontations. Ethical dilemmas surrounded these often aggressive actions, and finding an effective decision was strengthened by the confusing circumstances. Surviving, supporting a family, or keeping an acceptable job were at stake in these stories. Mándy focused mainly on young people, who were at the beginning of a long learning process of acquiring the skills to survive in the world, where ethics and law contradict each other.

IMRE ZSOLT LENGYEL

Literature as/against Culture: Magda Szabó's *The Door*

The New York Review of Books published Len Rix's translation of *The Door* by Magda Szabó in 2015 – the same year the English translation of the last volume of Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan tetralogy appeared. Several reviewers noted the thematic similarities of the two works: both portray a friendship between a highly cultured female writer and a woman virtually

intact from high culture, seemingly providing a self-critique of the first and a eulogy of the latter. It was, however, not remarked by the reviewers that it is a paradox that lies at the center of both works: the protagonists are not only *outside* but actively *against* culture and literature, which means that one can understand the very act of monumentalizing them as an act of treason at the same time. This paradox sets off in both novels a play of undecidability which concerns the value of culture and the function of literature; I reconstruct this play in detail in the case of *The Door*. Taking as a theoretical basis Simon Critchley's account of the philosophies of Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, I argue that the figure of Emerenc may be interpreted as an ethical supplement simultaneously showing the insufficiency and the indispensability of the political. In conclusion, I show how this central ambiguity of Szabó's novel was mostly made univocal by its original Hungarian reviewers influenced by the antipolitical climate of the late 1980s.

JÁNOS D. MEKIS

Puzzles of Literary Collectivism: Péter Esterházy's Poetic Answer to State Socialism

The oeuvre of Péter Esterházy, one of the most important Hungarian writers of recent times, still confronts the reader with such crucial problems as the relationship between historical consciousness and politics, or the connection of personal and communal memory and identity. Already during the period of state socialism, which elevated collectivism to a systemic ideology, the author found a way to provide a credible literary answer to these questions, despite all the repression, and continued this process after the change of regime and the fall of communism. To this end, he developed a distinctive literary language in which parody, experimentalism and anecdotal narrative all played important roles. The lecture will focus on three of Esterházy's novels: *Production Novel (Termelési-regény, 1979)*, *A Little Hungarian Pornography (Kis magyar pornográfia, 1984)*, and *Celestial Harmonies (Harmonia caelestis, 2000)*.

TÍMEA MURZSA

The Narrative Structure of Szilárd Borbély's *The Dispossessed*

Szilárd Borbély's *The Dispossessed* was published in 2013. The book was translated into several languages and gained international recognition. Its reception in Hungary can be characterized by two major tendencies: in terms of genre-related questions, many have interpreted the novel along two genres (autobiography and/or sociography); and in terms of narrative, some critics have argued that the supposed child narrator's voice is not 'authentic'. In my lecture, I will reflect on these problems and the possible origins of this confusion. I will examine the narrative structure not only touching upon the position of the narrator but also on what kind of identities and languages are linked to the different groups presented in the book (such as Jewish, Gypsy, and Romanian groups). In *The Dispossessed*, the location of the story is unnamed, although some GPS coordinates are present on the cover of the first edition. These mark a place called Túrricse, the childhood village of the writer. Borbély was inspired by this village when he chose the setting of *The Dispossessed*. This place embodied the essence of living on the borderline, as the village is located near the borders between Hungary, Romania, and Ukraine. The major changes of the 20th century in Hungary and this region – which are shown in the book as well, and which are even more prominent in places like Túrricse because of their special intercultural position – play an important role in the self-identification of the characters. At the same time, it has to be emphasized that the narrative technique (first-person narrative in present tense) provides a feeling of eternity and closed structure in the village: the behavior of the people, the social exclusion, and the feeling of otherness were always present, and this will never change.

SAROLTA OSZTROLUCZKY

“The Granite Core of Changelessness”: Géza Ottlik’s “Nothing’s Lost”

In this presentation, I offer a comparative analysis of two short stories, Thomas Wolfe’s “The Lost Boy” (1937) and Géza Ottlik’s “Nothing’s Lost” (1968), and point out an unexplored connection between these two texts. Wolfe and Ottlik employ a series of similar motifs in their fiction, including the presence of autobiographically inspired protagonists who, either actually or imaginarily, return to the scene of their childhood, so to say to ‘the granite core of changelessness,’ to rediscover and realize that nothing has been lost. This parallel reading of Wolfe’s and Ottlik’s short stories sheds light on more than just a hitherto unknown connection in their reception history. It is not only Ottlik who reads Wolfe, but both of them read and rewrite the parable of the Prodigal Son from the Gospel according to Luke.

GÁBOR REICHERT

Depicting “Rural Hungary”: Anachronistic Structure of Time in László Krasznahorkai’s *Baron Wenckheim’s Homecoming*

The image that we find of “contemporary rural Hungary” in László Krasznahorkai’s novel *Baron Wenckheim’s Homecoming* (2016) is based on the writer’s controversial conception, which draws parallels between Hungarian society of our time and that of the early 20th century. The inhabitants of a 21st-century town are portrayed as if they were stuck a hundred years earlier. In my paper, I seek to analyse the anachronistic structure of time in *Baron Wenckheim’s Homecoming*. In my opinion, the writer’s conception of time defines the fictional world and the narrative structure of the novel decisively. With the help of some examples from the text, I will try to reveal the most important factors which contribute to creating this not entirely convincing illusion of “contemporary rural Hungary” in Krasznahorkai’s work.

JÁNOS SZÁVAI

Dream Narratives in the Hungarian Novel

Dream narratives appear quite naturally in Homer’s *Iliad* and in several books of the Old and New Testaments. A dream is always a message of truth from gods or God. According to G. Lukács, the world of the novel is an ironic world, a world without God. Dreams are not necessary in that world. Nevertheless, some writers, Dostoevsky in the 19th and Thomas Mann in the 20th century, introduce a new kind of dream narrative in their novels. Some contemporary Hungarian writers, such as Miklós Mészöly, Imre Kertész and László Krasznahorkai, do the same, their plots incorporating dream narratives.

KATALIN SZLUKOVÉNYI

“Who Owns the Golden Apples?” – Editorial Notes on Folk Tale Collections by Dr. Csenge Virág Zalka

In the folk tale mentioned in the title, angels and humans fight over the ownership of a garden full of golden apples until the devil takes all the fruit. As the happy editor of Zalka’s several books in Hungarian – including *Ribizli a világ végén*, winner of the Best Book for Children Prize in 2019 awarded by HUBBY (Hungarian Board on Books for Young People) – I see the realm of folk tales as an inexhaustible orchard, where precious new fruit can be harvested every year. While editing her books, however, I also encountered numerous issues of theoretical interest. Who is the author of a folk tale collection? What is the relationship between oral tradition and the written book? Are folk tales only for children? In criticism, are juvenile books treated as literature? In other words: who is the owner of and who can benefit from the bountiful magic orchard of folk tales? My presentation will share certain experiences in the field, articulate some relevant questions, and offer the personal answers with which I work for debate.

DÁVID SZOLLÁTH

Halfway to Success: Miklós Mészöly's Departure for a Western European Career and the Hungarian Literary Émigré Network

Hungarian writer Miklós Mészöly's departure for international success in the second half of the 1960's has been considered as a rare opportunity for Hungarian literature to break out of political reclusion. The paper, as a preparatory research study of Mészöly's literary reception abroad, has three aims. First, it reconstructs the political and administrative obstacles of foreign publication in the times of state-socialism in Hungary. Second, it maps Mészöly's network of personal and literary contacts in Western European countries. Third, it analyzes papers on Mészöly written by three recognized Hungarian writers and literary critics living in exile (Gyula Sipos, Endre Karátson and Győző Határ).

JUDITH SZÖLLŐSY

Péter Esterházy in America: His Reception and Its Whys and Wherefores

Seven of Péter Esterházy's novels have appeared to date in English, as well as numerous short writings, articles, and interviews. Many of these were written expressly for American newspapers and magazines. Esterházy's books were well received in England and Canada, but his greatest success was with American critics, reviewers, and the reading public alike. His *Celestial Harmonies* (*Harmonia caelestis*) was especially well received and secured him a place even on the curricula of three American universities.

The question is: How did Péter Esterházy, whose works Hungarians generally consider untranslatable and his themes too specifically Hungarian, nevertheless achieve such success in the United States? How did his works survive cross-cultural transfer to become the center of interest? And to go one step further, did they need to be transferred at all, or is there something universal in them that speaks to readers on both sides of the Atlantic?

In the twenty minutes allotted, my presentation hopes to address these questions, however briefly.

SZILÁRD TÁTRAI

Suspicious Minds: A Social Cognitive Approach to Géza Ottlik's *School at the Frontier*

Set against the theoretical background of social cognitive pragmatics, this paper addresses the central question as to what directs readers' attention during the construal of the social world of Géza Ottlik's novel, *School at the Frontier* (*Iskola a határon*). By the analysis of alternative ways of creating orientation in the social world of the narrative – besides revealing that two characters (Medve and Bébé) are constantly set in the focus of attention – the paper points out the fact that the centre of the orientation among social relations is shifted to the two characters mentioned above with consistent frequency. The paper outlines that the prevailing of Medve's and Bébé's vantage points is crucial to how social relations are construed. Hence, the functioning of these vantage points initiates different patterns of relations between the individual and the community, solitude and companionship, power and solidarity, involvement and detachment, with all of these patterns mutually relativizing each other, thus inducing different social strategies which also mutually relativize each other.

ANDREA TIMÁR

Female Perpetrators of Dehumanization in Dezső Kosztolányi's *Anna Édes* and Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*

My paper aims to inscribe Dezső Kosztolányi's *Anna Édes* into world literary scholarship by arguing that the novel can be read as a paradigmatic and perhaps paradigm setting literary presentation of the domestic, ordinary, and eminently female perpetrator of dehumanization. First, I outline the theoretical framework, inspired by the work of Simona Forti, that helps us examine literary representations of ordinary perpetrators of dehumanization and establish their difference from both criminals and perpetrators of genocides. Then I compare *Anna Édes* to

Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing*, which, at first sight, seems to constitute a world apart. However, I show how both novels stage female perpetration in a typical domestic setting, foregrounding some displaced or misplaced sense of intimacy, and how both present, albeit differently, the revolt of silent victims, who eventually turn into murderers.

FREDERIK VAN DAM

“Az európai ember sértődötten élt”: The Reception of Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892) in Sándor Márai's *Sirály* (1943)

Since the turn of the century, scholars of modernist literature have turned their attention to literary engagements with ethical cosmopolitanism. Defined as the cultivation of detachment from one's main cultural affiliations, ethical cosmopolitanism is a way of being that contributes to the pursuit of perpetual peace. Rebecca Walkowitz (2006) suggests that certain modernist novels articulated this form of cosmopolitanism, insofar as they expressed scepticism about political commitments to a national culture through the use of particular stylistic techniques, including wandering consciousness, paratactic syntax, recursive plotting, collage, and portmanteau language. In a related vein, Jessica Berman (2001) has demonstrated how modernists rejected the notion of the nation-state and instead imagined alternative communal affiliations. In spite of their interest in world citizenship, many of these scholars are mainly concerned with English literature and the English-speaking world; a reference to Proust usually suffices to make their work relevant to European literature. In the present paper, I aim to recontextualize their findings by examining how ethical cosmopolitanism is articulated in a work of Hungarian literature, Sándor Márai's *Sirály* (1943). As the citizen of a multi-ethnic collective of various nations, as a journalist who had reported on European affairs, and as a member of liberal institutions such as the La Fontaine Society, Márai may be considered as an advocate of cosmopolitan ideals. Even before the onset of World War II, however, the failure of these ideals had become apparent. *Sirály*, I would argue, can be read as a reflection on this failure. The novel's protagonist is a high-ranking civil servant, who is about to execute an order that will result in a declaration of war, and who ruminates extensively on the European question and European culture. The novel embeds these ruminations in a story that, so I intend to show, is modelled on Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892). In my contribution to the colloquium, I will examine the intersection between the cosmopolitan reflections in *Sirály* and the concern with nostalgia in *Bruges-la-Morte*, which may shed some new light on our understanding of the relationship between fin-de-siècle aestheticism and modernist cosmopolitanism. In contrast to an influential view that modernism transformed the transgressions of aestheticism into new, violent artistic practices (Sheehan 2013, Evers 2013), Márai's work shows that these transgressions could also be marshalled into the service of peace.

EDIT ZSADÁNYI

Posthuman Perspectives in László Krasznahorkai's *From the North a Mountain, from the South a Lake, from the West Some Roads, from the East a River*

The international reception of Krasznahorkai's work clearly shows that the author is capable of mediating Central European heritage for a globalizing world. In my view, this capacity is closely connected to the fact that his sense of Eastern Europe is defined by its relationship to both Western Europe and the Far East. In my presentation, concentrating on the universal aspects of his fiction, I wish to call attention to the importance of the concept of posthumanism in understanding László Krasznahorkai's works. Analyzing the novel *From the North a Mountain, from the South a Lake, from the West some Roads, from the East a River*, I will focus on how the textually represented world about searching for a mysterious garden is transformed into a materially sensible entity. I will illustrate that the novel's key concepts are in accordance with some key posthuman principles, as they emphasize not the difference but the common features between mankind and its social and natural environment.