

Theses of doctoral dissertation (PhD)

The Representation of Society in Gypsy Tales

**Comparative Analysis of Gypsy Folk Texts from
Spain and the Carpathian Basin**

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I. Theme and Objectives of the Dissertation

The topic of my doctoral research is a textual hermeneutics study of traditional folk narratives collected from Gypsy communities settled down in Spain and the Carpathian Basin, intending to point out specific features, parallels, and differences regarding the method of text construction and the technique of storytelling, the moral worldview, social norms, cohabitation rules and cultural patterns as they are reflected in the narratives. The dissertation aims to explore and formulate relevant conclusions from the analysis of some phenomena (purity-impurity, fidelity-infidelity, love-incest, etc.), general ethnological-sociological features that appear in two Gypsy folk tale corpus whose difference derives from the fact that they have linkage with distinct local/ethnic communities, traditions, language and the horizon of expectations.

Although folklore scholars agree that nowadays we can hardly talk about unified Gypsy folk culture, in other words, the Gypsy culture living in Europe is highly diversified; due to the consciousness of their former common origin, geographically and historically distant communities still carry some identical social and cultural characteristics. Some of these features are a psychological bond derived from a common historical origin; cohesion and mutual acceptance between different Roma groups in terms of their language and traditions; social structure based on solidarity between community members; the same economic and survival strategies, the marginal social existence experienced together; community justice based on a similar mentality; the value of age and individual experience (on which community status is based); respect for the dead and the belief that the dead can interfere in the lives of their descendants; and group definition based on Gypsy-non-Gypsy dichotomy. These are the essential sociocultural phenomena referring to the shared Gypsy character, making a comparative analysis between the two folk-narrative corpuses possible.

II. The Delimitation of the Theme

Although the folk tale itself does not have a canonized definition unanimously accepted by the research society, universal and Hungarian folklore did not reach a unified position in the exact definition of the gypsy tale. The attempts and approaches to the definition of the gypsy tale in the Hungarian area were determined by the theses of József Vekerdi until a few decades ago. In his work entitled *The Gypsy Folk Tale*, published in 1974, Vekerdi

questioned the originality and the possible interpretation of gypsy tales as an independent category. He devoted an entire subchapter to the lack of traditions of the Gypsies, arguing, among other things, that the Gypsy communities did not have their own culture due to their material and intellectual deprivation; they only took over cultural elements from peoples who came in contact during migration but replaced them a few generations later. Following Vekerdi's statements, based on new results of the systematic gypsy tale research that began in the 1970s, many researchers responded to these claims and tried to consistently refute them (Veronika Görög-Karády, Olga Nagy, Károly Bari, Péter Bálint). In her argument, Veronika Görög-Karády emphasized the uncertainty in the general sense around the originality of folklore works. She also pointed out the natural process of formation of folk cultures, in which acquisition, borrowing, transmission, and transformation played a decisive role. She also emphasized that precisely because of their social isolation, Roma had the opportunity to preserve and pass on their traditional culture for centuries. Although there is a close connection and a high degree of similarity between the folk tales of the Roma communities and the majority societies, Görög-Karády believed that the independence of the gypsy folk tale material through their narrative and transitive specifics had become an increasingly recognized fact. This fact is especially actual in the case of narratives presented in Gypsy languages in front of a Gypsy storytelling community. The classification of which is not a problem in Görög-Karády's opinion, since language is decisive in defining the European folk tale, we can talk about the Italian, German, French or Hungarian variant of a folk tale type. It should be noted that stories told in Hungarian by Gypsy storytellers have long not been considered a separate category by the folk tale researchers; however, recent decades' results in Gypsy folk tale analysis encourage folklorists to do more research when they undertake to define Gypsy tale or, failing that, to describe it.

Gypsy folk tale researchers reveal general Gypsy storytelling specifics related to worldviews and interpretations arising from the individual and the local community. Some folklorists mention as almost an indisputable fact that, from a genre point of view, fairy tales/heroic tales were primarily liked by Gypsy storytellers; the hero/heroine comes from a poor background, and he/she frequently starts his/her journey from a Gypsy shanty on the edge of the village; the hero/heroine is not afraid of expressing his/her feelings (cries, shouts, gets sad, etc.); the "táltos" (magic horse) appears as a helper with whom the protagonist has an intimate relationship; the curse and being cursed are reiterated motifs; it is not rare that parents act violently, cruelly, or even sanguinary against their children; sometimes the tale does not have a happy ending, and even the hero/heroine can be definitively punished or murdered, or

elements of the ancient belief, such as the women of destiny or the chief god, Devla, appear. Another folklorist topos is that the gypsy storytellers placed great emphasis on enhancing adventures; the construction (configuration) of folktale narratives is characterized by the interchange, combination and/or contamination of motifs and episodes, resulting in a large number of variants and often invariants that cannot be classified in folk tale catalogs. It is also noticeable that the stories told by Gypsy storytellers combine the fantastic, mythical elements of the unreal/fictional folktale world with the realistic notions of everyday reality and the achievements of technical development in an almost entirely natural way. The “Scheherazade-technique”, i.e., the “fairy tale in the fairy tale” compositional tool, also occurs in large numbers in gypsy tales.

I considered the narrowing of the genre as a primary aspect during the selection of the folktales; the choice is also justified by the already mentioned characteristic feature of gypsy storytelling, i.e., the emphasis on heroic/fairy tales – so for the forthcoming analysis, I chose mainly from the ATU 300–749 folktale types.

Regarding the Spanish scene, the primary sources of the dissertation are the representative works of gypsy folklore in northern Spain: the narratives from an individual storyteller's collection entitled *Cuentos maravillosos de un gitano navarro* [Magic tales of a Gypsy from Navarre] (2008) and the narratives of a regional collection entitled *Cuentos populares de los gitanos españoles* (2011) [Folk tales of Spanish gypsies]. These narratives were narrated and recorded in Spanish due to the centuries of language loss suffered by Spanish gypsies. As the selected Spanish gypsy tales can be delineated relatively well in a regional sense, suggesting some characteristic uniformity, I also tried to narrow the selection geographically in the case of gypsy narratives collected in the Carpathian Basin. Thus, in the end, I focused on texts recorded in Gypsy language and published in Hungarian translation in the Oláh Gypsy communities living in the Trans-Tisza region. The collections used in the analysis are *A cigány meg a sárkány. Püspökladányi cigány mesék* (1974) [The Gypsy and the Dragon. Gypsy Tales of Püspökladány]; Oláh Gypsy texts of the first volume of *Cigány nyelvjárási népmesék* (1985) [Gypsy Dialect Folk Tales]; *Az erdő anyja. Cigány népmesék és néphagyományok* (1990) [Mother of the forest. Gypsy Folk Tales and Traditions]; *Az üvegtemplom. Cigány népmesék* (1994) [The glass church. Gypsy Folk Tales]; *Lujza meséi* (1999) [Tales of Lujza]; and folk tales from the third volume of *Régi cigány szótárak és folklór szövegek* (2013) [Old Gypsy Dictionaries and Folklore Texts]. At the same time, for the sake of a broader comparison, Hungarian and Transylvanian Gypsy tales and volumes, also narrated in Gypsy language, were included in the scope of the study: *A nap húga meg a*

pakulár. Marosmenti, kalotaszegi és mezősegi mesék (1973) [The sister of the sun and the pakulár. Tales from Marosmenti, Kalotaszeg and Mezőség] collected by Olga Nagy, and a bilingual volume of Gypsy tales from Transylvania entitled A gömböcfiú. Erdélyi cigány mesék (2002) [The Spherical Boy. Gypsy tales from Transylvania] collected by Olga Nagy and József Vekerdi.

III. The Theoretical Approach of the Dissertation and the Applied Methods

One possible approach to revealing the ethnic characteristics, worldview, value system and moral canon of Gypsy communities is an analysis based on a close reading of the narratives. One of the essential functions of traditional storytelling is to make social reality understandable and processable, which is supplemented by the narrator's personal – and through it the community's – reflection on the local society, inserted into the texts. During the text construction, the storyteller was able to recall, among other things, the centuries-old local tradition and adapt it to the audience's horizon of expectations. According to his/her creative (or just reproducing) talent, the final results are unique folktale variants, which reflect the community's collective knowledge, the system of ethical-moral norms, and the sociocultural world surrounding them.

The objective of the dissertation, i.e., the exploration and analysis of certain ethnological phenomena in Spanish and Oláh Gypsy folk tales, requires taking an interpretive position. According to the textual hermeneutic approach, I conduct an interpretive practice based on a close reading of narratives; therefore, I examine hidden or unspoken meanings in the texts. Thus, the first theoretical column of the dissertation is the hermeneutic study developed by Paul Ricœur, who developed a methodology for interpreting written texts. Ricœur seeks to decipher the layers of meaning, primary and secondary meanings, of symbols during the hermeneutic interpretation process. The dissertation's other theoretical pillar is the interpretation of the reflections on sociocultural-ethical-moral contexts inserted in the texts by the storyteller, from which we can deduce some characteristics of the representation of the local society. In other words, the research method in which folk tales are assumed as socio-narratives comes to the fore. Following the methodology of the Budapest school (research on individuality in folklore), the comparison of the collected socio-ethnographic data about the storyteller and his/her community with the recorded folklore texts made it clear that storytellers often used the techniques of localization, adaptation and updating. They did so in

order to make the centuries-old material understandable and close to experience; to convey a kind of knowledge about the world; and to make sure that storytelling can fulfil its primary socializing function, that is, to remember the ethical canon, moral norms and the basic rules of cohabitation. In addition, through narratives, they wanted to pass on fate-solving formulas applicable in everyday life to members of the younger generation, interpret the world around them, and provide entertainment. As a result, storytellers have created individual variants, which provide a particular representation of society.

The problem of the traditional folk tale as an “authentic source” on the way of thinking and living of a social group can be solved from an interdisciplinary approach: in the present dissertation, I compare the primary texts – the Gypsy narratives – with secondary sources in socio-ethnography, cultural anthropology, sociology and history. Both the narratives and secondary sources contain information on the everyday life and social organization of Roma communities; thus, the texts and their interpretations support and complement each other, and in some respects, the conclusions that can be drawn from the textual analysis may shed new light on previous scientific statements.

IV. The Structure of the Dissertation

On the one hand, I examine the plots, episodes, and motifs that compose the gypsy folk tales' structure; on the other hand, the linguistic expressions and different modes of speech available in narratives; and the texts' metaphorical and symbolic system. The interpretation consists of three central thematic units, through which, I assume, the essential connections between social functioning and world interpretation can be demonstrated.

(1) The peculiarity of the folktale world is the follow-up of the life of the hero/heroine – usually from birth to the wedding – therefore, the dissertation begins with the examination of the individual level, where I compare the male and female gender role expectations, the related ethical-moral norms, expected behaviours, and assigned roles that, despite their universal nature, shed light on the specifics of the local communities.

(2) In traditional folk tales, the family that forms the basis of the Christian norms is the socializing micro-world, where the hero/heroine acquires the primary gender roles and norms of behaviour, and later, by following them correctly, he/she can become a member accepted by the community. The actions of the hero/heroine often gain meaning in the relationships of the family scene; the relationship with the parents and siblings or the lack or deterioration of

these relations fundamentally determine his/her fate. Therefore, the second thematic block moves within the family as a micro-space. It interprets fundamental human relationships, interactions and conflicts such as the solidarity between family members, the division of labour within the family, modified roles and internal dynamics due to family crises and the ancient incest taboo.

(3) In the third central unit of the dissertation, I compare the different shapes of 'Other' and the situational interpretations of 'otherness' that appear on the scene of a macro world beyond the community's borders. Leaving the family nest, the hero/heroine embarks on a road full of adventures in countless folk tales, where he/she must face the question of 'Otherness', he/she experiences the feeling of exposure to an unknown and at the same time fearful world, and must learn to respond to the call of the unknown/fearsome being. I intend to prove that only if the hero/heroine interprets the unknown situations correctly and answers to the stranger/counsellor adequately will he/she perform the (difficult) tasks successfully, give a credible account of his/her aptitude, win the hand of the companion assigned to him/her and fulfil his/her destiny.

The dissertation has the following structure: each chapter begins with a theoretical introduction, in which I describe the conceptual and theoretical framework required for the textual analysis of the given topic. The selected theories are based on concepts developed in social ethnography, ethnography, folklore and cultural anthropology. A specific text analysis follows based on the selected thematic unit, where the primary and secondary sources are compared and combined. This interpretive task terminates with some conclusions about the ethnological and sociocultural phenomena of the Spanish and the Hungarian Oláh Roma communities. These results raise the methodological and etno/literary hermeneutical questions of whether there is a marked difference between (1) the representation of society reflected in the narratives that form the folktale corpus of the majority society and that of the Gypsy communities; (2) the narrators' configuration act and oral performance; (3) between the worldview of the narratives and everyday life's moral norms, mainly because the representatives of the Roma communities try to meet the expectations and topos of the majority society.

V. Argument-like Enumeration of the Results

1. Since the systematic collection of Gypsy tales began in the second half of the 20th century, prominent scholars of the Gypsy oral tradition have emphasized the importance of more exhaustive comparative textual studies. However, specified research, at least in the Spanish-Hungarian context, has hardly taken place so far; the novelty of the dissertation is that it attempted this comparison.
2. Although folklorists carried out researches about the relationship between folk tales and reality, emphasizing the narrator's reflection on the society surrounding him/her, the holistic and detailed presentation of the society reflected in Hungarian folk narration, or as Ortutay put it, "the peasant world", is still awaiting. The idea of the dissertation was inspired by this suggestion, which can also be called a research program, where I intended to analyze only one segment of the society, the Gypsy culture. With its results, the dissertation seeks to promote the spread of new research directions in the study of Gypsy folk tales as well as prove inventive to the scientific discourse of folklore in both methodological and disciplinary terms.
3. The dissertation considered as its starting point a specific storytelling technique: in order to relate universal folktale motifs and topos, the storyteller found inspiration in his/her own life, the daily operation of the community, the social-cultural-economic structure of the society and traditions; this was the point of reference which helped the audience interpret the narrative. Regarding the topic of social background, the folk texts reflect the everyday reality of the storyteller – and his/her community – which most often corresponds to the rural social reality. The narratives tell eloquently about the traditional livelihood, economic strategies and living conditions of the Gypsies, the social value judgment determined by ethnicity and/or economic position, the social hierarchy, and the social status interpretation by which the Gypsy is despised or marginalized.
4. When the tale as a socio-narrative differs from ethnographic and cultural anthropological secondary sources' description of Roma communities, the reason for discrepancy should be sought in the following explanations. On the one hand, in order to fulfil the happy ending and the „image of desire” function of the folktale, the narrator tried to alleviate the misery of the Gypsy audience at least for the time of storytelling, he/she sought to relieve the feelings of rejection and injustice they had

constantly experienced in the real world by allowing in this fictitious world the social mobilization and recognition that had proved almost utterly unimaginable in the ordinary world. On the other hand, the reason for the discrepancy can be explained by the narrator's adaptation to the values and perceptions of the majority society, as the approach to the Hungarian/Spanish – sometimes an actual identification – promised them a way out of their marginal existence and acceptance. The Gypsies' role as service providers and workers at shortage occupations, the interethnic coexistence, the cultural interference, or to measure up to the possible Hungarian/Spanish storytelling audience inevitably resulted in including in the folk narratives elements that characterized more likely the social and cultural organization of the majority society as of the Gypsies'. At the same time, we must not forget that the storyteller could only weave a motif, episode, value judgment into his/her stories that the audience agreed with; otherwise, they would have voiced their evident displeasure and spoken to the narrator under community control.

5. As for the similarity between the two scenes, we can state that folklore texts acted as a socialization mechanism in the two Gypsy communities. The narratives helped to recall and memorize the valid role expectations, the criteria of norm-conforming behaviour or the reactions and sanctions caused by opposing the norms. In other words, the audience was able to draw examples from narratives to follow, in addition to mastering survival strategies applicable in everyday life. In a detailed analysis of each topic, I pointed out that the texts collected from the Spanish and Oláh Roma communities reflect value judgments based on a similar schema, there is a high degree of agreement on the required role expectations and behaviours, gender ideals often coincide and are consistent in terms of mediated social and cultural patterns.
6. At this point in the summary, we can ask the extent to which the ethnological and sociocultural phenomena studied in Spanish and Oláh Gypsy folk tales are different, and where is it appropriate to look for the cause of this discrepancy? In the light of the comparative study, it can be stated that the most striking difference was in the formation of the group alien, as in the Spanish scene, this role was primarily played by the Moor with a different language, cultural customs and religious traditions. The storytellers used consciously chosen linguistic figures to describe it and reinforced this enemy image at the plot level, according to which, due to their diabolical character, these figures wanted to harm the hero/heroine. Although the Turkish is well known in the Carpathian Basin's folklore, in the Oláh Gypsy texts, the Jews, in particular,

appeared in the figure of the alien group, who, through their deception and evil deeds, also sought to bring about the fall of the hero/heroine. Considering the technique of storytelling, in these narratives, storytellers often used the method of incorporating ethnic stereotypes projected onto Judaism. However, this Jew image was supplemented in many places by a sociocultural Other's realistic depiction inspired by the multiethnic coexistence of the Carpathian Basin. At the same time, an authentic presentation of these sociocultural relations cannot be discovered in Spanish gypsy tales, although history has resulted in many centuries of ethnic coexistence in the Iberian Peninsula. The difference in the representation of the group alien should be sought above all in the different geographical locations of the two Gypsy communities, as the specific historical-political-socio-economic factors characteristic of each location formed a different imprint on the everyday reality of Gypsy communities. Naturally, as Spanish and Hungarian folklorists pointed out, we must not forget that until their expulsion in 1492, Jewish communities played an active role in the Iberian Peninsula's society resulting in several examples of a Jewish figure in Spanish folklore texts. Such is the case with the Moorish/Turkish, which is also well known in the folk tales of the Carpathian Basin. Nevertheless, to understand why these forms of 'Other' were left out or lost protagonism in the Spanish and Oláh Gypsy texts, targeted folkloristic, historical, and sociocultural studies should be conducted at the level of the respective local societies.

7. In the introduction of the dissertation, I pointed out the issue of recounting the peculiarities of gypsy storytelling. However, the examined texts do not fully cover the Spanish, and even less so the Gypsy folktale corpus in the Carpathian Basin, so I can hardly dare to make general conclusions based on a few case studies; overall, this interpretation pointed to some characteristic features, which can be linked to the gypsy storytelling and tradition. The syncretic character that fundamentally determines Gypsy culture can be applied to the description of their narratives in the same way: the narrative tools, motifs and symbols of the archaic worldview, the ancient tradition and the folk belief typical of the Gypsies – such as binary opposition, unique variants/invariants, the adventures of the cursed hero/heroine, horror, violence or the tragic end – are combined with external elements like the liturgical features of the Christian religion, the interpretation derived from the Christian moral canon, and the value judgment of the majority society. At the same time, a complete systematic comparison of the Gypsy textual character would require further comparative analysis,

which compares the repertoire of each Gypsy storyteller with the Hungarian/Spanish oral tradition of the given local society. It would be expedient to focus on the similarities and differences between the folk tales told by Gypsies and Hungarian/Spanish storytellers living in the same local community, and to find out to what extent they correspond to the narrative tradition of the community in terms of text creation technique, symbol system or world interpretation. In addition, it would be advisable to look at the most common folk tale types to find out the possible ethnic characteristics in addition to universal plots and topos. However, this task can only be accomplished in the context of future research.

8. The limited nature of the corpus also means that I should be cautious about the role of the Roma in preserving and creating a culture in general; however, the results of the dissertation will hopefully be sufficient to list some indisputable merits. Due to the marginal existence derived from their socio-economic position, folklorists had witnessed the practice of live storytelling in Gypsy communities even when it was already a rare occurrence in the majority society. In the early 2000s, perhaps they had the opportunity to locate the last Spanish Gypsy storytellers. The last decades' individual repertoires and regional gypsy folktale collection publications inform us about the memorable role that the Gypsies played in the survival and transmission of national and European folk tales. On the other hand, they also prove that this group is undeniably involved in creating national and international culture through new folkloristic works. I hope this study has contributed to overruling and changing some of the topos and possible prejudices against Gypsies and will inspire more “unbiased” research.
9. When the examination of the individual Oláh Gypsy folktale narratives made it necessary, both geographically and ethnically, I included in my analysis variants of other Gypsy communities belonging to the same tale type: this also helped to make the similarities and differences more pronounced.
10. In my research, I had to face the difficulty of examining linguistic expressions arising from live storytelling, which mainly arose from the translation and transcription of the texts. It is well known that translation, “transport” between languages, always means some level of distortion, explanation, so in the case of Oláh Gypsy narratives, I could only rely on the intention of the translator (who is sometimes a folklorist, a collector) who tried to be faithful to the original content. Thus, it is troublesome to decide the

constitutive power of the original meaning(s) of each word and their modification through translation.

11. The research of Oláh Gypsy and Gypsy narratives, in general, would be significantly easier if, in addition to Károly Bari, the creator of a monumental oeuvre, other researchers of Gypsy origin examined the extensive (sometimes unpublished or untranslated) folk text tradition from different theoretical and field approaches. They could provide accurate explanations of “facts” and linguistic references unknown or indecipherable to outsiders, which ultimately could deepen our sociocultural, ethical and textual knowledge about Gypsy storytelling. The researcher also feels the lack of this when writing a dissertation of this kind.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian book chapters (6)

1. **Bálint, Z.:** Bevezetés.

In: Koleszár Ferenc mesél: Egy zempléni pásztozember meséi. Szerk.: Bálint Zsuzsa, Balassi Kiadó, Budapest, 9-40, 2021, (Magyar Népköltészet Tára, ISSN 1587-3463 ; 19) ISBN: 9789634560922

2. **Bálint, Z.:** Az idegen kép értelmezése a cigány népmesében.

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3. **Bálint, Z.:** A cinkotai kántor meséje: az atu 922-es mese cigány és magyar változatainak szöveghermeneutikai vizsgálat.

In: Hunyadi Mátyás és kora / Bárány Attila, Kavecsánszki Máté, Pósn László, Takács Levente, Kapitális Kft., Debrecen, 107-117, 2019, 978-963-508-916-1 ISBN: 9789635089161

4. **Bálint, Z.:** Az 'idegen' reprezentációi: a közösségünkben élő Másik a spanyol és magyar cigány népmesékben.

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7. **Bálint, Z.:** The Representation of the World Wars and Their Consequences in the Folk Narratives.
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8. **Bálint, Z.:** "Folktales with interspersed songs" - comparative analysis of the Singing Bone tale type
in some Spanish and Hungarian Gypsy variants.
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of Romology. Szerk.: Tóth Norbert, Didakt Kft., Debrecen, 265-279, 2018, (Studia
Cingarorum, ISSN 2416-0970 ; 5.) ISBN: 9786155212666

Foreign language scientific articles in international journals (1)

9. **Bálint, Z.:** El papel de la mujer en los cuentos populares gitanos: Un análisis comparativo entre el
corpus español y el húngaro.
Boletín de Literatura Oral 11, 147-171, 2021. ISSN: 2173-0695.
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/11.17561/blo.v11.6004>

List of other publications

Hungarian books (1)

10. Szerk. Bálint, P., **Bálint, Z.:** "azé küdött az Isten ide hozzátk, hogy segíjék rajtatok": példázatok
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11. Szerk. **Bálint, Z.,** Lukácsné Marinka, M.: Popular Culture and War. MTA-DE Néprajzi
Kutatócsoport, Debrecen, 192 p., 2020. (Ethnographica et Folkloristica Carpathica, ISSN
0139-0600 ; 22.) ISBN: 9789634902577

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12. **Bálint, Z.:** A szegénység elbeszélhetősége: A pauperizáció reprezentációja az első világháború
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14. **Bálint, Z.:** A XX. század nagy háborúit követő hatások leképződése a népi elbeszélésben: A
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15. **Bálint, Z.:** Előszó.
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