

Theses of PhD Dissertation

On the reef of life on the peripheries

Dynamics of strangeness in the novels of István Szilágyi

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I. Topic, goals of the thesis

In my doctoral thesis titled *On the reef of life on the peripheries – Dynamics of strangeness in the novels of István Szilágyi* I review the novelist career of a significant author of twentieth century and contemporary Hungarian literature, focusing on a perspective which has been less studied in the literature, so far, namely, the dynamics of strangeness.

The choice of topic was justified by several premises. Not the least personal involvement, since I have been living in the region of Ukraine named Sub-Carpathia since I was born, in a Hungarian-speaking small settlement that belonged to several states as changes of history, turns of fate went by. Everyday experience was the first that made me face the complexity and problems of my own identity, the boundaries of my native language, the difficulties of learning multiple foreign languages used in my direct environment, the challenges of cultural differences and coexistence. I think this specific minority situation sets a distance, prospect and perspective for me from which the structure of contemporary all-Hungarian culture and literature is presented differently than looking at it from Hungary or from other foreign regions.

The shift in literary studies called culture science shift revealed several new approaches, issues, considering which literary analyses focusing on text and following the method of close reading may be enriched further. The strangeness studies in culture studies, a.k.a. xenology, the main perspectives of which I myself consider in my thesis, which mostly became an independent scientific field in the second half of the twentieth century, gained attention due to undoubtedly new and productive perspectives.

The dissertation primarily focuses on the novelist career of István Szilágyi. The analyses intend to prove that the dynamics of strangeness has a recurrently important role in the novels, shaping perspectives and also dealing with structural issues. To support this, I analyze the five novels published so far in separate chapters, following a chronological order (*Üllő, dobszó, haring* [Anvils, Drums, Bells]; *Kő hull apadó kútba* [Stone Falls in a Dwindling Well]; *Agancsbozót* [Thicket of Antlers]; *Hollóidő* [Time of Ravens]; *Messze túl a láthatáron* [Far

Beyond the Horizon). The structure of the PhD thesis basically approaches the text of the Szilágyi novels so that after the introductory thoughts and drafting the theoretical framework it focuses on the short summary of reception and impact history, the interaction of the novels and the previous texts and mostly on text analyses.

II. Methods applied in the thesis

Reading Szilágyi – as Péter Szirák calls the reception history narrative in its study titled *Példázatok a szabadság nélküli rend fokozatairól* (*Parables on the stages of order without freedom*) – has a quite rich tradition in contemporary Hungarian literature. For this reason I had to forego the idea of creating a synthesis, dealing with all the aspects of the career and the need for a monography so I could study the issues which I finally made the focus of my thesis in a more detailed manner. I prepared reviews of impact and reception history before the analyses, for which the monographies published about the author earlier (Béla Mester, *Hatalom, ember, technika Szilágyi István prózájában* [*Power, human, technology in the prose of István Szilágyi*], Budapest, Kijárat Kiadó, 2004. and Béla Márkus, *Szilágyi István*, Budapest, MMA, 2018.) provided a great help in addition to the studies, criticisms found in magazines, (collection) volumes.

Therefore, I endeavored to interpret the text and to reread the novelist's works, which naturally drew in certain questions of hermeneutics in the interpretative horizon. So, I studied the explanations, theoretical insights of the fundamental work of Hans-Georg Gadamer titled *Truth and Method* dealing with strangeness and prejudice in short, from the perspective of how such explanations, insights have a fertilizing effect today on studying strangeness. This is an important task also because in my experience the contemporary, mostly German oriented xenology (primarily represented in the essay by the studies of Alois Wierlacher and volumes he edited) has a quite strained relationship with Gadamerian hermeneutics. The study-grade recension of Pál S. Varga titled *Idegenségtudomány* (*Xenology*) and the study of Ernő Kulcsár Szabó titled *A különbözés megértése, avagy olvashatók-e az irodalom kulturális kódjai* (*Understanding being different or are the cultural codes of literature legible*) helped me in the theoretical release of the tension.

In the course of my analyses my starting point was the perceptive principle worded by Wierlacher that strangeness is not just a secondary or

peripheral matter of scientific, aesthetic or communicative nature but a central problem in the relationship system between humans and their own culture. However, I had to face the problem that the interdisciplinary literature related to xenology, which by now expanded to the size of a library, is extremely divergent. Because of this, I primarily considered those books, studies to be relevant from the perspective of my thesis with the help of which I could connect to the Szilágyi novels.

In the course of the novel analyses the direction of my questions were set by three basic questions. In his volume *A „Mi” és a „Másik”, Az idegen megértésének tudománytörténeti vázlata az antropológiában a 19. század második felétől napjainkig* (*“The “Us” and the “Other”, The science history framework of understanding the strange in anthropology from the second half of the 19th century until today”*), Gábor Biczó studies contemporary forms of understanding related to strangeness, the other by answering three questions. These are, in order, as follows:

- a) Who is the “Other”?
- b) Where is the “Other”?
- c) When is the “Other”?

Without dealing more thoroughly with the crisis of knowledge representation and the critical shift in anthropology, these issues can be connected to literary analyses as well, after some modification. The term *chronotopos* introduced in the study of Mihail Bahtin titled *Time and Space in the Novel* almost automatically offers itself for the questions of *when* and *where*. In my opinion the interaction, continuous change of time and space follows a specific formal and content dynamics in the analyzed novels, causing chronotopical movement. I try to grab this movement. The question pertaining to *who* – of course in a manner not separable from space and time – can be projected to literary figures appearing in the novels. Changes, often distortions of their personality, the representation, construction and deconstruction of identities, experiences of meetings with the other, or in a more abstract manner, with strangeness, can be studied the most by asking this question. In my opinion the

questions pertaining to *who*, *where* and *when*, borrowed from contemporary anthropology, can hold the experiences of strangeness revealed in the course of analyses together, at the same time providing free enough dynamics to bring the different interpretations of strangeness into play.

The book of the philosopher-writer Julia Kristeva (she is of Bulgarian origin but mostly writes in French) titled *Strangers to Ourselves*, had a productive effect on the dissertation due to the historic synopsis of the problem and due to facing the boundaries of metaphorical and conceptual language. It is an important perceptual innovation of Kristeva that she emphasizes shifting the discourse on strangeness to the problem of the own as strange – as a premise it appears in several of my novel analyses.

The study of Homi K. Bhabha (considered to be a representative of postcolonial criticism) titled *The Issue of the Other: Stereotype, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism* was unavoidable primarily because of its concept of stereotype. It was based on its twin concepts (like for example diversity and difference, metaphor and metonym, negation and negotiation, location and locution) that I took the concept of being bound further related to the ideological construct of otherness, stereotype. I assigned being unbound to being bound and being fixed, which thus provided a theoretical handle for prioritizing the expectation worded by József Imre Balázs (the reader expects from literature to dislodge stereotypes) when analyzing the relationships of literary figures between each other in the novel *Üllő, dobszó, harang* (*Anvils, Drums, Bells*).

The book of Bernhard Waldenfels titled *Borders of normalization, Studies on the phenomenology of the strange* is important because of emphasizing the bodily self, the experienced inner space and references to the strange, when I interpret traumas written in the body concerning the female protagonist of *Kő hull apadó kútba* (*Stone Falls in a Dwindling Well*), Ilka Szendy, who falls outside of the order. The analysis considering the multiplication of the personality is based on the concept of the ghostly (*unheimlich*) introduced by Sigmund Freud and the dynamics of unconscious as taken further by Julia Kristeva.

The “potential wanderer” from the writing of Georg Simmel titled *Excursion about the stranger* provided a conceptual foundation for analyzing the world of the novel placed between the real and the absurd and mainly the special character of *Agancsbozót [Thicket of antlers]* and his changing identity. Analyzing the motif of the camera and the references to movies, movie analyses throughout the novel helped to reveal the frame narrative.

I start the strangeness perceived in *Hollóidő (Time of Ravens)* first and foremost by detailing the problem of literature and historiography, thus after presenting the criticism of Hayden White concerning factuality and fictionality (*Metahistory*) I discuss the definition problems of the historical novel based on characteristics found in one study each by Mihály Szegedy-Maszák (*Történelem és/vagy regény [History and/or novel]*) and Péter Szirák (*Történelem nem volt, hanem lesz, A kortárs magyar történelmi regény változatairól [History was not, but will be; On the variants of the contemporary historical novel]*), respectively. Afterwards I analyze the concepts of writing, barbarism, orphanhood appearing in the novel, considering the latest media and culture science researches and the relevant parts of the monography of Béla Mester. Finally, I reveal the connection points of secret and strangeness concerning the latest Szilágyi-novel, *Messze túl a láthatáron (Far Beyond the Horizon)*. In this the analysis of Gáspár Gróh based on the method of operation of poetics, metaphysics of the secret (Gáspár Gróh, *A titok poétikája és metafizikája (1. rész) [Poetics and Metaphysics of the Secret (Part 1)]*, Kortárs, 2020/9., (2. rész), Kortárs, 2020/10.) provided methodological help primarily. Connecting secret and strangeness revealed several such characteristics concerning the special character, Mátyás Tompay Wajtha, on which my interpretation could be built.

III. Results of the thesis

Every novel of István Szilágyi published so far got its place in the doctoral thesis: each chapter is built on the detailed analysis of the problems posed by one of the novels. Interpretations closely following the text revealed a multitude of examples and arguments concerning that strangeness in the texts of István Szilágyi is not a peripheral issue – although in the literature so far it was a less studied phenomenon – but a characteristic promoting rereading, reinterpretation.

Concerning the first novel, *Üllő, dobszó, harang*, which was critically quite underappreciated and can be almost called forgotten I argue that due to the experimental nature of the narrative, the multiple levels of narrators, the time management and the relationship of the characters with each other – although it undoubtedly shows familiarities with the novel *Kő hull apadó kútba* – the novel can be read, appreciated not as a first draft (like for example Béla Mester does) but as an independent work. Revealing the strangeness-experiences only strengthens this view. Mapping the relationship of the literary figures between each other (for example the relationship system between Anna Gencsi and Feri Vura, Priest Béla, Gábor Önyey, Teri Tárnok) allows the conclusion that the teacher moving to Gidrány not only did not become a local during the not too long time she spent there, but stubbornly kept her strangeness all the while, and the community only watched, followed her activity in the village that far with distant respect. Concerning the appearance of the newcomer, the deserter, we can argue that the converging of two strangers (for each other and for their environment) can be observed: both protagonists, Anna Gencsi and István Karatna are fleeing from their own past, and can only find refuge in each other's proximity, even if the man is a potential source of danger for Anna. Thus, the situation in the novel is the following: the stranger woman takes the stranger man into her temporary home towards the end of the war. After the rape attempt, they become estranged, but in the last chapter of the novel they emphasize discussion, understanding each other. Prejudices, stereotypes start to dissolve in

conversation, truths that seem rigid get amended. At the same time the questions in the world of the novel of the writer posed by existential uncertainty and anxiety that dislodge stereotypes and prejudices become more important than the potential and relative answers given to them.

In the most well-known novel of Szilágyi titled *Kő hull apadó kútba* Jajdon appears as the conservator of order and values. Thus, this location conveys the image of the circular nature and ceaseless cycle of time towards the reader. Past is permanently present in the now, just as the present cannot get free from the shadow of the past, taken captive by past events. The one who, despite all that, attempts to break out, will have their life made impossible or ridiculed by the strict order. In the narrative present of the novel this world is ready to be destroyed. The family heritage of Ilka Szendy, considered to be substantial, slowly also falls apart. In my interpretation I stress that István Szilágyi simultaneously makes time become like space and turns space into a process happening in time. This tropological movement with chiasmic structure is what makes strangeness-experiences recognizable.

Ilka Szendy appears before the reader in the pages of the novel after already having committed her serious crime: she killed her peasant lover, the “America-goer” Dénes Gönczi, then threw his lifeless body in the well. In my analyses the fall into sin and then the purification process becomes important, interwoven with religious references, assumed to be ritual. From the past, the traumatization of the body becomes important in understanding the events leading to the personality falling apart later. This is how the boy coming from the outside to the legate emerges from the memories, who showed Ilka that the strict order of Jajdon does not mean a set direction in life for everyone. What the boy did and its consequence with lifelong effects (defloration and abortion) has a fermenting effect. It caused irreparable damages in the walls of a system about which those living “in the pit” thought would stand forever. Secrecy and confidentiality follow the future life of Ilka; due to the traumas written in the body a tension between the multiple representations of the female body and society can be perceived in the novel. Ilka Szendy, with her carrying stones, her concealment,

becomes ghostlike, until fate gets fulfilled. From the worldview of *Kő hull apadó kútba* it becomes apparent that Ilka Szendy becomes a stranger in this narrative world, and can only find absolution from her crime in the afterlife.

I interpret the world of *Agancsbozót*, which seems absurd and very much realistic at the same time, as a thought experiment of being in permanent uncertainty. The protagonist, the “potential wanderer”, Deres finds himself in such an alien, strange place, a rock forge – while fleeing from his past, everyday life – in which he has the opportunity to connect craft and art, at the same time deconstructing and reconstructing his past identity. The work, sword-making with classical methods way obsolete in the narrative present of the novel, does not follow the principle of practicality: its result is usually a sword replica aiming at perfection which ends up in a warehouse. The completed tools are never used as originally intended. However, the camera motif appears in the novel, the narrative framework is revealed through movie references and interpretations, implying that someone remotely observes the men working in the cave forge.

The continuously recreated uncertainty based on the strangeness of *Agancsbozót* has its own dynamic elbow room, revealing which can deepen our experiences obtained about the work so far. The fictional world of the novel is in a space between reality and illusion: on the one hand, it tries to make reality illusive, on the other, it tries to make illusion realistic.

The interpretation focusing on *Hollóidő* deals with the appearance of Turks named barbarians, and in close relation to that, with the dynamics of own and strange. After outlining the relationship between novel and history, fiction and fact, concerning the first part titled *Lovat és papot egy krónikáért* (*Horse and priest for a chronicle*) I deal with the layers of the narrative, the writing process appearing in the novel that forms identity, improves self-discovery, the role opportunities, past of the “unreliable” protagonist, the scribe, who meanwhile becomes an author, and the “reliability” of stories, historical tales from the past. The youth having to flee from Revek, the “orphans of history” face their own strangeness in the second part (*Csontkorsók* [*Bone jars*]) – and this experience is tied to a change in perspective and to narrative position. The boys face unceasing

provocation in the castle of Bajnaköves. When they arrive, they are seen with the distrust newcomers from afar get. While in Revek they defined themselves as opposed to the strangers, the Turks, in the changed environment they themselves count as strangers too (e.g. being called “Turkish bastards”).

In the course of the analysis, it becomes apparent that István Szilágyi built a world in *Hollóidő* which also includes experiences of strangeness in the conjured and depicted historical situation. Meetings with the appearing barbarians, just like the ordeals the boys forced to leave their birthplace face, and the “localization” attempts all appear – and can be seized by the interpreter - in the interaction of own and strange, and in the dynamics of their relationship with each other on the pages of the novel. Strangeness in this world has an effect in its own generality, and also including here the sometimes appearing supernatural it also transforms into a reasonably unexplainable experience.

The historical life experience leads on to the world of the new novel, *Messze túl a láthatáron*. Mátyás Tompay Wajtha lives through the fall of the freedom fight, the “kuruc rebellion” as the confidant, secretary of Ferenc Rákóczi II. At the request of Rákóczi he starts writing his memoirs, but a tragedy casts shadows over his fate: his wife was lured away, she got into an accident, the ice broke under the sled. The secret of his wife being lured away and dying keeps him captive until the end of the novel. After the tragedy Tompay “estranges away” from his environment, home in the first part. The second part of the novel picks up the story about thirty years later, when Tompay judges cases brought before him already as the chief judge of Típród county. His life is surrounded by secrecy and strangeness, and in the discussions “mind constructs” ahead of his age are revealed.

The analysis emphasizes the following characteristics: István Szilágyi words the important questions of defining and judging crime in an open, experimental novel format on the pages of *Messze túl a láthatáron*, interwoven with the fine web of motifs so characteristic of him. He does so on the one hand with a historic character, building on the tradition of witch trials. It appears as a serious moral dilemma, thinking in the scope of universal humanity, whether

witches exist at all. Based on what preconceptions does one pass judgment? Who has the right to judge crimes that cannot be uncovered in their entirety? Mátyás Tompay Wajtha questions the borders of human knowledge, just to get from certain to uncertain every single time, through bitter experiences. Even in the trapped situation of Tompay he tries to see behind the secrets, discover the practicality behind the superstitions, beliefs, witchcraft, love charms and murders. Such interpretative horizons intersect excitingly in the conversations which at first sight we would think to be long obsolete for a man of today.

In my opinion, by focusing on the dynamics of strangeness, utilizing the relevant insights of xenology, culture and literary science, following the system of criteria of close reading, I managed to reveal such structural problems, connection points hardly studied so far which might further nuance the statements of the reception and impact history so far. This way, the doctoral thesis might contribute to the complexity of reading Szilágyi.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian scientific articles in Hungarian journals (2)

1. **Csordás, L.:** Horizontok metszéspontján: Szilágyi István: Messze túl a láthatáron.
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3. **Csordás, L.:** Bűnbeesés és sorsszerűség Szilágyi István *Kő hull apadó kútba* című regényében.
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32. **Csordás, L.:** Regény a rettenetről: A sátán fattya ötödik kiadása.
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33. **Csordás, L.:** Külhoni magyar irodalmak - orosz nézőpontból: Egy orosz nyelvű antológia margójára.
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35. **Csordás, L.:** Mindennapi határtapasztalatok: (Zelei Miklós: A kettézárt falu).
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38. **Csordás, L.:** "Endre Ady from Érmindszent": Zelei Miklós: Situs Inversus. Az Isten balján.
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39. **Csordás, L.:** A malenykij robot és hatásának megjelenítése Nagy Zoltán Mihály A sátán fattya című kisregényében.
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40. **Csordás, L.:** Betyársors, pandúrélet: Kocsis Csaba: A legelső pandúr.
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