

***The Memoirs of Count Miklós Bethlen  
and the XVII<sup>th</sup> Century Hungarian Puritanism***

The name of count Miklós Bethlen as a writer became well known only after the first edition (1858) of his *Memoirs* were published. The interest of historians and literary historians in his work during the XX<sup>th</sup> century was continuously growing, mainly because the events, happenings narrated by the count in his *Memoirs* proved to be an excellent source for the study of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century history of Transylvania.

The contribution of the literary historians to the interpretation of Bethlen's literary activity consisted in the publication of several other texts (correspondence, pamphlets) written by the count. As a consequence a noticeable change occurred in the judgement of these texts written by the count: they were no more treated as historical sources, but as very important piece of art/literature.

My dissertations containing five chapters starts from this basic assumption and it is an attempt to describe the rhetorical, anthropological and literary peculiarities of the *Memoirs*.

The first chapter ("*Puritanism as Primary Context*") basically presents the theoretical background of my approach. According to the basic issues (historical representation of the past, the representations of the identity or self-fashioning) of my interpretation, I focus upon the *Memoirs* in their so called 'native or primary context', the devotional puritan literature of the XVII<sup>th</sup> century. This approach to the text stands on the methodological foundations of *Greenblatt's New Historicism*, which declares that a certain text must be interpreted strictly in his cultural, historical context. Bethlen's relation to the XVII<sup>th</sup> century puritanism (see chapter II: "*The Influence of Hungarian and English Puritanism on Bethlen's Memoirs*") is illustrated by his education, his Calvinist religion, his studies and peregrination in England, his excellent theological training based upon Ames and Perkins. His private prayers included in his *Memoirs*, or the references to his *praxis pietatis* are further arguments, meant to demonstrate this very strong and special connection to the puritan culture. This primary context is in fact a large system built upon some culturally promoted stereotypes, which for instance enables the individual to represent his or her identity, or to narrate his or her past. These culturally promoted stereotypes (*loci communes*) can be defined as conventions, which within the cultural limits of normality, promotes the standards or patterns sets of rules of behaviour, and self-representation.

The third chapter entitled “*Remembering the Past – Historical Representation in the Memoirs*” deals with the metahistorical interpretation of the narrated past events. The events described by Bethlen, who became the chancellor of Transylvania in 1691, represent a period of almost 60 years. Most of the happenings (battles, tragedies, economical crises, religious and confessional conflicts) were recorded in the collective memory as tragedies, as obvious signs of the apocalyptic end of the world. The terror and the perspective of the Last Judgement created an eschatological tradition in the western culture, a basic concept (God punishes the sinners) of historical thinking since the early Christians. This way of viewing the past or constructing history was very popular among the contemporary Hungarian puritan preachers. A huge amount of sermons concerned with the immediate arrival of the Antichrist and of the Last Judgement were written. In this atmosphere the narration of events undertaken by Bethlen is just a probable account relying on the collective memories, stereotypes promoted by the puritan context. The most common motives of puritan sermons related to the tragic happenings of those days (such as *Moribunda Transylvania*, Transylvania as a dying person) are the *Memoirs*’ most important elements in the process of narrativization and fictionalization of past events. Bethlen’s attempt to narrate his past experiences is an obvious compilation of personal, cultural and collective memories according to the eschatology of the Last Judgement.

The fourth chapter (“*Self-fashioning, or Constructing the Identity*”) deals with the problem of identity, an issue that was widely debated since post-structuralism. My dissertation focuses upon the anthropological aspects of the question, showing how a certain cultural context (puritanism) allows the construction of a complex identity. This remarkable performance of self-fashioning (cf. Greenblatt) is in fact a fascinating process of self-representation, which promotes the most common roles of puritan piety or patriotism. In Bethlen’s case it is quite obvious, that the roles (pious man, martyr, prophet) undertaken or performed by him in his writings originate in the puritan culture. These are actually certain identity prototypes promoted by the puritan spirituality as moral standards for everyone. Since Bethlen’s story is meant to demonstrate his honesty and devotion toward the country and the protestant church, he did not miss the opportunity to represent his identity according to these standards.

The fifth chapter (“*Is Bethlen a Reader of Montaigne? Revisiting a Traditional Hypothesis*”) tries to solve the ‘mystery’ of the hypothetical relationship Montaigne–Bethlen. Since Antal Szerb came up with the idea, that Bethlen might have read Montaigne’s *Essays*, the idea became very popular among the scholars who studied the epoch, although none of

them could actually prove this relationship. Szerb's argumentation was basically founded on an instinctive approach, in fact a supposition, according to which the sincerity of Bethlen is the imitation of Montaigne's sincerity, in the spirit of the famous line: „*Ainsi, lecteur, je suis moy-mesmes la matiere de mon livre.*” In my opinion, this *sincerity* although resembles to a certain extent Montaigne's techniques of narration, it has nothing to do with it. Bethlen's source for this kind of sincerity is the puritan theology (Ames, Perkins) and practice of piety, which had a very severe set of rules concerning the confession of sins and examination of conscience. The elected few had the moral duty to face and confess every sin without hiding anything. Therefore Bethlen's disposition to offer an insight into the intimacy of his childhood, or sexual experiences is not the imitation of Montaigne's sincerity, but the application of puritan rules, the praxis of piety. What is more, the *sincerity* in Ames's or Perkins's theology is a basic conception related to the *cases of conscience*, or confession to God.

Just like in the case of self-fashioning or historical representation the primary context (puritanism) makes available a plausible explanation for a traditional hypothesis. Consequently, the final conclusion of this approach from the point of view of the puritan context confirms the idea, that the *Memoirs* is not only an important source for the history of Transylvania, but also an outstanding literary achievement in the Hungarian Baroque culture.