

THESES OF DOCTORAL (PH.D.) DISSERTATION

THE VISUAL POETRY OF TIBOR PAPP

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I

OBJECTIVES AND SUBJECT MATTER

The major objective of my dissertation is the exploration of Tibor Papp's visual poetry. However, beyond the micro-historical description of certain characteristic generic groups of the oeuvre – like for example mail art, conceptual art, magic letter squares, computer generated poems and logo mandalas – I also reconsider certain contradictory genre theoretical assumptions, as well as the often ambiguous terminology of the secondary sources used in the introductory chapter, and the relative hierarchy of concrete poetry and visual poetry. Applying media-narratological approaches as a point of departure, I also discuss the historical perspectives of various media and intermedial features. I analyse for example those elements of mail art (a technique using postal service as part of the work of art) that are in connection both with literature and the fine arts, or the rivalry between new artistic models appearing in the 20th century, and the effects of technological media upon arts. I also reveal the elements of the mediativity of the computer. Thus, I read Tibor Papp's oeuvre within a wider discourse, the context of world literature.

In my doctoral thesis I also touch upon the themes of permanent renewal and those media that provide the possibility of continuous change, namely, the journal *Dialogue* that has stirred up the still water of Belgian literature, and *d'atelier*, the French avant-garde journal. I also explore in a detailed way how the historical context and the theoretical basis of *Magyar Műhely* have shaken Hungarian literary conventions.

I consider computer poetry a further research topic, particularly studying the textual corpus of *Disztichon Alfa* and a more detailed exploration of the generated dynamic picture, text and sound poems of *Hinta-palinta (Swing-Swang)*. Although I demonstrate the value of the generated poems in my dissertation, and I point out that these poems are by no means less valuable than the poems by other artists composed in the traditional dystichon form, or poems consisting of written two-beat twelvers; it is not the goal of my doctoral thesis (and it cannot be anyway) to fully refute the sceptical approaches to computer poetry – that would necessitate a completely independent analysis, and maybe even a new thesis topic. In literary criticism, the new forms, structures, the use of poetic language, and the new genres, generic variants in Tibor Papp's poetic practice are relatively neglected compared to their relevance in the oeuvre. Also, based on some aesthetic theoretical assumptions a “reductive canonization” (Szkárosi, 2006: 76) can be noticed in the reception of his life-work. Thus, I also aim to

present works that have so far been neglected by the critics and to dissolve the boundaries of rigid literary canons by claiming the values of visual poetry and eventually creating a literary balance.

Besides Hungarian interpretive discourses, several interpretive strategies of foreign secondary sources are used, published primarily in French. These discourses (see for example the writings of Annick Bureau, Francis Edeline, Alexandre Gherban, Jean-Jacques Lebel, Jacques Roubaud) also connect Tibor Papp's works into a world literary context, and their interpretive points of view or remarks can be useful in the readings of the individual works, and the interpretation of visual works as well.

By reading a rich segment of an oeuvre I intend to explore the new routes appearing in the category of visual art, and the initiatives and genres influencing other oeuvres as well. By doing so I try to present, with the words of Péter H. Nagy "one of the most influential classics of the living avant-garde" (2004/1: 84). The interpretive descriptions of the individual volumes and the works also aim at giving an answer to the question of how Tibor Papp's visual poetry and identity forming artistic force realize the project of contemporary Hungarian avant-garde.

II METHODS USED

By exploring the aesthetic aspects of Tibor Papp's works, my primary methodological goal is to call up attention to the works themselves, to point out their linguistic and pictorial values, the appearance of the avant-garde authorial attitude, and the interconnection of the work and the reader/spectator/watcher, i.e. the nature of the productive status of the recipient. My second objective is to present the visual poems within the dialogue of various generic discourses by the application of hermeneutical perspectives.

The theoretical-methodological sections of the dissertation also include the evaluation of certain concepts and basic assumptions of French and English literary theory, the critique of certain theoretical reflections that previously had been inaccessible in Hungarian. See for example the constructive presentation of the three branches of numeric literature, Annick Bureau's renewal of the genre by the world wide web published in *Art Press*, or the research

of a member of the Groupe μ in Liège, Francis Edeline on concrete and spatialist poetry and logo mandalas, and also Siegfried J. Schmidt's and Tony Godfrey's theory of conceptual art.

In the course of the aesthetic approach to the works, however, I did not choose to follow a chronological order, a strict movement from volume to volume. As I claim in the introduction, such an approach would have damaged the structure of my thesis; and so I rather concentrate on the new genres and the poetic attitude creating generic variants. In the case of the first three volumes, I intend to give a full picture of the beginnings by exploring the visual predecessors of Tibor Papp, and I also demonstrate how the poet gets to the visual poems from traditional, linear poetic forms. Further on, I focus on bigger units of the oeuvre, on works and groups of works that have an innovative force in contemporary visual poetry like for example the logo mandalas or the computer generated poems. Examples of the latter can be found both in *Vendégszövegek 2,3 (Guest Texts 2,3)* and in *Vendégszövegek 5 (Guest Texts 5)*. Moreover, several cover pages of *Magyar Műhely*, individual visual poems themselves, almost become manifestations of dynamic poetry. They evoke an effect as if they recorded a freeze-frame of the lines appearing on the computer screen. Tibor Papp published some of the seventy cover pages designed by himself in his volume entitled *Vendégszövegek 2,3 (Guest Texts 2,3)*, and in *Vendégszövegek 4 (Guest Texts 4)*. In his cycle entitled *Betlehemi vasutasok (Railwaymen from Betlehem)*, he published further visual poems from among the cover pages. The space/poem/pictures are also present almost all through his life-work. We can meet them here and there: sometimes a bunch of them, sometimes a whole volume of them. The space/poem/pictures thus also make up a separate chapter in the dissertation, as well as the rings, the festoons (hínárczók), the strings (sorjázók), or the logo mandalas.

Although my dissertation does not aim at exploring the typology of visual poetry or at providing a systematic presentation of it, in my interpretations of the oeuvre in question the generic definition and the classification of the individual works under a general ordering principle is considered important. Thus, the section of the introduction entitled *A vizuális költészet műfaji tipológiája (The Generic Typology of Visual Poetry)* reflects upon the problem of contradictory definitions and generic boundaries in the secondary literature. Amid the chaos of technical terms concerning the categories of experimental poetry, I tried to establish a grouping system of the poems (taking László L. Simon's points of view as a starting point), and my dissertation is consistently built upon this generic structure.

III

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

At first glance, Tibor Papp's first volumes might seem merely conventional, but *Sánta vasárnap* (*Lame Sunday*, 1964) and *Elégia két személyhez vagy többhöz* (*An Elegy to One Person or More*, 1968) are not only representatives of late modernist literature, but they are also examples of the deconstruction of traditional forms and the rebuilding gesture of the poet as well. In these works the later integration of various borrowed texts and the characteristic features of visual poetry are already present. By revealing the volumes' symbolic and motif systems, I identify their artistic kinship with János Pilinszky and Ágnes Nemes Nagy, the representatives of objective poetic language that features avant-garde properties as well. I also demonstrate the fine visual elements in Tibor Papp's first two volumes that along with the explored motifs already mark the evolving difference between them as well, the new direction that leads towards the avant-garde.

Tibor Papp is characterized by an artistic attitude of readiness to movement and change. He did not imitate Kassák's use of the Dadaist calligram (which in the first half of the 20th century also counted as revolutionarily new in the history of the genre), but he has created a formally well definable visual genre that feeds on the permanent force of the avant-garde, his predecessors, the past, the ever-changing present, and on the latest challenges. These elements appear sometimes suddenly, but sometimes they crystallize gradually in the course of the creative activity in the poetic oeuvre. I group and present Tibor Papp's life-work in twelve chapters (5-16), including the new genres and the generic variants that appear in contemporary visual poetry.

I consider the most important achievement of my dissertation that through the description of Tibor Papp's visual poetry I also aim at making up for a lack in the reception history of his art. By the interpretation of so far aesthetically undisclosed works of art, by presenting the intermedial characteristics of the new genres appearing in visual poetry, and by revealing their specificities I create new terminology of these generic initiatives. The closing piece of the volume *Vendégszövegek (n)* (*Guest Texts (n)*) is the work entitled *Pátkai, Pilinszky és a Pincér* (*Pátkai, Pilinszky, and the Waiter*, 1985-2002). According to Ádám Dukay Nagy this is the work in Papp's oeuvre that resembles a drama the most, Emőke G. Komoróczy calls it a dramatic trialogue composed for three voices, and Béla Bodor considers it a logo-metaphysical and meta-semantic horror comedy, that unifies all the poet's methods

of picture and text creation. Although all three critics seem to discover dramatic features in this work, its generic definition remains ambiguous. I intend to remedy this lack by introducing a new generic category, and based on the characteristic features of the work, I call it a visual metaoperatorio.

Apart from a monography by Erzsébet Tatai, we have but few Hungarian points of reference concerning conceptualism. We can only detect its literary forms in individual readings of certain oeuvres. Beside the article by Siegfried J. Schmidt, relying on Tony Godfrey's volume on conceptual art ([1998], 2008), I try to compensate for this lack when commenting on the volume entitled *Villanások (Flashes)* by Tibor Papp. Furthermore, I also touch upon genre-theoretical problems by discussing given works, and I reflect on the literary appearance of conceptualism in Hungary, and its representatives as well.

In the chapter entitled *Gondolati generálás – meditatív irodalmi műfajok (Mental Poem Generation – Meditative Literary Genres)* examining the research results of Francis Edeline, I point out the differences between concrete poems and logo mandalas (that are also regarded as concrete poems). Through examples of old Hungarian calligrams and 20th century visual poems, I demonstrate how the mandala motif (which according to Carl Gustav Jung functions as an archetype) is present in Hungarian visual literature. I explore the crucial features of this meditative genre on the basis of the major characteristics of Papp's logo mandalas building upon the interpretive attitude of the receiver, and by analysing some visual poems.

Tibor Papp occupies a major place in computer poetry: Alexandre Gherban calls him the pioneer of new poetry, one of those few authors in whose work "there is a balanced representation of pieces written on paper and literary works created by the computer", and whose era-forming, dynamic poems are recognized by all "histories of poetry" and by all writings concerning computer literature (<http://poezibao.typepad.com>, date of access: 16 October 2008). Considering the possibilities of the computer, there is a major difference between film, television, or even the mimetic character of video. The construction of the virtual spaces of the generated poems and the method of text generation both require a new receptive status. All this makes a lot of difference to the usual reading experience. The algorithm built into the computer system, i.e. the actual programme and the attached explanation, the "background information" can only come into interaction via the spectator. The receiver thus becomes a condition of the aesthetic experience: only through participation can he/she access the aesthetic experience. But to achieve this, a certain activity is needed: from a spectator he/she has to become an observer. The reception of the work "is not some kind of a passive conservation of the spectacle, but an active psychic organisational process"

(Csuri, 2009: 12). However, the meaning of a single dystichon or “homage” is not revealed as a result of an extended reading time or any intervention stopping the programme for the time of the interpretation. The work is completed only in the course of continuation, the endless stream of variants. This variability is created by the poet’s poem writing programme, suspending all previous authorial and receptive attitudes. The poem is born in the course of step by step designing. Despite the absence of the author, there is some kind of a presence: *Disztichon Alfa* has a more than 150 pages long programme, called *Hinta-palinta (Swing-Swang)* that has a lingo modelling language and a script resulting from several years of creative work. The endless stream of poems, pictures and sound series had to be designed very precisely. Thus the poet “manipulated” the medium by the programme, he interfered with the seeming independence of the computer, but he still filled the dynamic poem with authorial presence.

The positive after-effects of my publications and lectures on the role of this new medium in literature and on computer poetry can already be felt. They have started the critique of those receptive attitudes that call into question the artistic value of computer generated poetry, and they have also enhanced the re-evaluation of former points of view (see Alföldy, 2009: 220-221). Zoltán Bertha’s and László Z. Karvalics’s words appreciating my lectures and my articles call up attention to the fact that the technicity and materiality of computer language creation are “closely connected to the spirituality of language” (Bertha, 2009: 294), and that it implies “paradigmatically new dimensions of creation and reception” (Z. Karvalics, 2009/1: 5).

Avant-garde is primarily not a trend of style, not a school, but a certain kind of attitude. “It is the realization of the idea that art is not to be imagined as the divine gift or the ‘sacred’ activity of the elect, but a pervasive permanent activism that flows into the actions of human existence, impregnates everyday life, both existential and social spheres” (Szombathy, 2010/3: 70). The representatives of Fluxus were often creators who strove to connect their civil professions with artistic activity. Tibor Papp became a skilled printer precisely because of this (as well as Pál Nagy), and Bálint Szombathy worked as a graphic editor for thirty years. This is the inseparability of life and art that had already been emphasised by the early avant-garde.

I also pay attention to this avant-garde attitude in my dissertation. When Kassák visited Paris in 1964, he also met the founding members of *Magyar Műhely* to observe this revolutionary poetry: “be more daring” – the old, seventy-seven-year-old master told the young creators. He was the first who did not want to discourage them from the avant-garde,

but he rather boosted their spirits. In the very same year *Magyar Műhely* published a Sándor Weöres special edition and his volume entitled *Tűzkút (Well of Fire)*. All these were real “avant-garde gestures”, since these artists dared to look the official Hungarian value system in the eye, and brought Sándor Weöres back “to the central stage of literary life” (Papp, 2009/2: 3).

Tibor Papp’s second volume entitled *Elégia két személyhez vagy többhöz (An Elegy to One Person or More)*, and the repeated appearance of the expression “szakadjon szét a madár” (“let the bird be torn apart”) in *Az utazás fordulatai (Turns of the Journey)* bear characteristic avant-garde stylistic marks: the creative attitude of protest, the crystallization of a certain attitude. Also, in his early work, in *Műszerek, órák, jelzőkészülékek, lékek (Instruments, Watches, Signalling Apparatuses, Leaks)* chronological order is questioned, exhibiting the limitless experience of time in visual poetry. The boundary between the work of art and the outside world is dissolved, and the erasure of the sign “evokes the non-literary patterns of reception” (Kékesi Zoltán, 2003: 210). Since to the avant-garde authorial attitude implies the observation of the factors, movements and changes that influence the uniqueness of expression, and an individual creative reaction to all this, it cannot be mixed up with any other kind of art.

From the art of Tibor Papp we can reconstruct the diversity of the innovative avant-garde: it includes traditional textual poems, a surrealist short epic poem (*Forgó égtájak, [Turning Climes]*). These works mark the connection between the actual avant-garde and the poetry of *Újhold*. All of these works are representatives of an actively influential tendency: space/poem/pictures, graphics containing textual elements, generated poems, dynamic picture poems, logo mandalas, kubuses, the so called flashes made up of letter typographies, rings and spirals, string poems (sorjázók), where two neighbouring syllabi melt into one word; or the Papp’s “logo-metaphysical meta-semantic horror comedy that unites all the author’s picture and text creating methods” (Bodor Béla, 2005/4: 110), the visual metaoratorio entitled *Pátkai, Pilinszky és a pincér (Pátkai, Pilinszky and the Waiter)*. But I could also mention joint projects (with Pierre Pica: *Transparence et Opacité, Hommage à Mitsou Ronat*, with Claude Maillard: *Icônes – Icons, Dressages informatiques no 1 – no 8*, with Alpár Bujdosó, Pál Nagy, Áron Kibédi Varga and János Petőfi S.: *Vízalatti tekercs [The Underwater Scroll]*). The birth of productive reception is also marked by the effect of the logo mandalas that are created both by mental generation and computer poetry.

Beside the reception aesthetic and hermeneutical approaches towards visual poems, the interpretation of fictive autobiographies, novels, sound poems and performances might also

complement the interpretive-evaluative approach with a fresh set of criteria. The theoretical foundations of the works are parallelly present with the birth of the individual pieces, and I consider the exploration of this phenomenon a further topic of my research, a study of the development of avant-garde literary theory in the Hungarian context. The volumes of Tibor Papp's collected articles *Avantgárd szemmel (With an Avant-Garde Eye)* demonstrate the perennial presence of theory in his work. Even today, avant-garde creators often make up for those tasks themselves that "contemporary literary criticism presently fails to accomplish" (Szombathy, 2009/1: 7). My doctoral thesis aims to fill this gap, just like the joint series of *Magyar Műhely* and Ráció Kiadó entitled *Aktuális avantgárd (Present-day Avant-Garde)*, along with the conference lectures organized by the special order of the avant-garde.

IV

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V

THE CANDIDATE'S PUBLICATIONS IN THE FIELD OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

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2. *Innovatív költői beszéd. Papp Tibor alkotásainak tárlata a Sánta vasárnaptól a születő kubusokig (Innovative Poetic Speech. The Exhibition of Tibor Papp's Works from Sánta vasárnap [Lame Sunday] to the Birth of the Kubuses)*, Szépirodalmi Figyelő 2006/5., 60-68.
3. *Létem egy pillanat csupán: virtuális verssorok megtestesülése (A programozott számítógépes költészet) [My Existence is but a Moment: the Embodiment of Virtual Lines of Poetry (Programmed Computer Poetry)]*, Magyar Műhely 145., 2007/5., 7-13.
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VI

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4. *L. Simon László = Íróportrék II. (László L. Simon = Writer Portraits II)*, Szépirodalmi Figyelő, Budapest, 2008, 153-168. Also see: *Agria* III/4, Winter 2009, 154-166.
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