

Theses of a University PhD Dissertation

‘Like they are heading to Masquerade...’

*New interpretations of three pieces of work of Miklód Bánffy based on the
main topics of historical and contemporary reception*

Györgyi Váradi-Kusztos

Supervisor: Dr. András Görömbei



DEBRECENI UNIVERSITY

PhD School of Literary Arts

Debrecen, 2013.

1. Objective

In the recent years the oeuvre of Count Miklos Bánffy – renowned politician, aristocrat, author and skilled supporter of various cultural projects – has gained an international popularity. Reviews and other publications published in the recent decades – both popular and scientific approach – share the common problem when tries to describe the nature of the oeuvre: they have to use metaphors of unnoticedness, indignity, shortage of fair judgment.

The main goal of this paper is to partake in the progress of eliminating this shortage, agreeing with the argumentation of László Imre (from 1993): the repositioning of canonical niche of Bánffy's masterwork *The Transylvanian Trilogy* is have to be considered not only because of the decades of obligate silence, but because of the substantial need of a coherent view on 20'th Century Hungarian literature.

Defining its own theoretical boundaries this work focuses three texts of Bánffy's prosaic works which are widely considered as pieces of fine literature: *The Transylvanian Trilogy*, 'Emlékeimből', 'Fortéjos Deák Boldizsár memoriáléja'. They were published in the life of the author, a wide variety of reviews and scientific criticism is available on them. They are also in common that they are widely associated with the genre of autobiography.

There is a fair reason of the extensive enumeration of the most important pieces of the last 80 years' reception: the international critical and financial success of the late editions of *The Transylvanian Trilogy* makes it unavoidable. A thorough overview of the Hungarian reception could open new ways of interpretation and analysis.

The three texts show major differences in reflecting the main topics of the reception. The role of 'carnavalesque' aspect and logics varies in the works, but it's always essential. *The Transylvanian Trilogy* it's also connected with a special biblical-apocalyptic vision.

So the main scientific / narrative position of the argumentation of this work is based on the perspective offered by the works themselves.

2. Methodology

The first part of this work is about Bánffy's largest and most appreciated work, the '*Erdélyi történet*' / '*The Transylvanian Trilogy*' – which has been published many times in Hungary and worldwide as well. After summarizing the main topics of reception, interpretations, controversy and cultural influence, the next chapter attempts to develop new methods of interpretation and analysis. The key concepts are: contextual understanding of the biblical motto, understanding its functions, analyzing the forms and functions of the forms of remembrance and usage of anecdotic motifs. There are also a few thoughts about the style and linguistic perspective used by both the narrator and the characters of the novel.

The second larger part of this paper is about two works of the author. The first one is called '*Fortéjos Deák Boldizsár memoriáléja*' and the second is called '*Emlékeimből*'. The parallel interpretation of these texts focuses on the controversy between the two possible ways of reading these books: as fiction or non-fiction texts. In addition there is an important possibility to understand the connection between the appearance of masquerade or carnival ('*Carne Vale*') – the special time of feasts before Lent – and the role of metaphorical masks in the world of the books.

The closing chapters of this part describe the possible methods of parallel reading of these books – and as a result it proves the twin-like nature of the texts. This is done by analyzing the role of narrators, the odd, seemingly randomized editing and comparing the lingual style of the two texts.

In the *Appendix* detailed information can be found on the editions of the books studied in this paper.

3. Results

By chapters:

I. Novel or autobiography: *The Transylvanian Trilogy*

I. 1. Homeland reception

In this chapter we summarize the main conclusions mostly of those reviews which (at least partially) approaches the book as it is self-biography or memoir. It is essential because the national fame of the author (mainly not as writer, but as politician and aristocrat) lightly forced the readers to project their prejudices about the author to the protagonist of the texts.

Enumerating the various forms of readers' beliefs on autobiography, changing with time helps to understand the perspectives which from *The Transylvanian Trilogy* can be read contemporarily as a novel and as autobiography as well.

I. 1. 1. Realism and expressiveness: the quality of representation

As the main topic of *The Transylvanian Trilogy* is of historical nature criticism and praise on the quality of the representation of real events is very common in the reception.

The most of the opinions describes the method of representation as *realism* – it means that presence of precise descriptions, highly reliable usage of time and place, fine presentation of fine details and overall trustworthiness is highly expected by the early readers.

The not-so-well hidden irony of the text as well its romantic reminiscences and expressionist features is recognized mainly by the (present) contemporary readers – due the growing usage and popularity of text-oriented interpretation techniques.

I. 1. 2. Honesty, spontaneity, psychological accuracy: the quality of trustworthiness

In this chapter we prove that the approach which sees Bánffy as the devoted critic and as well an authentic representative of a historical class – the aristocracy – is unquestionably the main topic of the reception. Furthermore, in this point of view making strong association between the writer and the historical-political statesman also essential. Despite the fact that most of the early-mid 20'th Century reviews discuss this topic by fairly committed political narratives, we have to notice that the real potent and meaningful readings of the text have to deal with the historical figure of the author, Bánffy.

I. 1. 3. Teaching, entertainment, catharsis: the quality of impact

This chapter shows that critical opinions based on reading the Trilogy as ethical parable were able to control or worse: completely counterwork the canonization and/or publishing of the book in the mid-20'th Century. The independent thinking and honest way of view made the Trilogy the 'stumbling block' of the communist regime – both in Hungary and Romania. Evaluating the contemporary reception it's obvious that recent statements of the foreign reception – viewing the text within international, sometimes post-colonial context – can be very fruitful for the further interpretations to make.

I. 1. 4. Oneness, consistency, economics: the quality of expression

The Transylvanian Trilogy uses a fair variety of forms of literary expression. Enumerating and praising these highly artistic methods was always a very effective tool against condemnatory or humiliating interpretations. Systematically inventorying these highlights of Bánffy's masterpiece could also be the foundation of rediscovering the full oeuvre.

I. 2. Looking for Daniel!

I. 2. 1. The connection between *The Transylvanian Trilogy* and the 5th Book of Daniel

Rediscovering the Trilogy first we focus our attention primarily on the titles of the volumes. *They Were Counted*, *They Were Found Wanting*, *They Were Divided* – the titles without direct reference remind to the *interpretation* of the biblical prophet.

But it's also important to notice three archaic texts following the titles – these parts-of-a-motto are not biblical citations – rather paraphrases, interpretations or variations of the original story. Direct reference is missing as well the original names of the biblical characters, or the mentioning of the prophet Daniel. So there are missing persons: not only the interpreting prophet, but character of the condemned king, Belshazaar.

It looks like that the motto itself is the key of the interpretation, but it is highly questionable that the victims of the divine judgment – the historical aristocracy – whether be able to decipher its layered meaning.

I. 2. 2. Faces and perspectives

The 6 parts of the 3 volumes of the book enumerates a large amount of locales and characters: buildings like casinos, the Houses of Parliament, castles in Hungary or in Transylvania, mansions, theatres, ballrooms and churches – and sites of nature: the Alps of Kalotaszeg, the landscapes of Mezőség, Almásmente – or the seaside of Portofino, Venice, etc. – and the people of them.

In this enormous setting it's rather difficult finding an inner perspective needed for a coherent, Daniel-like interpretation – we must agree with most of the critics that only one character could fit in that role: István Tisza – former Prime Minister before the War.

In the Parliament only Tisza is able to decrypt the symbolic 'writing on the wall' – the forthcoming danger of war and losing parts of Hungary.

I. 2. 3. The fresco

The word 'fresco' is often mentioned in reviews on *The Transylvanian Trilogy*. Weirdly a precise explanation of this metaphor is always missing – like it could be only an expression used instead of 'monumental' – trying to describe the pictorial and picturesque nature of the book.

However using the phrase 'epic fresco' can be elucidative in a special point of view: like an observer's gaze 'scans' the fresco, focusing separately on fine details (unlike the blurred backgrounds of photos or movies) so does appear the characters and places of the Trilogy before the imagination of the reader.

Although the world of the Trilogy is limited by every means – the number and variety of places and characters are very high, but it could be counted or arranged – it looks like that the ‘poetic devices’ of the text are used to maintain the illusion of the infinity – and force the reader to focus his attention on different parts of the ‘big picture’.

I. 2. 4. Remembrance as subject and tool of storytelling

One very distinctive feature of the book is the way how three of the protagonists: Bálint Abády, Adrienne Milóth and László Gyerőffy recovers certain events, and interprets these repeating images of remembrance. This kind of consciousness and the experience of its unreliability is one of the most distinctive features of the text. (Also, it is a very useful tool of storytelling: events of the past as causes of present situations can be easily shown this way.) Furthermore, it could increase the credibility one of the characters or the narrator himself.

Summarizing our observations: remembrance as narrative method and as motif is one of the main parts of the textual world of the Trilogy. The book itself already – a story of a long-lost world of aristocracy – defines itself as a memento. So the motif and method of talking about the events of the pasts is one of the Archimedean points of the book – it’s highly capable of establish strong and coherent reading points of view.

I. 2. 5. Anecdote as a tool of modern storytelling

There are at least two good reasons for debating the role of the role of anecdote in Bánffy’s book. First: the ironic nature of this short episodes is similar to the so-called ‘carnival perspective’ – a kind of reverse view of reality – discussed in detail in the last chapters. Second: the role of these short stories suggests an implicit statement about the text: *The Transylvanian Trilogy* (literally in Hungarian: *Transylvanian Story*) is (can only be) assembled from a series of short stories. This perspective can lead to the question: could it be a sign that the unwritten (hi-)story of Transylvania is essentially *unwritable*?

I. 2. 6. Self-aware use of language in *The Transylvanian Trilogy*

The narrator of our book rarely tells directly anything about using the language. During a close reading it become evident that in the Trilogy different functions of storytelling tends to use different forms of lingual expression. We call them ‘linguistic registers’. They often appear parallel, counterpointing each other.

II. *Fortéjos Deák Boldizsár memoriáléja* (1931) és az *Emlékeimből* (1932) – two memoires?

II. 1. Overview of the reception

II. 1. 1. On the reception of *Fortéjos Deák Boldizsár memoriáléja*

Most of the first reviews on *Fortéjos Deák Boldizsár memoriáléja* describe the book as ‘literary candy’. All of them praise the stylistic value and bravado of using a 300 years’ old archaic language. Although there is a 60 years’ gap between the first and the latest editions of the book – the contemporary reviews also focus on these outstanding stylistic features. Urge of re-reading, joyful experiences of discovery are typical features of contemporary reviews.

II. 1.1.1. The textual corpus of *Fortéjos* – masked storyteller?

From the first reviews mentioning the role and functions of *masks* in the book is rather common – as a metaphor of the pseudonymous writer. According to our theory the role of fictional *masks* and *masking* is far more important and complex phenomenon in the textual world of *Fortéjos*. It can be described from a wider perspective in which the world of the book exists as an allegory of ‘carnival’ (‘Carne Vale’, type of masquerade before Lent). So we decided to use Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory on *carnival and grotesque* – to see our topic from wider theoretical perspective.

II. 1. 2. Personal historical narrative as a self-portrait of a politician/writer? About the reception of the book *Emlékeimből*

II. 1. 2. 1. Arguments of early reception

The first reviews published in the years 1932-1943 highlights the power of expression, the quality of editing and descriptions. According to these papers the *human qualities* of the *writer* – Count Bánffy (honesty, humor, irony, fantasy, knowledge, noble modesty) – are in evident connection with these literary qualities.

The early notes on the voice of narrator, the parallel role of events with or without historical importance will be very important motifs of the late reception and also important for the concept of this current work.

II. 1. 2. 2. Variations on *The imprudent Li*: the reception of *Emlékeimből* in the communist era

Between 1943 and 2000 mentions of the book *Emlékeimből* (‘*Memories*’) are very uncommon in Hungarian. This situation is originated in the 1959 – when Sándor Huszár first published his blasphemic critique in the communist paper *Utunk* (‘*Our Way*’). As he published again the revised edition of the paper in 1985 in *Kortárs* (‘*Contemporary*’) the argumentation of the writing has changed slightly – but the Marxist approach of the author hasn’t changed at all.

II. 1. 2. 2. Ways of contemporary reception

For example in the papers of Béla Márkus the modern nature of the books is appreciated also their connection with the similar confessional literary type works of the 1930-s become evident. Also the main topics of early reception: self-depiction, hidden references, theoretical problems of fiction / non-fiction categorization are still highly debated.

II. 2. „Non nunquam ridetur” The role of ‘carnavalesque’ logic in the texts of *Fortéjos Deák Boldizsár memoriáléja* and *Emlékeimből*

II. 2. 1. About the ‘editorial preface’ of the *memoriálé* and the letter of *Fortéjos Boldizsár*

According to the main topics of reception it’s evident that the historical references of the book *Fortéjos Deák Boldizsár memoriáléja* are rather indirect. It uses historical references

all the time but by applying special stylistic and narrative tools it makes their being as textual construction evident as well.

The pseudo-scientific preface aimed to the humble reader is a perfect parody of style. The letter written by Fortéjos to his younger brother is also a form of parody through lingual style – but the story of *Kerkóposz ikrek* ('*Cercopi*') told in the letter makes thematic foundation of 8 further stories and offers a position of interpretation as well. The hermeneutic way of view associated by the *Cercopi*: the 'carnavalesque' way of view. Their logic is – according to the theory of Bakhtin – turning the world head over heels, seeing everything inversed.

II. 2. 2. The characters of *Fortéjos* as masks of a masquerade or masks of death

The stories of the book are mostly ended by explicit moral sentences. So the characters – like in the genre of classic fable – are mostly metaphorical beings depicting moral qualities and categories. Most of them have telling names – another direct reference of the role of / the fact of wearing masks. These masks become death masks in those stories where the role of historical context grows important.

II. 2. 3. Carnival / Masquerade – a special window in time

This chapter is about evaluating the position and role of the Carival-period in the liturgical and cultural procession of the year. This event also appears directly in the 4ths story of the book.

II. 2. 4. A fool of Carnival: our protagonist Fortéjos Boldizsár

The role of the main character is two-fold: as protagonist he usually acts victimized by jokes, but as side-character he appears to be the bright-minded - tricky wanderer. He is well-known world traveller, enlightened protestant student, self-reflective Transylvanian memoire-writer and last but not least – a clown in one person. The layered personality of Fortéjos is able to represent the world's hidden, grotesque nature.

II. 2. 5. Picturing the 'carnavalesque' logic

The book is illustrated by the author himself. The drawings are rather cartoonish; the figures are very grotesque as well. The way these drawings together with the hand-drawn initials of the text leads the view of the reader is similar to the method of the texts building a reversed reality.

II. 2. 6. The style of *Fortéjos*

The use of language in *Fortéjos* makes a strong emphasis on the proper, Hungarian pronunciation of the words of the text. The use of long-forgotten or totally fictional dialects, phrarses and playful hapax legomena also expresses the 'carnavalesque' oddity of the book's world.

II. 2. 7. Roles of the narrator in the book *Emlékeimből*

The self-reflective tone of the narrator of the book *Emlékeimből* ('Memories') is of divided nature. There are two distinctive tones: one is the tone of *confession* – it's self-conscious and precise; the other is the tone of *consideration* – analyzing and evaluating the memories. But sometimes a third tone is present: the distant and deconstructive voice of (self-)irony.

The split role of narrator defines the possible positions of the story-teller: the remembering witness or contributor – or the creative storyteller using 'not-so-reliable' resources. The latter is in close connection with the clown of the masquerade – depicted in the other text.

II. 2. 8. „Randomized” composition and the layers of imaginal masks

The seemingly incoherent, randomized order of telling memories in the books are very similar to the two-fold nature of memory itself. Its uncontrolled random variety contains a very distinctive mix of pathos and irony, triumphant and grotesque.

Creating masks – like in the text of *Fortéjos* – is a multi-layered process but uses a different method. In this case the expectations of the humble reader towards a trustworthy storyteller are highly appreciated – though there are always positions for alternative, inversed interpretations.

II. 2. 9. The style of *Emlékeimből*

Unlike the delicate, highly artificial and controlled language of *Fortéjos*, the textual corpus of *Emlékeimből* seemingly lacks every distinctive feature. There are no imitations of archaic language, no dialectical words, nor hapax legomena. Although there are direct and also almost direct references to specific parts or chapters of *Fortéjos Deák Boldizsár memoriáléja*. The principle of material perspective defined by Bakhtin is also noticeable is specific loci of the text.

4. Publications in the domain of the dissertation

KUSZTOS Györgyi, *A model of unifying innovation and reproduction - Miklós Bánffy and „Transylvaniam”*. = TRANS. Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften. No. 16/2005.
WWW: http://www.inst.at/trans/16Nr/09_5/kusztos16.htm

VÁRADI- KUSZTOS Györgyi, *Posztumusz Magyar Művészetekért Díj Gróf Bánffy Miklósnak*. = Kalotaszeg, 2007, 2., 3., 4. szám. 1.

VÁRADI- KUSZTOS Györgyi, *Kettős pályarajz (Recenzió: Takács Péter: Bánffy Miklós világa. Lucidus Kiadó, Budapest, 2006.)* = Magyar Napló, 2008. április. 68-69.

VÁRADI- KUSZTOS Györgyi, *Személyes történelemi narratíva mint politikusi / írói önarcképek-
konstrukció?* = Zempléni Múzsá (ISSN 1585-7182), 2009, 3. szám, ősz, 32-39.

VÁRADI- KUSZTOS Györgyi, *Dániel kerestetik! (Gondolatok Bánffy Miklós Erdélyi története és Dániel 5. könyvének kapcsolatáról)*. = Magyar Szemle (ISSN 1216-6235), 2010. június, 93-108.