

Theses of the Doctoral Dissertation

**The Mythologem of the Contract with the Devil
in 19th Century Fiction
(with Special Attention to
Conrad Ferdinand Meyer's *The Judge*)**

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Aims of the dissertation, defining the topic

In my dissertation I am setting out to examine literary texts with the methodology of comparatively oriented *myth criticism*. The first section is searching for the most important connections between the definitions of myth and literature; furthermore it illustrates some aspects of these connections using examples from 19th century world literature. The texts under scrutiny are: Balzac's *The Magic Skin* and also his novels known as the Vautrin trilogy: *Father Goriot*, *Lost Illusions* and *Scenes from a Courtesan's Life*; while the symbolising process of literature is examined in Adelbert von Chamisso's novel *Peter Schlemihl* and Gogol's *Dead Souls*. Different analytic approaches can also shed light on parallels between the chosen texts, however, I specifically selected these works because money as a symbol is heavily featured in all of them. In every case money has a demonic role, it is an instrument of temptation, or even the manifestation of the devil himself. All of the texts contain and interpret the complex web of problems addressed in the title that can be summarized as the mythologem of the contract with the devil.

The second part of the dissertation focuses on a single literary text: Conrad Ferdinand Meyer's *The Judge*. Considering the fact that Meyer's texts are historical narratives, one of the subchapters preceding the analysis itself discusses the relationship between Meyer (and his fiction) and history. The subsequent subchapter introduces contemporary ideological (and artistic) views influencing Meyer, with special attention to the thoughts of Burckhardt and Nietzsche. The analysis expands on the theoretical background introduced in the first section, and goes on to examine the story of the judge giving in to the devil's temptation. The demonic quality of money and its connection to the devil do not appear as thematic elements in *The Judge*. The text, however, presents several motifs as reasons for giving in to temptation, though none of them is unambiguous. Thus the narrative introduces lust for power, the role of the mother protecting her child, love, or spur-of-the-moment passion as such potential reasons. The aim of the interpretation is to explore and introduce those aspects of the narrative which can be read in the framework of myth criticism, with special attention to inter- and intratextual connections.

Beyond analysis, the aim of the dissertation is to recount and systematize the most important theoretical bases of the methodology of myth criticism and present their workings in the form of practical analyses. The dissertation also sets out to examine the theoretical background of the methodology as well, looking at myth and the connection between myth and literature. Familiarizing ourselves with myth and mythological thinking also helps to

understand the analytical aspects of myth criticism, its logic and system, and also the way it approaches literary texts. The syncretic, unifying, standardizing quality of myth is created by the featured symbols and the symbolism of the text, while hierarchy and the relationships of opposing units (things, events, qualities etc.) are represented by binary oppositions. By analysing symbols and binary oppositions, such elements of the text are scrutinized as magic and miracles, the relationship between the narration and the narrator, the recurring microsubjects and their respective places in the sujet, the role of inter- and intratextuality in the formation of meaning and reason, Doppelgängers and other doubles and the role of their potential system, the interpretation of the various appearances of space and time, the interpreting role of the text's bestiary and herbarium, and the role of the text's subversive nature (often originating in a carnivalistic view) in the formation of meaning. The dissertation aims to assert these analytical considerations both on a theoretical and on a practical level.

I find the methodology of myth criticism ideal to examine the topic of the contract with the devil. This contract promises to make personal dreams come true, even if they go against human and/or natural laws, or even if a human life is in the way of realizing the dream. From this aspect, then, we are dealing with such a mythologem whose mere theme leads us (or leads us back) to a chaotic world, that is, it immanently contains and, at the same time, as a basic function, it reverses the event of world creation for the mythical consciousness: the creation of cosmos from chaos, the creation of sacred from profane.

Introducing the methods applied

My aim when introducing the methodology of myth criticism was not to locate it in within the history of literary studies, but rather to examine the theoretical bases and methodological aspects of the field. When myth criticism reads a literary text as a discourse providing continuity for myth, then it is attempting to find out where can we find traces of myth's heritage in literary fiction and how is it realized in the text. When studying myths, it is worth positioning ourselves into the myths' point of view, to embrace mythological thinking, claim Kerényi and Losev. This can be carried out as literary texts are, in fact, "transposed" myths – claims Frye. Their continuity can be seen in the historicity, according to which literature originates in myth and in its ever devalued "fictional modes" the ironic mode provides a turning point back to myth. Critics work in that territory which, from criticism's point of view, regards myth as a literary category, but it analyzes myth with regard to mythological aspects, that is, it uncovers their characteristics within the text. The critical point

of view is that centre where literature is viewed as not myth *any more* and not myth *yet*. Thus the text becomes a constructed, artificial – albeit open and unfinished – creation, and it is a living, organic – albeit closed and whole – individual.

According to mythological thought, man and nature form a unity, people living in archaic societies have not yet distanced themselves from their natural or social environment, and instead, they attributed their own characteristics to the objects of the surrounding world. Anthropomorphising the natural environment results in general personification in myth, and also in comparing natural and social objects, which leads to the symbolism of mythology. Mythological thought is characterised by the identification of form and content, subject and object, or the material and intellectual (signifier and signified, the thing and the word, the creature and its name). It does not differentiate between part and whole, one and multitude, static or dynamic, or even between natural and supernatural. Interpreting the magical objects present in the texts as symbols, we can claim that they have their own personalities which they declare. At the declaration, though, they remain themselves, they do not act any differently than as could be expected from their material self, but still, a magical event takes place. We can find the definition of magic in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, who claims that there is some sort of a relationship between two, apparently completely independent things, a "secret sympathy," which enables them to affect each other. When this mutual affection takes place, then a causal relationship is created between their self-declaration and another event. For humans it is usually establishing and declaring the laws of nature, which is equal to the manifestation of powers from above, that is, a miracle.

Symbols in literary texts do not behave any differently, as they retain their essential characteristics. As the same original symbol can unfold into several different plots in different texts, the unfolding of the plot shows the potentials of the symbols. The symbol is presented as such a multi-layered coding system that Lotman labels as "the text's specific 'gene.'" Magical objects have central roles in *The Magic Skin*, *Peter Schlemihl* and *The Judge*. Upon the declaration of their own personalities – that is, upon being used –, these objects work miracles. The main characteristic of miracles that was established in mythology remains, that is, miracles do not defy the laws of nature even in the worlds created in these texts. The magic skin makes wishes come true, but the owner, Raphael has no such wish that would be unlikely to come true. For instance, when he wishes for a large income, it turns out that the notary has been looking for him for two weeks, because he inherited a fortune of six million francs. In Schlemihl's case verisimilitude appears in the rhetoric: the narrator uses magical objects several times – seven-league boots or a purse that continuously replenishes its supply of

money –, but regards their existence as natural, obvious, and this view is also embraced by the reader. In *The Judge* – and also in several other stories by Meyer – two magical objects have central roles and have their own myths and family rituals. There is a horn, which is, when blown by the owner, makes the wife confess her sins against her husband; and there is a chalice, which, when offered appropriately by the wife, makes the husband love her. Thus, to take the example of the horn, we can see that when Stemma (the judge) hears the sound of the horn, she confesses that she has committed a murder. The magic works, then, and it does not contradict the laws of nature. The horn as a magical object declares its own personality (it is blown and it gives a sound), and then the event attached to the object also takes place: the guilty woman confesses her sin to her husband.

A subchapter is dedicated to the introduction of Northrop Frye' literary symbolism, using the analysis of the shadow symbol in *Peter Schlemihl*. Frye defines symbol as any unit in any given literary structure, may that be a letter, word, or image, as long as it can be isolated for the purposes of critical analysis. Frye presupposes five phases. In the literal phase – interpreting the text as an autonomic verbal structure – the symbol is a structural unit: a motif. In the descriptive phase – in which the literary text is a verbal structure, just like any other, non-literary text – the symbol is a rhetoric instrument, which helps to extract things from the flow of life phenomena, in order to function in the world created as a model just as they functioned in the real world. In the formal phase the form of the work of art is scrutinized, and the symbol is interpreted as an image. In the mythical phase the question of convention is in the focal point of the interpretation. In this case we regard the text as a unit of a whole literary corpus, and the symbol helps to create the relationship between the units. Here the symbol is an archetype, which the reader generally realizes as intertextuality. In the anagogic phase the text is endless and infinite, “the universal creative word which is all words.” The symbol is an anagogic monad.

Lévi-Strauss, using the bases of structural linguistics, calls attention to the significance of binary oppositions. When describing the world, as a simple and universal tool the mythic consciousness couples opposing characteristics and features, a positive and negative meaning making up every pair. This system of oppositions divides the continuous, apparently coherent world into individual segments. Later the oppositions are systematized into a hierarchy and formulated in different codes: in the language of rites, in natural or social codes, or in the codes of body parts. For instance, the binary opposition of up and down mean sacred and profane in rites, sky and ground in natural codes, the place in the family (or in the community) in social codes, and the upper (and frontal) and bottom (and back) parts in the language of

body parts. The oppositions are based on the number two, which, in mythological logic, is the symbol of the tear in unity. The number two also indicates the appearance of the devil, the disintegration of the whole divine unity. Besides the meaning of division and opposition, this also calls attention to the similar nature and interconnections of the contrasted parts, as they create a whole, a unity. Thus the analytic and syncretic nature of the myth is preserved.

We can find a number of binary oppositions in the analysed texts, which, may they manifest in space or time, are usually connected to the devil and temptation. In *Peter Schlemihl* the oppositions are not limited to oppositions describing the world – land/sea, plain/forest, inhabited/uninhabited areas, body/shadow, visible/invisible –, but they are also present on the level of structure and genre: the novel consists of two parts and its genre is also dual. The structure of *The Magic Skin* is also based on two stories. On the one hand, there is a reminiscence recounting ten years and thus occupying the major part of the novel, and, on the other hand, there are parts providing the framework for this reminiscence: the story of the devil's temptation and its consequences, taking place over the course of nine months. In the Vautrin trilogy we have Jacques Collin, who appears in two forms – as the fashionable Vautrin and as the priest Carlos Herrera – in the three novels. Besides this, the whole of the French society is described in binary oppositions: rich/poor, commoner/aristocrat, liberal/monarchist. In *Dead Souls* we can also see several examples of introducing society with binary oppositions: fat/thin, men/women (this opposition is markedly thematized, its special emphasis is a possible source of humour), living/dead (the latter are also organic parts of society as they can be bought), what is more, acknowledged writers/unacknowledged writers. The text has a dual structure as well: in the first part, the protagonist, Chichikov visits estates of landowners, while the second part is concerned with events taking place in the city.

Space appears in several binary oppositions in *The Judge*. On the one hand, there is closed space/open space: palace/plain ground, room/palace courtyard, on the other hand, there is up and down, which are accompanied by images of the world above and below (heaven/hell): tower/dungeon, snow-capped mountain/valley, sky/the bottom of a lake. The introduction of the hierarchy in society is based on Doppelgängers. The two female murderers, the two murdered husbands, and the two daughters represent the two levels of society. The two main symbols of the text are also in binary oppositions: the horn is worn and used by the man (Wulf, later Wulfrin), and its sounds evokes the horns of the Last Judgement and it symbolizes truth, while it is the woman's responsibility to guard the chalice (first Stemma, then Palma novella), and it stands for love and union.

The causality working in the story becomes part of describing the world in binary oppositions, due to the ironized narrator. Certain events – which in causal relations function as effects – have two-fold explanations. On the one hand, there is the cause given by the narrator, which is to show that there is order in the world and this order is ensured by the narrator himself. The world announced by the narrator is free of mythology and the cause of events is usually given as something rational. He looks at the world from below, therefore the world remains chaotic for him, he is unable to create the order previously announced. On the other hand, though, a magical reason is also given as the cause of events. Magic reinterprets the incidental nature of events, it connects consecutive events and thus it creates a magic causality which has a strong influence on the sequence of events. The miracle work of the magic, personified objects, or the realization of the previously uttered prophecies is what fills the world with reason: it views and declares the world from a position above. From above, all the elements of the world somehow belong together, everything has a pre-determined place, every object or event identifies with a mythological or sacral object or event. The examples mentioned in the analysis clearly show that the world can be known in the oscillation of binary oppositions, and it also proves that the mythic technique is capable of describing “any kind of” world. Describing the world thus points out both elements and unity showing disintegration and affinity.

A subchapter is dedicated to Bahtyin’s carnival theory, illustrated through an analysis of *Dead Souls*. Carnivalistic logic is built upon the unity of the system of binary opposition, as it always defines its subject in opposition to something. The reversing, subversive theoretical and practical tendencies of the carnivalistic worldview can be seen in a number of literary texts, such as in all of Meyer’s stories. For Gogol, the only effective weapon in the fight against the devil is carnivalistic laughter. The novel parodies everything from motifs to major structural elements, what is more, it even parodies itself. By parodying itself as a parody, it becomes a meta-parody.

Conclusions

Using 19th century examples from world literature, the dissertation recounts the most significant theoretical principles of myth criticism. The most detailed analysis of the practical application of these principles concerns *The Judge*.

Meyer experimented with historical fiction, and, as a result, his works are novella-length texts structurally similar to classic short stories, and while dramatizing history, they

represent stylized symbolism, and therefore they would be better defined as pseudo-historical fiction.

The stylized nature of Meyer's prose conveys a view similar to Nietzsche's views on history. The stylized representation of history and humans gives the impression that the surface of reality is dominated by masks, and thus this reality becomes a masked ball. The representation of emotions, problems, characteristics further enforces this idea. In fiction, the impression of "life" frozen as a sculpture makes reality seem even more constructed, the rigidity breaks down life's natural dynamism, turns metaphysical phenomena into physical poses and enforces an aesthetic relationship between the world as experienced by man and the world surrounding man.

In Meyer's texts the narrator or the narrating function become subjects of irony, the narrator (and the reader not perceptive to irony) becomes a victim of irony. I labelled this type of narrator ironized narrator.

Because of the simplification of and failing to understand the world, and also due to the incompetent narration, the story adopts a bottom-view perspective. From this point of view, from a causal perspective, the sequence of events can be rationally explained, easily understood. The narrator strictly and arbitrarily but not understandingly owns every right of moulding the plot.

The narrator of *The Judge* not only will not or cannot interpret certain events, but he incorporates certain specific elements into the story, strengthening the erotic or mystical effects. I labelled this dually carried out interpretation dual misleading.

Meyer's narratives lack all such transitions which would link the past to the present. However, the unity of history still manifests itself from a certain aspect: the narratives always find a way to connect themselves to Switzerland's history. By reading the narratives as a coherent corpus of texts, we can see that the "national past" is depicted in a fragmented way. The fragments do not make up a coherent whole, and there are no causal relations between the fragments. The narratives take place in specific (sometimes fictional) microcosms, where everything works secluded from outside events. Instead of a heroic and glorious past we can read about such fragments where many on top of the state hierarchy disregard morals, and the workings of providential care are usually manifested in somebody's death.

The peculiarity of the narrative's treatment of time is that the narration can describe simultaneous events in such a way that they do not appear as chronologically overlapping scenes. Therefore the narration of simultaneous events do not seem to return to a previously

narrated event (to describe it from another point of view), therefore it creates a semblance of linearity in narrative chronology.

When we look back on them from the closures of the stories, certain groups of signs in Meyer's fiction prove to be fulfilled and genuine prophecies. Their declaration is reflexive, they declare themselves as prophecies on the level of the text, but the contexts of these declarations and the narrators – due to their own empiric standpoints – claim these prophecies to be unbelievable and unreliable. In Meyer's fiction we have to take the content of the “prophecy” literally: the signifier is, in fact, not coded. The decoding mechanisms do not work because there is nothing to decode here, the (mis)interpretation of the given historical situation is responsible for the fact that the given cluster of signs is not recognized as a prophecy or truth.

Meyer provided his narratives with a self-referential system, there is some kind of a connection (mainly in the themes and motifs) between all of his stories. The two main symbols in *The Judge* (the horn and the chalice) and their appearance in different contexts and meanings are rather impressive: they appear in almost every narrative and they retain their extra meaning.

The two causal – the rational and the magical – relationships and critical positions that have determining roles in event history prevail at the same time, in spite of their oppositions and they do so without creating a paradox situation. The (apparent) contradiction is solved by the reader's dual vision, which takes the ironic situation set up on the two positions and interprets the events, then widens the scope of interpretation by understanding and accepting both positions. We can regard this ironic position as a dialectic reading generated by the text, or as the appearance of the implied author, who by definition can make the myths and thus the magical nature of the world seem more serious, or play down the very same ideas.

Publications concerning the topic of the dissertation

Mikroregény, nagybőgővel (Csehov prózájáról) [*Micronovel with a double bass. (On Chekov's fiction.)*] In: Nagyvilág, 2008/6. 580-603.

Mythological forms in Conrad Ferdinand Meyer's "Die Richterin" In: 7th International Conference of PhD Students, University of Miskolc, Miskolc, 2010, 25-30.

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Ismét, ugyanaz, újra – Az ismétlés és az identitáskeresés összefüggései Csehov prózájában [*Once again, the same. Connections between repetition and the search for identity in Chekov's fiction.*] In: Közelítések – Közvetítések. Anton Pavlovics Csehov, szerk.: Regéczi Ildikó, Didakt Kiadó, Debrecen, 2011, 50-70.

Anselmus, Aureliano és a Bölcsek köve – Az arany virágcserep és a Száz év magány alkímiai kontextusban [*Anselmus, Aureliano and the Sorcerers' stone – The Golden Pot and One Hundred Years of Solitude in an Alchemic Context.*] In: Alföld, 2012/2. 93-110.

Other publications

Korszakok kísértése, kísértések krónikása (Mihail Bulgakov: Acéltorok – recenzió) [*The haunting of eras, the chronicler of hauntings. (Mihail Bulgakov: Steel Windpipe – review.)*] In: Élet és Irodalom, LI. évfolyam 48. szám (2007.11.30.)