Theses of the PhD Dissertation

THE ART OF TRAVEL IN CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN FICTION

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Debrecen, 2018
A, Identifying the aims and the subject of the dissertation

Travel is a form of art; to paraphrase Nietzsche¹, it is an adventure by the end of which the subject is not the same person that he used to be, since he did not begin the journey to simply see the world, but to learn how to see differently. The art of travel can be performed in certain practices. It is a cultural technique, which has, as Judith Adler puts², historically changing styles, namely codes, norms, material and infrastructural conditions. Travel, which can be considered an anthropological constant, affects the senses: it conquers the body – the eyesight, the hearing, the taste – of the traveller. Travel literature can convey both the historical-cultural embeddedness and the eventness of these experiences.

Relying on these insights, the dissertation examines literary works written by Ágnes Nagy Nemes, Miklós Mészöly, Péter Esterházy, László Krasznahorkai and János Térey that epitomize the complexity of the genre traditions. Their writings reveal how the various, politically, historically and socio-culturally influenced forms of travel – cultural tourism, the visiting of relatives in communist Eastern-Europe, contemporary pilgrimage, hedonist post-tourism and the imaginary journey – can affect the subject. Thus, the chosen texts are not discussed in the present study for the reason that they constitute a well recognizable literary tendency. The dissertation examines them because they all offer different but exciting and complex answers for the following questions: how can a generic tradition that was flourishing in the beginning of the 20th century be re-interpreted from the horizon of late modernity and the postmodern? How is the encounter with the alien enacted in them? What kinds of experience does travel grant us?

When referring to the chosen texts, I use Jan Borm’s notion of travel literature³, and I explore the ambiguities presented by the attempts to define the genre (or group of genres) in detail in the introductory chapter. At the beginning of the dissertation I offer a brief survey of the historical and medial contexts of travel writing, too, taking my examples mainly from world literature. With the historical detour I also aim to prove that the analysis of the aforementioned texts definitely needs to take into consideration the interrelatedness of travel and literature. As I suggest, the very term “travel writing” implies that the writings it refers to do not only represent travel on a thematic level, since they reflect on its historically and culturally changing norms and customs. Therefore, the generic traditions of travel writing go along with certain

travels of travel. Throughout the dissertation, the close reading of the selected writings shall be completed by reliance on secondary literature concerning the social function, infrastructure and mediality of the practices they represent.

Although the dissertation does not aim to expose a literary historical tendency, the analyses of the chosen texts have revealed certain connections between them, which has helped me to create a relatively unified criterion. As the introductory chapter discusses the issue in detail, literary travelogues have been facing the challenge of how to reflect on the phenomenon of mass tourism from the beginning of the 20th century until today. Accordingly, every chapter touches upon the question of how the difference (or the lack of difference) between travel and tourism is articulated in the given work. I explore how the function of travel writing’s most typical generic convention, the description itself – an element that has gained special significance in the sights-oriented paradigm of travel – has changed in the chosen 20th century and contemporary pieces of travel writing. I will also demonstrate that the texts re-evaluate another strategy of coping with strangeness: the dialogue with the inhabitants of the visited areas, which played an important role earlier in the Renaissance travel ethos. For this reason, I pay special attention to the way dialogue form influences the production of meaning in the texts; I outline the ways they interpret the notion of ‘conversation’ and address the issue of mediation between languages. Furthermore, the dissertation emphasises the fact that the chosen texts define ‘the alien’ not only in terms of linguistic, geographical and cultural distance, but also as a product of temporal separation. Thus, I will examine how the narration of the journey is intertwined with reflections on memory and remembrance in the selected novels.

**B, An outline of the applied methods**

At several points, the dissertation relies on the results of the Anglophone travel writing studies, which has become a distinct sub-discipline of cultural studies by the turn of the 1980s. Each chapter draws upon monographs and collections of essays (the works of Mary Baine Campbell, Tim Youngs, Carl Thompson and Elizabeth Korte, among others) that focus on the history of European travel writing, demonstrating the process throughout which travel, originally considered a necessary evil, has transformed into a form of entertainment, and the travelogue, initially regarded as a source of information certified by tradition and later by autopsy, has transformed into a literary text in the modern sense. I put special emphasis on Judith Adler’s argument, according to which travel – in compliance with the double meaning of the Latin term ‘ars’ – can be understood as a ‘performed art’.
Drawing upon these sources, the introductory chapter outlines the changes – concerning the social function, infrastructure and mediality of travel – that can be linked to the history of the modern literary travelogue, and designates the place of the chosen texts among the tendencies of 20th century travel writing. I have found the historical detour essential, because I often refer back to the Romantic ideal of travel or to the pre-modern variations of the traveller’s persona when analysing the chosen late 20th and 21st century writings.

Beyond the secondary literature on travel writing, the dissertation is inspired by the hermeneutically and phenomenologically oriented theories of strangeness, such as the articles published in the anthology entitled *Hermeneutik der Fremde* and – most importantly – the works of Bernhard Waldenfels. When exploring the ways a travel narrative constructs a land that is characterized by a language and culture different from that of the traveller, I differentiate between otherness and strangeness in accordance with Waldenfels’s philosophy. While the former notion implies comparison and mutual symmetry, the latter indicates an asymmetrical, non-interchangeable relationship; it cannot be conceived as a lack of knowledge that can be supplemented but rather as an uncrossable threshold. I will argue that on the one hand the purely alien does not exist, since even the most radical threshold experience assumes the existence of an order it transgresses, but on the other hand ‘ones’s own’ can never be entirely pure either, since “the alien begins in ourselves, and not outside ourselves.”

Whether explicitly or just implicitly, all the chosen texts touch upon another central problem of 20th century and contemporary travel writing: to what extent can the traveller’s identity formation be based on the difference from the tourist? When addressing the question, I rely on the most important researchers of contemporary tourism studies: e.g. Dean MacCanell’s *The Tourist*, which breaks away from the moralising criticism of the phenomenon, and *The Semiotics of Tourism* by Jonathan Culler. Culler’s study sheds light on a paradox: the binary opposition of travel (considered to be authentic) and tourism (regarded as inauthentic) itself has been produced by the discourse of tourism. I shall also frequently refer to John Urry’s *The Tourist Gaze*, according to which the historically changing tourist gaze (similarly to Foucault’s medical gaze) has always been shaped by its relation to the social practices that are seen as its opposite or independent from it. Thus, after Urry, I regard tourism as a leisure activity which presupposes its opposite, namely, regulated and organized work. At the same time, a significant part of my Protokoll-interpretation is built on the recognition – shared by current tourism research – that the dividing line between the two spheres has already become blurred in 21st century consumer society.

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Finally, I shall highlight two aspects of my argumentation. It may seem evident but still needs to be emphasised: the ways in which the central questions of travel writing are articulated in the chosen novels are inseparable from their worldview and their view of literature – which might recall the attitude of classical and late modernism or the postmodern sensibility. Thus, their analysis can broaden our knowledge concerning the late 20th-21st century history of Hungarian fiction. Furthermore, although the dissertation focuses on literary works written in Hungarian, I aim to use a comparative approach, indicating the links that connect the chosen texts to different tendencies of world literature.

C. The results of the dissertation

I. In the opening chapter of the dissertation I briefly outline the research of travel writing studies. Then I address the following question: why is the meta-discourse on the genre of travel texts centred around an issue that does not seem significant at all from certain horizons of contemporary literary studies? In other words, why are scholars still concerned with the factuality and probability of travel narratives? I come to the conclusion that behind the expectations regarding the veracity of the narrated travel there is a more than one hundred years old convention that reads these texts not as literature but as the written sources of reliable, externally verifiable information. This tradition is coupled with a new, ethics-based expectation concerning the political-ideological aspects of travelogues that represent mainly developing countries. In the historical overview of the opening chapter, I explore the Romantic cult of travel in detail; I argue that around the turn of the 19th century travel became a form of “performed art” embedded in the individual’s life story and this shift was closely related to the stabilization of the status of the travelogue as a literary genre dominated by a confessional and subjective voice. After outlining the social and economic consequences of the spread of tourism, I point out that most of the dreams, promises and identities circulated by the tourism industry are rooted in the ideology of Romanticism. I also explore the ways 20th century travel writing has reflected on the uniformization of travel; I reveal the shift from the classical modernity’s elitist criticism of tourism towards a relativist, self-ironical approach and new strategies of creating an effect of authenticity. Finally, I focus on the literary historical antecedents of the chosen texts, with special regards to the interruption of the genre tradition that was flourishing between the two world wars. The reason for this break was obviously of a
political nature: the literary travelogue favoured by Kosztolányi, László Németh and Lőrinc Szabó was not welcomed by the cultural politics of the Communist era after 1947. However, as I point out, the genre codes that dominated the travel literature of the interwar years gained a new significance in the oeuvre of the immigrant Hungarian writers (László Cs. Szabó, György Ferdinandy, Endre Karátson).

II. The second chapter focuses on the travel diaries of Ágnes Nagy Nemes, which were originally not intended to be published; they came out posthumously in the 2014 volume entitled Magyarul és világul [In Hungarian and in World]. The notes report about everyday troubles belonging to the very private sphere of the writer (e.g. shopping) and more abstract aesthetic and identity problems, mixing very different linguistic registers. According to my hypothesis, the volume can be understood as a source of mentality history. The diaries are written by an Eastern European artist-intellectual, who – although living behind the Iron Curtain – deeply identifies herself with the traditions of European high culture. The volume demonstrates the ways she interpreted her position as an Eastern European traveller during her journeys in the 1960-70’s Western Europe and Western America. The “travel style” associated with the figure of Nemes Nagy can be defined as a form of cultural tourism; it is featured as a systematic and disciplined practice that contributes to the intellectual enrichment of the traveller. The urge “to see more” is not just a reaction to the limited travelling options of Eastern Europeans; it is an inner imperative. Therefore, Nemes Nagy’s writings link back to 18th century philosophical tradition according to which travel is a strenuous activity that is demanding not only physically but also intellectually. The traveller engages in a highly challenging form of interpretative work and the travel diary opens up space for carrying out the task of understanding. However, as I point out, the experience of the cultural diversity of the Western world does not guide the narrator towards the recognition of the subjective, culture specific nature of taste and aesthetic judgements. Instead, the diaries affirm the existence of a homogenous, unchangeable set of aesthetic norms rooted in classical European culture. At the same time, the semantics of taste and tasting, consumption and aesthetic pleasure constantly overlap in the language of the diaries, which suggests that maintaining the self-image of the artist who prefers intellectual enjoyment over physical pleasure becomes difficult in capitalist societies, where – in parallel with the works of art – consumer goods are also located in an aesthetically pleasing environment. The subversive effect of the alienation from one’s own world is alleviated by the self-reflections scattered on the last pages of the American diary that utilize the notion of learning. The idea of learning transforms the experience of self-alienation into the overstepping of habitual judgements and the re-discovery of one’s own identity.
III. The third chapter focuses on Miklós Mészöly’s novel entitled *Pontos történetek útközben* [Exact Stories on the Way]. I argue that the novel does not continue the trend set by early 20th century travelogues – it rather demonstrates the break of that particular travel writing tradition. Thus, Mészöly’s work immortalizes that period of Eastern/Central European history when the experience of travel for travel’s sake was unattainable for the ordinary citizen. The gestures and the vocabulary of tourism are preserved in the characters’ discourse and narrated behaviour only in fragments, creating an ironical effect; the book suggests that taking a journey as a means of recreation is impossible within the fictional world. Similarly, the novel deconstructs the Romantic ideal of travel. Instead of associating wandering with adventure and freedom, the novel emphasises the characters’ fear and defencelessness, questioning the presupposition that travelling exerts a productive influence on the subject. The episodic structure of the text does not constitute a teleological narrative; both the individual chapters and the whole novel lack an epiphanic closure that would metaphorically link together the “inner” and “outer” endpoints of the journey. I suggest that *Pontos történetek* still maintains the possibility that the experience of travel can be meaningful – not because it serves as a means of self-fulfilment, but because it opens up new ways to practice empathy.

IV. The fourth chapter explores Péter Esterházy’s *The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn*. I read the novel in the context of a 1970’s-1980’s tendency in world literature, namely the postmodern trend of travel writing that was popular among British, German and Italian authors. I approach Esterházy’s work as a meta-travel text which gathers the genre codes of the literary travelogue and the symbolic meaning potentials of the notion of travel. The title of the novel evokes the sights-oriented paradigm of travel. As the dissertation reveals, Esterházy’s book can be interpreted as a reflection on the complicated, historically changing relationship between travelling and seeing, and – at the same time – as an attempt to “rehabilitate” other sensory impressions. Although the novel utilizes the topoi of the tourist and its opposite, the “real traveller”, its rhetoric undermines the dividing line between the authentic and the superficial experience, promoting a postmodern world-view from which the differentiation loses its relevance. Furthermore, the meta-fictive allusions that refer to the processes of travelling, writing and reading as each other’s metaphors are coupled with a narrative voice that lays special emphasis on the representational traditions of the regions depicted in the book. Therefore, *Hahn-Hahn*... functions as an archive of the typical representational patterns and topoi of the discourse on Central-Europe; the text sheds light on their embeddedness in the history of mentalities and points out the aesthetical and ideological contexts they are rooted in.
The problem of regional identities gains new dimensions in the chapters that are set on the “Poor-Danube”; the relativity of the East-West dichotomy manifests itself when the Traveller finds himself in the position of a “picky Westerner”. Instead of relying on the Transylvania-narratives familiar from previous travelogues, the representation of the Romanian areas is dominated by the immediate perception and the physical sensation of the locals’ “intense poverty”. Similarly to Pontos történetek…, Esterházy’s novel illustrates the connection between travel and compassion; even if only temporarily and with restrictions, his Traveller identifies himself with the marginalized other.

V. The fifth chapter analyses three works by László Krasznahorkai that are all set in China: Az urgai fogoly [The prisoner of Urga], Csak a csillagos ég [Only the Sky with the Stars] and Rombolás és bánat az Ég alatt [Destruction and Sorrow beneath the Heavens]. I argue that Krasznahorkai’s travel writing re-interprets the classical modern principle according to which wholeness can be recreated within the aesthetic sphere, and it does so by staging the possibility of fulfilment in the Chinese culture. His texts also demonstrate that the Eastern way of thinking does not separate the spheres of everyday life, transcendence and aesthetics from each other. Another common feature of the three writings is that they do not employ comparison – the typical structuring principle of travelogues – in the customarily way. Namely, these texts do not contrast the thinking patterns, customs and reflexes embedded in the traveller’s own culture with the new, alien and subversive impressions gained in the foreign country. Instead, their narrative dynamics is determined by the tension between the previous expectations towards China and the actually experienced reality. The protagonist of Az urgai fogoly does not become disappointed in his expectations of China, he indeed ascertains the perfection, timelessness and transcendental nature of the culture. However – precisely because he considers these features as inherent, previously given properties, not as qualities that emerge in the dialogue between the own and the alien – he can only bear witness to his exclusion from the Chinese perception of the world. Still, the more painful the unreachability of the experience is, the more valuable it seems – this self-generating process is described by the narrator as “melancholy”, and it can also be connected to the repetitive structure of the novel that intertwines the end and the beginning. When exploring Csak a csillagos ég, I highlight the fact that – as opposed to the other works of Krasznahorkai with a similar theme – the reportage pays special attention to the problem of mediation between languages. I focus on the ambiguities permeating the dialogues that mostly consist of simple sentences. The encounters presented by the text imply that the act of raising questions does not broaden only the knowledge of the traveller, since the reporter – as an outsider – is able to make his interviewees realize such aspects of their relation to their
own culture that they have previously not been able to see. The next subchapter on Rombolás és bánat az ég alatt reveals that the essentializing and idealizing rhetoric of Krasznahorkai is completed with another typical feature of the travelogues of high modernism, namely the attitude according to which the mixing of different cultural formations causes an irreversible loss. The narrator’s complaints draw attention to the fragility of the endangered Chinese tradition, in parallel with the elitist criticism of tourism that is deployed in the novel as a symbol of late capitalist consumer societies. However, I come to the conclusion that the textual complexity of the novel surpasses the narrator’s intentions, indicating the blind spots of the communicative and self-representational strategies epitomized by his figure.

VI. The sixth chapter offers a reading of János Térey’s Protokoll [Protocol], a unique piece of contemporary Hungarian literature that reflects on the cultural, medial and economic embeddedness of the intertwining practices of travel and tourism. Furthermore, the text illustrates the fact that the social practices of work and tourism are also inseparable. Within the framework of the diplomatic travel, the dividing line between work and leisure, public and private sphere becomes blurred, thus the figure of the protagonist – a middle-aged diplomat – can be interpreted as an allegory of our contemporary consumer culture. I also explain that the educated tourists of Protokoll do not attempt to read the foreign streets, customs and tastes as the signs of authenticity. Instead – looking at touristic sights as places of semiosis from the first – they find pleasure in the inspection (which also entails self-inspection) and understanding of touristic sign processes. As such, they embody the self-reflexive “post-tourist”, who, according to Maxine Feifer, regards touristic practices as parts of a governable and manipulable game.5 The novel in verse does not only aim to interpret the phenomenon of tourism, but it also plays upon its discursive features, re-utilizing the well-known clichés that permeate the verbal and visual representation of touristic sights. What is more, Protokoll demonstrates the fact that the traveller can encounter “otherness” in “intense and intimate ways”6 – similarly to what is stated by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht about the atmosphere of literary works. However, instead of being affected by the mood of the literary text, the traveller experiences the atmosphere of the place that preserves traces of the vivacity of its former inhabitants.

A PhD értekezés alapjául szolgáló közlemények

Magyar nyelvű könyvrészték (3)
1. Balajthy, Á. "Nem akarok mást, csak mozgást": Az utazástagasztalat színrevitele Térey János Protokoll című művében.


Magyar nyelvű tudományos közlemények hazai folyóiratban (5)
4. Balajthy, Á. Térkép, mitosz, labirintus (Bruce Chatwin. The Songlines).
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Idegen nyelvű tudományos közlemények külföldi folyóiratban (2)

12. **Balajthy, Á.**.: “In the labyrinth of invisible pathways”: Tropes of Aboriginal Australia in Bruce
    Chatwin’s The Songlines.

13. **Balajthy, Á.**.: Die neu definierten Traditionen der Reiseliteratur in dem Roman Donau abwärts
    von Péter Esterházy.

Egyéb folyóiratkozlemények (2)

14. **Balajthy, Á.**.: Úton lét, megérkezés (Szirák Péter. Ki említ megérkezést?).
    *Kultur.hu* 2017. (05.10.), [4], 2017.

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Magyar nyelvű konferencia közlemények (1)

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További közlemények

Magyar nyelvű könyvrészletek (1)

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Időszaki kiadványok (1)
   kötetek:

A DEENK a jelölt által az iDEa Tudóstérbe feltöltött adatok bibliográfiai és tudományometriai ellenőrzését a tudományos adatbázisok és a Journal Citation Reports Impact Factor lista alapján elvégezte.

Debrecen, 2018.02.06.