

Debrecen University

Faculty of Arts

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Székely János

The theses of the Phd dissertation

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Consultant:

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I. The aim of the dissertation, specification of the theme

The theme of my thesis is Székely János's literary career. Székely János's life's work is a thesaurus of Hungarian literature that is not fully investigated in detail in spite of the fact, that in his own age the writer was one of the most prominent characters of Hungarian literature. He became widely known only in the 1970's in Hungary with the publication of his parabolic, historical plays (Caligula's Proconsul, Protestants etc.) involving topics of current concern. Although by the time Hungarian and Transylvanian theatres started to perform his plays, he had already finished a significant poetical career, an autonomous set of prose works, excellent novels (Soó Péter's Misery, The Shadow), a collection of short stories and three volumes of essays (The Western Corps, The Genesis of an Idea, The Meaning of the Myth). It was only in the 1980's, after completing all the works listed above, that he wrote a modern, form-breaking novel entitled The Other Tower and erected a "memorial" to the Romanian fascist dictatorship with it. In The Saracen, a play designated as a historical essay, he deals with the tragic perspectives of Hungarian minority and in the last years of life he grasped a complete world concept and interpretation of existence in a philosophical book of essays entitled The Real World, that is unique in Hungarian literature. My thesis attempts at appraising and assessing this remarkably rich and complex literary career that gave significant

works of art to every genre.

II. Applied methods

While analysing Székely's literary career I will put emphasis on the organic and homogeneous nature of Székely János's life-work, but for several reasons (good organization, systematisation, the need for different poetical categories etc.) I will study the genres one by one and analyse his essays, poems, plays and prose in individual chapters. While going into details analysing individual writings, I am going to prove the interdependence of the works and the plasticity, penetrativeness of boundaries between genres by keeping on referring to other writings. At the same time, I also intend to present the process of development in Székely János's literary career from the beginning till the end of it. Through analysing the collections of essays, I intend to devote a whole chapter to demonstrate the special features of Székely's aesthetic views, his unique world concept and interpretation of life that determines the poetical character and structure of his works. By sometimes challenging, sometimes applying the contemporary reception I practically reinterpret and reevaluate the writings. In the first chapter I am going to examine the reception of his works separately and put my own questions while analysing different statements and evaluations. In the final chapter I am going to sum up the main points of the analyses, the results of the studies of different genres, point at the significance of Székely's life work and assign a place to it in Transylvanian and Hungarian literature.

III. The results of the analysis of Székely's life's work

Via explaining contemporary and posthumous reception of Székely's writings I draw attention to the contradictions between ways in which his works were

received. For example to the fact that although contemporary or even later criticism praised the writer and his works to the skies (for example Lengyel Balázs: “Székely János is the writer of not only Hungarians beyond the frontiers, the so called minority, but of our century, the second half of our century. Somewhere between Camus and Orwell. One of the greatest artists of our age.”), only a few critics undertook the task of a conclusive and through analysis. I interpret the collections of essays, especially *The Real World*, as a personal confession, since they can be handled as the bases of the world conceptual and poetical interpretation of the life-work (and his attitude to art). By means of examining them it becomes obvious that to what a great extent the particularly unique philosophical way of thinking, attempts at describing the fundamental laws of the world and human existence influenced the aesthetics of his writings. At the end of *The Real World* the author sums up his views man’s on position in life and his sense of alienation from the world. He adds to the inner conflicts originating from human consciousness and to the duality of loneliness and, at the same time, being social, the tensions resulting from the fact that we belong to different sexes, from relationships between men and women, from love and from those arising out of the immorality of the genes and the morality of humans to enable him to express his views: when it comes to human existence “we can sense obstinate and irresolvable duality, discord everywhere. Duality, discord on every possible level, in every possible respect. Man is not only a being rent with inner conflict - he is Nature’s split through his consciousness.” That thoroughly conceived and personally suffered experience of life is the explanation of the frequent appearance of Doppelgänger motif in Székely’s writings.

Székely János’s moral- and value-centred world concept and aesthetics attribute literature, arts and culture in general to such traditional ontological functions that they can fulfil more and more poorly in the second half of the

century. The writer, always striving for a way of thinking with no illusions, was one of the first becoming aware of it, inasmuch as, by the early 1970's. Simultaneously with the exhaustion of his poetic inspiration, he had already reached his final conclusions. In 1973 in his essay entitled *Ars Poetica* he pronounces his theses: "The conscience of word became troubled" and "Poetry is dead since it lost its function". In *Ars Poetica* Székely deliberates responsibly on the history of culture and reveals his fatally serious inner conflict resulting from seeing the contradictions of his age in metaphysical literary attitude; his disillusionment with his ideals (unified concept of the world, totality, synthesis, truth, moral purity etc.) and with the sacredness of poetry. Although he was ruthlessly rational, consequences and his commitment to outspokenness did not allow him not to draw the final consequence and express it. Nevertheless, deep in his heart he could never give up his principles and his instinct for life. Authorial responsibility did never allow him to stop writing. From that time on, facing the vision of pointlessness, exchanging his former confidence with unceasing scepticism, he wrote dramas, prose and essays instead of poetry to express his disillusionment.

Székely created his literary universe in the 1950's and based it on the traditions of classically modern world literature and Hungarian literature. It is equally influenced by a mythic and egocentric world concept. His theory of life and perception about his position in life was determined by the lack of illusions by the late 1960's, but for moral and ideological reasons, he recoiled from the aesthetics of poetic disillusion. By the early 1970's he no longer wrote any poems, therefore, his poetry is not influenced by the poetic tendencies of the time. He did not yet raise problems in connection with language and works of poetry, did not realize that the bounds of language limit the boundaries of the world. He had preference for the denotative and referential, cognitive and rational language usage. Just like

Babits, he was unwilling to give up the deliberate determination of authorial meaning. Székely worked according to the traditional logocentric approach, as Derrida put it. For him a piece of art did not yet compose itself. His writings have a message that is always value-centred and emphatically moral by nature, he never substitutes a third party for his own self. He declares himself to be a confessionalist following traditional Hungarian attitudes to art. Despite believing in his mission in life, he avoids being prophetic.

I do not insist that his poetry is among the greatest of Hungarian lyric poetry written after 1945, yet, his best poems definitely belong to those of the top rank. Székely's lyrical poetry is (could be) the thesaurus of Hungarian literature poor in philosophical lyric poetry, even though philosophic properties are sometimes detriment to lyric quality in his works. Although newer and newer fashions in literature are supposed to make that sort of poetry outdated, his best poems endowed with classic qualities, profound intellectual faculties and exacting nature in matters of form, are enjoyable from time to time just like those written by Székely's great predecessors: Babits, Kosztolányi, Szabédi László, Szabó Lorinc and Rilke.

Székely János did not write particularly much prose, but the role his prose plays within his life's work is very emphatic, even though, succeeding generations did not take much interest in it. His early prose (Soó Péter's Misery, The Shadow) reminds us of Thomas Mann's, Babits' and Kosztolányi's works and, on the other hand, it also resembles romantic (German) narrative traditions. These novels do not either follow the classical Transylvanian tradition, or resemble contemporary writings. In fact, they are most closely related to his own lyrical world. Although his narrative technique still resembles the story-centred, psychological realist prose portraying reality, the epic structure of his works is already influenced by the ontological and atmospheric, lyric or mythicizing

European and Hungarian prose. The inevitable epic objectivation forced a personal content, the expression of his world concept and attitude to life behind parabolic stories and metaphoric situations. The liveliness, flexibility of these novels are not the result of the originality of the way they are composed, it derives from the occurrence of motifs in different passages, and even more from the evocative effect of artistic images (representing thoughts, symbols, facts of life mythically) and from poetic tone.

Already in *The Shadow* the writer intends to delineate the social determination of the autonomous personality's existence. The historical short stories in *The Western Corps* illustrate even more emphatically the basic laws of human existence and society. In *The Other Tower* he no longer focuses on personality, but on collective fate. The writer moralizes (in the gentler sense of the word) and makes us think by combining factual intellectualism with the parabolism of mythical meaning. He does not merely relate his experiences in stories about his biographically inspired and, still, invented world as an implicit narrator, but continuously reflects on them while making conversations with the reader.

Székely's authorial programme combining the modern with the traditional presents itself most harmoniously, most excitingly and also most expressive of aestheticism in his prose, mostly in Soó Péter's *Misery* and in *The Other Tower*. The writer avoided experimentation whenever possible, using traditional methods and classically strict, closed literary forms. For the sake of exactness in the expression of facts of life and models of existence he was able to give up his former principles and ceased striving for the illusion of reality. He may not have been fully conscious of it, but rather instinctively, deriving from his personal experiences and authorial condition, taking into consideration the changes of the genre in the twentieth century and the modern sign systems, he created such structurally and semantically open works of art that can claim readers' active

collaboration in every age. His works influenced the Transylvanian Forrás Generation, (e. g. Szilágyi István, Bodor Ádám, Mózes Attila), in a liberating way.

Drama, just like poetry, prose or essay, is the instrument of self-analysis and self-avowal for Székely. Having a closer look, we can identify the stigmas of the writer's own life in the moral dilemmas of the agonizing protagonists. Not only in his best known work, *Caligula's Proconsul*, but in almost all of his dramas he intended to express "people's moral dire straits existing within the social pyramid": the limits of the individual's autonomy under pressure of the authority. Clinging to the historical tragedies written in verse Székely János wanted to preserve and carry on a classicised, out-of-date ideal. In spite of that, both the unique experimentation on drama in the 1950's and 1960's and the parabolic historical dramas of the 1970's and 1980's must have been influenced by the changes of the genre in the twentieth century and are similar to classical tragedy only in their form. They lack traditional dramatic plot and crisis, as well as, heroic acts resulting in catharsis. Székely tried to make his readers think, make them uncertain and disappoint them in illusory ways of behaviour. The profound intellectuality of his works dealing with the meaning of life and with the way one can keep on being humane whatever the circumstances are, can be associated with Camus', Dürrenmatt's and Sartre's philosophical dramas. At the same time, the typical problems of the Middle East, such as, the relationship between authority and individual, or between history and individual and the argumentative dramaturgy similar to essay parallel his works with Németh László's and Illyés Gyula's historical dramas not to mention the contemporary writers in Transylvania, Sütő András, Páskándi Géza, Kocsis István, whom he differs from widely because he did not try to impress his audience with the moral victories of pride heroes' tragic failures. Consequently, the writings dealing with the morally problematic, but not necessarily political, relationship

between the individual and authority will be of importance until there is an individual at the mercy of authority. According to Goethe, tragedy is poetry written by man driven by his sentiments. The heroes in Székely János's modern tragedies live and think in the spirit of moral autonomy, without scrupulousness, irrespective of whether their actions have a chance and result or not. Sometimes their failure is due to their failing suit the demands they make on themselves.

Just like the message of all literary works, those of Székely's dramas also change, alter in time. We do not already sense, for example, those current political messages Székely intended for his contemporary audience in the 1970's and 1980's, and which people were particularly receptive of. All the same, his basic existential situations, eternal questions and attempts at answering them can be appreciated by all generations including our own long after the collapses of Eastern European dictatorships.

Finally, I conclude that the philosophically oriented writer's versatile life-work is united by a particularly unique world concept, theory about existence and communicative purpose with a strong moral content in all of his writings. His life's work proves that one can express the same or very similar thoughts, philosophical content in different genres. It was a general tendency in world literature in the twentieth century for dividing lines between genres to grow indistinct and become penetrable. That may account for the mixed genres and indistinct forms. As Székely put it: the subjects, themes take their own "nature" from one genre, one form to another. His poetry is dramatic and epic, his dramas are lyric and epic, his epic poetry is lyric and dramatic and all the three reveal essayish features as well as those characteristic of its their own genres and sometimes they do so at the expense of their original form. Székely János's literary ambition was never satisfied with

putting into words the actual social and political issues of his age. He did not long for people's appreciation or for the admiration of those dealing with contemporary cultural policy. He wanted not less than: "Expressing, putting into words the world, yes." The world that he wished to view and explain as an integral whole, while, from the late 1960's on, he had to face the crisis of artistic attitudes, inherited from Romanticism, but renewed by classical modernity, counterposing at least the totality of aesthetic quality with the lost totality of existence and the world.

On the basis of this wider context we can understand his radical decision on giving up writing poetry since he regarded the traditional, sign-centred, communication-based lyrical form containing recorded messages limited. (See his essay entitled *Ars Poetica*!) Still, he did not give up his striving after a unified world concept. *The Real World*, his great philosophical work, one of the best Hungarian collections of essays, proves that. On the other hand, in spite of all his doubts, mostly for moral reasons, with a kind of heroic pessimism, he deliberately stuck to the ontological functions of writing. For example, he stuck to his opinion that: "Writing positions man as a sentient being in an unconscious world. The manifestation of Nature's discord", he still believed that "sometimes, somebody will grasp the world better" with the help of his writings. That is to say, even if not in poems, he kept on adopting Szabó Lorinc's programme: "let the poet be a useful will". He did not regard literature as a social duty. Just like his master Thomas Mann, he regarded it as the expression of the profoundest laws, facts of human existence. Aesthetic value for him was never autonomous and a work of art was always concerned with something bigger, with the world." I would like to contribute to human consciousness and identity." - he said in a (lesser known) interview, and he seemed to have devoted his whole life to it. In that context his attitude can be viewed as not only conservative, but in his sense of the word, even romantic (although romanticism is a common feature of real art in general), since

he also called the world to account for ideals. Therefore, his works are by no means mere texts, but worlds of texts with content addressed to us, serving (also) our salvation.

IV. Publications about the theme written by the author of the thesis

1. "...cachet I make you to take medicine in" (Correlations between world concept and aesthetics in Székely János's essays.) *Kortárs*, 1999. 3. p. 114-128.
2. "A part fenced off the whole" (About Székely János's poetry). *Hitel*, 1999.3. p. 89-105.
3. "What is really worthy of man..." (About Székely János's dramas). *Bárka*, 1999. 3. p. 79-92.
4. "What is really worthy of man..." (Székely János's historical dramas in the 1970's and 1980's). *Kortárs*, 2000. 3. p. 85-99.
5. The classicist of modernity (Székely János: the curse of flowers). *Alföld* 2000. 7. p. 106-111.
6. "His mode of existence is inner discord" (two forgotten short novels by Székely János's: Soó Péter's Misery, The Shadow). *Hitel*, 2000. 9. p. 97-104.
7. "...to express the world" (Székely János). *Bárka*, 2001. 2. p. 70-76.
8. Székely János (monograph). Kalligram Publishers, Pozsony, 2001. p. 192.