

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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IDENTITY AND HISTORY
IN THE PROSE OF NÁNDOR GION

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I. The antecedents of the research and the raising of the problem

The Noran Libro Publishing House in 2012 led by József P. Kőrössi finished the publishing of the life-work of Nándor Gion, which started in 2007, edited by László Füzi. The publication does not contain the whole life-work, only the most important writings of the writer (who died in 2002) became available for the reading public in Hungary. There is a place in this selection also for some diary extracts and interviews which were never published in a volume before. These texts are so interesting not only for the non-professionals but for the analysts as well, because they focus on important literature-sociological connections, formation-historical and creation-psychological problems as well.

Parallel to the publication of Nándor Gion's life-work also the doctoral dissertation of Hargita Horváth Futó (who lives in Szenttamás) was finished, which involved a lot of earlier not or almost not analysed writings in the analysis. The dissertation drew the attention of the numerous local aspects of the writings and also of the forming Gion-cult, in this even the writer of that dissertation is very active. Hargita Horváth Futó completed and published the bibliography of 1326 items of the works of the writer and the literature in connection with them, as the part of her dissertation until 2012, which already was published in 2010 in a separate volume. In the meantime also the secondary literature could grow enormously. Károly Árpás was the first to publish in a separate volume the diary of Gion about Pest in his monograph in 2008 besides other text-analysis, he also completed the register of Gion's characters intended to be exhaustive,

which can be a help for researchers and analysts. Erika Bence used the novels of Nándor Gion as a starting-point in her historical novel about Vojvodina in 2009, which novels she also used later in more studies. She focused the attention on the importance of the border and self-identity problems in the Gion-novels, these analysis viewpoints she examined thoroughly.

Two monographs came to light in 2009 in connection with Gion: the volume of Tibor Elek as the supplement of the life-work and the book of László Gerold in the series of Kalligram Publishing House introducing contemporary Hungarian writers. The book of Elek – completely simplified – first of all takes into consideration the aesthetic values of the Gion-prose, while the work of Gerold is based on the collecting and value-based treating of the acknowledgement about Gion.

Besides the completion of the Doctoral School of Literature Science, the Central-European special studies at our university also belonged to my personal research experiences. This made me sensitive for the ethnic and identity questions of our region, that is why I wrote my master's thesis in history about the history of Serbians in Hungary, later working on a (tourist) guide book for years I made efforts to thoroughly work up the southern part of the historical Hungary, the present Vojvodina in Serbia.¹ During writing this guide book I read through Gion's life-work available in Hungary and I also visited Gion's homeland and I got to know the background of his works: the circumstances in which his literary works came alive and they

¹ THOMKA Orsolya – KURCZ Ádám István – TÓTH Anikó, *Délvidék – a Vajdaság és Belgrád: Bácska, Bánág, Szerémség és az Al-Duna*, Bp., Ketzal, 2010.

are inseparable from those. During the six and half years work in MTA (Hungarian Academy of Sciences), in Research Institute for Linguistics, through the work of writing dictionary entries I got to know to recognise those sensitive linguistic phenomena which not only individualize in a text, but also encode local identities.

In 2010 a review was published by Zsófia Szilágyi about the Gion-monographs of Tibor Elek and László Gerold and she – examining the acknowledgement of the last part of the life-work – drew the attention to important insufficiencies, stating: „[...] a new monograph is required, which examines destiny, path of life, identity-crises.”² I partially try to supplement this deficiency with my dissertation to be defended. During reading the secondary literature about Gion a feeling of lack developed in me also in connection with the aspects of the texts. The author himself called these “playing flower-language tricks” referring to his own works before the regime change, but neither had he mention it in more details, nor the analysts. Though first I only planned to summarize the subject of identity in my dissertation, during rereading the texts I came to realize that it is possible to find the key to reveal Gion’s “playing tricks”, so his encoded messages between the lines, which are also in connection with the theme of identity. I managed to do this with the help of my literary and historical knowledge acquired at the university and possessing local memories and experiences in Vojvodina – applying different points of view together.

² SZILÁGYI Zsófia, *Két monográfia Gion Nándorról (ELEK Tibor: Gion Nándor írói világa; GEROLD László: Gion Nándor)* = Irodalomtörténet, 2010/I., 116.

József Kőrössi P. was a great help to start my work; he made the electronic forms of volume 3–5 of the life-work available for me. From the above mentioned authors it is thanks to Hargita Horváth Futó, who made her dissertation and other volumes (which are not available in Hungary) available for me. She also helped me to find enough data to start my research work by directing my attention on local reality references.

II. The construction of the thesis

In the first – introductory – part of my dissertation I indicate those subjects and questions which I explain and give an answer in my thesis. Later I place Gion's life-work in the relation-system of the Hungarian literature in Vojvodina and of the historical period of the texts. Here I already refer to the relation between referentiality and fictionality concerning the works of the author, which relation is a key in understanding the content typical of Gion's prose, in connection with identity and to understand the encoded hidden meanings in the works. In the same place I make clear which works I take into examination.

In the second chapter of my work I point out, that Gion – in each of his writing period and writing type – gave an important role to locations emphasised in connection with identity; most of these locations probably are cemeteries in his works. These characteristic locations (called as heterotopia by Michael Foucault) of the works I put under investigation based on the space theory of the French philosopher. I find out, that Gion's cemeteries with their ability to confront time and value – sometimes in a smart way – draw our attention not only to bring to the surface and protect

the irreplaceable values of the lost past, but also they represent the fate of the badly suffered Hungarians in Vojvodina. The symbolic function of cemeteries and the connected burial customs, rituals are especially present in the Vojvodian Hungarian writer's prose because of the endangered minority situation, as I show these with my examples from the volumes: *Ezen az oldalon, Sortúz egy fekete bivalyért, Zongora a fehér kastélyból*. The eternal spiritual deeds of mortal humans in connection with burial customs and the general roles of remembrance and other manifestations of religiousness fulfilled in communal identity all appear in his works, so in the second chapter of my work.

In the third bigger unit of my thesis I deal with the questions why and how Gion left out from his historical novel *Latroknak is játszott* (he started writing it in 1973) the period between 1918–1920, and yet what kind of gentle allusions he made to Trianon and other painful events of the Hungarians. I also mention in this chapter why Gion stopped the plot of his novel series at the eve of the Hungarian troops marched into Bácska in 1941 for decades – until the regime change. And though he stopped his main work in 1976, he went on with the publication of coded messages in his novel in 1977 which could fit into a novel about the Easter of 1941. Gion then chose the youth novel as genre and a mode of expression in which he could talk about the deepest longings and sorrows of his community in a hidden way, even about the events in 1944. The novel *A kárókatónák még nem jöttek vissza* is full of allegories: every element is the equivalent of a hidden content. These are so well coded in the novel, that even the specialised literature did not realize them before, so this part of my thesis formulates its' huge symbol system the first time.

In the fourth part of my dissertation with the analysis of the novels: *Ez a nap a miénk* and *Aranyat talált* I point out, that the writer who grew up in a dictatorship and almost felt at home in it, after the regime change he had to look after new limits, new fixed points. I explain here how Gion's method of writing changed when he was allowed to write freely about the sensitive questions of the Hungarian minority and how much he made efforts to be objective and to what extent he could stay moderate while demonstrating the injury of his community. I also write about how Gion then made the edges blunt with irony and how he responded to those doubts and objections in the narration of his texts, which could arise in the readers' mind through his brave statements and how he could make the descriptions more authentic with the help of these.

In the next chapters I deal with how Nándor Gion found the manner in his novels written in Yugoslavia – especially in *Virágos Katona* and *Rózsaméz* – under the pressure of (self)censorship and the party discipline to write about the problems of life of the Hungarians in Vojvodina between the two world wars and during the time of the writing of the novel. What kind of compromises he had to make and how he managed by dodging the compulsions of literary politics to describe his observations in connection with identity, especially with the symbiosis of majority and minority with a special code-system, which uses the reality references (especially the Germans in Vojvodina and their circumstances) in an individual way. What is more he did it in a way that the problems of the contemporary Serbian-Hungarian opposition should (not) be mirrored in it.

In these chapters besides the German and the Lutheran identity used as main guideline we can also meet more other questions in connection with

nationality-, religious-, political- and regional identity. Among others I discuss here the often very individual and intentional application of the Hungarian, the Serbian, the Catholic, the communist and the Vojvodian identity by Gion and also his playing with these. Also the assessment of Nándor Gion's public function and the analysis of his personal identity crises concluded from his works got place in these chapters.

In the last chapters of my thesis I point out the direct and veiled references for the biggest trauma of the Hungarians in Vojvodina: the massacre of Yugoslavian partisans in 1944–1945, the unlawful acts of communism at their beginning and later periods and the assimilation policy of the state authority in Gion's short stories and novels (*Kétéltűek a barlangban*, *Testvérem*, *Joáb*, *Ezen az oldalon* etc.) in the relatively free political atmosphere of the 60's and then in the worse and worse beginning of the 70's.

Because of these hints, Gion was suspected in Yugoslavia at the end of the 1960's and his writings were prohibited in Hungary. I establish that Gion had to realize at the beginning of the 70's, if he wanted his works to be published or he wanted his writings to be available in Hungary, he would have given up his direct allusions. The above mentioned and analysed works were made in the 70's–80's after his crisis in writing and about these works I made clear that the ethnical, political and historical messages can exist in them as water exists in the iceberg swimming in the sea. *Zongora a fehér kastélyból* from his 'youth novels' and *Ez a nap a miénk* and *Aranyat talált* from the 'adult novels' are the top of the iceberg; in these novels it is visible what was important for Gion in connection with the question of identity; but a considerable part of the iceberg under the water also exists

and is from the same material however it is less easy to recognise and observe.

I list the linguistic regionalisms collected from the works of Nándor Gion in the appendix of the dissertation, including separately the ones which are still used in the language of his home town. I can conclude – by taking the linguistic data into consideration – that Gion tried to ignore the dialect words and other characteristics of the regional language before he settled down in Hungary.

After 1993 in a moderate number Gion let local colours, expressions in his works; earlier only those local language items could appear in his prose, which belonged to the traditional rustic life or the ones he was not aware of, as probably he did not know the equivalent of them in the standard language.

III. The novelty of the inquiry method and the main results of the thesis

In my work I present those earlier little discussed aspects, that Nándor Gion lived in a dictatorship during the most important part of his profession of writing as a Hungarian minority writer who felt and accepted responsibility for his community, but he found the possibilities to outwit the vigilance of the political power and to write about the most important topics of his community in a hidden way; as a public person he could serve the benefit of his community.

I deal with the decoding of the most exciting, but until now undiscovered meanings of Gion's literary life-work in my dissertation, with

encoded messages, which could be the most important for the author, but because of political reasons at the middle of his career he was compelled to conceal so much, that people had to wait a lot for decoding and explaining them.

The “exposure” of Gion started with the exploring of the inner relations and associational network of his works, it went on with the reference of the works before the regime change and after it and finally it achieved its purpose in the confrontation of the events, names, data in the works with the local reality references, dates, events and other facts well known from history books.

Finally we can conclude that Gion in order to his literary aims, in numerous cases he tendentiously rewrote the reality known also by himself, beside preserving the appearance of likeliness even more the documentary faithfulness; and his aim with this was mostly to code the grieves of the minority into parable-like stories and to legitimate the local Hungarian community.

In my work I point out the many allusions of Nándor Gion in connection with the minority identity, I solve his numerous and characteristic symbols and I explain more of his parabolae, what the writer placed in his works in order to discuss the vital ethnical questions in a presentable way. I only refer to one of his smart and numerous literary techniques from his works: in Gion’s minority-majority model most of the time the majority is not the Serbian, but the Hungarian nationality; he almost does not mention directly the most problematical Serbians and we get to know the problems of the existence of a minority through the German community.

I also present in my analysis, where and in what Gion's works (before the regime change) lack the degree of historical and sociographical authenticity because of the writer's "abuse" of reality references; about what more of the analysts have already written. Of course these "distortions" of the works I uncovered do not detract from the merit of the Gion-prose, they rather praise the skilfulness of the writer, who wrote the "truth" in a way that a lot of people thought he also wrote the "reality".

IV. Relevant publications

Ismerjük a Délvidéket? = Stáció, 2010, V/2, 33.

THOMKA Orsolya – KURCZ Ádám István – TÓTH Anikó, *Délvidék – a Vajdaság és Belgrád: Bácska, Bánság, Szerémség és az Al-Duna*, Bp., Ketzal, 2010.

Rendhagyó útikönyv a Délvidékről = Magyar Szó, 2010. augusztus 14–15, 11.

Délvidéki reformátusok = Stáció, 2010, V/4, 14–15.

Reformátusok a Vajdaságban: Történeti, földrajzi, nemzetiségi körkép = Reformátusok Lapja, 2010. október 10, 9.

Evangélikusok a Vajdaságban: Kalandozás a lutheránus végeken, In memoriam Dolinszky Árpád (1949–2012) = Evangélikus Élet, 2012. október 28. [az Útitárs c. mellékletben]

A temetők mint heterotópiák Gion Nándor műveiben = *Filológia és irodalom: Tanulmányok a Pázmány Péter Katolikus Egyetem Irodalomtudományi Doktori Iskolájának Kárpát-medencei irodalmi MA- és PhD-hallgatók számára rendezett Filológia és irodalom című konferenciáján elhangzott előadásokból*, szerk. TOMPA Zsófia, Piliscsaba, PPKE BTK, 2013, 431–451.

Gion Nándor temetői = Forrás, 46/3, 2014. március, 103–117.

Temetők Gion Nándor Szenttamásán = Tanulmányok=Studie=Studies [az Újvidéki Egyetem Magyar Tanszékének kiadványa] 47. füzet, 2013, 99–112.

A németek szerepe Gion Nándor műveiben = Hungarológiai Közlemények, 2014/3, 118–131.

A német identitás szerepe Gion Nándor regényeiben = Délvidéki Szemle, 2014/2, 96–103.

Leölt kárókatónák: Gion Nándor és a „még hidegebb napok” = Magyar Nemzet, 2015. január 24, 25.

Accepted for / before Publication:

A katonák még nem jöttek vissza: Gion Nándor virág- és madárnyelvi trükkösködése = Forrás, 2015.

A németek szerepe Gion Nándor rendszerváltás előtti prózájában = Kortárs, 2015.

Gion Nándor és 1944: Virágnyelven az etnikai tisztogatásról = Magyar Szó, Kilátó c. melléklet, 2015.

Virágnyelven az 1944-es etnikai tisztogatásról Gion Nándor rendszerváltás előtti regényeiben = Délvidéki Szemle, 2015.

A német sors mint az általános kisebbségi sors példázata Gion Nándor prózájában = A „Babits és kortársai” címmel 2012 novemberében Piliscsabán rendezett konferencia tanulmánykötetében

Gion Nándor „virágnyelvi trükkösködése” = A Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége Irodalomtudományi Osztálya által 2014. febr. 24-én rendezett *Identitás, emlékezet, történelem* c. konferencia kötetében

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