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From the BRG to the Novel

Theoretical Questions Around (the Genre of) Zsolt Csalog's Prose Poetics

PHD thesis abstract

1. Theme selection

I approach Zsolt Csalog's œuvre (which to this day has been without a scholarly treatment) from the point of view of **genre theory**, not wanting to get lost in realism, sociography, non-fiction, or any other "realities" labeled with obscure technical jargons. In any event, the aim was not thematic categorization; I was working on achieving the writer's **re-canonization**. Referencing the words of his widow at the none-too-felicitous publication of his posthumous novel, I wished to revive the ethical and esthetic principles synonymous with the name Zsolt Csalog.

Why did genre theory specifically seem the most suitable approach? The answer can be found mostly in the provinciality of Hungarian literary history and conceptual thinking which surrounds all works with suspicion, whose genre cannot be identified exactly as to their esthetic value—in other words, anything that does not fit into the strict categories of the short story or, even more, of the highly respected novel. Hence, the primary goal of my work became to legitimize and to promote: **to prove that *Parasztregény (Peasant Novel)* is a novel, which is based on personal perspective, to place the rest of the œuvre—at a proportionate distance from the magnum opus—among "legitimate" and "academic" works.**

2. Methodology

The chief concept behind my analysis comes from Milan Kundera, who, in his book, *The Art of the Novel*, declared with simplicity and conciseness that the novel is "[t]he great prose form in which an author thoroughly explores, by means of experimental selves (characters), some great themes of existence". It is easy to see that the Zsolt Csalog who approached his sociological research around the world with wide open eyes and with empathy, and who while transforming the language and life stories of his research subjects into novels, saw the exact same potential in these **experimental selves**. And this is where we can connect with another of Kundera's fundamental definitions according to which "[t]he meditative action of a novel rests on the pillars of a few abstract words. [...] A novel [...] is often no more than a long hunt after a few mercurial definitions." This latter perception led us to specific **words as the existential-ontological keys** to the text: in the case of *Peasant Novel*, "peasant" or "I stayed"; in the case of *Hands Up!*, the "whore"; in the case of *I Was Prisoner of the Party*, "alienation".

Naturally, whether I wanted to or not, I was forced to confront the relationships between

genre and raw material, spoken word (phonolexeme) and written word (philolexeme)—in other words, **the debate around documentarianism**. It was Kundera again who led me to the solution of how to liberate the term. Specifically with the oft-quoted sentence from *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* according to which “[t]he novel is not the confession of its author, rather his examination of what human life means inside the trap that this world has become.” If we start out from *Peasant Novel*, Aunt Eszter’s **identity crisis** shows just such a trap: the quasi-intellectual farmer who, stubbornly and defiantly accepts and wears her peasant identity, yearns for biographical accounting and summation of her existence. More specifically, it portrays the waning days of traditional peasant culture and the intolerance of the modern “New World” (perhaps even more savage than the old one) through the lens of a single life. Aunt Eszter’s desires and fears, diatribes and silences illustrate precisely the labyrinth faced by both the individual and her world.

3. Conclusions

Above I claimed that Zsolt Csalog’s œuvre has not received scholarly examination, but this is not entirely correct. For example, Zita Sisák in 2005 wrote a superb study—albeit from an ethnographic perspective—on how living words transformed into a novel in Csalog’s hands. This essay could have saved us (and it did in a certain way) from analyzing all of the raw material off the tapes of *Peasant Novel* and the time-consuming work of comparing them with the chapters of the finished manuscript, but since I had substantially more to say about Csalog’s language than my ethnographer colleague, at the end, using *Lajos M., Aged 42* as an example, I was able to **show the extraordinary difference between the recorded and the written word**. Thus—hopefully, and at long last—I pulled the rug out from under all those previous claims which either naïvely or maliciously blurred the line between the audible and visible language, accusing the author that his “art”—questioning, if recorded work could even be called that—was purged during the sterile process of recording.

As it happens, it is the **very creating and imagining of language** that makes Csalog’s work genuine epic art, by taking the familiar and much applied raw language and life stories of documentation and employing it to create a brand new, original vision of destiny. This by letting the read aesthetic prose hold a mirror up not only to the communicator of the data, but also to the recorder and, with a Gogolian gesture (“you are laughing at yourself”), awaken the reader to the well-known Todorovian thesis, according to which the fantastic is never in the text but is in existence. And this is true even if—especially if—Lajos Mikluszko, excavation laborer, or General Lőrinc Kána

happened to have boasted to maximize their own importance, or if Mrs. Mohácsi (Aunt Eszter) is subjective about her husband's debauchery having led to tragedy.

To summarize. **I conclude that *Peasant Novel* shows the differences between the subjects of desire, speech and writing, and is an excellent illustration of how with Zsolt Csalog the documentary is not the result of the act of writing—which it should be according to the Zhdanovian-Lunacharskian plan-poetics—but “merely” the raw material, the starting point, the motivator of same.** So as not to mechanically repeat that which I stated in my thesis, rather than using scholarly sources, let me bring an example from literature to shore up my premise. If we pay close attention, we will see that Magda Szabó in her *Old Fashioned Story* handles the title of the novel in the same way—referring to quotes from secondary texts in the primary text as affirmation—just as its author does in the *Notes from Peasant Novel*. And she does this not only in the introductory chapter titled *Can, with Swans*, but also in every part of the text. In addition, we meet with the same naïve-cynical, insider and outsider, points of view in the book of essays, *Outside the Circle*. It is clear that the question “Where does the author end and where does the work of art begin”, or “Where does the work end and where does the author start”, had been pondered well before *Peasant Novel*.

That being said, I am not suggesting that the narrating voices of either Szabó's or Csalog's subjects can easily be identified with the voice of the formerly living person; in fact, quite the contrary. I wish to demonstrate that **the position of the narrator of documentary prose is unique, in many ways different from the habits of typical fiction writing, i.e., a different method of writing; for instance, it is demonstratively more self-reflexive, and yet it does not step outside the boundary of literature.** Let me consider the premiere of Szabó's *Für Elise*, at which they supposedly challenged the author about why she invented a non-existent sister named Cili, when she promised in the novel's introduction that readers are holding in their hands the first of a two-part biography, in response, the author took out a photo from her handbag and displayed it: “But of course my Cili exists! Here is her picture!” (This is similar to the Dani-monologues in Csalog's *I Wanted to See the Ocean*), long after the *Für Elise* premiere, they were still speculating: Was it to purposely create a scandal, or cunning legend-creating, or could it be about something entirely different? It is my opinion that this demonstration was for no other purpose than to emphasize that the words in the introduction did not lie: we did receive “the author's biography”, meaning that we could become eyewitnesses of a writer's questioning through dissecting raw material fattened by history and an experimental self—of the basic tenets of life. And with this we arrive at one of the key

concepts of my thesis: the **confession**.

Neither Kundera's novel, nor Csalog's portrayal, are "its author's confession"; yet we found the most fruitful approach to the subject through the confession theories of Augustine and Hamvas. Kundera himself does not stop at the above-mentioned declaration; he suggests that while Dante still believed that action is the doer's self-portrait, "[o]ne of the great discoveries of the novel is the paradoxical aspect of action". In which case, the question is: "If we cannot capture the self in action, how and where can we apprehend it?" Csalog answers this question in his own way, showing that the **inner life of a potential hero is to be discovered and understood through his/her language and speech by an outsider who has been blessed with the ability to create in an authentic tongue. Only after that is the "self"-portrait or "docu-portrait" born, which of course was the product of two people, but which was "painted" into the art of fiction single-handedly.**

Finally, let me say a few words about the **monologue** (since this will end up being the enduring genre of Csalog's portraits). Largely thanks to the newfound fascination with oral history, many are curious about the original recordings, which served as raw material for the stories. This question receives added emphasis in one of Csalog's statements, according to which he wishes to make "a total acoustic effect" readable in his prose portraits. Ah... but on the recordings (we had the benefit of listening to several dozen), it is not one person's monologue, but a (not-at-all-spontaneous) dialogue, which is hobbled by the **complex labyrinth of both the fact-giver's and the documenter's expectations and desires** to be put on record. Thus, keeping in mind the excitement around the new Hungarian translation based on the original tapes of *On the Road*, also Ginsberg's compelling alternative postscript to *Visions of Cody*—in my paper I stuck to **reading the texts**, while leaving the **interpretation of the tapes** to others.

I posit that while this kind of approach may create a gain for the essay-writer (the artist), the literary analyst would merely get himself into debt with methodology.

4. Publications in connection with the theme

- SOLTÉSZ Márton, „*Itt van ez a robadt szocializmus*”: Csalog Zsolt *A tengert akartam látni című kötetének fogadtatása*, Kortárs, 2011, 11. sz. (november), 58–71. (= UÓ., *Felhasznált irodalom*, Bp., Magyar Írószövetség Arany János Alapítványa, Kortárs Kiadó, 2012 [Kritikai Füzetek, 5], 9–28.)

- SOLTÉSZ Márton, *A valóság művészete – a művészet valósága: Írói és költői kompetenciák Csalog Zsolt és Turcsány Péter szociográfiáiban* = S. M., *Működés: Tanulmányok, kritikák, előadások, jegyzetek*, Pomáz, Kráter Műhely Egyesület, 2013 (Teleszkóp Könyvek, 27), 36–44.
- SOLTÉSZ Márton, *Az olti tutajút: Bevezetés a Gézám! című Csalog-elbeszélés olvasásába*, Irodalomtörténet, 2012, 4. sz. (tél), 535–553.
- SOLTÉSZ Márton, *Bejegyzések a Cs betűhöz: Csurka István levele Csalog Zsolthoz*, Kortárs, 2012, 4. sz. (április), 67–68.
- SOLTÉSZ Márton, „Szelíd lázadás az érvényes norma ellen”: *Bevezető gondolatok Csalog Zsolt Cseréptörés-kritikájához*, Kortárs, 2013, 9. sz. (szeptember), 70–80. (= „Figyeljétek a mesélő embert”: *Esszéek és tanulmányok Lengyel Péterről*, szerk. RADVÁNSZKY Anikó, Bp., Ráció Kiadó, 2013 [Libra Librorum, 1], 245–256.)
- SOLTÉSZ Márton, *Egy lelkiismerettel megvert írástudó: Avagy jegyzetek Tar Sándorról és a megrendülésről*, Kortárs, 2015, 2. sz. (február), 49–56.
- SOLTÉSZ Márton, *Csalog Zsolt*, Bp., Argumentum Kiadó, megjelenés előtt.