

BALÁZS DEVESCOVI

Jugs and ornamental vessels

Eötvös József's novels before 1848

Theses of PhD dissertation

Szeged, 2005.

This PhD dissertation, that sounds anyhow surprisingly, mainly and firstly desires to offer a close reading of József Eötvös's three novels before 1848.

That could be surprising in 2005 but: I attempt—novels are being discussed here: so far as it is possible—a kind of interpretation that focus barely on the text itself of *A karthauzi (The Cartesian)*, *A falu jegyzője (The Village Notary)* and *Magyarország 1514-ben (Hungary in 1514)*, what for example János Arany had done around 1858-1859 in his *Bánk-bán-studies*, or—let me use after all a little bit closer example—Ágnes Nemes Nagy had done at the end of the 1980s in her *Szőke bikkfák (Blond beech trees)*, collected prosodic analyses.

That could be surprising, because although József Eötvös is doubtless always ranked amongst our classical authors, actually his oeuvre is a strangely blank area of the Hungarian literary history writing: the judgement of his work even in recent decades has remained almost one-sided, since in a good while no one has dealt with the belletrist aspects of his oeuvre. From dichotomy of theoretical versus literary man what was right from the beginning perceived, had the stress been more and more shifted to appreciation of the thinker: Eötvös was first examined as politics-theory thinker, and only secondly as politician. The politician and the political-thinker face of the writer-politician appeared more interesting for the strong ideological-minded literary scholarship of the past half century. Besides the fact was laid down for a quarter of a century already, even his former successful belletrist works have fallen in popularity. What is more, his novels have been from the literary common knowledge completely ousted, or rather—to illustrate the displacement—at the very most they have been as the illustrations of the politician's ideas.

That could be probably surprising as well, because if I now begin to scrutinize József Eötvös's belletrist works as fiction, I do value by poetical aspects, namely I care firstly to the question, how has a given verbal message become a work of art, I really read the novels as novels, then so in a particular manner I shall oppose myself, still at least I shall leave the

moral-political authorial intention(s) what probably motivated the rise of the novels out of consideration. However, there is no question about it: I can accept the tendentious reading of the three novels. I suppose it's legitimacy but only as one, possible reading. So much, that I try to support in each novel the tendentious interpretation(s) which became canonical with concrete loci, or at least I scrutinize, on which concrete loci can they be based.

So I can accept the tendentious reading of all the three novels, but emphatically not as only and absolute interpretation, just like one from many, and for me furthermore this reading does not play a favoured part at all. In my opinion the title—in all probability stolen from Ferenc Pulszky—of the dissertation intimates this specific situation: *Korsók és díszedények (Jugs and Ornamental Vessels)*. Namely Ferenc Pulszky finishes his critic—published in the *Magyar Szépirodalmi Szemle (Hungarian Belletrist Review)*—on the *A falu jegyzője* with these words: “B. József Eötvös started to write a jug what in his hands became a wonderful ornamental vessel, worthwhile to put to the altar of the Muses in the church of art, because the year 1845 had not in our country more pleasant present to the goddess produced.” But I must here acknowledge: I much prefer to struggle with Eötvös’s ornamental vessels, of which world seem to me very wealthy, and witch seem to me with much circumstance created, than with the jugs.

So on the other hand, looking at the novels as fiction, I am sorry to say, but in a particular manner I oppose myself, or at least I practically ignore almost the whole interpretative tradition, which is given till nowadays. And it looks to me, curiously enough the newer significant and comprehensive Eötvös-researches—which in the past few years, so during the time, I had the dissertation written, pleasingly increased—make no exception from this: Gábor Gángó mainly looks Eötvös (and his works) as political-philosophical, ideological author, on the other hand both Zoltán Z. Kovács in the concerning chapters of his dissertation, and Ernő Taxner-Tóth in his monograph—which was published just when I finished this

manuscript—performs his interpretation of the novels in that manner: he accepts as the starting point, they are tendentious. Nevertheless I must certainly remark: I do not neglect the special literature. In each analysis the reception's review of each novel plays an important part, even if it seems to me, on the whole by all the three novels, we can not really speak about the history of reception: in most cases for all that the authors of every single writing composed in different period, they belonged to completely different theoretical scholarship, and that the single writing—from the memorial speeches through the studies and the critics up to the commemorations, which are in newspapers, or which are usually presented by festive occasion by round anniversaries—could be reckoned amongst disparate genre, generally not really happens anything else, just the permuted employment of several concept, the simple variation some great man's observations or notes.

So the present dissertation mainly and firstly attempts to give close reading of József Eötvös's three novels, which were published before 1848. It takes with assistance of some traditional rhetoric and literary issues, like leading of the plot, handling of the time, character-drawing and guiding of the persons. It is essential that I consider deep revealing of the world of the novels and I think these old-fashioned issues are excellently appropriate for it. Certainly I am not against the method, only because I was not able to write my analyses without the considerations and results of quite a few theory of literature schools, I was not able to recognise several particularities of the texts without the adoption of standpoints, results of some theory of literature schools, methods like formalism, Prague school, structuralism, poststructuralism, theory of speech acts, study of cult, ecocriticism, narratology. Notwithstanding, I made an effort to keep them in background, and I contented myself basically with making use of more traditional terminology, and only at few times, when by the respect of the mental process it was unavoidable, I applied notions of (recent) theory of literature.

About *A karthauzi*—the first novel of Eötvös, what was published in 1839—41 in the

Budapesti Árvízkönyv (Budapest Flood book)—I have written a study, which mainly concentrates on problems which come from the narration. In the paper, I analyse exhaustively specialties which come from the two time levels, those so conscious methods of the narrator which oblige the reader to accept the own world of the novel. I put to the centre of the analysis the phenomena of melancholy, so in this way I go through some so accented motives of the text, like nature, the wish of death or love, and I make the object of meditation, in which case could one insist the novel upon the world of sentimentalism. I particularly show this characteristic fact of the novel's reception as well: while the analyses in course of time move more and more away off the text, and apparently they just repeat the former interpretators—I have a hunch that above all János Erdélyi's ideas that could be derived from two sentences of the last paragraph that is about *A karthausi* of the essay *Egy századnegyed a magyar szépirodalomból (One quarter century from the Hungarian literature)* (1855), at the same time the most canonized observations after all could be supported with particularities, which one can discover only by close reading.

About *A falu jegyzője*, published in 1845, I have written two papers. One of them throws light on a very philological problem: I compare the texts of the two first editions and reach a conclusion of the rewriting. In my opinion two beliefs are incorrect. First that got into the literary common knowledge owing to mainly István Sótér and István Fenyő that there is a close connection between the publishing of the novel in 1845 in booklets and the tendentiousness, and second that the author would had by the twenty years later rewriting those parts erased what have their actuality already fallen. I take a stand as well on the question the novel's birth above all: I do think the novel is not a serial, it has not been written during the time while the booklets have been got to the press, the manuscript has been finished by the end of 1844, though smaller changes have been happened during the printing.

In my other paper on *A falu jegyzője* I give an interpretation that consider many re-

spects of the novel. I put to the centre poetical angles like character-drawing, leading of the plot, and I dwell on particular stylistic analysis of the novel's notorious period, I attempt with the demonstration of close connection between theme and narration to secure acceptance of narrator's excursions that form an integral part of the text, and I describe the concrete reason of the text's irony. I certainly right here dwell on the history of the reception, I release that in my point of view the most foregoing explainers have in a particular manner confined themselves to review the whole novel on the basis of just one part (and what is more: this part has abridged sentences) of the text. I attempt to stand up with the enumeration of strictly poetical arguments against belief that makes—right on the basis what I have just referred—the novel as fiction yet nowadays unreadable, and I undertake to call attention to some other alternative angle. My paper in this way has that declared aims as well: it wishes Eötvös's second novel to relieve of the restrictions that come from the solely tendentious being, it wishes to bring the novel closer to us by the help of world- and contemporary literature works that come seemingly from the novel itself quite far away located—like James F. Cooper's *Leather-Stocking* tales, *Winnetou*, *Winnie-the-Pooh*, *Sátántangó (Satan tango)* by László Krasznahorkai. What is more, it wishes to make an enjoyable text for the reading public of today as well.

I have written the longest paper on *Magyarország 1514-ben*, published in 1847. In the first part I reckon with the history of reception, I present that in a peculiar way those who bring up the tendentious novel roughly simply follow Antal Csengeri's method what he did in his Eötvös-biography in 1851. They cite independently from the preface of the work *and* explicitly declare the tendentiousness of this novel. In the second and in the third chapter I partly after all stand by the novel's tendentious reading's behalf, but I partly flash a beam of light: the foregoing (mostly tendentious) explainers had not rarely about the text on the basis of a bit faded memories. In the two next sections I partly throw light on such a problem that firstly come from genre of historical novel: why give the text prefer the impression of historiogra-

phy, and why prefer literature, besides how fuse the author the seemingly prefer historiography and prefer literary threads into just one inseparable whole. In the sixth and seventh chapter I concern with guiding of the characters, I bring numerous arguments for the observation that have been written firstly by István Sótér in his monograph: “Eötvös does not group the plot around one centre character, but he joins numerous characters with threads of public- and privet life, and so in this way the plot is from the complicated chains of public life and privet life developed.” In the eighth part I examine relentlessly the lengthy novel’s handling of the time, I recount with much circumstance, what even when happens, when applies the author to breaking by the narration, I put my finger on the points given from the breaks in that can one finds aesthetic pleasure, and this whole is just on account of the clearer picture what has been already came to light in the former chapters: *Magyarország 1514-ben* is interesting and remarkable work with quite complicated handling of the time. In the ninth piece, I present *Magyarország 1514-ben* as demonical novel by help of Northrop Frye’s ideas. And finally, in the last chapter, I speak about the problem of the novel’s fidelity, so I can practically again consider angles, questions, what have arisen. At the end let me add that in background of the analysis surely pass along considerations and views of micro history, in so far as I somewhere try to picture the everydayness of the novel that up to now had not been properly underlined. I illustrate that the novel set itself right against great historic narratives, it does not tell eternal acts of great heroes, but it marches out numerous characters of small calibre, and what is more, they are often the cause of great events, or rather it tells intendedly event that could with anyone happen, right because to make an impression of a very trustworthy novel—it gives a comprehensive and almost over-particular picture of peasants’ war’s of Hungary.

During research and writing I have basic work for—let us say: hopefully—future Eötvös critical edition accomplished. On one hand I have upon the circumstances of first editions of all the three novels touched. On the other hand such kind of work is the particular and de-

tailed comparing of the first two editions of *A falu jegyzője* which was first published in 1845 in booklets and for the second time in 1865 in three volumes, because this is the only way to clearing up reassuringly the whole and authentic text. (Although this is not part of the dissertation, but I must lay down, I have *A falu jegyzője* (1845) redacted with running commentary and pictures, it can be seen on the internet at: [http://magyar-irodalom.elte.hu/totnes/eotvos.](http://magyar-irodalom.elte.hu/totnes/eotvos)) Finally it could be this kind of work as well that I give utmost care to the reception of the novels, neglecting that the reception altogether does not seem to me—how should I say it—to be really deeply interesting or to be such a fruitful theme, and also neglecting that the author may have been a famous, outstanding historian of literature or an unknown person, may the place of publishing has been a monograph, a collection of essays or a school report, a daily.

So I guess the stake of this PhD dissertation mainly is that if the unstable balance of Eötvös-interpretation—so much as possible—could be succeeded to replace. Possibly it is not too late yet to see (again) these novels as primer literary texts, because in absence of this the novels for certain will not be able to come back to literary common knowledge. The philological part of my paper could be interpreted as basis of the future critical edition. At the same time the analyses provide an opportunity to draw wider reception- and history of criticism lessons. For example the significant works of contemporary literature, primarily László Darvasi's and László Márton's historical novels bring to other light József Eötvös's historical novel from 1847 as well, so it seems specially important—with the knowledge of these contemporary novels—to reread Eötvös's novel, and his applied narrative techniques. Not mentioned that the paper gives a chance to yield methodologically important results. Till now there is hardly a precedent for deep revelation and presentation of world of text, leading of the plot, handling of the time and character of novels in Hungarian. On the other hand in the present dissertation I attend to use—as Péter Dávidházi has written as such a particularity some of us in the chapter of his book *Egy nemzeti tudomány születése. Toldy Ferenc és a magyar*

irodalomtörténet (The birth of a national science. Ferenc Toldy and the Hungarian history of literature) that the chapter is unfortunately rather about handling of literary terminology in literary history writing—“a style which is *more* informal like the language heritage of national science”. Furthermore during writing I have made an effort to work basically in the same way as I have done in my book *A mítosz és Fanni (The myth and Fanni)*, I mean I tried to—as probably my most important master, Márton Szilágyi have formulated in the blurb of the book—‘pay at least the same attention to the theme of work, as to the interpretative language in that I can subscribe the perceived problem’. With application of ecocriticism such a new respects have appeared which have naturally never arouse around Eötvös, and which are certainly important in Eötvös’s works. Moreover with using this new method I give useful knowledge to not only scientist of other literary history periods, but to the wider public which is interesting as regards human ecology, environmental protection or environmental education as well.

Publications from the dissertation's theme

Studies

1. On the sentencies of A falu jegyzője –centrelization–. *Szöveghatárok feloldódása. Új Holnap különszám*, 1997. 46-64.
2. On the sentencies of „A falu jegyzője” (on characters, on plots, etc.), centrelization. *Pompeji*, 1997/2-3. 212-244.
3. What can one knows about the first two editions of A falu jegyzője and what conclusion can be drawn from this by the Tendenzroman? *Irodalomtörténet*, 2002/2. 219-231.
4. Ghosts in A' vadászak. In *klasszikus – magyar – irodalom – történet. tanulmányok*. Edited by Pál Dajkó, Gergely Labádi. Tiszatáj könyvek, Szeged, 2003. 361-382.
5. Historiographie versus literature. The *Magyarország 1514-ben* as historical novel. *Irodalomtörténet*, 2004/4. 454-484.

Article, conference

1. The view of the landscape in A falu jegyzője. (collecting). *Cédrus*, 2001/April. 3-6.
2. „Et in Arcadia ego” (Interpretation and revelation of the classical Hungarian literature's inharitance). Round-table talking: The historical novel in the 19. century Hungarian literature. (Péter Bényei, Balázs Devescovi, Sándor Hites, László Imre, Márton Szilágyi). Debrecen, 26–28. Januar 2005.

Edition

1. Eötvös József: A' falu' jegyzője. Gépeskönyv, 2003. URL: <http://magyar-irodalom.elte.hu/totnes/eotvos>