

Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation

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The First Part of Zsigmond Justh's Literary Career

1885-1889

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1. Topic and Objectives

Zsigmond Justh was an important figure of Hungarian literature and culture at the end of the 19th century, while his works remain difficult to fit in the theoretical and aesthetical trends of his era as well as in the ever changing canons. The *fin de siècle*'s academic criticism based on positivism was criticizing his novels' outlandish, French-like heroes and his analytic, psychological method of writing. The modernists and the circle of *A Hét* could not understand the secessionist features of his folklorism and the aristocratism of his artistic attitude. Gábor Halász, the publisher of *Napló* and an enthusiastic rediscoverer of Justh's fiction and publicism considered him an emblematic figure of *fin de siècle* and a precursor of *Nyugat*. The so-called „népi” („from the people”) writers find „Móricz's bronze colours” in his writings about peasants and see him as a sharp-eyed presenter of rural society. „Like Ady later, he also placed himself between the two worlds of Paris and the land, but for him the land is what Paris means for Ady.”- says László Németh about him in *A Nyugat elődei*. In view of Justh's three novels and the *Napló*, Béla Németh G. sees such comparisons as well as the enthusiasm of the late generation of *Nyugat*, who made a legend out of Justh, meaningless. András Diószegi, Imre Bori and György Bodnár emphasize the value of his experiments regarding the history of modern prose. On the other hand, István Dobos warns us of his misleading ideologies in his literary representation of peasant society.

Diverse judgements on the one side, partly unknown areas of Justh's complete body of work on the other: this controversy made me clear that the reinterpretation and reevaluation of his works need to be prepared with an extensive basic wide research. In the course of this, the most important task was an overall philological research of the oeuvre. With the inquiry of the manuscripts, the fiction and non-fiction published in contemporary papers, we could restore the context of the author's volumes edited by himself. The parts of the corpus reconstructed that way shed light on each other, providing a better understanding of the already known works. As a result of this critical research, we co-edited the first volume of Justh's selected writings with Judit Kiczenko which was published in 2013. The philological part of the research spreads to the complete body of the artist's work, but the reinterpretation deals only with the first part of the oeuvre. The reasons for this limitation were the enormity of the task on one hand, and the analyzed texts themselves on the other: by 1889, Justh shaped his new theory of society, which was represented aesthetically in the second part of his oeuvre.

My thesis intends to interpret the author's works in the context of European and Hungarian *fin de siècle*. Such a project demanded a highly detailed inquiry of Justh's widespread correspondence, which gives much more data about his era. The inevitability of the reinterpretation came from the discovery of the oeuvre's reception history. The reception of each volume showed the most important assumptions of late 19th century criticism, which therefore had a great influence not only on Justh's career, but also on

certain tendencies of his literary afterlife. Overviewing the past hundred years, the review of different viewpoints of different eras and commentators, the variously defined inner canons of the corpus, and a new knowledge of canonizing problems were all conditions of an adequate and original interpretation in the present. I was trying to analyze and answer the questions of a present day reader within the dialogue of the original works and their secondary literature – along the lines suggested by Hans Robert Jauss–, capturing the two in the relations of question and answer, problem and solution.

Besides doing the philological basic research, the main task was to reinterpret Justh's works. Along with the methods of stylistical and poetical analysis (used by Halász, Bori, Bodnár and Dobos), I studied Justh's work from the viewpoint of intellectual history. My hope was to get a more precise picture of his worldview hidden beyond the various categories (naturalist, impressionist, neo-folklorist) usually used to describe his artistic efforts. The typical – and in the course of the research unavoidable – abnormality of Justh's oeuvre is that the aesthetical problems of certain writings often continue in sociological actions, or vice versa, the insolvable problems on the level of personal and social life seek solutions in poetically experimental artworks. It results from this peculiarity that in the course of the reinterpretation of the first part of his oeuvre I focused on the relationships of life and art, on social and artistic identity. This needed an additional viewpoint of biography and history of mentalities.

2. Approach and Method

The aim of my research is to find and interpret, or reinterpret the first period of Justh's oeuvre. Due to its aim, there is a duality in the applied method as well: in the first part of the inquiry I followed mostly philological and textological methods, while in the second I mostly used various methods of literary criticism (stylistics, rhetorics, narratology, comparatistics, history of ideas). Each chapter is about a significant work of Justh. The chapters are structured as follows: first they briefly present the actual period of the author's life, his career and the circumstances of the birth of the text to be interpreted, then they recover the text's contemporary reception and the critical and poetical factors, which influenced it. They also analyze the work's critical literature, and they try to reinterpret the text itself and place it in the canon of the era and in the history of prose. It is important to note that the role of the reconstructed biographical narrative is always meant to support the literal scientific aim: it gives a better understanding of the writings. Naturally, this does not imply any historicistic illusion of a perfect restoration of one horizon from the past, rather, it performs a fusion of horizons, which – as Hans-Georg Gadamer says – „does not allow the interpreter to speak of an original meaning of the work without acknowledging that, in understanding it, the interpreter's own meaning enter in as well.” (*Truth and Method*) Following this concept, the present essay intends not only to understand the story,

but it also offers a story of the understanding taking its own historical situation and prejudices as the conditions of comprehension.

3. Academic Context and Achievements

In my thesis, I will reinterpret the first period of the complete body of work in the context of the European *fin de siècle*. The nature of its results are partly philological, partly hermeneutical. Following the chronology of the writings, the chapters deal with the oeuvre complemented with the completely recovered manuscripts. Each chapter shows and analyzes the complete contemporary reception of Justh's novels and volumes of short stories, diaries, and publicism written from 1885 to 1889, while they also provide a new interpretation. The main result of the reinterpretation of Justh's artistic trajectory is that his achievements fit in the canon of the history of Hungarian literature of the *fin de siècle* not only individually – as early examples of typical modern prose –, but also in their integrity as the „novel sequence-like” volumes of prose are inevitable accomplishments of the era's artistic life. To be more specific, in the series of his writings of the first period a genuine process of aesthetical experimentation takes shape. Beginning with deterministic naturalism, Justh then proceeds to aestheticism, ending up in an attempt to overcoming decadence with a metaphysical, preraffaelit-Art Nouveau concept of traditional popular culture

which becomes present in his fiction. In my thesis, I will discuss this „mental path” followed consistently only by him and the aesthetical-poetical experiments resulting from it. The first period of his career contains the novel *Ádám*, the volume of short stories *Káprázatok*, the *Művészszerelem* (a Künstlerroman), the *Hazai napló*, the *Páris elemei* and the first published short story of *A puszta könyve*. They are outstanding results of the author’s era as a coherent poetical and theoretical experimentation not independent even from his social activities. This series is a curiosity in Hungarian literature, whose distant relations can be found in the catholicising decadents (Bourget, Huysmans) of the French *fin de siècle*. Considering the quality of his theoretical and aesthetical orientation – if not its artistic significance – Justh belongs to the same „race of writers throughout Europe”, who – according to Thomas Mann – „coming from *décadence*, appointed to be chroniclers and analysts of *décadence*, at the same time have the emancipatory desire to reject it – let us say pessimistically: they bear the velleity of this rejection in their hearts and at least *experiment* with overcoming *décadence* and nihilism.” (*Against Justice and Truth*)

Justh, who was born in a rich upper-Hungarian noble family, was greatly influenced by those social ways of thinking which surrounded that capitalizing literary life. The newspaper discussion, which began with an open letter by Gyula Reviczky entitled *Nincsen remény*, shed light on these facts. I will argue in my essay that the addressee of the letter cannot be identified with certainty with the yet

unknown Justh, who did not even know Reviczky in person at that time. The significance of this debate is (thanks to other unknown participants) that it gives a precise picture of the surrounding history of mentalities at the time when Justh was at the beginning of his career. In this dispute – taking place during the spring and summer of 1885 – two „longe durée” processes crossed each other, the history of dilettantism and the embourgeoisement of literary life. Not only the reception and literature of Zsigmond Justh’s writings were influenced by them, but even his contemporary artistic role was defined by the contemporary meaning of dilettantism (led by Bourget). Because of the debate and Reviczky’s position in it and because of Reviczky’s handwritten critique about the novel *Ádám* we will get a better view of their friendship.

The reinterpretation of the four short stories of *Káprázatok*, Justh’s first published volume, complements the statements of previous secondary literature. The analysis of the phenomenon of *fin de siècle* decadence reaching back for its antique roots in writings contemporary to Justh (like Bourget, Baudelaire, Nietzsche), and the interpretation of the first short story, *Taedium vitae*, shows that Justh wrote with a remarkable consciousness about the phenomenon of decadence in this first edition. And the scrutiny of the reception of the first volume highlights the differences in the *fin de siècle* critics’ main points of view (like those of Ambrus, Petelei, Péterfy).

An important result of the research is that we succeeded to find the manuscript of the first Hungarian *Künstlerroman* in the unprocessed heritage of Zoltán Ambrus. Textological analysis of the

manuscript proved the previous literature's statement wrong, i.e. that the *Művészszerelem* was finished by someone else. In the past two decades several important essays and monographs dealt with the novel (György Bodnár, László Gergye and Éva Harkai Vass). In my thesis, a comparative study of *fin the siècle Künstlerromans* (regarding the poetics and narrative structure) made me distinguish three types of the genre. These are the aesthete-novel (K.-J. Huysmans' *À rebours*), which creates a rival second reality against nature; the „artwork in the artwork” *Künstlerroman* (Edmond de Goncourt's *Les Freres Zemganno*; Zola's *L'œuvre*), which creates a masterpiece against life; and the third type is the „Doppelgänger novel” (Maupassant's *Fort comme la mort*; Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), which creates a more original reality against reality. The thought of the young Nietzsche can be easily noticed in their backgrounds: „art is not only an imitation of natural reality but a metaphysical supplement to that reality, set beside it in order to overcome it.” (*The Birth of Tragedy*) The first Hungarian *Künstlerroman* constitutes a fourth version of the genre at the end of the 19th century, which justifies the borrowing of the expression „novel writing itself” from Péter Esterházy and Mihály Szegedy-Maszák. It is partly similar to the type represented by Zola's novel, but while in Zola the visual semiology of the painting is reflected in the novel's linguistic semiology (we are facing an „in-between system” quotation), in Justh's novel the reflection becomes self-reflection, since its theme is the birth of the novel itself.

Justh's publicism dealing with modern art written before *Párizsi napló* proves the observations coming from the poetical analysis of *Ádám, Káprázatok* and *Művészszeretem*. He gets nearer and nearer to the theory of aestheticism – expressed in his *Künstlerroman* too –, starting from the naturalism of Zola and passing through the analytical psychological novel whose pitfalls he cannot avoid, but at least he later becomes conscious of them.

The last and longest chapter of the paper deals with Justh's most popular work, the *Napló* (*Párizsi napló*, *Hazai napló*) and it tries to reinterpret it on the basis of poetics and intellectual history. I am arguing against Gábor Halász's strong argument that Justh did not intend the *Napló* to become a piece of art. The central question of the theory of this genre consists in the relations of referentiality and fictionality, documentary and fiction. Justh solves the inner paradox of the genre – described by Szávai and Lejeune – by composing his life instead of his diary. In fact – and in this way he is still Zola's follower – he creates an experimental situation like in his *Künstlerroman*. There he wanted to point out „the effect of intellectual improvement on love” and here he wants to show the effect of the sophisticated Paris, „the only modern city”, on himself as an experimental subject having a perfectly dandy lifestyle. It is hardly surprising then that the enterprise does not go the way he planned. In my interpretation the main theme of *Párizsi napló* is this failure, which is also the failure of Justh's dandyism and the beginning of his quest for new social and artistic identity. The significance of the *Napló* and his publicism is increased by the fact

that it is the most important source not only of Justh's quest for artistic identity and his changing tastes, but of that quest for theoretical escape, which sees a new way out of decadence by finding a preraffaelit-secessionist folklorist theory.

Some of his critics miss a more lively reaction to impressionist painting from Justh who was well acquainted with Parisian circles. This hiatus is explained with Justh's extraordinary taste even by Gábor Halász. If we analyze Justh's artistic taste and modernism in the light of *Napló* and his contemporary articles, it becomes clear that Justh's taste was not unusual, but up-to-date. He was not ignorant of the impressionists, he was over the impressionist-experience, they did not affect him with the power and excitement of novelty any more. His notice about his favourite painter Paul-Albert Besnard expresses it: „the army of worshippers and haters followed him, which made Besnard – like Manet, Claude Monet and Zola before – a leader in literature, proclaiming: but I will paint just like this!” (*About this year's exhibition of paintings in Paris*) At this time Justh's artistic ideal was nearest to the Pre-Raphaelites: to overcome decadence by learning something essential from the „primitives”. He writes about Puvis de Chavannes in his *Napló*: „d'un décadent qui fait le primitif.” The Pre-Raphaelite school had a further reaching impact than Justh's artistic thinking. In the works of the period following *Napló* he steps forward in this direction from the aestheticism of *Művészszerelem*. The early Art Nouveau of *A puszta könyve* and the following works, his attraction to the Nazarenes and his life in Szenttornya bear a faint resemblance

with the Pre-Raphaelites' artistic and social intentions. The theory of Art Nouveau folklorism – as we can read in Ruskin and specifically in William Morris – does not seek national originality (like the folklorism of the romantic age) but only schillerian naivety, which already is comprehended as exotic. It looks for a similar quality to the one Justh found in the life of the peasants in Szenttornya. Justh's folklorism, which in a sense is less, in another sense more than the Pre-Raphaelites', is fully present in its main features and in an aesthetically valid form in his short story, *Anyaföld* in 1888.

This basic Pre-Raphaelite-Art Nouveau folklorism is complemented with the social ideology called Social Darwinism, whose influence can be recognised in the writings of the second period of Justh's oeuvre, mostly in the parts of the last novel sequence (*A kiválás genezise*). Setting the ideology of Justh against the theory of Darwin and Spencer, it becomes clear that the writer's basic concept – namely that in the course of the centuries the viability of individuals becoming „sophisticated” (differentiated), later even too sophisticated would decrease – is in contrast with the basic idea of Darwin's evolutionary theory. In my opinion Justh just combined the influential antique decadence-concept of the French *fin de siècle* with the Darwinian idea of natural selection, incorporating in his argument the logic of the decline from the former and the notion of organic evolution from the latter. The Justhian presentation of the decline experienced among the Parisian high class society and in the Hungarian historic families uses darwinian definitions, but the description of the „race becoming softer” is seemingly based on

biological explanation and it actually follows the tradition of historical decadence theories leading back to Polybius.

Seeking for his social and personal identity, by 1889, that is by the end of the first part of his career, he gets to his new folklorism as a result of an individual and consequent train of thought which defines the significant novels and volumes of the second period. Thus the earlier secondary literature identifies or maybe originates wrongly this social theory from István Czóbel's impatient Turanism, with whom Justh becomes familiar only in 1889. The intellectual development presented in my essay, especially the relations between Justh's social theory, modernism, and aesthetics put „the social ideology” beyond the novels of *A kiválás genezise* into a new perspective, and onto a new, aesthetical level. With his „popular” turn, Justh was not looking for the solution for the political degradation and biological exhaustion of historic classes as Czóbel did. From his vision of modern society and his own class in it, as an aesthetical conclusion, his new theory of society was born in *A puszta könyve*, in *Gányó Julcsa* and in *Delelő*. We should therefore look for the parallels of his literary representation of the peasantry, which overwrote the existing canon, and the similarities of his Art Nouveau Folklorism in the conception of modernity informed by the Pre-Raphaelites; and in that respect, his „Doppelgangers” – to borrow Sándor Bródy's term – are to be found „hundreds of miles away from our country.”

4. Relevant Publications

Lezáruló mítosz, felnyíló jelentésszerkezet: Justh Zsigmond A halottszerző című novellájának értelmezése, ItK, 2010, 223-236.

Hungarian Aestheticism in European Context: The Typology of Künstlerroman and Zsigmond Justh's the Artist's Love = Literature & its Margins, Cergy-Pontoise, 2011, 47-60.

Versengő valóságok koncepciója az európai művészregényekben = Ködlovagok. Irodalom és képzőművészet és találkozása a századfordulón 1880-1914, szerkesztette és az előszót írta PALKÓ Gábor, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, Budapest, 2012, 127-140.

Ha úr ír: Egy századvégi hirlapi vita mentalitástörténeti nézőpontból = Pázmány nyomában: Tanulmányok Hargittay Emil tiszteletére, szerk. AJKAY Alinka és BAJÁKI Rita, Vác, Mondat, 2013, 231-242.

„Taedium vitae”: A pályakezdő Justh Zsigmond dekadencia-értelmezéséről, Irodalomismeret, 2013/4, 81-89.

Relevant edited volume:

JUSTH Zsigmond, *Válogatott művei – Szerzői kötetek*, szerk. KICZENKO Judit, s.a.r. KICZENKO Judit és KARDEVÁN Lapis Gergely, Bp., Ráció, 2013.