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Metafiction in the Modern Hungarian Novel: Non-Conventional Fiction-Making in Endre Fejes and Gyula Fekete*

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> "Once we knew that fiction was about life and criticism was about fiction . . . now we know that fiction is about other fiction, is criticism in fact, or metafiction."
>
> Robert Scholes, *Structural Fabulation*

Recent years have seen a decidedly new development in literary criticism, one aspect of which is the "disintegration of the paradigms of realism under the impact of structural linguistics."[1] Structural discourse seems to rely on some version of Kantian epistemology, and has been practiced by many writers recently both within and outside such self-conscious "movements" as the French *nouveau roman*. One of the most conspicuous assumptions in recent criticism is that "in the 'new novel'... reality and imagination are fused in such a way that it is not only impossible to distinguish between reality and the play of the imagination, but (according to the new esthetic) . . . it is the imagination that creates reality, reality, objectively, does not exist."[2] In structural criticism this assumption is readily apparent whenever a writer's "work is studied as a vehicle of an implicit theory of language or of [some] other semiotic systems and is interpreted in those terms."[3]

Implicit in much recent criticism, then, is the idea that the language of fiction is a species of double-talk, because the story discloses something about reality while, albeit unintentionally, it also relates the story about the story, or meta-story. This criterion decidedly pertains to all overtly self-conscious metafictions with a "keen perception of paradox in the relationship between fiction and reality. . . . If human reality is itself a dizzying kaleidoscope of individually improvised fictions . . . a novel is

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fiction at a second remove, a manifest fabrication about fabrications."[4] But many novels are not overtly metafictional, nor do they explicitly unmask themselves or their own creative processes. They subtly convert explicit metafiction, or fiction about itself, into implicit metafiction, or fiction which addresses itself to the role of fiction-making in the realm of real life. Implicit metafiction insinuates that the prototype of conventional fiction is non-conventional fiction-making, because life itself is life as it is interpreted, explained, or rendered meaningful by those who participate in it.

This study explores two recent examples of implicit Hungarian metafiction — not because Hungarian literature shuns the explicit variety (Kálmán Mikszáth's *Két választás Magyarországon,* or Sándor Márai's recent *Ítélet Canudosban* are obvious examples), but because "socialist realism" is not conducive to its production. Of course the examples chosen in no sense attempt to subvert "socialist realism." But they do transcend it by transcending themselves. Authentic literature has either never been written with doctrinaire preconceptions in mind, or it has always excelled them. One means of surpassing doctrinaire preconceptions is through metafiction. The term may be new, but the sense in which it is employed (conventional fiction about non-conventional fiction-making) is at least as old as *Don Quixote.*

All stories wishing to expose certain individual or collective fictions are at least implicitly metafictional. What is new in structural or quasi-structural criticism is the emphasis. The "universal truth," or the recent critical preoccupation with the fictionality of the real as well as of the fictive world is decidedly not new. Aladár Schöpflin remarked more than fifty years ago that "Mikszáth loves characters whose lives are based on a lie in such a way that the lie emerges as their subjective truth." This was a precursor of more recent structural criticism: "When lies thus become an important ingredient of human life, the distinction between a truth and a lie, between what is real and what is imagined, itself becomes faint . . . if what is but the offspring of imagination can thus become true, is not what we take to be reality in general itself but the offspring of imagination?"[5]

The Fejes and Fekete novels imply that Schöpflin's observation has more substance than meets the eye. The readings or interpretations are self-justifying precisely in accordance with the idea that the theme of significant conventional fiction may at least partially deal with the role of non-conventional fiction-making, in which man renders the reality he inhabits intelligible. These novels also imply that the meaning apparently generated by life has in fact been imposed upon it. Each novel is

conventional fiction about non-conventional fiction-making; in each, the form of the content deals with the content of the non-novelistic or extra-novelistic form. In each, ultimately, metafictional double-talk justifies its own statements about reality. Each implicitly dramatizes the distinction between the reality generated by conventional fiction and the reality of the non-conventional fiction-making, of which each novel is a subtle duplication or imitation.

> "They wanted facts. Facts! They demanded facts from him, as if facts could explain anything."
>
> Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*

Endre Fejes's *Rozsdatemető* (Junkyard, 1962) appears to be a straightforward novel, realistic in form and content. Its narrator reports a homicide and investigates its cause. He interviews many of the characters who will later appear in the narrative, including the killer. The narrative consists of an apparently factual account of nearly three generations of the killer's family. The novel is divided into two untitled and unnumbered parts. The first part narrates János Hábetler, Jr.'s killing of a factory hand (his ex-brother-in-law, as it turns out). In order to trace the cause or causes, the narrator investigates the Hábetler family's background. A relentless reporter, he interviews many people, and broods over his notes. He arranges and rearranges them, trying to fit each new piece of information into its proper place. When the whole account is in sequence, the narrator visits Hábetler in jail, and demands the "junkyard, the last act." Hábetler refuses. He has, in fact, persistently refused to talk to the authorities as well. The narrator thereupon threatens to "make public" his narrative. At first Hábetler taunts the narrator: "Do what you will. Write the story! [much of the story is already written]... What do *you* know? You know nothing"[6] (pp. 9, 10, italics mine). But finally Hábetler provides an apparently satisfactory account of the "junkyard, the last act." The narrator claims it his "duty to speak the truth and nothing but the truth at the time of the trial." He believes there were things Hábetler "did not understand, that's why he was so frustrated" (p. 10).

The second part is one uninterrupted "chapter," a kind of cinematographic montage, a series of vignettes or slices of life in rapid chronological succession. This section is littered with dates of marriages, births, divorces, and deaths. There is neither commentary nor transitions. One paragraph terminates one thread, another picks up another, only to be

dropped, so that a new thread might be picked up or an old one continued. Nonetheless a realistic story slowly emerges. The gradually aging characters become transparent; each personality emerges as a kind of stable theme; each new episode provides the reader with a new manifestation.

The narrative proper transports the reader to the end of World War I. It chronicles Hábetler, Sr.'s courtship of Mária Pék, their marriage, the births and deaths of their children (three girls and one boy survive), their life in interwar Hungary, the coming of World War II, Hábetler, Jr.'s participation in it, his captivity in Russia, his return to Hungary, only to learn that his Jewish sweetheart, together with their illegitimate daughter, had perished in Auschwitz. Meanwhile the Hábetler girls are courted until each weds, one a drunkard, another an unfaithful man. The third is herself unfaithful. By the time young Hábetler weds, his sisters' marriages are either foundering or have already terminated. The novel compares the first generation, which tended to stay married, and the second, which did not. Young Hábetler's marriage might have been the only exception, but the killing of his ex-brother-in-law (the drunkard) apparently dashes that.

The killing itself is an accident. Throughout the narrative, Hábetler, Jr. is portrayed as having a volatile temper, mitigated by a desperate sort of self-righteousness. But his anger apparently stems from a deep-seated intolerance of human frailties or imperfections, particularly of moral blemishes. The brother-in-law's speech that provokes the fatal blow is bitterly antagonistic, but there is some truth in it. He claims that the Hábetlers are wanting in morals and culture, that they are hypocritical, and that the daughters — all divorced by this time — are being prodigal with their respective alimonies. Finally, the ex-brother-in-law disparages Hábetler's long dead sweetheart. Having delivered the fatal blow, Hábetler is horrified. The next paragraph resumes the Hábetler chronicle some months after the killing, which occurred in the spring. It is now July, and various family members are departing for their vacations. Old Hábetler mutters something about his having served in the Red Army, because he hopes his pension would be increased. These final paragraphs ignore Hábetler, Jr., but presumably the reader is left to believe that the family regards the entire episode as rather disrespectable.

Fejes's *Rozsdatemető* is clearly a distant cousin of Conrad's *Lord Jim*. Both novels deal with young men who under ambiguous circumstances and in response to irresistible temptation and undue provocation commit unlawful acts. But here the similarities apparently cease. Conrad's novel fails to provide a chronologically rearranged narrative

that would explain Jim's inscrutable act of cowardice. Conrad conveys not so much the product but the process of the search for an adequate explanation. The first part of Fejes's novel hints at such a quest, but the second part is merely its product. Whereas Conrad's novel seems to imply that facts never explain anything, Fejes seems to offer nothing but facts, as though facts were the sole satisfactory grounds for any explanation. Fejes never questions his facts, whereas in Conrad "there shall be no message, unless such as each of us can interpret for himself from the language of facts, that are so often more enigmatic than the craftiest arrangement of words." But here the dissimilarities cease. Fejes's language of facts does explain Hábetler, Jr.'s act, though only on its own level. The real explanation is not even implicit in the narrative proper, except that perhaps at the end, circumstances seem to extenuate the fatal blow.

The clue to the novel's meaning is provided in the inscription:

> Man is but a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed. The entire universe need not arm itself to crush him. A vapor, a drop of water suffices to kill him. But, if the universe were to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which killed him, because he knows that he dies and [because he knows] the advantage which the universe has over him; the universe knows nothing of this.
>
> All our dignity consists then in thought. By it we must elevate ourselves, and not by space and time which we cannot fill. Let us endeavor then to think well; this is the principle of morality.[7]

What Fejes's language of facts demonstrates is that no one in the narrative attempts to organize experience through thought. The principal characters fail to discern the entangling details which might render them intelligible. Herein lies the metafictional nature of *Rozsdatemető*. The novel exposes the lives of a "typical" family, whose members refuse to bother to evaluate the significance of their experiences. They apparently assume that by procuring the bare necessities of life, they have explored its possibilities. This is why when Hábetler, Jr. is confronted with hostility, he cannot respond with words, only with a fatal blow. The meta-story (the implicit double-talk of the novel) resides in the carefully explored absence of an interpretative scheme, in the context of which Hábetler, Jr. (or perhaps some other important character) might have mastered the frustration which eventually triggered a meaningless act of violence. But the "fact" that life is by and large meaningless (or that its bare necessities exhaust its meaning), apparently Hábetler's sole conscious interpretation, is itself a fiction. This, in fact, is the non-conventional fiction the novel exposes.

". . . to name a thing at all is to turn it into a fiction."
Wilbur Marshall Urban, *Language and Reality*

Gyula Fekete's *A hű asszony meg a rossz nő* (The Faithful Wife and the Bad Woman, 1963) is constructed as a thematic double plot which explores the conflict between collective and individual fiction-making. The investigation also embraces authentic and inauthentic fictions, implying that all public or social fictions fit into the second category. The title turns out to be misleading for one character in the novel as well as for the reader. The labels "faithful wife" and "bad woman" are earned by the respective women to whom they apply, but how they are earned is itself questionable. The labels represent convenient categories into which it is all too easy to force individuals whose surface behavior is the sole evidence that they do in fact fit. The basic plot involves a childless married couple and a divorced woman with three children, each by a different man. The surface of the text shimmers with discussions about the decline of morality reminiscent of Heidegger's "idle talk." Morals in fact do occupy the center of the novel's thematic attention, but the allusions by idle talkers constantly contradict the novel's own discourse about them. Imre Östör, the "faithful wife's" husband, becomes the hero of this conflict as he gradually discovers the authentic "bad" woman, for whose sake he eventually sheds his former inauthenticity.

Just as Fejes, Fekete, too, is interested in the meaning of life, but in *A hű asszony* what is really meaningful is artfully contrasted with what is only apparently meaningful by the hero's intellectual awakening. This creates a double contrast, the implications of which are unmistakably metafictional. The first contrast is the adverse judgment society passes upon Östör; the second contrast is the judgment the reader passes on the novel's social judgment, which is clearly superficial and false, in fact, highly ironic.

As the novel opens, the Östörs are depicted as a nice couple, with no ironic imputations. When the "bad woman," Klári Palócz, moves into the building where the Östörs and their landlady reside, the immediate or surface context seems to support the new tenant's unsavory reputation. Klári has been frequently forced to change jobs because of her questionable moral practices; the wives of a number of her ex-fellow-workers have accused her of husband-stealing, and have seldom shied from labeling her a "whore."

This estimate of the "bad woman" changes from the reader's point of view. Although the process is gradual, it is not quite as slow as it is for Östör. Even when consciously reflecting that the "woman is not bad,

only her reputation," he remains ambivalent towards her even after having spent a night in her arms[8] (p. 134). The reader can discern sooner than the hero just exactly what is amiss in his life. Time and again Östör feels that life is empty, that something vital is missing. Time and again he agonizes over his accomplishments, and time and again he responds obliquely. The dog he obtains for Klári's children to keep them quiet and the house he builds for the animal are the sole achievements that ironically bolster Östör's self-esteem (pp. 111 & 143). Explicit in Östör's reflections is the distinction between labor performed for money and labor performed for its own sake. Only the latter seems really valuable and authentic (p. 111). This distinction also persists, albeit implicitly, in Östör's internal questionings about the source of happiness. Östör soon realizes that material possessions cannot fill the essential void in one's life, but not until much later does he realize that his "faithful wife" is a materialist, whereas the "bad woman" is not (pp. 94 and 142–143).

Labor performed for its own sake, as well as the sense or awareness that non-material values are the real treasures in life, are omens that Östör is ready to move from the inauthentic to the authentic plane. This movement occurs with Östör's recognition that his "faithful wife" is an abortive person, whereas the "bad woman" is a life-giver. Irén Östör knows that her husband is slipping away, and she hopes that a new car might re-cement their ever-loosening bond. She is about to inherit a substantial sum of money, but an unwelcome pregnancy seems to block their renewed happiness. While the "faithful wife" is collecting her inheritance, Östör stumbles into bed with Klári. Fekete treats this scene with great delicacy. Östör has been good with Klári's children and he has slowly come to see the "bad woman" as a victim rather than as a victimizer. This particular physical contact results in pregnancy. The "faithful wife" seeks an abortion, whereas Klári, whose last husband is suing for custody of her last child out of sheer spite, is too busy to get rid of her new child in time. When Östör discovers that his "faithful wife" had aborted their baby for the sake of a new car, and that the "bad woman" is carrying his child, for which she is willing to assume total responsibility, the stage is set for his intellectual awakening.

Östör "read once somewhere that while some men look for lovers, and some seek spouses, wives, most are searching for both, and it is the unusually lucky ones who find the two in one person." Later he thinks it possible that he had never read this, but has merely "invented it, in the midst of his broodings." In any event, Östör suddenly discovers that "today belongs to the lovers, while the wife-oriented women deny today so that they may win tomorrow; without them there is no continuity, out of

their flesh and blood issue the generations of the future" (pp. 153–154). Just before his final decision to leave his "faithful wife" and cleave unto the "bad woman," Östör once again reflects that

> the whole world was empty — he had never before felt just how empty the world was. This queer feeling had taken him by surprise; up to now — for thirty-two long years — it had never occurred to him, and now, from one moment to the next, he saw with utter clarity and with absolute certainty that life was meaningless. Days pass by inexorably, the most beautiful days pass away, and they leave nothing behind. Nothing, nothing remains of them (p. 171).

The day after these reflections Östör moves out. The "bad woman" had already departed, and Östör will join her. The concluding paragraph reverses the significance of the title: "for a long time . . . [the whole] neighborhood discussed this affair, that Aunt Orsi's tenant — although he looked like the decent sort — had left his pretty, faithful, devoted wife on account of a bad woman" (p. 174).

But only the reader sees this significant reversal, whereas the "neighborhood" still agrees with the most literal implications of the title. From the neighbors' point of view Östör had left a faithful wife for a bad woman, hence his act must be deplorable and is, in fact, another manifestation of the recent decline in morality. In other words, the idle neighborhood gossips turn Östör's authentic impulse into an inauthentic cliché. Fekete's novel reverses this process; it takes a cliché and turns it into authenticity. In other words, the feigned reality of the novel's fiction exposes the fictitious reality of the non-novelistic or extra-novelistic pretense at reality. Herein lies its special species of metafictional double-talk.

> "The critic's interpretation is fiction too."
> J. Hillis Miller, "The Fiction of Realism"

When critical language, which can be just as elusive as the language of fiction, receives a "more open and inquisitive attention," its "self-reflexive qualities" can emerge. "Criticism then becomes a conversation about itself, though a conversation that has to guard against becoming an obsessive soliloquy."[9] The claim that recent Hungarian novels are covertly metafictional, might itself be a species of double-talk, the significance of which has been mentioned in the beginning of this discourse. It would be self-referentially inconsistent to insist that one's own language can escape fiction-making. It does not. The critic's rejoinder to the writer's statement, which in turn is a reaction to the mind's response

to life's impressions, is merely another layer of words. We live in layers upon layers of words, and re-wording a layer already re-worded is the best we can do to squeeze intelligibility out of what would otherwise remain unintelligible. If it is true that while studying anything we are merely studying our own works, then to claim that the "study of criticism is necessarily also the study of ourselves as critics, just as the study of literature is also the study of ourselves as readers,"[10] is really to divulge as much as needs disclosing.

One final point: how valid is the claim that the Hungarian novel of recent years is covertly metafictional? Phrased differently, would other recent novels also benefit from a structural or quasi-structural analysis? At the risk of venturing an unqualified generalization, the answer is yes. The two examples discussed here may not be typical in terms of their specificities, but it would be unreasonable to assume that the kind of preoccupation with the thematics of non-conventional fiction-making to be found in them is somehow an exception to the rule. Undoubtedly, specific readings of several novels would reveal other versions of metafiction. Perhaps it would be appropriate to interpret various recent or even older Hungarian novels along these lines.

NOTES

1. J. Hillis Miller, "The Fiction of Realism: *Sketches by Boz, Oliver Twist,* and Cruikshank's Illustrations," *Charles Dickens and George Cruikshank,* ed. Ada B. Nisbet (Los Angeles: University of California, William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1971), p. 1.
2. Miklós Magyar, *Regény vagy "új regény?" Regénytechnika és írói magatartás a francia "új regényben"* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1971), p. 21.
3. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 98. The relationship between German Idealism and Structuralism has never been established, but it is clear that Kant's insistence on the mind's creative role in knowing (especially with regard to the "synthetic a priori") is assumed in almost all instances of structuralist discourse. The model of structural discourse is, of course, Ferdinand de Saussure's influential *Cours de linguistique général* (Paris, 1916), translated into English by Wade Baskin as *Course in General Linguistics* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959). Of immediate importance is Saussure's contention that as a system of signs, language shapes or even creates significant human reality.
4. Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 129-30.

5. *Magyar írók: Irodalmi arcképek és tollrajzok* (Budapest: A Nyugat Folyóirat Kiadása, 1919), p. 51.
6. All references to *Rozsdatemető* in my text are to the eighth edition published by Magvető Zsebkönyvtár. This novel is available in English under the title of *Generation of Rust*, trans. Sanford J. Greenburger and Terance Brashear (New York: McGraw Hill, 1970).
7. W. F. Trotter's translation of Pascal's *Thoughts*, Section IV, #347.
8. All references to *A hű asszony* in my text are to the third edition published by Magvető Zsebkönyvtár.
9. Gary Nelson, "Reading Criticism," *PMLA*, 95 (1976), 805.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 813.

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American Influences on Hungarian Political Thinking from the American Revolution to the Centennial

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From about the end of the eighteenth century until the War of Independence of 1848–1849, the United States provided a model for Hungarians seeking national independence. Progressive intellectuals and politicians attacking feudal conditions in Hungary also looked with interest and enthusiasm to the American example.

In the eighteenth century, Hungary resembled the Young Republic in at least three different respects. After the Turkish occupation, when all the waste land and depopulated areas had to be reconquered and resettled, Hungary was something of a frontier on a minor scale. Encouraged by the Habsburgs, German settlers came to the abandoned land, and various other ethnic groups settled on territories formerly inhabited by Magyars. Historians later described the recapture of the land as a development on the American scale. In 1844, Wilhelm Richter, a German traveller, compared pioneering in America and in Hungary: "No able bodied man with capital who likes work and is mentally alert need to go to North America; he can make his fortune much nearer home, in the forests and steppes of Hungary."[1] The country's numerous peoples and the many religious denominations resembled America's ethnic groups and her variety of religious sects. Above all, the colonial status of Hungary under the Habsburgs invited comparison with the Young Republic that had gained its independence from the British crown. As a matter of fact, an anonymous poem in 1790 cited with sarcasm the British king grieving over the loss of America.[2] The success of the American Revolution inspired the patriotic Hungarian nobles, whose main concern was to gain their country's independence, while the young nation's democratic institutions appealed to the progressives dedicated to the modernizing of Hungary along the lines of Enlightenment ideals. In a broader sense, these aspirations included economic progress and many related issues; however, this study will investigate only questions of political democracy.