

SHIFTS IN STYLE AND PERSPECTIVE IN ZSIGMOND KEMÉNY'S *THE FANATICS*¹

THOMAS COOPER

Indiana University, Bloomington, IN
USA

In this article the author discusses how changes in style in Zsigmond Kemény's novel *The Fanatics* can be construed as shifts in perspective from that of the narrator to that of a character in the novel. By suggesting a distance between the narrator and the narration, these shifts in style render it impossible to consolidate the text as the work of a single agency with an identifiable perspective. The narrating presence, itself a blend of formulas taken from other narratives, evanesces behind the conventions that comprise the text. Rather than offer itself as an account of events told from a particular perspective, the text emerges as a constant wavering between different modes of literary production.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Kemény, narrative

On the first page of Zsigmond Kemény's novel *The Fanatics* the narrator interrupts his account of the Thirty Years' War to draw the reader's attention to the style of the narrative: "But why this elegiac tone instead of the facts to which we should think back?"² This interruption suggests the ironic stance of the narrator towards his own narration. By questioning the appropriateness of the style, the narrator denies any sort of authorial ownership of the previous paragraphs. Furthermore he discredits any assumption of meaning in these opening passages, insinuating rather that these statements are merely a convention of discourse.

In this paper I will use Bakhtin's concept of double-voiced discourse to show how the utterances of the third person narrator of *The Fanatics* are pervaded with the voices of the characters of the novel. Adopting as the basis for any distinction between so-called voices the question of how a particular voice differs in style (vocabulary, tone, idiom) from the other voices that comprise a narrative, I examine passages in which it can be argued that changes in styles of discourse imply changes in perspective from that of the narrator to that of the characters. I argue that these shifts in style, like the explicit reference to the act of narration in the opening passages of the novel, render it impossible to consolidate the text as the work of a single agency with an identifiable perspective. Rather than offer itself as an account of events told from a particular perspective the text emerges as a con-

stant wavering between different modes of literary production in which, as Heidegger suggests, only language can be said to speak.

In passages describing the discord in Rákóczi's principedom, the blend of an elegiac style with more colloquial speech suggests scorn for the discordant factions:

From morning until late at night messengers departed continuously to the different parts of the country.

You could see that Rákóczi was busying his brain with great things.

Sharpen the sword, saddle the stallion, put the old Zsigmond Kornis and the young János Kemény before two worthy corps of troops under the leadership of the prince himself, flying the flags of freedom of religion and conscience, to push from Tokaj to Nagyszombat, to merge the disruptive elements into an army, with at least sixty thousand men to attack from the besieged Nagyszombat to Moravia or Silesia in order, in a common plan with Baner, the Swedish general, to force Ferdinand III into a decisive battle: this bold plan had already been planted into Rákóczi's head by the leaders of the party that favored war, and, embellished with various flashy alterations, spread around.³

The first sentence of the passage sets an epic tone. The syntax lays emphasis on the adverbial phrases ("From morning until late at night" and "continuously") typical of epic. The reference at the close of the sentence to the entire country ("different parts of the country") emphasizes the extent and consequence of the enterprise.

This grandeur is deflated by the sarcastic intimation of the second sentence. The word "látszik," which I have rendered in my English translation as "one could see," introduces a third perspective (neither Rákóczi's nor that of the narrator). The colloquial "great things" [nagy dolgok] and "busying his brain" [jártatja az eszét] seem to express the cynical view of this third party towards Rákóczi's deliberations. No more can the epic style of the passage be read without irony. Though the elaboration of the plan for war contains stylistic features characteristic of epic, these seem to be the borrowed words of scheming warmongers who adopted this style to persuade the callow prince to support their cause. (This conclusion is supported by the clause "had already been planted into Rákóczi's head by the leaders of the party that favored war.") The narrative then quiets down to a more moderate voice, summarizing the elaborate schemes as "this bold plan." The curtness of this summation suggests a suspicious attitude towards the entire design, an interpretation made more plain by the use of the words "flashy" [cifra] and "embellished" [kicicomázva].

At the close of the second chapter a gradual shift in style anticipates the introduction of the capricious Zsófia Báthori. As on the first page of the novel, the narrator addresses the reader, this time with mischievous suggestions:

But we, who, from our upbringing and our nature, prefer to see and examine passions in private chambers than under the open sky, let us leave now the thronging multitudes, and gently, quietly strolling to the end of Church Street, let us try to go through the gate of the 'third court' into the Prince's residence, in the event that there we find more interesting scenes.

No one will hold us up.

[...]

Let's not be late peeking into the dressing room of the beautiful women.

This is not forbidden to us, even during these bashful morning hours[.]⁴

The jest in the first line sets the light tone of the passage, preparing the reader for the change of scene from the streets to the ornate residence. The narrative assumes a new perspective (that of the women of the court) by expressing exasperation with the "thronging multitudes" [tomboló sokaság]. The phrase "gently, quietly" [szép csendesen] blends this implied perspective with a still more subtly implied mocking of the dainty manners of the court. This becomes more obvious with the incorporation into the narrative of a flattering epithet of refined (courtly) speech ("beautiful women" [szép nők]). The narrator concludes by playfully borrowing the word "bashful" [szemérmes] from an understood code (understood by the people at court) of proper comportment. Falling on the heels of the audacious proposal to look into the women's chambers, this suggestion of modesty (the Hungarian "szemérmes" is more suggestive of modesty than "bashful") seems little more than a parody of pretense.

The reader cannot fail, upon encountering Zsófia kneeling at prayer, to recall the narrator's perversion of the statement from the Bible: "blessed are the rich" [boldogok a gazdagok].⁵ While the description of Zsófia herself is not nearly so sarcastic, the narrator mocks her mannerisms by mimicking her speech:

By the prie-dieu in the niche of the window the figure of a woman kneels, head bowed, hands clasped together, in front of her an image of Madonna and child and a crucifix.

With what yearning do her lips mumble the 'Our Father' and 'Ave Maria', while the beads of her rosary roll down through her slender, ivory white fingers!

– Amen! Amen! ... O, heavenly Father! Forgive me for the horrible sin that I am going to commit. God the Father! Plead for me! Saints! Intervene for me! Oh! What a grave sin.⁶

The words in the first paragraph associated with religious ritual (“prie-dieu” [zsámoly], “kneels” [térdel], “crucifix” [fészület]) are perhaps nothing more than simple signifiers used to depict a scene. The phrase “figure of a woman” [nóialak], however, seems a deliberate embellishment of style that implies a distance between narrator and narration. “Figure of a woman” lends the air of an icon to the figure of the woman kneeling in the window recess. The reader may begin to suspect that the narrator is not relating his perception of Zsófia. Rather he is parodying, though with only gentle mockery, her perception of herself as she engages in what is a curious variation on the ritual of confession. This mockery becomes more evident as, in the second paragraph of this passage, the imitation of Zsófia’s speech is more apparent. The style of the passage anticipates the style of Zsófia’s pleas for forgiveness. The interrogatory “mekkora áhitattal” (in English rendered as “with what yearning”) that introduces the exclamation is later echoed by Zsófia herself when she exclaims “Mekkora bűn!” [what a great sin].

Both the style and the terms of Zsófia’s direct speech are clearly borrowed from the tradition of confession. She remains faithful to the form of the tradition. However, the fact that she asks forgiveness for a sin that she has not yet committed reveals that she misconstrues the significance of the act. By incorporating Zsófia’s speech into his description in the previous two paragraphs, the narrator toys with this awareness of form and suggests Zsófia’s fondness for ceremony. Miklós Nagy’s contention that “Her forced conversion merely compels Zsófia Báthory to constant pretense”⁷ seems misleading. Zsófia’s fondness for affectation seems rather an attribute of her character. No doubt this tendency was influenced by the compulsion to convert, but it was not caused by it.

The mix of perspectives in the introduction of István Kassai depicts not only Kassai’s deviousness, but also the maliciousness of his detractors:

The title-less chancellor had yet to speak; István Kassai, the hated and miserly minion, who, so that he wouldn’t have to host guests, had himself dubbed simply prothonotary; so that he could satisfy his unbridled thirst for wealth from the plunder, constantly discovered insurrections; and so that he needn’t risk his influence because of his cowardice, so that control of affairs wouldn’t slip from his hands, continuously clamored for peace.⁸

The adjective “hated” [gyűlölt] suggests the perspective of those who oppose Kassai. The narrator immediately denies the characterization of Kassai as his own and articulates rather the accusations of Kassai’s enemies. The narrator in no way disputes these accusations. Neither does he express any solidarity with Kassai’s accusers. On the contrary, when the narrator resumes speech in the following paragraph, his characterization of Kassai is far more sympathetic. As Mihály Szegedy-

Maszák has noted, "The characterization of [Kassai] from the beginning is not unambiguous[.]"⁹ Through this contrast between the narrator's description and the scornful allegations of Kassai's enemies the "prothonotary" appears not a simple villain, but rather one among many conniving to have his way.

The ironic distance between narrator and narrated, created through the incorporation of the vocabulary, style, and – hence – perspectives of the characters into the narration, need not always be interpreted to imply skepticism or scorn. On the contrary, at times it can seem to suggest sympathy. In the beginning of the third section of the novel the narrator describes Klára's fears concerning her husband's mystifying behavior:

She knew already her husband's sin, but not the motives, not the horrible temptation, not the dark future, not the inexplicable way in which the cruel spirit succeeded in triumphing so quickly over a noble, an exceptional nature.¹⁰

The word "inexplicable" [megfejtethetlen] suggests that this is Klára's perspective. The religious, almost liturgical, diction at the close of the passage ("cruel spirit succeeded in triumphing", [birt a gonosz szellem diadalmaskodni]) is borrowed from the vocabulary of the devout Sabbatarian. Syntactic features also reveal this passage to be Klára's thoughts incorporated into the narration. The structure of the sentence is not simple. Rather it is punctuated with repetitions and amplifications: "not the horrible temptation, not the dark future" [nem az iszonyú kísértést, nem a sötét jövődőt] and "a noble, an exceptional nature" [egy nemes, egy kiváló természet]. The first repetition is the narrator's voicing of Klára's increasingly despairing premonitions. The second constitutes Klára's affirmation to herself of her enduring adulation for her husband in spite of her uncertainties.

In several other instances the narrator borrows Klára's speech. In the following example the distance between narrator and narrated lessens as the narrator almost assumes Klára's perspective:

She didn't want to weep or sigh, she didn't want to think on her own misfortune, only the thought of freeing her husband turned in her head.

And from what should she free him?

She had to free her husband from sin.

Ah, but if she freed him... could she save him from the accusation of his conscience?

Klára shuddered in her premonition of the grave, the critical hours.

What should she do if her husband lost his self-respect, or if, unable to bear the shame, instead of seeking sanctifying repentance he should sink into the maelstrom of wild despair?

After what had happened it was impossible for Klára not to be-

lieve that her husband, because of some secret and tremendous temptation, had strayed from the path of virtue, likened himself with God, and risked his eternal being for worldly interests.¹¹

Though the grammar of the passages indicates that this is third person narration, the perspective seems to alternate between that of the narrator and that of Klára. The repetition in the first sentence (reminiscent of that in the passage previously cited) suggests that the narrator has again borrowed Klára's style in order to express her resolve. The question that follows: "And from what should she free him?" [S mitől szabadítsa meg?] appears as the narrator's interruption; but the response: "She had to free her husband from sin" [A bűnből kellett férjét kiragadnia] seems to be Klára's. In the following sentence, "Ah, but if she freed him... could she save him from the accusation of his conscience?" [Ah, de ha szabaddá tette... megmentheti-e a lélekvádtól?] the perspectives blur as the narrator seems to wrestle with the same doubts that trouble Klára. The form of the sentence (another question) suggests that this is merely the voice of the narrator. Indeed the "Ah" that introduces the question implies that this question was prompted by the answer (Klára's answer articulated by the narrator) to the previous question. However, the hesitation in the middle of the sentence and the use of a phrase ("accusation of his conscience" [lélekvád]) characteristic of Klára's speech suggest that this is an expression of Klára's thoughts.

This alternating and blurring of perspectives continues throughout the rest of the passage. For example, in the sentence "Klára shuddered in her premonition of the grave, the critical hours" [Klára visszaborzadt a komor, a válságos órák előérzetében] the narrator's use of Klára's name suggests that this is his perspective, but the amplification "the grave, the critical" [a komor, a válságos] expresses Klára's growing apprehension. The following sentence is another question posed by the narrator, though in terms that are borrowed from Klára, "unable to bear the shame, instead of seeking sanctifying repentance, he would sink into the maelstrom of wild despair" [szégyent nem tudva hordozni, a tisztító bánat helyett a vad kétségbeesés örvényébe süllyed]. In the last sentence of this passage the phrase "lehetetlen volt Klárának nem hinni" introduces Klára's thoughts into the narration.

At times this passage seems to verge on free indirect style, and indeed it is tempting to borrow Dorrit Cohn's concept of narrated monologue (the rendering in third person narration of a character's thought).¹² However, the virtue (and perhaps the weakness) of an analysis of voice based on style rather than on the grammatical features that Cohn and others suggest is that ultimately it does not require that any passage or even a word within a passage be attributed to a particular character. On the contrary, it is exactly the ambiguousness of such moments that depicts the ambiguous relationship between thought (the presumed thought of a character) and the language through which that thought is formulated. The

text presents Klára's consciousness in Klára's idiom while evincing an uneasiness with any implied identity between the thought and the language to which it might give rise. Language appears necessarily as a matter of production through which thought may be depicted but in no way subsumed.

This discussion of passages from *A rajongók* suggests an interpretive strategy that does not restrict itself to isolated elements of style within the novel, but rather addresses how several contrasting styles blend in a single text. This appeal to Bakhtin,¹³ however, should not be misunderstood to imply agreement with Bakhtin's claim that a reader can infer, from this polyphony of voices, authorial intention. The diversity of voices in a text, themselves a construction based on a reader's perception of stylistic differences, not only thwarts any attempt to locate authorial presence but undermines the concept of authorship entirely. The narrating presence, a blend of formulas taken from other narratives, evanesces behind the conventions that comprise the narrative. The reader is presented with a text in which, as Roland Barthes says of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, "one never knows whether [the author/narrator] is responsible for what he writes (whether there is an individual subject behind his language)."¹⁴ It is this, Barthes claims, that constitutes the essence of writing (*écriture*): "to prevent any reply to the question: who is speaking?"¹⁵

Notes

1. "A rajongók"
2. Zsigmond Kemény, *A rajongók* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1969), 7. The Hungarian text reads as follows:
De minek ily elégiai hang a tények helyett, melyekre vissza kell gondolnunk.
3. *Ibid.*, 10–11. The Hungarian text reads as follows:
Reggeltől késő éjig szüntelenül futárok indultak az ország különböző részeibe.
Látszik, hogy Rákóczi nagy dolgokon jártatja az eszét.
Kardot köszörülni, megnyergelni a hadimént, a fejedelem személyes vezénylete alatt a vén Kornis Zsigmondot és a fiatal Kemény Jánost két tekintélyes hadtest élére állítani, a hit és lelkiismeret szabadságának zászlóit lobogtatva Tokajtól Nagyszombatig nyomulni, mindenütt a békétlen elemeket a seregbe olvasztván, legalább hatvanezer emberrel a megostromolt Nagyszombatból Morvába vagy Sziléziába rontani, hogy Baner svéd tábornokkal közös hadterv szerint lehessen III. Ferdinándot eldöntő csatára kényszeríteni: e merész terv a hadpárt főnökei által már Rákóczi szájába adatott, s különböző cifra változatokkal kicicomázva terjesztették szét.
4. *Ibid.*, 25. The Hungarian text reads as follows:
De mi, kik növelésünknel és véralkatunknál fogva inkább szeretjük a szenvedélyeket a szobában, mint a szabad ég alatt látni és vizsgálni, hagyjuk el most a tomboló sokaságot, és szép csendesen a Templom utcán végigballagva, kísérsük meg a 'harmadik udvar' kapuján a fejedelmi lakba menni, hátha ott benn érdekesebb jelenetekre találunk.
Minket senki sem fog föltartóztatni. [...]

Ne késsünk a szép nők öltözködőtermében is betekinteni.
Nekünk ez a szemérmes reggeli órákon sem tilos[.]

5. *Ibid.*, 31.
6. *Ibid.*, 31. The Hungarian text reads as follows:
Az ablakmélyedés zsámolyánál nőalak térdel, feje lehajtvá, keze összefogva, előtte kisdéd Mária-kép és feszület.
Mekkora áhitattal rebegék ajkai a Pater noster-t és Ave Mariá-t, míg ivor-fehér és finom ujjai közül le-legördül az olvasófüzér gyöngyszeme!
– Amen! Amen! ... Ó, mennyei Atyám! Bocsásd meg az iszonyú bűnt, melyet elkövetni fogok. Isten atyja! Könyörögi érettem! Szentek! Vessétek közbe magatokat! Jaj! Mekkora bűn.
7. *Ibid.*, Afterward, 513. The Hungarian text reads as follows:
Báthory Zsófiát csupán állandó színlelésre készítette kényszeredett áttérése.
8. *Ibid.*, 41. The Hungarian text reads as follows:
Hátra vala még a cím nélküli kancellár: Kassai István, a gyűlölt és fukar kegyenc, ki hogy házat ne tartson, magát csupán ítélőmesternek hívatta; hogy szertelen vagyonszomját a zsákmányból kielégítse, folytonosan lázadásokat fedezett fel, s hogy gyávasága miatt befolyását ne kockáztassa, és az ügyek vezetését kezéből ki ne ejtse, szünetlenül béke mellett rajongott.
9. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, *Kemény Zsigmond* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1989). The Hungarian text reads as follows:
[Kassai] jellemzése már a kezdet kezdetén sem egyértelmű[.]
10. Kemény, 256. The Hungarian text reads as follows:
Férje bűnét tudta már, de indokait nem, nem az iszonyú kísértést, nem a sötét jövőndőt, nem azon megfegjethetetlen módot, mellyel egy nemes, egy kiváló természetben oly hamar bírt a gonosz szellem diadalmaskodni.
11. *Ibid.*, 256–257. The Hungarian text reads as follows:
Nem akart könnyezni, sóhajtani, nem akart saját szerencsétlenségére emlékezni, csak férje megszabadítása forgott elméjében.
S mitől szabadítsa meg?
A bűnből kellett férjét kiragadnia.
Ah, de ha szabaddá tette... megmentheti-e a lélekvédtől?
Klára visszaborzadt a komor, a válságos órák előérzetében.
Mit tegyen, ha férje elveszti önbecsülését, vagy ha a szégyent nem tudva hordozni, a tisztító bánat helyett a vad kétségbeesés örvényébe süllyed?
Az előzmények után lehetetlen volt Klárának nem hinni, hogy férje valami titkos és nagy kísértés miatt letért az erény útjáról, meghasonlott az Istennel, s földi érdekekért örökkévalókat kockáztatott.
12. See Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
13. See especially M. M. Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981).
14. Barthes, Roland, *S/Z* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), 146. The French of this text reads as follows:
on ne sais jamais s'il est responsable de ce qu'il écrit (s'il y a un sujet derrière son langage)[.]
15. *Ibid.*, 146. The French of this text reads as follows:
l'être de l'écriture (le sens du travail qui la constitue) est d'empêcher de jamais répondre à cette question: Qui parle?