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*SURSULAPITSCHI AND THE JOURNEY
A CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH ON CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN
HUNGARY*

Abstract

In the following brief reflection, I present some of the characteristics of current and recent Hungarian initiatives in children's literature, based on the institutional framework and internal literary dynamics. The aim is to give the reader a realistic picture of the current state of research in contemporary Hungarian children's literature. The paper focuses on the opportunities and challenges facing active and prospective researchers in children's literature. The text describes the impact of the political and literary regime change on the institutional system and research practices in children's literature; considers the reasons for counterproductive literary historical approaches, discusses the lack of methods of children's book criticism and psychology, and proposes some modest methodological suggestion for textual analysis. Despite all the difficulties, for example the legacy of the literary history and the the poorer literary output of the nineties, children's literature research in Hungary is moving in the right direction. So in this text particular attention is paid to the remarkable initiatives, projects and texts in children's literature especially of the last 15 years.

Keywords: children's literature, contemporary literature, Hungarian literature

Introduction

Jim and Luke (the engine driver), the protagonists of Michael Ende's wonderful novel *Jim and the Wild 13*, travel the sea in a steam locomotive. When they meet Sursulapitschi, the mermaid princess of the sea, and have to explain to her the workings of the mysterious steam locomotive, the following conversation takes place:

– So, this meastoto... or leam mocostotive is something like a steamship, but it's used on land.

– It's a very apt phrase – Luke admitted with a cheerful snort – and quite accurate. You are very clever, my little lady.

The mermaid giggled again with satisfaction, then said:

– So this boat, which is not a boat at all, is a kind of boat! – she said, with a happy clap of her hands.

Marine creatures have a somewhat one-plane view of the world, you could say an aquatic perspective. And of course they are very disturbed if something is not fully understood from this aquatic perspective. But when they finally manage to 'aquafy' this incomprehensible thing, they are suddenly very relieved."

So, as a decent aquatic creature, Sursulapitschi has limited knowledge of how land-based vehicles work, but she is able to incorporate the steam locomotive into her own worldview. All she has to do is to find the conceptual similarities, distort a little in her lack of empirical knowledge, and relax. In the following brief reflection, I present some of the characteristics of current and recent Hungarian initiatives in children's literature, based on the institutional framework and internal literary dynamics. The focus will be primarily on the opportunities and challenges facing active and prospective researchers in children's literature. In some ways, the case of Sursulapitschi and the steam locomotive is particularly apt for the outline of institutions and discourse: the desire for change, the need to acquire new knowledge, and the act of "aquafying" are all characteristic of recent children's literature.

In Hungary, excellent initiatives in children's literature have emerged in the last decade and a half, but the reflection – or the systematic research – of children's literature still has debts. In my opinion, this is mainly due to the fact that during the regime change in literature that accompanied the political regime change, rather little attention was paid to children's literature.¹ Around the time of the regime change, with the so-called "literary theory boom", several reading strategies that treated biographical (but mostly Marxist) interpretation with suspicion entered the country. Since most of the researchers working on children's literature in the 1990s reflexively applied previously entrenched patterns of reception (and were not really interested in new approaches), children's literature, to put it bluntly, could not really develop a literary theory.

Children's Literature after the Regime Change

Another consequence of the change in the public sphere – that came with the regime change – was that the new topics and the use of more colourful literary discourses had such a liberating effect on the writers who had become well-known that they (again, to put it bluntly) had little thought of writing children's literature. In the case of children's literature, the fact that the regulation of the literary public sphere under socialism – as Géza Arday has pointed out – affected children's literature much less than so-called adult literature further highlights the issue (Arday, 2013). It is no coincidence that the 1990s seem to be a kind of blind spot when taking into account the major achievements of children's literature after the regime change.

Of the most important authors of children's prose, Ervin Lázár wrote his most influential works essentially up to 1985, including *The Square Around Forest* (*A Négyszögletű Kerek Erdő*) – only *The Elf Factory* (*A manógyár*) stands out from his output of the nineties. The situation for Éva Janikovszky is similar. Of her books after the regime change, only *Cvikkedli* (*Czvikkedli*) is inherently one of the best-known of her oeuvre. Nor is the decade after the fall of communism the peak of Pál Békés's oeuvre in children's literature. As a masterpiece comparable to *The Clumsy Wizard* (*A kétbalkezes varázsló* – 1984) and *The Wise Gap-Filler* (*Bölcs Hiánypótló* – 2005), the most that can be mentioned is *The Half-Life*

¹ With the regime change in Hungary in 1989, the communist system collapsed and Hungary became a democratic state with the multi-party system and free elections.

(*Félőlény*) from 1991. The cream of Ágnes Bálint's and István Csukás's oeuvre of children's prose was also clearly written before 1989, as was Magda Szabó's. After the turn of the 2000s, however, the production of quality children's prose definitely took off. In addition to Pál Békés's aforementioned work, the first three volumes of Judit Berg's *Rumini* (*Rumini*) were published between 2000 and 2010, along with the already mentioned work by Pál Békés, the *Prince of the Suromberk* (*Szuromberek királyfi*) by Ferenc Szijj, László Darvasi's *Trapiti* (*Trapiti*) novels, Gergely Péterfy's *The Book of Misi* (*Misikönyv*), János Lackfi's *Lajos Kővér* volumes, *Csoda és Kósza* (*Wonder and Stray*) by Zoltán Czigány, and László Bagossy's bestselling book of fables, *The Dark-Seeing Fairy* (*A Sötétben Látó Tündér*) (Gombos, 2011).

The situation is very similar in children's poetry. In the nineties, few of the canonical authors of what we would call modern Hungarian children's poetry were still alive: the best-known authors were István Kormos, Zoltán Zelk and Károly Tamkó Sirató, who died at the turn of the seventies and eighties, and Sándor Weöres as well as Ágnes Nagy Nemes around the time of the fall of communism. From the 2000s onwards, however, a series of more important books appeared, ranging from *Fresh Ink* (*Friss Tinta*), which sometimes had genre and age mismatches, to *Golden Cap* (*Aranysityak*) and autonomous, single-verse children's poetry books. To name just a few examples: *Mario the Star Picker* (*Csillagszedő Márió*) by Ottó Kiss, Dániel Varró's *Over the Smear-Mountain* (*Túl a Maszat-hegyen*), Krisztina Tóth's *Animal Stories* (*Állatságok*), János Lackfi's *The Silly Adult* (*A buta felnőt*), András Ferenc Kovács's *The Edge of the Dawn Star* (*Hajnali csillag peremén*), Péter Kántor's *Two Hundred Steps Up and Down* (*Kétszáz lépcső föl és alá*), or, more recently Árpád Kollár's *What Bird* (*Milyen madár*) and József Keresztesi's *What Eats the What?* (*Mit eszik a micsoda?*) have all been able to touch on the tradition of children's poetry in a productive way. The quality of children's poetry in the 1990s is similar to that of children's prose: there are few children's poetry collections worth mentioning.

After the turn of the millenium children's literature, simply put, began to catch up with itself. On the one hand, the quality of texts has improved and, on the other hand, the institutional system has begun to develop. In the middle of the first decade of the 2000s, *Cso-daceruza* was created to fill the gap in the magazine culture, and the most popular children's publishers, with the exception of Móra, were established between 2001 and 2012: in chronological order, Pagony, Csimota, Manó Könyvek, Naphegy, Vivandra, Betűtészta, Cerkabella and Kolibri, as part of the Libri Group. The list also shows that the situation is much more promising from a publishing point of view than for magazines, helped by the fact that illustrators and, with them, children's publishers have updated the visual appearance of books, partly as a result of the Bologna Book Fair 2006. In sum, the years following the regime change brought a sudden rush of free competition into the literature industry, which took a decade and a half to recover from, but it is also true that the recovery can best be described as the beginning of quality work (and the development of the book market).

Hungarian children's literature is still lacking several important segments: children's book criticism and illustration criticism have not been developed, there is a general lack of basic research, and there is still a great need for a forum that systematically deals with

children's literature research. Over the last decade and a half, such platforms have been created for longer or shorter periods, but unfortunately they have not been long-lived. Thus, the institutional changes that accompanied the regime change did not result in the kind of institutional system that would have been needed for systematic and methodical work. Csilla Sándor, in her plan for the later Hungarian Institute of Children's Literature in 2014, impressively summarized why an autonomous institutional system could be useful. (Sándor, 2010) While some of the works that claim to be summaries have taken stock of the major institutions of children's literature, it seems to be a matter of attitude whether all the functioning institutions are presented as the beginning of a hopeful story (Ruppl, 2012) or as the heroic attempts of a profession in continuous crisis.

At present, apart from the publishing activity and the excellent "Children's and Youth Literature" course at the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, the aforementioned Institute Hungarian of Children's Literature, and the Centre for Youth and Children's Literature (Ifjúsági és Gyermekirodalmi Centrum) represent the highest institutional standards, and Hungarian Board on Books for Young People, National Educational Library and Museum (Országos Pedagógiai Könyvtár és Múzeum), Hungarian Reading Association (Magyar Olvasástársaság) and applied fairy tale research – most notably the Folk Tale Treasury (Népmesekincstár) project and Metamorphoses Fairy Tale Therapy Association (Metamorphoses Meseterápia Egyesület) – are important complementary activities. The public background of IGYIC and its systematic and conceptual development over the last 3-4 years give reason for great hope: the Csimborasszó (Csimborasszó) project promotes children's literature by setting contemporary children's poems to music; the Mesecentrum (Fairy Tale Centre) online magazine publishes noteworthy studies, essays and reviews; the Vadlázac (Wild Salmon) workshop, developed in collaboration with the Hungarian Board on Books for Young People, Mónika Luzsányi Miklya and Mária Bajzáth, disseminates contemporary children's literature through experiential, all-arts teaching methods. In addition to the programmes that provide continuity, occasional events have a major impact on children's literature. The Budapest Illustration Festival and the International Book Festival are of a high standard, and the first Children's Literature Session in the Humanities Section of the Spring 2021 National Scientific Students' Associations Conference was a highlight for the academic sphere.

Legacy of the "Literary History"

The initiatives listed above are promising from the researcher's point of view, but from a disciplinary point of view, the "literary history" legacy of the research on children's literature in the 1990s is an additional difficulty. To illustrate why I have put the term "literary history" in quotation marks, I will give a symptomatic example: the available literature on modern Hungarian children's literature tends to divide it into three phases from the early 1950s to the regime change. The reference point is *Gyermekirodalom (Children's Literature)*, edited by Gabriella Komáromi and written by several others around the turn of the millennium, which both provides an accurate account of the decades of children's literature before the regime change and also shows the reasons for the doubts

about the literature. The author of the relevant chapter, Béla Rigó, identifies the qualitatively paradoxical 1950s as the first important decade of modern Hungarian children's poetry, when poets (Ágnes Nemes Nagy, István Kormos) who were on the forced path of children's literature due to the censorship of the Rákosi era were already creating (the first *Vackor* volume, for example, was published in 1956), and when children's literature, which carried communist ideology, was also still in its fertile period. Rigó places the second phase between the 1960s and 1980s, which I believe he rightly identifies as the peak of the history of Hungarian children's poetry, mainly because of the quality of the works of Ágnes Nagy Nemes, Sándor Weöres, Zoltán Zelk and István Kormos, and the leniency of cultural policy. The period between the 1980s and the fall of communism is interpreted by the author as a period of decline, the only contribution of the decade being the infiltration of Swedish children's poetry, as Béla Rigó mentions (Rigó, 2001).

There is certainly a problem with the above passage. I think the author has done a correct job of drawing and judging the context of children's poetry. To quote Ágnes Nemes Nagy, in the second period mentioned by Béla Rigó, the prestige value (i.e. recognition) and self-worth of poetry could indeed meet because authors who were outstandingly talented wrote children's poems (Nemes Nagy, 1981). The narrative style of these forty years, however, reveals a symptomatic phenomenon. The simplifications that arise from the mode of existence of chronological literary history narratives (the highlighting-disclosure dichotomy, the need to form a canon, the treatment of time, conceptualization, etc.) are very difficult to avoid (if they can be avoided at all), so I would not dwell on them. However, the argument and the specific textual examples raise a different kind of problem. On the one hand, it seems that Béla Rigó's narrative is strongly determined by the reception of the poets. Since there are not many critical texts on their children's poetry (and what is available is not very high quality), reflections on their adult poetry come to the fore. For example, in discussing the children's poetry of Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Rigó writes about the "object poetry" that dominates the reception of the poet's lyrical oeuvre, which is difficult to justify in the case of children's poems (Rigó, 2001). In addition to the dysfunctional use of reception, the narrative of modern Hungarian children's poetry becomes problematic because of the excessive adulation it receives. For example, in his analysis of Zelk's children's poems, the treatise emphasizes the imagery, while the poet's – sometimes truly sumptuous – text organization is exemplified in the *Seagull*, which has nothing to do with children's poetry except that it is written in an even rhymed quaver (i.e. in the popular form of a children's verse) (Rigó, 2001). The *Seagull* is one of the most serious poems of mourning in Hungarian poetry, a traumatic narrative of the loss of a spouse, a grand poem of 82 four-line strophe written with manic repetitive rhetoric and strong emotion. Not a poem for children.

The above is not at all an attempt to invalidate the narrative of children's literature of the period (especially since I deeply agree with the basic thesis of the 60s-80s). However, in the last ten years, since I have been teaching children's literature to future teachers at the teacher training college in Szekszárd and Veszprém, I have been encountering similar phenomena. The impact of the book goes beyond my personal experience. It is an important text for the course syllabus of the largest educational institutions in Budapest,

Eötvös Lóránd University, Pázmány Péter Catholic University and Károli Gáspár Reformed University and it is the basis for the synthesized textbooks on children's literature. In keeping with the tradition of Hungarian teacher training, such volumes mostly function as college (now more like university, due to changes in the institutional structure) notes by authors who teach children's literature anyway. The available notes generally function by adopting (at most nuancing) the basic premises of the volume from 1999, or expanding them in part, according to the authors' research interests. For example, the 2013 book by József Bárdos and László Galuska (*Chapters from Children's Literature*) contains very fair fantasy chapters and a recommendation for reading for the age of the author based on the concept of the fairy tale novel described in detail by the authors (Bárdos & Galuska, 2013). Nevertheless, their work is also organized by the genre-theoretical and author-principled approach, which is not at all a problem, but is not very exciting in the light of the other notes.

The practical consequence of this kind of anomaly is that in university courses, lecturers either recite what is written in the synthesized texts or try to revise it according to their own tastes and preferences. The latter solution has at least the advantage of reinforcing the classical humanities competence of critical thinking in students, but the presentation of textual discourses cannot support this kind of thinking, because there is simply no literature that can be argued with each other on the merits. Of course, how could they be in a context where a self-reflexive literary theory could not even develop?

The question, it seems to me, goes even further. On the one hand, it raises the question of whether it is even worth doing literary history under such conditions, or more precisely: is it possible to write a good literary history without a well-defined conceptual and methodological (essentially literary theoretical) framework? The question is easy to answer, of course, but it seems much more important to note that this kind of methodological approach is only exceptionally in demand among researchers: texts on literature in the strict sense, with a fair theoretical basis, can be found in the works of Anna Kérchy, József Lapis, Andrea Lovász and Hermina Gesztelyi. This does not mean, of course, that there are not excellent researchers and excellent books, from Zoltán Hermann to Gabriella Petres and Zoltán Pompor, but theoretical methodological rigour – which can provide a model through critical treatment of one's own literary theoretical preconceptions – is less typical (in this respect, the work of Emőke Varga and Emese Révész is welcome in illustration theory).

Institutionalism and the frustration of scientific theory that goes hand in hand with a lack of systematicity also act as a barrier. Anyone who has been to a conference on children's literature have seen that it is not just a compulsory cliché, but a general researcher's public mood. For my part, I see the existing attempts to write the history of children's literature in terms of genre and authorship as simply a compulsion to conform due to a minority complex (Zoltán Pompor's book on Ervin Lázár is the most serious exception on a monographic basis). These narratives operate by the same mechanisms as, for example, the old academic literary history, but they are much more summarized, less detailed and have proportionally much more associations. The inferiority complex is also evident in the oral discourses, and the compulsion to conform is obvious in the use of

narratives similar to (and indeed unreflective of) the grand narratives of, for want of a better term, adult literature.

A Specific Set of Criteria

When dealing with children's literature, it seems appropriate to develop a specific set of criteria. Most of the basic texts dealing with children's literature and the functioning of children's and youth literature already report on fundamental problems at the conceptual level, from the definition of "child" to the conflation or even separation of "children's and youth literature" (Arday, 2013). Komáromi's definition in *Children's Literature*, for example, refers to literature that is part of national literature; that is applied literature with specific themes and structure but without its own means; and of which the child is the recipient and consumer (Komáromi, 2001). The definition raises several problems. Many adults read children's literature for pleasure (or even as a result of parental practice), and there are many works of children's literature written for adults which contain quasi-instructions for use. From a structural point of view, I do not see much difference between the possibilities of a work written for children and a work not written for children. The basic criteria for *good* children's literature, for example, are very often unworkable. When it comes to describing a *good* children's poem, it is safe to say that the "barely rhymed" (Lengyel, 1988, p. 181) *Lóci*-poems of Lőrinc Szabó do not at all correspond to the criteria of aestheticism, and Ottó Kiss's Swedish children's poems do not even so much (and in many cases they remain conceptually without visual representation), but the didacticism of István Kormos's *Vackor* series cannot be called a model characteristic either (not to mention the nonsense poetry). In the end, it is just that children's literature cannot really be separated from non-children's literature by a purely literary approach. The conclusion may therefore be that it is a kind of applied literature, as in the case of bibliotherapy (it is hardly by chance that fairy tale therapy has become the focus of children's literature). In this light, the assertion of a literary-historical approach seems even more paradoxical.

József Keresztesi's famous article on Eva Janikovszky, which started as a review, already in 2011, seriously addressed the problem. According to his two closely interconnected premises, children's literary criticism could only function legitimately if it had its own critical language, and if this language was created not only with the help of literary theory but also with the tools of psychology. "*For children, art is not primarily a cultural but a psychological fact. The complex network of values and concepts that make up the fabric of culture is not yet a given for them, and therefore the work of art is not intended to place it in this network, or to enrich it. Critical practice must take account of the fact that when we speak of children's literature we must take account not only of the poetics of the literary text, but also of a very specific psychological mechanism of action.*" (Keresztesi, 2011, p. 13). A similar conclusion is reached by Sándor Vojtek, who, in his essay on *Rumini*, entitled *Is it possible to interpret children's literature?*, distinguishes children's literature from literature for non-children on the basis of two aspects. The first claim is that texts for children cannot really be interpreted in more than one way, while the second claim emphasizes that children's literature is intended to be not only entertaining but also emphatically useful, i.e. to educate (Vojtek, 2012). Both claims reinforce the psychological

approach defined by Keresztesi. Receptive perception (often referred to as child perception), which favours a polarized world order, favours definite, univocal interpretations over sophisticated explanations. The limitation of interpretations to the field of literary aesthetics or even literary history creates narrow interpretative frameworks (not to mention that monodisciplinarity, with welcome exceptions, is still a basic tenet of literary studies). The *useful and entertaining* conception of literature in the case of children's literature really means that, in a good case, the basic concepts of linguistic formality, genre relations and, for example, focalization are reflected in the critical text, while the basic concepts of sensuality and identification – psychological – are deeply embedded in the impact of children's literature texts. The reception mode guided by sensory functions was most recently applied by József Lapis in his enumeration of the poetic possibilities of contemporary Hungarian children's poetry (Lapis, 2021), while the issue of identification – whether in the tools of narrative psychology or reception aesthetics – has so far been less addressed by scholars. Of course, the toolbox of cultural studies also holds other possibilities, from media studies to neo-historicism, as Artemis Harmath pointed out at the end of 2021 (Harmath, 2021).

Despite all the difficulties, research on children's literature in Hungary is making progress. As far as I can see, there is less and less "aquifying", while the adaptation of international research trends has begun. That said, there are many mysterious *craft* plying the seas of children's literature that can confuse researchers, but I am convinced that learning about and especially applying new technologies (methods, if you like) is shaping Sursulapitschi's perception of research, along with her attitude – and that this makes for a much more exciting journey than before.

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